

# The Black Lion:

## Chapter 3 - Latchkey Kid - Part 1

By John McCabe

Jakob hung around Pflenzen for three more days before he went back to Freiburg. His impression of Matheus was good, and he had a long talk with Ansel which reassured him that his daughter and grandson were in safe hands. Ansel and Rorc left too not long after that. The Darokinian had persuaded Rorc that a nice ocean voyage would be a pleasant change, so after arriving in Freiburg they booked passage on the first ship heading south. Ansel had arranged to have the gold that Matheus had earned placed in a bank with directions for Jakob on how to access the money. Jakob had refused the offer, insisting that he had no need of it and indeed the funds would come in useful someday for Matheus, Anya and his grandson.

That left the family of three alone for the first time ever. It was great to finally be in each other's company again and it was a couple of weeks before they had their first argument. Druss needed constant attention. It was not that he was a fussy eater or did not sleep well. It was more about his proclivity for wandering. He seemed to have a supernatural ability to be in one place when you saw him first and seconds later halfway down the road, or up to his waist in a puddle of mud. He was very interested in animals and would gleefully run towards even the angriest of dogs to pet them. That he was never bitten or seriously hurt was a minor miracle. Matheus would take him for rides around the lakes or into the surrounding woods. He became a firm favourite amongst the notoriously stern druids of the region.

All in all, it was an enjoyable childhood and he had settled in so well that it gave Anya the confidence to tell Matheus that she would be leaving for Freiburg in a couple of weeks. He looked at her his expression unreadable and waited. She continued "It'll only be for a few days. I want to see Grand Knight Erstenlicht".

"The Heldannic Knight. You're going ahead with this plan to join the order?"

She looked suddenly unhappy, her eyes shifted and looked out the window. "Yes, of course. You knew that was always going to happen. I gave my word, remember?"

"Your word. Aye, I remember. But I thought once the child was born. Once you saw that he needs his mother, you would change your mind. See sense. You can't leave him"

She looked back at him her face pale. "You knew I promised. You knew I am not one to break a promise, even if it means doing what is probably the hardest thing I'll ever do in my life. You were hurt..."

He interrupted her "Yes, yes, I know. I was hurt, you asked Vanya to help, and she helped. You don't think I get tired of hearing that? What's done is done. You think Vanya will notice, one insignificant mortal..."

She bit back “Insignificant, am I? Is that what you think? Oh, the truth is coming out now isn’t it?”

“That’s not what I meant. You are very important to me and to Druss. More important to us than to some Immortal”.

“Careful now Matheus. That Immortal gave me the power to heal your wounds, save your life”.

“Hah, save my life. I told you it was only a small wound. I would have recovered just fine. I always do”.

“No, Matheus, you’re wrong. It was bad. So, so bad. I was so scared I would lose you, but she helped me, and I didn’t lose you”.

“Well, you’re losing me now, aren’t you, and the child. You’re losing both of us by keeping this promise. You become a Heldannic Knight, and you can’t have a family, you can’t visit or spend time with your son. Whatever about me, he needs you. You don’t think I can do that job by myself do you?”

She appeared close to tears but managed to stave them off, composing herself. “Matheus, my love. You and Druss are the best things that ever happened to me. The few months, years we had together I will treasure forever, but I am a woman of my word. Please don’t make this any more difficult than it needs to be. You’re a good man and you’ll be a great father. Maybe your mother can help?”

“My mother?”

“Yes, Asturi”.

He grunted a scornful laugh. “What about your mother. That might be a better option. My mother is...”

“No, not my mother” she interrupted. “I saw the way she whittled away at my father and Hader had no chance being so young. He couldn’t cope and you know well how that ended. Your mother would be better. You turned out alright, no?” she ended with a hopeful smile.

“Enough with the dimples, Anya” he sighed, and then closed his eyes, breathing deeply through his nose and then breathing out through his mouth. “Ok. I can understand you made a promise. I am not happy about this, but I respect it. I’m not sure Druss will when he’s old enough to understand”. He opened his eyes and looked at her again. “I’m not sure my mother is a good idea, Anya. You think the child is wild now, just wait till she gets a hold of him”.

She smiled reassuringly her eyes gentle. “She’s family. She’s your family, Druss’s grandmother. Does she even know he exists?”

“There’s so much about my mother you don’t know Anya. So much. If you knew I think you might change your mind about leaving our son with her”.

“Then tell me”.

It took him a few seconds, but it was clear the time had finally come, the moment right. He nodded. “You’d best take a seat, this might take a while”.

She listened while he relayed the story, he had told Ansel and Rorc. The story of how his father had become a vampire and how ultimately, Asturi had slain him. He went into more detail with Anya, leaving nothing unsaid. After he was finished, they sat in silence. Druss began to stir from his nap and Anya went to him, lifting him from his cot, glad for the distraction. She mulled over all that he had told her, her expression thoughtful. She walked over to a chair beside the kitchen table and sat down with Druss on her lap, still not fully awake. He lay there contentedly, his eyes wandering about the room before resting on Matheus, who smiled. Druss returned the smile.

“We really won the lottery when it comes to family eh?” she murmured. She was silent again. “I’ll go to Freiburg in a few months. Not now. We’ll make a holiday of it. The Cathedral to Vanya is due to be completed next year. We’ll go and visit my father, the three of us. We’ll see them opening the Cathedral and then...” She looked at him, rocking Druss who was sitting up now on her knee.

“...and then you’ll go and see the Heldannic Knight and tell her you’re ready to take your Oath” he finished.

“Yes”, she replied. Her voice and expression were determined. “I’ll keep my promise. You’ll take care of our son. Take him to visit his grandmother in Ethengar. See how she is. See if she’s...”

“Still crazy?” he asked.

“You should go see her anyway. I hope if things turn out strained in my relationship with Druss, that he will still come visit me”.

“Ok, Anya, we’ll do it”. He stood up and walked to his wife and child. She stood too, Druss in her arms now. He embraced them both tightly.

They tried their best not to talk too much about their future plans. They pushed it down deep and lived each day like a newlywed couple. The young Druss made this easy. He allowed very little time to daydream. It was a full-time task to keep track of him. In Freiburg, Anya had simply locked him in a room in her father’s shop when they were busy but here in Pflenzen they took the approach that he would have to learn fast the difference between fun and danger. Anya had very short fingernails after a week of this, but Matheus had insisted.

“Anya, I’m not saying we leave him to fend for himself, we’ll make sure he’s safe, but if he’s going to spend any time with Asturi then we need to do this if he’ll have a chance”.

“Come on Matheus. You make it sound like she’s a complete basket case. As if she’ll leave him to wander the steppes unsupervised”.

“She gets distracted Anya. It’s like she’s living two separate lives at the same time. One, external, is our world. When she’s there everything is good, but she doesn’t stay there. Sometimes she goes to an internal world. She gets distracted and there’s no warning sign for when this happens. Whatever the cycle or trigger is, she slips into it. If she slips into it while Druss is with her then yes, he’ll be unsupervised. We need him to know it’s not safe to wander too far and if that means he gets hurt a little then so be it”. He saw her look of concern “Don’t worry. I don’t mean with let him off alone. I just mean we stay back a little and judge the circumstances. If it’s not too dangerous, then we let him fall or trip. Let him cry”.

She looked at him and he could see she was clearly upset by this. “He’s still a baby, Matheus. How much do you think he really understands? We’re supposed to keep him safe. That’s our job”. She sighed deeply and leaned into him, hugging him tightly.

Druss was only sixteen months old and one of the youngest in the village. He had been taken in by the other children as a playmate. Some of the older girls took him along with them, treating him like a little brother. He fell off walls, got butted by a goat, hit by some of the older boys and almost drowned in the lake, but he was a tough little child and rarely cried. His mother, Anya, did all the crying for him.

“This isn’t going to work Matheus. The others are gossiping. I hear them. They say we’re terrible parents that he’ll be a tearaway and he’s going to grow up to be an outlaw”.

Matheus only laughed. “He’s solid, Anya, like his father. He’s as tough as an old boot”.

“Thank, Vanya we only have one child. I don’t know how we’d ever cope with another one”. She used both her hands to smooth her hair back from her brow and stood there her hands on her head, lines of stress creasing her forehead.

“I bet you’d find handling two children easier. You’d be less stressed over Druss and...”

“Forget it. I can’t delay much longer taking the oath. We’ve one child. He’ll have to be enough for us” she replied, adding a smile to ease the harshness of her words.

Matheus had heard of an attack on a village a day’s ride from Pflenzen. He was convinced it was a vampire. Anya and Druss accompanied him. He was very much aware that history was repeating itself but reassured her it was a one-time thing and then they would be going to Freiburg in the New Year for a few weeks.

They arrived in the village of Talbard and Matheus secured them some lodgings arranged for them by the residents. He then made sure she had a supply of holy water and garlic. She kept her holy symbol in her hand, the leather thong wrapped tight around her wrist. She had cast a spell to protect them from evil and sat down with some of the others to wait. She did wonder how much history would repeat. Would he return to her transformed? A creature of the night like is father? Would she be able to do what Asturi had done? A noise from outside brought her back from her thoughts. She stood with her hand gripping the pommel of her sword. The door

opened and Matheus stood in the doorway. He looked fine, still human. He smiled at her, and she felt the relief. They had found the vampire while it slept and dispatched it. A farmer's daughter had been rescued and priests were at work helping her. They had returned to Pflenzen the next day.

The New Year Celebrations were very enjoyable. A group of passing adventurers had stopped over in Pflenzen. The mage in their party had cast spells which had awed the children such as cantrips, illusionary creatures and fireballs sent high into the sky.

Four months later, Flaurmont 17<sup>th</sup> and they started out for Freiburg. The journey would take some time, but they planned on being there before the opening ceremony for the Notre Dame of Vanya's Cathedral, scheduled for the 28<sup>th</sup>.

Three days by barge brought them to the intersection of roads leading to Hockstein, Freiburg and Grauenberg. From there they joined up with a caravan and journeyed by road to Freiburg, which took about four days.

There were thousands of people coming and going into the city. Matheus was taking a chance returning there, however unlikely he was to run into any Heldannic Knights that would recognise him.

Jakob was on edge at first, he was not a gambling man. Every knock on the door or creak in the floorboards had him tensing. The return home had been good for Anya. She saw some friends and ate lots of her father's cooking. Anya helped her father with the cakes she had suggested he make for the occasion. Her favourite was the rose pattern inspired by the Rose Window in the Cathedral. Jakob had begun to relax, and Matheus was content to stay house bound for much of his stay. When he did go for walks it was usually later in the day, when it was dark.

The mood in the city was good and filled with a hopeful anticipation that things were getting better. The attacks on the abbeys had petered out and things had begun to settle down once more. As the day for the grand opening of the Cathedral arrived, arrangements were made to festoon the streets with banners. Seating had been built for honoured guests and a podium for the speakers.

It was the first time Anya had ever actually seen Hochmeister Klaus Stamhoffer. He was a tall powerful man, despite being over sixty years old. His hair was pure white and cut short in the style common amongst the Heldannic Knights. He was accompanied by his bodyguard as he moved around the Plaza inspecting the work and with him was Grand Knight Erstenlicht. Anya did not make herself known and stayed back, lost in the crowd. She was not ready to answer any questions and she respected Maude too much to put her on the spot regarding Matheus.

The city was packed full of people, with more streaming in every day for the ceremony. The day itself was a gift and they could not have asked for better weather. It was dry, the sky was clear and blue with only a handful of clouds. The air was crisp, and people gathered were wrapped

up well to stay warm but there were plenty of stalls selling hot food and drinks. The seats were all full of high-ranking knights or visiting dignitaries.

Hochmeister Stamhoffer gave a powerful speech that brought a cheer of enthusiasm at its conclusion. Only a few seats down from him was Konrad Blutfelden, now a Knight Banneret. He had several ribbons on the breastplate of his armour and had risen through the ranks distinguishing himself in the fight against the Partisans.

Grand Knight Erstenlicht also gave a speech one that was very well received in Anya's opinion. It was not as rousing as the Hochmeisters but you could hear a pin drop while she spoke. Anya was beaming to such an extent that Matheus nudged her with his elbow. "A fan, are we?"

Despite the gentle mocking tone, she could not stop smiling. "She's a great woman, Matheus. A great woman". She linked arms and walked with him as he carried Druss, stopping at a stall to get a hot drink. She spoke incessantly about the Order and the Knights.

Matheus was only half listening, much of his attention was focused on the Knights and the newly constructed Cathedral. It was an impressive building, he had to admit and no doubt it would assist in the recruitment drive he could see happening all around. Several Knights were answering questions from young men and women eager to become part of the Order so impressed were they with the speeches, the building, the pageantry. It saddened him to think that they would be enemies to the Partisans. A lot of them were of Hattian heritage but there were many too that were Heldann Freeholders. They would be on the wrong side in this battle, but they would learn, he thought grimly. Then he looked at Anya. She was glowing with pride and happiness, and he could see she was eager to join the Knights. His eyes narrowed in thought. She too would be on the wrong side in this battle. She noticed him looking at her and flashed him her famous smile, dimples on full display. The grim look melted away, he shifted Druss to his other arm and reached for her taking her hand. She leaned against his shoulder as they walked back home to Jakob.

They returned to Pflenzen after two more days in Freiburg. Anya was out most of the time, taking full advantage of her time there. She took a tour of the Cathedral but knew the ins and outs of it as well if not better than the guides themselves. She called in to see Ashemon but was disappointed to find that he was away on business.

Upon her return home she was quiet for a day or two. Not sad or depressed but contemplative. Druss would be two years old in a few short months and as she had discussed with Matheus she would return to Freiburg and take the Oath. She pulled the small portrait of herself, Druss and Matheus that she had commissioned the artist Fabian while in Freiburg, from a small box that contained her few items of importance. She was supposed to leave all family behind when she took the Oath and was in two minds about taking this small memento with her.

There were more stories of vampirism in the area around Grauenberg and despite his promise to Jakob about leaving them Matheus went and was gone for almost a week. Anya said nothing

about this, understanding that in most cases there were exceptions and with Matheus, that exception was vampires. He returned to them safely but restless. They had not managed to locate the source of the evil. She knew that it was only because he had a family to return to that he was here at all. She wondered what would happen when she left next month. Would Druss be enough of a draw to keep his father close at hand or would the lure of hunting vampires prove too much?

Felmont 19<sup>th</sup> AC 974 – Druss was now two years old. All the children of the small village gathered for a party. Jakob had come to Pflenzen for the event, bringing many cakes and breads from his bakery. He also brought several bottles of wine much to the delight of the adults present. He could feel the slight tension between his daughter and Matheus. He was sympathetic to their plight but did not interfere. He had offered to assist in raising Druss, but Anya did not want him in Freiburg while she was there. As far as she knew she would begin six months of basic training in the fortress before being assigned to one of the provinces.

The time was passing by so quickly she felt the guilt she had buried begin to rise in her again. She pushed it down. “What kind of person would I be if I did not stay true to my word? Matheus is alive and I have a son. That must be enough for me”. She did not feel entirely convinced by this thought but chose to pretend that she did. Maybe in time she would be.

Jakob had stayed with them since the child’s birthday and would travel back to Freiburg with Anya. He busied himself with the horses while Anya said her farewells to her husband and son. They did not say much, only embraced and looked at each other.

“Now my little lion. Take care of your papa, alright?” she murmured, kissing her child gently on the forehead.

Matheus wondered how long before Druss noticed his mother's absence? How long before he realised that she was not coming back?

She climbed into the saddle and gave them a smile. A smile of mixed emotions. She dug her heels into the sides of her horse, spurring it into a trot.

Jakob turned briefly to Matheus “Don’t mind what Anya says. In six months, she’ll most likely be out of Freiburg anyway. Bring my grandson to see me if you have time, ok?”

Matheus nodded and watched until both riders had disappeared from view.

## Latchkey Kid - Part 2

Matheus walked back into the cabin to the bedroom. A thought had occurred to him, and he was curious about the answer. Still holding Druss in the crook of his left arm he picked up the small wooden box and placed it back on the table closer to him. He pushed open the lid and looked inside. He reached in and took out the piece of paper, the family portrait of Anya, Matheus and Druss. She had left it behind.

They got into a routine over the next few weeks. Matheus had found someone to keep an eye on Druss on the occasions when he had to leave the village, although this did not happen very often. Otherwise, Druss went with him wherever he went, including hunting and fishing trips. He spoke to the young boy about everything he was doing, what bait he used and why. What kind of tracks they were following and identifying whatever birds, plants or animals they came across. He did not expect the child to remember or understand any of this but nevertheless this is what he did.

Summer, turned to autumn, and the temperature began to drop again once more. Druss seemed to have inherited his father's hardiness and was not too bothered by the cold. The leaves turned golden brown before falling to the ground. They entered the cabin, and he began readying their meal. In this case that involved reheating a stew one of the neighbours had dropped over. He sat facing his son who was holding the wooden spoon, preparing to dip it into the meat and vegetables in the bowl.

"Blow it first, it's hot".

Druss looked at him and scooped some of the broth up. He paused and blew gently on the contents of the steaming spoon before shoving the spoon into his mouth.

"Good lad", Matheus smiled, following suit and blowing on his food to cool it slightly before he ate it.

He had a good appetite and before long the bowl was empty. He belched and smiled as his father laughed gently.

"Did you like that?"

Druss grinned back, happy at having made his father laugh. He placed the spoon in the bowl and climbed down from his chair. Then as he had been taught, he carefully took hold of the bowl, his two hands cupping the sides firmly and walked to where the wash basin was. Matheus finished soon after and placed his bowl and spoon alongside. They walked out into the yard, the bell from the goats making the familiar sound. He handed Druss some of the dry hay, which he happily fed to the hungry animals. When they had finished, they walked into the village to visit friends and Matheus allowed time for Druss to play with some of the other children. He sat down on a bench close by and leaned against a tree.



“You have your hands full with him. Why not find someone to take care of him?”

He turned to the speaker, the village leader’s wife Rachel. She was an older woman, her iron-grey hair was pulled back from her face and plaited.

He smiled “Good Morning, Rachel. Are you offering?”

She gave a short laugh in reply “Not that I wouldn’t love to Matheus, but I wouldn’t have the energy to keep up with him”. She looked at the children playing. A look of happiness on her face. If you did not know that she had lost her two children in the fight against the Heldannic Knights you would never guess, she hid it well.

“What are your plans for the years end festival Matheus?” she asked, taking an apple from her apron she bit down on it with a satisfying crunch. She pulled another from its place and handed it to him.

He shrugged and took a bite.

“We have plenty of space and we’d be happy to have yourself and Druss over” she offered.

“Thank you, Rachel, I’d like that, and Druss loves your cooking”.

This pleased her and she took another bite. “It’s not my place Matheus. I’m not trying to pry but...”

He turned to look at her waiting, an eyebrow raised in question.

“...will Anya be returning anytime soon?” she asked.

He looked back at the children, at Druss who was chasing one of the other kids and laughing.

“No, Rachel. I don’t think she is”.

Rachel let the questioning end. She took another bite from her apple and rose to her feet with a grunt of effort. She placed a warm hand on his shoulder. “Jorgen has some cider brewed. I’ll have some dropped over to you tomorrow if you like?”

“Careful, Rachel, you’re spoiling me, people might talk” he teased.

She laughed, a rich youthful sound “You’re young enough to be my son, Matheus, but let them talk”. She walked home, through the playing children, mussing the hair of one young boy who was picking his nose. “Stop that, Radja. Go home and tell your mother you’re hungry”. The young boy looked up at her and wiped his hand on his trouser leg before running home.

Autumn turned into winter, the days shortened considerably. He had stocked up plenty of wood and food should they need it but like elsewhere in these lands, they were not truly alone, a tight knit community was always ready to step in should help be needed.

They joined Rachel and Jorgen for the New Year's Celebration. The meal was stupendous, and Jorgen had laid by several casks of cider for the evening. After the meal they all went to the village centre and lit the bonfire. The entire population of Pflenzen were there, warming themselves around the fire, drinking and talking long into the night. A lot of the children were there too but soon got tired. They were wrapped up warm and placed in a large lean to shelter that had been prepared for the occasion. One by one it filled with sleeping children, while the parents continued to talk and sing close by.

The New Year began quite well, a few more families had come to live in the village. The druids gathered in the woods for one of their ceremonies. When spring came, a new generation of goats were born. Druss cradled the newest addition to their growing herd in his arms. It was not until summer, when some traders from Hockstein arrived, that Matheus heard the news from Freiburg. The Notre Dame of Vanya's Cathedral had been burned down a couple of months ago and it had not been an accident. They had stopped the attacks on the abbeys, but the Partisans had claimed their biggest, most noteworthy prize. The total destruction of the jewel of the Heldannic Knights and in the seat of their power, their capital city to boot.

His first thought was that Anya would be extremely angry and upset about this. His second was one of satisfaction. Halvard's forces had gone quiet, and he had wondered if they had run into too much trouble, had lost momentum. Taking out the Cathedral told him this was not the case, and this made him happy. The fight to drive the knights out would go on.

Jakob arrived on Felmont 18<sup>th</sup> the day before Druss's third birthday. He stayed for the week and filled him in on all the news. Out of respect, Matheus kept his satisfaction regarding the destruction of the Cathedral to himself. Jakob said that Anya had not been to see him, but he had been informed that she had been assigned to the Altendorf province which had surprised him but on reflection concluded that Grand Knight Erstenlicht had arranged it. It may have been a test, Nordenham the village where Anya had spent a lot of time was in Altendorf. He doubted very much if anyone there would be happy to see her if she arrived wearing the knight's colours.

Matheus busied himself with finishing his cabin. He extended it to include an extra bedroom in anticipation of Druss needing his own space. He continued the young boys training in animal and plant lore keeping it very basic and appropriate to his understanding. Druss enjoyed wrestling and swimming in the lake where he spent hours jumping off the small pier the fishermen had constructed to moor their boats. Rumours of a Skrimsl of great size in the lake caused Matheus some concern but no one had actually seen the great river wyrm in recent memory.

When winter arrived back in Pflenzen it also coincidentally brought some Heldannic Knights on patrol. Druss sat on his father's shoulders his legs dangling down on either side of his head. He held the top knot like the reins of a horse leaving Matheus's hands free. The big man eyed them with interest wondering if any of them knew Anya. The villagers went about their business

paying little heed to the visitors. The knights left later that day heading across country to Grauenberg. One of them had spoken freely with Oscar the fishmonger, telling him about vampires and nosferatu plaguing the land in this area.

The end of year festival was more of a low-key affair as a lot of the youngsters had left to join the Partisans, answering the call of Halvard Gudmunson. Matheus sat on his chair, outside his cabin, whittling away at a piece of wood with no idea what he was carving. The simple act helped occupy his hands, clearing his mind, and allowing him to think. He felt hobbled here in Pflenzen. There was a war going on between the Partisans and the Heldannic Knights and he was not involved. He had friends putting their lives in danger and he would not be standing by their side. It was a disturbing thought. Added to that, the rumours of undead in the land were becoming more frequent but again he was not free to act to purge the land of their existence. He sighed in frustration and looked at the young child who was carefully piling stones up and packing them with mud. He supposed it was a house of some kind, but it could just as easily have been a cake. He smiled at the child, totally oblivious to all that was going on in the “grown up” world. He sliced another piece of wood watching it skip off the end of his blade and fall to the ground two feet away. When Jakob came for Druss’s birthday, he would persuade him to take his grandson into his care. Once Druss was in safe hands he would decide where he was most needed.

The weeks past and spring turned into summer. Matheus had been talking with Jorgen, the head of the village when a large contingent of twenty Heldannic Knights rode into the village. They gathered outside the village hall and six of their number dismounted and strode towards the door. Jorgen went to meet them, moving cautiously, uneasy in their presence. The mood was more tense, they were not sightseeing, it was all very business-like. The lead Knight explained that the taxes were being raised and that Jorgen was to gather them from the local population, to be ready for collection in one month. When he did not immediately answer that he understood the Knight became aggressive.

“This is what happens when you Heldann scum burn down Cathedrals built to honour our Lady Vanya. If you have a problem with that then take it up with whoever burned it down. Better still if you know who did it and you can tell me, then maybe I can put a word in, and you won’t have to pay any taxes this year. Well?”

“I have no idea who burned down the Cathedral”.

The knight eyed him with contempt. “See you next month then and don’t make me come looking for you”. He looked around “It’s a nice place you have here, it’d be a pity if anything bad happened to it”. He turned then and climbed back into the saddle of his horse. Before they rode off, he pointed at Jorgen “One month”.

Jorgen watched them go without a word. He looked at Matheus who now stood alongside him. With a sigh he grumbled “I knew it wouldn’t last. I knew they wouldn’t leave us alone for much longer”.

Felmont 19<sup>th</sup> rolled around but there was no sign of Jakob. Matheus knew something was wrong. There was no way he would miss his grandson's fourth birthday. He wondered if the destruction of the Cathedral had made things more difficult for the residents of Freiburg, even those of Hattian ancestry. He thought long and hard about it before settling on his course of action. Jakob would be here if he could, so there had to be a major problem. Going there himself would not be advisable with tensions so high and staying in Pflenzen was not a long-term option either. He would take Druss to Ethengar. He would take him to see his grandmother and depending on what he found there, he would determine his next move.

He had four horses for the journey, Druss at four years old would have his own mount. He had been preparing the boy as he had been prepared. On the Steppes everyone rode a horse well and he was determined that his son would be no different. The boy was comfortable in the saddle but for extra security he had tied him to it. Druss had shown his Ethengarian heritage and proved a quick study. He would have more practice over the course of the weeks it would take them to reach Asturi in Ethengar.

They left Pflenzen early one morning towards the end of Felmont. Jakob had still not arrived, and although it caused him some concern there was little he could do about it right now.

They journeyed across land using the trails and paths familiar to Matheus. Once they reached the road that led to Grauenberg they followed this for a few miles, but then cut across country to avoid the town until they came across the trail that brought them to the ruins of Hayavik. It was once a very busy town on the trade route between Wendar and Ethengar but after being repeatedly attacked by the tribes of Ethengar it had never recovered. He planned to set up camp here for a day or two before beginning the second leg of the journey into Ethengar itself.

Druss sat on a rug beside the fire staring at the flames while his father prepared their evening meal. There were several merchants with their caravans and guards. The carts were packed with goods and some of them looked like they had been travelling for many weeks.

"When will we get to grandma?" asked the young boy.

"We'll be travelling for many more weeks and don't call her grandma, ok? Her name is Asturi".

Druss looked away from the flames and to his father. He scratched his neck and took up a stick and dragged it along the ground. "What if I want to call her grandma?"

Matheus was unpacking some meat and stopped to consider the question with a smile. "I tell you what Druss. You call her grandma if that's what you want".

Druss looked at him closely, sensing something was off. "Maybe I'll call her Asturi".

Matheus laughed, drawing looks from the men in the area who were sitting around their own fires.

In the morning when Druss awoke, his father was already up and preparing breakfast. He had laid some fresh clothes and a hat beside him. He put the hat on first, it was rimmed with fur, and he was able to pull the flaps on the sides down to cover his ears.

“Glad you could join us sleepy head”, said Matheus as he stirred the pot of porridge. “Finish getting dressed and then come eat”.

Druss did his best with the clothing, but tying the belt was beyond him. He held it before Matheus who took it from him and secured it tightly. He rubbed the boys head fondly. “We’ll get going again once we’ve had breakfast”. As Druss was eating his porridge Matheus took some salted eggs from a satchel and began to peel the shell away. When it was half done, he handed it to Druss who took a bite of the egg between every spoonful of hot porridge.

They left the ruins of Hayavik and travelled further south through the hills. The trail led gradually higher until they were up on to the Steppes and into Uighur territory. They passed some small camps and were able to stay on occasion in a yurt. The Ethengar were a fierce and warlike people, but they were good hosts and while you stayed in their yurt you were safe and under their protection. They were intrigued by Druss. The young child did not look like a native, having received most of his looks from his mother’s side, yet he spoke the Ethengarian language well. Matheus was known to some of the older men, and they knew his mother was from the Kaeruts tribe with whom they had good relations. They teased Matheus on his full beard, telling him he looked untidy, barbaric. He just laughed along and agreed that he did need a haircut. They also noted that if Druss was to stay with his grandmother, then he would need a haircut too.

They left the yurt the next day and continued the journey, crossing the Streel River into Kaeruts tribal lands. He knew roughly where his mother’s clan should be at this time of year before they would join up with the others in autumn to see out the bad weather together. The wind had picked up, but it was not yet cold. They passed herds of yak and sheep and he spoke with some of the herdsman explaining his and the child’s presence in their land. It was about two weeks since they had left Hayavik when they finally came within sight of Clan Kogatai of the Kaeruts.

A woman walked out of a yurt as the men approached. Putting her hands on her hips she stretched her back, making it crack with a satisfying noise. She gathered some phlegm in her mouth with a strong cough and turning her head spat on the ground. A large dog trotted out of the yurt regarding her briefly before sitting down at her heel to await the riders. Of average height for a woman in these parts she was almost fifty years old, attractive but for the pock marks on her face. A face that had the fangs of a great cat tattooed there. The dog whined, eager to be released from its sitting position. She gave a slight chuckle and whispered “Go, Ransen, say hello”. The dog needed no other encouragement and sprinted full speed towards the riders.

Another woman, slightly younger, joined her. "Who is it, Asturi?" she asked.

"It's your nephew, Nominar and he brings a surprise".

Some of the other clan members notified by the excited barking of the camp dogs emerged from their yurts. Kogatai himself stood beside Asturi "Try at least to look happy that your son has returned".

Asturi touched the tiger teeth necklace around her neck and smiled.

That evening when all the clan had gathered, they had a feast. Matheus handed out the gifts he had brought with them while they ate.

Druss was quiet at first, taking in his surroundings. The other children in the tribe were too shy to approach him, so they sat in a group, whispering and laughing. He did not mind. The dog Ransen had taken a shine to him and sat by his side while he ate. He looked about the large yurt, it was warm and had a strong smell of people and yak fat. It was something he was not quite used to, but he kept these thoughts to himself. His father always said if he did not have something nice to say then it was best to keep quiet. Matheus was speaking with Asturi his grandmother. He had heard some things about her but not much and he was not curious enough about her to ask. The dog stirred by his side, and he rubbed its ears, which caused it to settle down again contentedly. He looked closely at his grandmother, she was not a tall woman but in some ways his father seemed small beside her. He was big and strong, the biggest and strongest man he knew but Asturi was a lot scarier. Even when she smiled or laughed the teeth tattooed on her face made her look fearsome. He would be happy when they returned to Pflenzen and happier still when his mother returned.

Asturi met his eyes with hers and walked towards him, Matheus followed close by. "He's a handsome boy, must take after his mother", she smiled, that fearsome cat like smile. "We'll have to do something about that hair though, he looks a mess". She ruffled the hair on his head. Her grandson looked at her, not saying a word. "Doesn't say much, does he?"

"He speaks when he has something to say, you don't have to worry about that", said Matheus, aware and uneasy about the appraising eye his mother was casting on his son.

"When are you leaving?" she asked.

"Two days, once he's settled in"

Druss pulled away from his grandmother, understanding but disbelief on his young face. "I'm going too, papa".

Matheus knelt, in front of Druss, his mother stood beside him. "I must go back, Druss. There's a vampire problem I need to help with. You will stay with your grandmother while I'm gone".

Druss's brow creased in consternation. "You said not to call her that. Her name is Asturi you said. You said she wouldn't like being called grandmother!"

Matheus turned his head to Asturi, looking to her for help.

Her eyes flicked to him and then back to the child. "You're right Druss. My name is Asturi, and no one calls me grandmother". She looked back at Matheus who nodded almost imperceptibly, encouraging her to continue. "I would like you to stay here with me and Ransen. You can see he likes you. I'm sure you'll become great friends".

Druss looked at his father. "You'll come back, when all the vampires are dead?"

His father nodded "It might take a little while but yes, I will come back".

The young child looked at his grandmother. "Ok Asturi, I'll stay with you". The dog stepped forward licking his face as if it understood and was thrilled with the decision.

The next day Druss had his haircut. His grandmother produced some scissors and got him to sit down. She proceeded to chop away his mane and it fell to the floor all around him.

"Mama says I'm her brave little lion" he said, a note of uncertainty in his voice as he spoke, as if he was unsure if this was still true.

"Your mother is right I'm sure" replied Asturi taking up a straight blade and shaving away the stubble of his hair, until his head was smooth.

"But a lion has a mane" he said holding some of his hair in his hand before letting it fall from his fingers.

Asturi did not reply at first, she was concentrating on not cutting her grandson with the razor-sharp implements. "You don't need your hair to be brave. The tiger has no mane, the wolf, the eagle. What makes you brave is inside you. If you keep it strong and keep it fed, then no-one can take it away from you. Do you understand?"

"I think so" he replied quietly, raising his hand to the smooth dome of his head. He moved his hands around. All his hair was gone, except for a fringe of hair that hung almost to his eyebrows and two long clumps of hair, one behind each ear that Asturi was braiding into place.

Ransen sniffed around the strands of hair littering the ground at the feet of the boy and then looked up at Druss. He moved forward and leaped up on to his hind legs resting his paws on the boy's knees.

"You see, Ransen likes it. Much better" she laughed.

Druss grinned and rubbed the dog as it licked his hands.

The rest of the day was spent getting to know the other children. Most were a bit older than Druss or too young and still being cared for by their mothers, apart from Loi-Tan, Nominar's

youngest daughter who was eight. She was a pretty little girl, with hazel eyes and ears that stuck out. They ran around the camp, chasing each other or throwing sticks for Ransen and the other dogs to chase.

Matheus kept his distance, letting his son settle in as best he could before he left the next day. He stood with Kogatai, the clan head, a short burly man with broad shoulders and a long moustache that was greased with yaks' fat and hung to mid-chest. He had the strands of hair behind his ears tied back, but having lost the hair on his head many years ago there was no fringe above his eyes. Matheus was leaving three of the four horses behind as a gift to Kogatai in appreciation for taking his son into the clan. They spoke for some time as Kogatai was very interested in what was going on in the Heldann Freeholds.

The next day the camp was being packed up. All the yurts were being dismantled and packed away with speedy efficiency. The animals were herded together, and the clan moved on to find fresh grass for their horses and flock to eat. Matheus went with them for the first few miles before pulling on the reins and stopping his horse.

Asturi was in a small cart pulled by a yak, with Druss sitting beside her wrapped in warm furs. She exchanged glances with Matheus and then put her arm around Druss. "It's time now to say goodbye to your father. He must go now, but he'll return, ok?"

Druss nodded and looked at his father, waiting.

"Take care of Asturi while I'm gone. Remember you are my brave lion". When Druss nodded in response, Matheus gathered the reins again more tightly and guided the horse away, back towards the Heldann Freeholds.

Asturi looked down quickly at her grandson but could not see his face as the furs around his head were blocking her view. She urged the yak onwards and the wheels began to turn once more. Moving into line with the rest of her clan they carried on to the next grazing spot where they would once again erect their camp.

Druss stared ahead watching the head of the yak as it walked forward, the creaking of the cart became a soothing noise. Although he had only awoke an hour ago, he was already beginning to drift off to sleep. His dreams were troubled. He stood on the windswept steppes with this father. It was cold but he was not shivering. In the distance he could see his mother was walking away. He held his father's hand and called her name, but she did not stop or even turn around. He noticed then that he was no longer holding his father's hand. He turned but his father was gone. Looking around frantically, biting back the panic he spotted his father. He tried to run after him, but his legs would not move. He called after his father, but like his mother before, Matheus did not turn and was soon out of sight. His eyes welled up with tears, his lips quivered. He fought to be brave, but he was losing the battle. He became aware of a presence then, it was warm and comforting. He turned and saw a very large, striped cat. He had never seen one before but knew instinctively it was called a tiger. It came closer to him and nuzzled



him, before lying down. He should have been afraid, but he was not. He lay down next to the tiger, which blocked the wind, its body warm. In his dreams he slept once more, this time in peace.

### Latchkey Kid - Part 3

They moved camp every few days as the animals used up the available grass in the area. He soon got used to the routine and despite being only four years old he helped out where he could. This usually involved keeping Ransen and the other dogs in check. The other children had grown bored with him, the novelty had worn off. There were few children his age and only Loi-Tan was happy to entertain him. She was a talker, and he was happy to listen, so they got on very well.

As the seasons changed, Kogatai planned their route back to the winter camping ground where they would stay until the spring. Asturi would warn him if there was a storm coming. When this happened, they had to move carefully and prepare to set up their shelters earlier than Kogatai wanted to.

Loi-Tan told Druss about the big celebration they would all go to. She had lots of friends that she only saw at this time, so she was very excited about it. Druss was worried, he did not have any friends, only Loi-Tan. What would happen if she met her friends, and she left him too? He remembered the tiger, Asturi and his father's words about being brave and he could hear his mother's voice in his mind "My brave little lion". If Loi-Tan left, he decided, then he would be alright. It was nice to have friends, they were fun to be around and helped to pass the day, but he did not need them and when he got older, he would not need anybody.

A few days later they met some of the other clans. The people were excited and happy to see each other, greeting each other warmly. Druss stayed close by his grandmother. His friends had all left him, so happy were they to see the children from the other clans. Asturi did nothing to soothe or reassure him. She herself seemed distracted and only paid attention to him when he needed to eat.

They stayed in place for over a week, each day, more and more clans joined them. Then it was time to pull down the yurts and move on again to the wintering site where they would stay until the spring.

His grandmother spent a lot of time sitting on some cushions. To him it looked like she was asleep or thinking with her eyes closed. She could stay that way for a long time. He grew bored and picked up her shamanic drum. It was round with some strips of leather hanging from it. He was tempted to play around with it but the last time he had she had become very cross and slapped him, telling him it was not a toy. He placed it back on its stand and walked outside.

"Druss" called Kogatai the clan leader, upon seeing him emerge. "Go with Madutai, he needs help watching the sheep".

He nodded to show he understood and walked to where they kept the sheep penned in overnight. Ransen, lying just outside the yurt, lifted his head from his paws to regard them and then returned to his former position.

Druss knew Madutai only a little. He was a quiet boy and did not really get involved in the games the children played. He did join in sometimes and would laugh along but he was always the first one to stop laughing. He was older than Druss at about ten years old. Tall for his age and of slim build. He turned to look at Druss as he approached and then resumed his work. He walked to the gate which was no more than three long poles. "Come and help me with these".

Druss ran forward and took one end of the pole and lifted it off while Madutai held the other end. Once they had cleared the way, Madutai walked in among the sheep, whistling and prodding one or two with his staff to get them moving. "Watch closely it's not too difficult".

Druss nodded, his face serious.

Two dogs were nearby waiting to be summoned to work, their tails wagging in anticipation.

A whistle from Madutai and they moved the sheep out and began herding them to a patch of fresh grass. The dogs were on the flanks in case any sheep left the formation, but it was a peaceful morning, and the sheep were content to be guided to breakfast.

"What happened to Berke?" Druss asked.

Madutai shrugged "He was hurt yesterday when we were bringing them back to the pen. Twisted his ankle".

They walked about five hundred metres from their camp before Madutai indicated they would stop here. He was very interested in Asturi and asked Druss a few questions. As the clan shaman she was highly respected and although the children sometimes joked about Kogatai their clan leader, absolutely no-one would dare mock Asturi even when they were well out of sight or earshot. Druss as her grandson stayed in the same yurt as her and so earned some of this respect by way of association. It was one of the reasons the children had stopped playing with him Madutai explained.

This made no sense to Druss, but he did not comment. He was vague in his answers to Madutai who did not press the matter.

Madutai explained what was involved in keeping the sheep safe. For the most part it was rather boring, but you had to stay alert as there were wolves and mountain lions that enjoyed the taste of mutton. He preferred the wolves as you usually had some warning of their approach, but the mountain lions seemed to spring from nowhere. They were rarely seen and were a ferocious animal to encounter. The dogs were usually enough to keep them at bay but not always.

The day past uneventfully but Druss enjoyed the experience and was beaming with joy when Madutai told him he did well, and he would see him again tomorrow. "We'll be using the horses and don't forget to bring your bow and we can do some practice".

He was so excited talking about his day to Asturi as she poured some soup into a bowl for him. She only grunted in reply and did not seem as thrilled about the day as he was. He did not let it spoil the feeling. That night he had trouble getting to sleep so excited was he for the next day to begin.

Asturi knelt by his side, making sure he was tucked in warm. The yurt was very dark with only one light illuminating it, but he could see a smile on her face. "Go to sleep or you'll be no good to Madutai. Foolish child".

The days fell into a steady routine for Druss. He had taken Berke's place alongside Madutai, so each day he was out from the camp watching the sheep, talking, horse riding and practicing with his bow.

One day he and Madutai had to herd the sheep together and lead them to the gathering, where Ulatai Khan of the Kaeruts was waiting. All the clans were now in one place and Madutai explained that all the horses, sheep, yak, goats, everything belonged to Ulatai. They would count them all and, in the spring distribute them out to each of the clans again. If their clan had performed well, they would receive additional livestock to care for.

The next day there was a huge feast and Asturi had some new clothes for Druss. Some of the recently born children were presented to the Khan, where they were blessed and given a name.

Loi-Tan had two sisters, including Barbar who was already married into the neighbouring Yugatais tribe and was living with her husband's clan. This time it was the turn of Kwelon, the second born. Her parents had met with the parents of a young man at last year's Horse Fair and arrangements had been made for marriage. Kwelon's parents announced this contract to the Khan who gave his permission for the date to be set. According to Loi-Tan it would take place in the spring.

It was a very eventful night, with lots of singing and exciting stories of adventure and heroes past, told by the shamans of all the gathered clans, including his grandmother, Asturi.

He was late to bed that night as all the children were out and getting into all types of mischief. The adults did not seem to be bothered by this at all but had no trouble cuffing a child across the back of the head if they got too cheeky.

As the sheep had been returned to the Khan and were now being turned out to graze together with those of all the other clans, he and Madutai were not needed every day to keep a watchful eye on them. Despite this, he was up early, his body clock attuned to the rhythm of his life.

Asturi got up and took some food from a container. "Take this food with you and the waterskin".

"But we won't need it, we won't be going far".

"Do as I tell you".

The boy nodded and gathered up the items.

“Take your bow”.

Druss looked at his grandmother about to protest but decided against it. He took up his bow and the quiver of arrows.

Her face was serious, but she grunted in approval.

He walked out of the yurt, Ransen was wandering close by and came up to him in greeting.

He went to where he had agreed to meet the others but only Madutai was there. “Is no one else coming?” Druss asked.

Madutai shrugged. “We’ll give them a few minutes and then we’ll be off”.

They had agreed last night at the height of the festivities that they would go hunting. They were inspired by the stories that they had heard about their ancestors and decided that they would set out early. Madutai knew a place where there were plenty of rabbits and gerbils. Loi-Tan arrived a few minutes later, with her sling looped into her belt, followed by the twins, brother and sister, Noyon and Waruni. Then came Berke, the lack of sleep obvious by his constant yawning. He had neglected to bring anything at all and declined to return to his yurt to grab some supplies.

“How are you going to catch anything without a bow or sling eh?” asked Loi-Tan disapprovingly.

“I have these haven’t I” he replied holding up his hands.

This caused the others to laugh good naturedly. Berke was a good-humoured soul. He was always joking and never took offence when he was the butt of any jokes, which was quite often.

They took their horses and set off with Madutai showing the way. They rode for about half an hour heading north towards the mountains. Berke was telling them about a hakomon called Bakalgu that lived around the place they were headed. Druss looked to Madutai to see if he was going to laugh at the joke, but it seemed that for once Berke was not joking.

The boy Noyon piped in “You never said anything about a hakomon, Madutai”. He had pulled up on his reins stopping his horse, awaiting an answer.

Madutai did not stop “If you want to go back Noyon, go ahead. Besides we won't be going anywhere near him”.

Druss had heard of these hakomon from Madutai during one of their conversations while herding the sheep. They were powerful magic users, different to the clan shaman and they lived alone, usually in one place but sometimes wandering about. Bakalgu usually stayed in one place but there were occasions when he had been to a clan camp.

Noyon had continued with them on the urging of his sister, Waruni. She was very pretty but all the boys stayed away as Noyon was very protective of her and was quick to start a fight.

The route took them into the Land of Purple Grass, which lay in a depression in the northwest region of the Steppes. They paused for a few minutes allowing the horses to graze on the thick purple grass that grew here all year round.

“What about the Gostai goblins?” asked Noyon, speaking up again.

This time Loi-Tan responded, “Don’t worry, I think they’re smart enough to stay away from the hakomon”.

The others burst out laughing and even Noyon managed a nervous smile. As usual Madutai was the first to stop.

They reached the hunting ground and spent a few hours running through the high grass in pursuit of their prey, their imagination running wild. They were great warriors, and the gerbils were vicious creatures from the Land of the Black Sand.

They spent so much of the time planning how they were going to take on these monsters and laughing at missed shots then they actually spent catching anything. Nevertheless, by the end of the day they had a respectable haul to show for their efforts.

They sat down in a circle while Loi-Tan prepared the fire. Druss opened his satchel and handed out the food Asturi had prepared for him. He passed around the waterskin and was surprised that when he received it back it was as full as when he first held it. He remarked on this to the others, and they were in awe of this magical item.

“I wish my grandmother was a shaman”, grumbled Berke.

“Head up to old Bakalgu and see if he has any magic items to spare” goaded Noyon.

After the fire was ready, they gutted and skinned some of the gerbils and cooked them on wooden skewers. There was very little meat on them after all the fat had dripped off, hissing into the fire, but they were extremely tasty.

The children were laughing and joking when the sound of a wolf howling in the distance quieted them. They sat in silence and listened, exchanging glances. Druss was calm but he could see a concerned look on the faces of some of his companions.

After a few seconds, Noyon spoke again “It’s getting late, maybe we should start heading back?”

Madutai nodded and after putting out the fire, they collected their horses and started home.

They arrived back at the camp, tired after their day hunting. It had been fun, probably the best day Druss had had so far. They agreed to do it again but with winter closing in it was unlikely to

happen until the spring. He walked into the yurt passing by the ever-watchful dog. He had heard the beat of the shamanic drum so knew that Asturi was home. She was chanting softly to herself, her eyes closed. He tried to be as quiet as he could so as not to disturb her. He walked to the small table and unpacked the waterskin and two of the cooked gerbils. He sat quietly until she finished and smiled when she opened her eyes and saw him.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“Good” he smiled. “I brought some gerbils for you”.

“So, I see, thank you”.

After a lengthy silence, he asked about the hakomon.

“Stay away from him Druss. Bakalgu is an old friend, but he likes children even less than I do, so be warned”.

“Madutai says he collects the skulls of goblins”.

“He’s half right”, his grandmother replied “He collects the skulls of goblins .... and children”.

Druss looked at her his mouth partially open in shock “Children, really, why?”

“Children are annoying, and I told you he doesn’t like them”.

He slept that night, but his dreams were filled with visions of a fearsome hakomon on the hunt for children to add to his collection of skulls.

Winter had arrived and the snow began to fall quite heavily in case there was any doubt. Most people did not stray too far from the camp and were content to stay in their yurts, mending clothes or fashioning a new composite bow.

Most of the days the children were up early. The difficulties Druss had with making friends was no longer an issue. They had got over the fact that his grandmother was a shaman and had welcomed him as one of them.

Around halfway through the winter there was another festival. Druss had begun to look forward to these as it was a time when they got to see more of the other children from the other clans. Everyone was needed to help organise and prepare and Asturi was involved in some rituals that would help ensure the tribes fortunes for the year to come.

There were a lot of friendly rivalries and games such as the eagle hunt competition between clans. For this competition they used the eagles to hunt wolves. The young hunters would drive a wolf out into open while the older men with the best eagles took to the high ground to wait. When the wolf was spotted the eagles would launch from the arm of the hunter and swoop down on to the fleeing animal and the hunters would follow along on horseback. When the

wolf was finally taken down by an eagle, the owner was declared the winner. He would then get to shout out the name of his ancestor.

Maduatai's father had one of the finest eagles for about seven years. It was a tradition that when the time came the eagle would be freed. Madutai went with his father up into the hills to set their eagle free so that she could breed and bring fortune to the clan.

Things settled back into a normal routine once more for a while. The children were walking in amongst the numerous yurts and came across some of the clan leaders and their shamans examining the huge herd of horses they had. Berke told him they were looking for the most magnificent, powerful white horse. When they had chosen one, they would perform a special sacrifice and the horse's spirit would return to look after the herd and keep it safe. Druss was not sure how a dead horse could keep anyone safe, so he made a mental note to ask his grandmother about this.

The weeks passed and the older children spoke of how the clans would soon be breaking up for the spring. This set the scene for another great festival which once more involved lots of food and drink. Noyon had managed to take a clay jug of kurmiss. All the children gathered around the back of one of the yurts on the edge of the camp away from all the festivities. There were nervous but excited glances as they goaded each other to be the first to drink the strong alcoholic beverage. In the end Noyon took the first swig. They waited a few seconds and when he did not collapse in a heap, they all reached for the jug to try some. Druss did not see the attraction of the foul-smelling liquid and wrinkled his nose and shook his head when Madutai offered him some. About thirty minutes later the exuberant feeling wore off and several of them were sick, the others looked pale. They staggered off to their yurts hoping to avoid their parents and live till the morning.

On the Day of Parting, Ulatai, the Khan of the Kaeruts divided up the herd once more amongst the assembled clan heads. His son and future Khan, Huaji was there, learning what he needed to know for his future role.

Kogatai was smiling broadly as he called for them to bring the animals out to their camp site. He had done well the previous season and the Khan had rewarded him with more sheep. He gave orders for an immediate departure and soon Clan Kogatai of the Kaeruts were on their way again across the Sea of Grass.

The weather improved and the children would sometimes spend the nights outdoors under the stars. The parents encouraged this practice but ensured that they had the large hunting dogs along for added protection.

The days spent minding the flock were usually uneventful but there were moments of danger and excitement. Wolf packs and mountain lions were always on the lookout for straggling sheep and sometimes they were successful. Kogatai was never happy about this and would fly



into a rage at them if they lost any lambs. Wolves could go on a killing frenzy and wipe out an entire flock. It was also not uncommon for a hungry wolf to follow a herd for hundreds of miles. Whenever they lost an animal, Madutai would take the brunt of this, but he made sure that Berke and Druss got their fair share of the bruises.

Asturi noted the bruised face of Druss when he returned on one of those days.

“What happened to you?”

He shrugged, “A mountain lion got one of the sheep”.

With a glint of mirth in her eye she asked “And he gave you that bruise? You were lucky it wasn’t you that got dragged off”.

Druss’s fifth birthday came and went but no one remembered to celebrate it. It was only weeks later when the parent of one of the clan’s children came to the yurt complaining about Druss. “That boy beat my Gokti. He’s lost a tooth”.

Asturi looked at Druss and then back at the mother “Oruni, boys fight. What would you have me do?”

“I’m sorry Asturi but Gokti is only six. Druss should fight someone his own age”.

Druss looked at Gokti, his young face, defiant. He was not at all happy with Gokti running off and crying to his mother. Then he looked at Asturi when she called his name.

“Druss, how old are you?”

He thought for a moment, unsure. “I was four but that was a long time ago”.

Asturi looked at Oruni who was very uncomfortable bringing such a matter to the respected shaman. “His father brought him here when he was four and that was just before we wintered, which means that Druss is only five”.

Oruni was about to retort in disbelief, the child looked a lot bigger than five, but she held her temper in check. She bowed her head slightly and walked away, grabbing Gokti and dragging him with her. Then Asturi turned to Druss “I think we missed your birthday”.

It’s alright grand...Asturi. It doesn’t matter”.

“Of course, it matters foolish child” she replied gently. “Each year is precious. It should be marked”.

Two days later she brought him to Kogatai and told him that she would be gone for a few days. Kogatai listened as she explained that she needed to take Druss into the hills. She had spoken with the spirits and there were lessons he needed to learn and trials to be faced.

She took him to a place where they stayed for a few days. It was a small, shallow cave carved into the side of a hill, a place she had been to many times before. There were a handful of trees and some thorny bushes. "Remember this place Druss, I will bring you back here on your sixth birthday. You are very young to be undertaking this, but I believe it is necessary. Your father was almost seven when I brought him here the first time and you are younger, but it is as it should be. You will stay here alone tonight but I will come back for you in the morning".

He nodded and walked to the cave and unpacked his few belongings, a blanket, his bow, a quiver of arrows and a knife.

It was not until the afternoon of the next day when Asturi came back for him. He was sitting on a rock waiting for her, his belongings packed and ready.

When they arrived back at the campground the other children made it clear they wanted him to tell them what had happened. There was not much to say, and they were unsure if he was keeping something to himself, some shamanic secret. He insisted that it was just a few nights camping out but that he would be going back next year and staying there alone.

The next few days were routine. Druss, Madutai and Berke were watching over the flock when a commotion broke out amongst the sheep. A blur of movement amongst the terrified animals caught his eye.

"Lion!" he shouted, sprinting forward with a staff in his hand.

Maduati and Berke whistled, and their two dogs came running.

The terrified bleating of a sheep in obvious pain and the growling of a lion as it pulled its prey to the ground let Druss know where to go. The lion had a firm grasp of the sheep at the back of its neck and was trying to drag the stricken creature away to be consumed.

"Raarrgh" roared the young boy hoping it would drop the sheep and run.

The lion dropped the sheep alright, but it did not run. It growled in anger, the ears flat against its head. It was crouched down low and regarded the sheep briefly as it staggered away, its wool stained red with blood. The lion roared again, it was sleek and brown with white fur around its face. The teeth were bared and it was coming slowly forward.

With his heart thumping in his chest, Druss held his ground. He knew that as soon as he turned his back the lion would be on him. He shouted again trying to intimidate the lion, but it did not appear to be working. The barking of the dogs was a relief to him, and they came bounding over the ridge to engage, barrelling into the lion without a second thought. He moved back a few paces until he was joined by Madutai and Berke.

There was a yelp of pain from one of the dogs amidst the roaring of the lion and the barking of the dogs as they fought. Berke readied his bow but was unable to get a clear shot at the lion amidst the tumbling, snapping bodies. In the end the lion broke free and leaped away,

bounding over some rocks. The dogs gave chase a short while, barking at the departing lion until Madutai's whistle called them back. One of them was hurt but it did not look too bad.

They walked quickly back to the sheep and began herding them together. Along with the blood-stained sheep they lead them back to camp.

Kogatai was very impressed with them and praised their courage.

When everything settled down, the boys were shaking with nervous energy. It had been a very intense experience and they retold the story many times to each of the children that crowded around asking to hear about it. Druss was given most of the praise, but he insisted that the dogs had done all the fighting.

Asturi greeted him at the door to the yurt. She looked at him, checking him for cuts or scrapes. "Foolish child", she admonished him.

He was a bit upset at this after spending the last hour basking in pride and glory. "But I saved the sheep".

"You saved the sheep? How many sheep do we have and how many grandsons do I have?" she asked placing a hand on his shoulder and leading him into the yurt. Ransen was sniffing Druss and followed them inside.

"I had to be brave. You said I had to feed it and keep it strong"

"Feed it? You almost fed the lion and then where would we be. Foolish child".

He appeared confused and crestfallen. Her expression softened and she embraced him, pulling him into her body. "Druss, what you did was very brave, but you gave me a scare. I told your father I would take care of you. It hasn't even been a year".

She looked at him and ran her hand over his head, the short bristles of hair on his scalp. "Sit down".

He did as he was bid while she prepared her blade to shave his scalp.

"Stay away from lions ok".

"I'll try", he replied.

She laughed "Yes, please do and next time take your bow. Why are you always leaving your bow behind? So, like your father".

Thankfully the next couple of weeks passed without incident and the date for the much talked about Horse Fair arrived. Loi-Tan was a bit upset as her sister, Kwelon, was to be wed and after that she would only see her when the clans came together at the Wintering Sites. She began spending a lot more time with Noyon's sister, Waruni and began to drift away from the boys, tired of their immaturity. As this year's horse fair was just outside Kaeruts land and into

Yugatai's land Druss got to meet some new people from a different tribe and Loi-Tan got to see her older sister, Barbar.

There was talk of a different tribe in the south east called the Hajiks. Interested in hunting, Maduatai had relayed the tale of a red wolf to his younger peers. The colour red was an important symbol amongst the Kaeruts and used in a lot of their clothing, so this got their attention. The Hajiks herds were being stalked by this animal, so the men resolved to catch and kill it. The hunters would mimic the wolf call and listen for a response. Wolves could never resist answering this call and so give their location away. They used this tactic to call the wolf and lure it out so that they could kill it. In this way the Hajiks hunters killed a wolf only to realise it was a lactating female and would have cubs nearby. They located the wolf cubs and took them, and this was when things got really bad because the pack returned for revenge.

One night a horse was killed and dragged out of its pen, and they knew by the tracks it was the big red wolf. This red wolf was smart and would attack a goat or sheep, and then withdrawing before the hunters got there, it would circle around and attack again. In the end their shaman said that the only way to appease it was to release the cubs, which they did. The Kaeruts children took this as a personal triumph over a rival clan and cheered.

Druss kept his promise to stay away from mountain lions but unfortunately the mountain lions did not make the same promise. It was an almost unheard-of scenario. The lion had approached the camp undetected by the dogs or any of the clan members. The timing was uncanny as it came to their yurt while Asturi was in a spirit trance. Ransen her ever present bodyguard was the only thing that saved her.

The sound of a fight, a terrible commotion, a life and death battle woke some of the clan. Druss who was outside looking at the stars, came running and pulled back the flap of the yurt. He saw two tumbling bodies rolling around the yurt, knocking things over as they tore lumps out of each other, his grandmother sat in the centre, unmoving, locked in a trance. He could see that Ransen was mortally wounded and without a second thought he joined the fray. The lion turned from the dog to engage with the new opponent.

Druss was getting mauled but drove his knife into the lion's ribs, it roared in pain and broke away, limping out through the tear in the back of the yurt it had used to enter. Ransen, rallied and gave chase expending the last of his life energy to ensure Asturi was safe.

Druss ran after them catching up as they had their final battle. The dog's powerful jaws were clamped down on the throat of the lion and squeezing hard. The lion in trying to break free from the death grip and being dragged around, was using the claws of its hind legs to rake the dog's body but Ransen would not let go. Their struggle slowed down and they lay in a crumpled heap, their limbs and bodies entwined.

Druss ran up but walked the remaining few feet, his bow in his hands, an arrow nocked. He took aim at the lion's body afraid to shoot in case he hit Ransen. When he was less than four feet

away and sure of the shot, he fired the arrow. It pierced the body with a thud causing the lion to emit a last groan before it finally died.

He knelt beside Ransen, untangling him from the lion's embrace, whispering soothing words as the dog whimpered in pain. He rested the dog's head on his lap and stroked his neck, his hands were soon covered in blood. The dog raised its head with a whine and licked his face, then it sagged in his arms. He buried his face in the dog's bloody fur and wept.

The men from his clan came soon after, roused by the fighting. He felt a hand on his shoulder and heard his name called. He asked them to bring Ransen's body with them. Asturi had awakened from her trance and was outside the yurt when they arrived back. She brought him inside and washed the blood from his body, treating the wounds that he had sustained while helping Ransen against the lion. She shook her head disapprovingly. "Foolish child".

He was quiet and as he did not appear too badly hurt, she shook her head once again but said no more, letting him process what had happened. His friends came to see him and hear about the fight. He was largely unresponsive and after a while Asturi told them to come back tomorrow.

They sat opposite each other at the small table. Asturi had prepared a light meal knowing that once the shock wore off his appetite would return but right now, he was uninterested. He poked and prodded at his food, pushing it around the bowl. She raised the spoon to her mouth but watched him carefully. His young face looked thoughtful.

"When you go to sleep sitting up..."

"Not sleep, it is a trance" she corrected him.

He looked up at her briefly and then returning his attention to his bowl of food he continued to poke and prod at it like it was somehow helping him to formulate his thoughts. "When you trance, Ransen was there. He made you safe". He looked at her then. "You won't be safe anymore. You don't have a guard dog".

She looked at him, her eyes twinkling "You can be my guard dog".

He thought about this and seemed to come to a conclusion, shaking his head "No, the lion killed the guard dog, but I could be a lion. They are bigger and fight better".

"That's a good idea, Druss. You can be my lion, your mother's brave lion. You can keep me safe when I'm in my trance."

"Why did the lion come into the yurt? I thought they only ate sheep".

"No, sometimes they eat people too. Now eat your food and go to sleep. You look tired".

He left the table not having eaten much and climbed into his furs and closed his eyes. Although his body was tired and the wounds from the lion claws stung, his mind kept him awake,

relentlessly going over the events. The noise of the animals as they fought and wounded each other. The noise and commotion, the breaking pots and knocked over furniture. Those last moments with Ransen, so terribly wounded, as he licked Druss's face. The feel of Ransen's fur on his face. The taste of blood. The tears flowing from his eyes. Then the process would start all over again from the start and he did not know how to stop it.

Kogatai the clan leader came to the yurt to speak with Asturi. They spoke in hushed whispers, but his hearing was keen and seeing as he could not sleep, he listened.

"What happened Asturi? I don't understand how a lion would tear open the back of a tent to get in. They're not that smart".

"That was no ordinary lion, Kogatai. It was bewitched. This clan has an enemy".

"But who, why?"

"That I do not know, but I do not think it will be the last attempt. We must be watchful".

He looked over at Druss, "The child's wounds, why did you not heal them?" he asked.

"The wounds and the pain are part of the lesson, Kogatai. If I take away the pain, the lesson will not be learned".

"What lesson Asturi? He's just a child" said Kogatai in exasperation.

"Do you trust me Kogatai?"

"Of course," he replied.

"I will consult with my spirit guide".

Kogatai left then and Druss lay awake a while longer thinking about what he had heard, and wondering what a witch lion was. He thought again of the mountain lion and the tale of the red wolf and considered the similarities, before he finally drifted off to sleep.

He had been with the clan a year now, a year since he had seen his father and it was soon time again to head to the wintering site. They were making sure to graze the animals on the best grass, as much as they could. This would help them put on enough fat to get them through the winter.

Once more the clans reunited for the winter months and things slowed down somewhat. The snow was heavy this year and they were confined to camp as it was too deep for the horses to wade through and too dangerous for the sheep, who had to be fed with bales of hay put by for times like this. Heavy snow blanketed the animals and any people as they walked.

Madutai told him that Kogatai was worried about losing sheep in snow drifts or to the always hungry predators. His father had told them that they had lost half the animals one year the weather was so bad. It was also the reason why there were not many children of Druss's age in the camp, a truly terrible year.

It was on one of these bright, cold mornings while the boys were out that a dragon flew by high overhead. It looked like a bird to Druss, but the boys assured him it was a dragon and probably a big one.

"That must be Khanistar", shouted Noyon, naming the most fearsome dragon, a great blue that was said to have her lair somewhere on the world mountain, at the centre of the Land of the Black Sand.

"No, I don't think it is" said Berke after a pause, his hand shielding his eyes from the sun, and straining to see. "Khanistar doesn't have wings. That one does".

"What are you talking about, Khanistar doesn't have wings? How can she fly then?" scoffed Noyon.

Berke just shrugged and Noyon deciding the matter settled and that he was correct moved on to another topic.

Looking after sheep began to bore the young Druss and he used his off days to go exploring. He never usually got very far as the snow was deep but one evening, he persevered and climbed on to a large rock. The wind swept the fringe of hair from his eyes, the cold was biting but invigorating. In the distance he heard a wolf howl, and moments later it was answered by another wolf some distance away. He took a deep breath and mimicked the howl and then waited. He smiled when the wolf gave an answering howl.

"Come away from there, foolish child".

He did not have to turn around to know who had spoken. He gave one more howl, dragging it out for as long as he could. Then he climbed down and walked to his grandmother who was watching him closely. They walked back to the yurt, and she sat down heavily on one of their chairs.

"There's some fish there on the table, take the knife and clean them. I'll cook them".

He nodded and picked up two juicy ones, slicing each belly open with the knife and pulling the insides out. He placed the guts in a bowl, which he would keep for one of the camp dogs. He scrapped the scales off and then walked outside to wash the fish. When he returned Asturi was heating some water and preparing the vegetables, without looking at him she asked, "What were you saying to the wolves?"

He smiled and shrugged "I don't know. Hello, maybe?"

She nodded and sliced some carrots. "Put the fish in the water".

He dropped them into the water and then sprinkled in a handful of herbs and salt. She stood by his side and scrapped the vegetables from the chopping board into the pot.

When the food was ready, they ate in silence. Asturi nodded her head in satisfaction as she ate her meal.

"Can I go see the wolves in the spring?"

She looked at him, picking a fish bone from her mouth and placing it on the table. "I know what your mother would say to that".

He looked at her and slurped some of the potato into his mouth, opening his mouth to allow some cool air in as it burned his mouth slightly. When he had swallowed it, he said simply "Don't tell her".

She allowed herself a small wry grin. "What about your father?"

"Papa would let me".

She grunted, suppressing a short laugh "He would, would he?"

Druss nodded, smiling as he scooped up some more food from his bowl.

"I'll be bringing you to the place in a few months remember?"

"Uh-huh" he replied.

"You'll be staying there alone for a few days. Maybe you'll see some wolves then".

This appeared to satisfy the young boy and he gave all his attention to his bowl of food, finishing it quickly.

"So, like your father. You'll be big and strong like he is".

The months passed until it was AC 978 Felmont 19. This time Asturi did not forget his birthday, his sixth. He was given a new knife that he would take along for his camping trip in two weeks. Kogatai did his best to talk Asturi out of it, but it was not to be. They left their Kaeruts camp and arrived at the small cave, mid-way through the second day.

Before night had fallen, she made sure that he was organised, giving him a few last-minute reminders on lighting fires and staying safe. She had left him enough food to last for a week but told him she would be back on the fourth morning. She gave him a stick with directions to mark the stick each morning with his knife. She would return on the day he made the fourth mark. Then she got back on her horse and rode away.



He sat there watching her go and then when she had disappeared into the darkness he listened. He strained his ears until the noise of the hooves on rocks and gravel were swallowed up by the silence. He continued to sit for a while, until his stomach grumbled reminding him to eat. He prepared his small meal and after eating it he climbed under his furs and slept.

The next couple of days were interesting. At first, he was a bit nervous about being alone, but then he got used to it. By day three he was missing his friends and was looking forward to Asturi's return, when he heard a wolf howl. He stood up and walked outside the small cave waiting for another howl so that he could locate it. It was another five minutes before it did. He ran up the slope behind the cave to get to higher ground. There was another howl and he changed direction and went that way, excited by the chance to see it. There were no sheep or goats to mind so he was at ease. The thought that the wolf might see him as a potential meal never once occurred to him. When there was no noise from the wolf, Druss raised his hands to his mouth and imitated the howl. A broad grin erupted on his face when there was an answering call. He found himself leaving the high ground and heading downhill to some trees and brush. Several times he called out, sometimes to elicit a response, sometimes to answer the wolf's lonely sounding call. He came to some rocks and climbed up grasping the top and peering over. Down below in a small clearing he could see several wolves and much to his delight a number of wolf cubs. The wind was in his face, so he knew they did not smell him, even though he was quite close. Despite his precautions one of the adults looked in his direction and made a barking noise in warning. He stood up clear on the rock in plain sight and raising his hands to his mouth he howled. All eyes were now on him. He stood looking at the wolves and they held their ground and looked at him.

"Goodbye brother wolf", he shouted and then climbed down from his spot and walked back to his cave.

In the morning he cut the fourth and final nock in the wood. Now that the final day had come, he was disappointed. He had finally found some wolves and now he was returning home. He had his things packed up and ready by the time Asturi came to collect him.

"You look well and happy. How was it?" she asked.

"I found some wolves".

She nodded with a smile. "I'm happy for you. Let's go".

Back with his clan, he found that after a few days, he missed being out in the wild. He had always been quiet, especially when compared to Berke, but his friends remarked that he was even more so now. It took him a few days to get back into the routine and he had a whole new perspective on the predators that preyed on their animals. He did not have the same anger towards them but at the same time he had to protect the sheep as his clan depended on them.

It was late in the summer and the night was overcast and unusually cold. A wind blew through the camp raising a cloud of dust, blinding the children as they played. The dogs began barking in warning and some of their goats started bleating. Parents could be heard calling their children back and then there was a scream.

Asturi arrived at that moment calling for Druss with a quick, brusque tone. "Back to the yurt now!"

He raised his hand to his face to wipe away the dust but was already moving in her direction. She took him by the arm, and they had almost reached their yurt when the wind dropped in intensity. She stopped, her head sweeping around, searching for something.

"Grandma, is everything alright?"

She must have been shaken as she did not reprimand him for not calling her Asturi.

She reached into her clothes and drew out a long white stick, "Hold still" she commanded.

He did as he was told as she reached down and began scouring the ground, dragging the stick as she walked around him. He turned in a circle as she did this until she was back to the start. Then she took a small pouch from a pocket and once she had removed the string binding it closed, she walked around the circle pouring some red substance like sand along the groove. She was muttering words he did not understand as she did this. The wind had stopped altogether now, and he turned on his heel and looked around as another scream came from a nearby yurt, Berke's yurt.

"Druss. I need you to listen to me".

He turned back to Asturi and gave her his full attention. It unnerved him to see his grandmother spooked.

"Stay in this circle and do not leave it. For absolutely no reason. You will die. I don't care what you see or how frightened you get do not leave it. Do you understand me?"

When he did not immediately answer she spoke again more forcefully "Say you understand me!"

"I understand grand... Asturi".

She locked eyes with him, her eyes hard and deadly serious. Then she ran to where the last scream had come from.

A man ran down between some yurts with a sword in his hand. At this distance he was not sure who it was. He looked back the way his grandmother had run but could not see her. He turned to their yurt. It was less than fifteen paces away. He was tempted to make a run for it. He did not feel safe standing out here in the open. His bow was there. If he could get it, then maybe he could help. Another scream sent a shiver through his body, and he turned to face it.

A noise from behind him and he spun again, his heart beating. He was shocked at what he saw and then he was bursting with relief. His father had returned. Matheus was here. They were safe.

Matheus strode towards him from around the yurt. Druss had forgotten just how big his father was. He had an axe in his hand and looked around menacingly for something to kill. His mood lightened when he saw Druss and he appeared relieved. "What has my mother done now? I should have known better than to leave you here. Come my son. Let us leave this place".

The young boy took a step towards his father and then unexpectedly stopped. He felt uncertain. His father was here, he was safe, but his grandmother had given him an order.

Matheus reached out his hand "Come, Druss. It's not safe. We must go. I have horses for us both".

"...but Asturi said I have to stay here".

His father looked angry. "I said come here. Listen to your father".

"...Asturi said".

"I don't give a damn what the old witch said. Come with me now, we're leaving".

"I... I can't" replied Druss, his face contorted in fright and uncertainty.

"Last chance Druss. I'm leaving now and if you don't come now, you can stay here, I won't be coming back".

Druss shook his head weakly, "I can't".

Matheus looked angry but spun away without another word and disappeared behind the yurt.

His heart was pounding. Was that his father? Was he leaving him again and not coming back this time? He turned in the circle again, looking for Asturi, hoping she would return soon. Night was beginning to fall.

His head whipped around when he heard another blood chilling scream, followed by the sounds of fighting. A slender figure appeared at the side of the yurt. It was a woman and she appeared to have been hurt. At first, he did not recognise this woman as part of his clan but when she spoke, he knew who it was.

"Druss help me, I'm hurt so bad. The blood. You have to help me". She stumbled and fell to her knees, leaning against the yurt. She looked at him when he did not move "I'm sorry I left you but I'm here now. Please I need your help".

"Mother?"

Again, he took a step forward but again he stopped. His brow was creased with concern. His mother looked badly hurt. He was sure if Asturi was here, she could help her.

His mother was coughing badly and moaning in pain. She reached out to him, her hand dripping with blood and as if reading his mind said "Please, Druss. Get Asturi. I need Asturi".

He turned around to see if his grandmother was on the way and when he turned back his mother was gone.

He sat down in the centre of the circle and put his hands over his ears and closed his eyes. He could just about make out another scream but refused to look or remove his hands. He thought of a lion and focused on that, his mother's brave lion.

He had a sense that something had changed. He opened his eyes and then slowly lowered his hands. He sighed in relief when he saw his grandmother, Asturi walking towards him.

She looked angry. "It's ok, it's all over" and held out her hand to him. "Let's go. It's not safe here. We need to go somewhere safe, come on, take my hand".

He got quickly to his knees and crawled right to the edge of the circle before he stopped again. He moved back slowly to the centre as Asturi moved forward.

She was fuming. As angry as he had seen Asturi, he had never seen her this angry. He wilted before her but did not leave his place at the centre.

"Come on foolish child. Do not dare disobey your grandmother. Come here right now or you will be in so much trouble".

He gritted his teeth and raised his head, facing his grandmother, a look of defiance growing there. "No" he shouted, getting to his feet. "If you are my grandmother, then you come here", he shouted, pointing at the ground at his feet, inside the circle.

His grandmother gritted her teeth and spat back "You won't come when I call you. Fine. Stay here. I'm leaving" and she walked away behind the yurt.

His head began to throb with a headache, although at least his heart was returning to a more normal rhythm. He stood there for perhaps another ten minutes when he saw his grandmother finally returning. He looked at her suspiciously, was this another trick?

She looked exhausted, her robes were ripped and torn, her shamanic drum held loose in her hand. She walked up to the circle and then stepped over the line. She dropped to her knees and embraced Druss tightly "Foolish child, my foolish child" she sobbed uncontrollably.

He raised his hand to her head to soothe her, stroking her hair as she held him tightly. "It's alright Asturi, don't cry, everything will be alright".

She stopped, and looked at him, her grief changing from a sob to a laugh. She embraced him again. "Thank you, Druss. I needed to hear that".

In the aftermath they were able to get a full picture of the damage. They had lost six clan members to the evil spirits that had attacked the camp, Madutai's father and brother, one of Kogatai's wives and three clan children. They spent the following seven days in mourning, but Madutai impressed all his peers with his stoicism.

When the children met one evening, as they usually did, Berke told them that he had heard the adults talk of a blood feud with the Hajiks tribe to the south east. Apart from the tale of the Red Wolf, none of them knew much about this clan, but they were reputed to be fearsome warriors.

Asturi spent a lot more time in her trance, leaving Druss to cook for himself. He made sure to cook something extra, which he left beside his grandmother. She would have to come out of the trance eventually and when she did, she was sure to be hungry.

Loi-Tan came running across their campground early the next day as the boys were preparing to take the sheep to graze. The hakomon, Bakalgu, was coming to their camp to help with the blood feud. Everyone was excited but nervous about seeing him. The boys had to bring the flock out and would likely miss his arrival.

As it turned out the children in the camp did not get much more than a glance of Bakalgu when he did arrive as he disappeared almost immediately into Kogatai's yurt. When the children gathered later that day there were different versions of the hakomon described. Some said he was tall and powerful but some of the others said he was quite small, about the same height as Berke. At this Berke amused his friends by walking around on tip toes to make himself taller.

Memories of the attack were still fresh amongst the clan, but the children seemed better able to put it behind them, even Maduati who only had his mother now.

Before long, it was time to once more go to the wintering site. Most of the children looked forward to staying in the yurts, eating food, getting fat and waiting for the spring but for some of the children including Druss it was a time of building frustration. There was only so many snowball fights you could have before it got old. The only ones to leave camp were the men and that happened only on occasion, either for hunting or to keep an eye on the roving bands of Gostai goblins.

He sat watching his grandmother as she muttered some incantation in a low droning voice. She held her drum in one hand, the other held the drumstick which she used to beat on the leather skin drawn tight over the wooden frame. He found himself, mimicking the droning noise and allowed a small grin to play across his face as he felt it vibrate from his head to his chest. Then he got bored again and began varying the tone of the noise he was making, increasing and decreasing and then dragging it out.

As he began to get carried away, he noticed that his grandmother was no longer beating the drum and had her eyes open staring at him. "If you can't be quiet" she said nodding towards the doorway to their home.

"Sorry Asturi", he said getting to his feet. He grabbed his bow and quiver and walked outside. It was not too cold in the lee of the yurt but out in the open the wind made the temperature drop. He walked to the pen where they kept the horses and walked around it. A horse walked over to him, but he ignored it and picked up a piece of wood lying nearby. For the next hour he practiced with the bow, sending arrows into his target, until his fingers and hands were frozen. He cupped his hands to his mouth and blew on them until they warmed up a little. Then he retrieved his arrows and walked back to the yurt.

Asturi was preparing a meal, stirring the pot of mutton stew as he entered. He sat near her warming his hands on the fire watching her. He judged the best moment to ask the question that had been gnawing at him, "Asturi, in the summer after my birthday..."

"You want to go back to the place you saw the wolves, I know" she finished. Then she lifted the wooden spoon with some of the soup from the stew and tasted it. Not satisfied, she gathered some herbs and tossed them into the pot and stirred them in.

"Can I?" asked Druss, when enough had time passed without an answer.

"You'll be seven. It's a good number". She nodded her head as if having an internal conversation. "Yes, it's a good number".

Druss remained silent. His grandmother could be very strange and sometimes it was best not to push too hard. He could be patient. He could wait. Winter would not last forever and with the flock to look after, spring would fly by too. His grandmother had not confirmed that he could go back, but in his mind, he was already there.

With Madutai's father dead, his mother married another man in the spring and went to live with her new clan, taking Madutai with her. It had all been arranged so quickly. According to Madutai his new father would be his uncle, the brother of his deceased father. Druss was hit with this loss more than he wanted to admit. The older boy had been a friend and a peer that he had looked up to. Madutai acknowledged without saying it that he would miss Druss too but like him kept his exterior calm, emotions in check. They reassured each other that they would meet again at the next horse fair or wintering site.

Druss and Berke were tasked by Kogatai with looking for a replacement for Madutai to look after the clan's flock. There were many vying for the position as it was seen as an important path to manhood. They finally had it down to the brother and sister, Noyon and Waruni. Both boys had privately agreed that Waruni would be a better choice than her brother. Noyon had a wise head but seemed to them to be constantly worried about threats. They laughed that he would have a heart attack before he was twenty. It was not an easy decision however as they

did not want to embarrass him by choosing his sister. Druss went to ask his grandmother for her advice.

“Who would you rather have by your side? Who would you trust with the flock when you are gone?” she asked.

“Waruni would be better, but Noyon might be better if a lion or wolf showed up”.

“Why do you think she would be better?”

“She doesn’t always complain. She's interesting and she isn’t afraid all the time”.

“...and what about Noyon?”

“Well, he’s always worried and wants to go home but if there was a fight, he would be better”.

“Sounds like you have a difficult choice to make”

“Who do you think, Asturi?”

She sighed and thought for a moment “Take them both. You’ll be leaving soon anyway, and they’ll have to find a replacement for you too when you leave”.

“I’ll only be gone for a few days”.

Asturi looked at him and smoothed the folds of her dress. “What if it’s longer? You’ll be out there by yourself. Anything could happen”.

“Like what?”

“Well, you might get lost, the weather could turn bad, and you’ll have to stay longer, a mountain lion might eat you, or someone could kidnap you and whisk you away to marry their daughter” she chuckled.

Druss liked seeing his grandmother happy and smiled with her, enjoying the moment. “I won’t leave Asturi. I’ll go for a few days, but I’ll come back”.

Her face softened and she leaned forward and pulled him into a hug. “Thank you, Druss, someday you will have to leave and take your place in the world but I’m glad you’ll be with me until then”.

Druss spoke with Berke and it was agreed to take Noyon and Waruni on and teach them. Waruni was as good a companion as they expected but Noyon impressed them with his affinity with the new-born lambs. He stepped in and helped on one occasion when a sheep was having difficulty delivering its lamb. Spring was a very busy time with all the new lambs boosting the flock, but it was also much more dangerous as the predators also showed up. They did an admirable job keeping the flock safe and lost only two to predation.

Then it was into the summer and his seventh birthday. He awoke that morning and lay there for a few minutes, enjoying the warmth of his bed and the silence. He heard Asturi get up and listened as she prepared some food. He got dressed and sat beside her when it was time to eat. "When can I go to the place, Asturi?"

"In seven days, we will leave camp".

He nodded and resumed eating his food with a smile.

She looked at him, a thoughtful look on her face, then she smiled and shook her head.

Berke and the others were excited to hear about his upcoming adventure, although Noyon, true to form was warning about all the things that could go wrong. Loi-Tan said she would make him a red sash to wear around his waist that would bring him luck and keep him safe. Noyon scoffed at this "He'll need more than a sash to keep him safe where he's going".

"It amazes me, Noyon that you even get out of bed every day. Now that's bravery" replied Loi-Tan mockingly.

Noyon was about to shove her but thought better of it and accepted the criticism in silence.



## Latchkey Kid - Part 4

When the day came to leave, all of his friends were there outside the yurt and they rode with Druss and Asturi for a mile before returning to camp. Loi-Tan made sure the red sash was secured around his waist and Berke clasped forearms in the manner he had seen the men of his clan do. Waruni bid them a safe journey and Noyon merely nodded and waved them off.

Except for the sound of the leather saddles creaking and the horses' hooves hitting the ground, the two rode in silence. There was a fresh wind blowing in Druss's face and he took a deep breath. He had been waiting for this day for months now and was so content it was finally here, he lifted his arms and stretched them out from his body, basking in the moment, the gentle rocking of the horse as it walked, swaying his body in the saddle.

Asturi looked at him smiling "So, like your father".

He smiled back, happy to be compared to Matheus.

They arrived at the cave and Druss settled in while Asturi took a quick look around and then returned to him.

"I'll be back in four days. Mark the stick like before each morning and I will arrive the day you make the fourth mark, ok?"

"Seven days" he said looking at her intently.

She was not too surprised by this and gave him an appraising look. "Seven days, are you sure? That's a long time to be alone."

He nodded "Yes, seven days. It's a good number, remember?"

She smiled at this, "Foolish child. Yes, I remember, and it is a good number. Alright then as you wish, seven days".

A broad smile of delight broke out on his face when she agreed.

When she was satisfied everything was as it should be she rode off, leaving his mount with him in case there was an emergency and he needed to leave.

Once more he watched her depart, until she was a tiny dot in the distance and then gone. His horse whinnied softly, and he walked to it rubbing its forehead in reassurance.

He set about gathering as much wood as he could for the night. He had learned that the nights could be sleepless if he was too cold, so it was a priority. He had enough food for a few days, but he would have to hunt if he wanted to finish the seven days without hunger pains. Asturi had given him a couple of items including the enchanted waterskin, but he decided that he would only use this in an emergency. So, while he gathered the wood, he stooped down and

drank from the small stream that flowed not too far from the cave that would be his home for the next few days.

That night he sat in the small cave and cooked his food over the fire, heating the water to make a soup. He slept well that night after a busy day.

Late in the evening of the second day he saw smoke far off in the distance and at night he could just about make out the light from the flames. Whatever it was, it was not a campfire for him to be able to see it at this distance and with such clarity. He went back to the ridge to where he had seen the wolves last year and was happy to see that they were still using the area to raise their pups.

On the third day he saw Ethengar riders passing by but could not make out what tribe they were with. They could be from his own Kaeruts tribe or possibly the neighbouring Yugatais. Whoever they were they never came up to where he was and were soon out of sight. He wondered briefly if they had any connection to the fire he had seen.

He enjoyed the feeling of being separated from the outside world while it continued on without him. When he was here alone, he got to do his own thing, make his own rules, live the way he wanted to live and at his own pace. Late in the evening when he was in his cave and preparing to sleep, he could smell the faint aroma of smoke and it was not coming from his own as he had covered the hot coals in ash to bank it for the night. The smell was not too strong but enough to pique his curiosity. He rose silently from his bed and crouched outside his cave. He took a moment to read the wind and locate the smoke again, then he walked quietly in that direction. After walking for about five minutes, he could hear the faint noise of something or someone moving about. He paused again and crouched peering through the darkness and the tangled brush of the area. He could see the dancing, flickering flames of a small fire. A shadow passed by it momentarily blocking it from his view as whoever was there moved around it. He watched for about ten minutes, trying to decide what to do. He decided he would return early in the morning to see who had intruded in his space.

He woke as the sun was rising and gathered up his bow and knife. His imagination was creating all sorts of possibilities for who was at the campfire. He gave some consideration to it being a tribesman, a humanoid, one of his friends coming up to surprise him and even a hakomon. This last possibility gave him some pause. He was sure that sneaking up on a hakomon would not be one of his better ideas. He had no desire to be turned into a gerbil and spend the rest of his short existence being chased by foxes or wolves.

He crept up to the spot he was at the previous night and looked in the direction of the campfire. He could see no fire or smell any smoke. He watched and waited for some noise or movement. His patience paid off and he saw something moving off to his left away from where the campfire was. He grinned a wolf like grin as he stalked his prey. This was turning into a more enjoyable experience than he had been hoping for. He worked his way through the brush until it cleared, into a more rock-strewn environment, being careful where he placed each foot.

He caught sight of his prey here and there but kept his distance. He came to a dry riverbed and spotted a small, cloaked figure walking away. He was disappointed. It was a child. Of all the possibilities his imagination had offered this was his least favourite. He did not recognise any of his friends, but it was clearly a child.

He let himself relax. The game was over. There was still the mystery of why a child was out alone without any adults, so he was preparing himself to call out in greeting when he spotted the mountain lion on the ridge above the child. Its body was down low to the ground and creeping along, parallel to the figure who was picking their way along amongst the rocks, oblivious to the great danger they were in.

Druss nocked an arrow to his bow and walked quickly forward. As much as he had been practising, he did not feel confident about hitting his target from this range.

He ran forward a few more steps, shouting a warning to the figure ahead of him. The figure turned in his direction, just as the mountain lion had moved into a favourable position to strike. Ironically his warning call had made the figure stop providing the lion with a stationary target. The lion leapt with a roar and the child uttered a strangled scream. Druss instinctively ran forward to assist. The child was like one of the sheep in his flock and he was not going to let the lion take it.

The lion had leapt on to the stricken child, who was screaming in pain and fright. If he had more time to think Druss would not have risked the shot, but once more, his instincts took over and almost before he realised what he was doing, he had sent an arrow whistling through the air. The arrow released, he held his archers pose watching and hoping the arrow would fly true. The lion roared in pain, leapt and twisted in the air when the arrow hit home.

Druss ran forward, shouting and waving his arms around. The memory of the last time he had tried this, and it had not worked, came to mind but he had committed now and there was no going back. The child was scrambling away from the lion. The lion flicked its head to watch its former prey move away but then back again at the fast-approaching noisy newcomer. It roared again but it was an empty threat and it leaped away and back up over the way it had come. The arrow was still protruding from its hind quarter but fell free as it reached the top.

Druss slowed his run as he got nearer to the child. He did not want to replace one fright with another and arrive in too fast.

“It’s ok. I’m here to help. Are you alright?”

The child who was cowering in fear raised his head causing Druss to pull back and once more grab an arrow from his quiver.

The face had faintly tinted yellow skin, the eyes red in the shadows of its hood and a wide mouth with sharp pointed teeth. It had long pointed ears that protruded out straight from its head and a goatlike nose. It was one of the ugliest things he had ever seen in his short life.

The arrow nocked and ready he realised he had not been following a child but a goblin.

The short creature was childlike in stature not even four foot in height. Druss guessed it was male, but he had never seen a goblin before, so he was not entirely sure. The goblin was frightened and looked about as if it expected more humans to arrive. He climbed slowly to his feet but paused when Druss pulled the arrow back. The goblin was breathing heavily, its forearm and neck leaking blood into the clothing it wore.

A bird erupted with a frightened squawk from some bushes and Druss moved to face it expecting more goblins or even a returning mountain lion. The goblin made his move and ran for some boulders as Druss turned back to it. He pulled back on the bow string, taking aim but then stopped. His instinct to shoot was overcome by his instinct to give chase. He relaxed and put the arrow away. He pulled his knife from its sheath and sprinted after the fleeing goblin. In a straight sprint across flat open country Druss would have closed the distance quickly but he found here amongst the rocks and bushes he was always just behind the goblin, only by a few inches but never quite close enough to grab hold or stab him with his blade.

The goblin was leaping off rocks and tearing through bushes with complete reckless abandon. He was so terrified of the pursuing human that he gave no thought to the possibility of running off a ledge or being impaled by a branch. He was simply more afraid of the human.

Druss noticed this blind panic and thrilled at the feeling it gave him. He had heard of the Gostai goblins and the battles his people had with them and here he was with his own battle. Much to his delight the goblin was in fear of his prowess and running in terror. Now this was a story he was looking forward to telling his friends.

A yelp of fright followed by a panicked scream from his quarry made Druss slide to a stop on the loose gravel. The goblin's luck had run out. Druss stood at the edge of a deep ravine that the goblin had fallen into. He could see him wedged about forty feet down whimpering in pain. Druss crouched and watched to see if the goblin would free himself or fall further down to his death. He stayed there until the goblin stopped moving, apparently giving up the fight or falling unconscious. He looked around and thought about climbing down to finish the job, but the sides were too smooth and provided no hand holds. He thought about shooting an arrow into the trapped body, but this did not appeal to his sense of honour or sportsmanship. Decision made he walked back to his camp to get some rope. As he slung it over his shoulder, he gave some thought to what he was planning. He picked up the small jar his grandmother had given him and then jogged back to where the goblin was trapped.

Standing once more above the ravine, he had half expected the goblin to be gone, but it was still there, not moving. He tied one end of the rope around the base of a sturdy looking bush and tested it by pulling on it as hard as he could. When it did not move, he threw the other end down and manoeuvred it, so it lay against the goblin's body. He waited to see if this would rouse the goblin but there was no movement. Goblins were sneaky and maybe this was a trap but even with that thought in mind he grabbed the rope and climbed down. He nudged the toe of

his boot against the goblin's body but there was no reaction. He wedged himself between the sides of the ravine and could just about see signs of life, the goblin's lungs were still functioning.

He was still not sure what the correct course of action was but ended up looping the end of the rope under the arms and tying it around the goblin's torso. Then using the rope, he began the climb back to the top. Once there he began pulling on the rope, but the goblin's unconscious body would not budge. He thought about going back for the horse and in his mind, he began working out the difficult path he would need to take. It would be possible but not easy for the horse. Just then a moan of pain came from his trapped foe. He looked down and could see feeble struggling from the goblin as it tried to free itself.

Druss shouted down "Try and get free, I'll pull you up, ok?"

The goblin looked up at him, its red eyes almost glowing in the shadows of the ravine.

This gave Druss momentary pause and reminded him that he was not helping a child. This was a goblin, a creature his people were always at war with. The bane of their existence.

"I can still kill him, once I have him out", he thought.

He pulled hard on the rope again and could hear the goblin shouting either with pain or effort. It did not really matter, he kept dragging on the rope as hard as he could, his feet slipping occasionally on the loose rocks around him. He felt the taut rope loosen as the goblin came free. Druss sidestepped to a rock and moved around it. He found that it helped to take some of the weight off the rope and give him a moment to get his breath and adjust his grip. Then he pulled again, using the rock to stop the goblin from sliding back. It got easier as the goblin got closer to the rim, finding some handholds to assist in his escape from a slow death.

With a last effort, Druss pulled and along with the clawing hands of a weakening goblin, managed to get him out of the ravine and onto solid ground.

Druss dropped the rope and walked a few steps forward. The goblin lay on its back, panting and breathing heavily, his chest rising and falling. The wounds sustained from the mountain lion had been added to. The goblin's legs and arms were scraped and bloody from his fall.

Without the strength to lift its head, the goblin's eyes looked sideways as Druss moved closer warily. He continued to breathe heavily trying to summon the energy to resist death once again.

Druss could see that the goblin did not have much fight left in him. Mauled by a lion, chased across country and then falling down a ravine had almost been too much. It would have been too much if Druss had not done the unexpected and fished him out. He opened the jar he had brought with him and stuck two fingers in. They were covered with a white cream, like soft butter. The goblin continued to regard him with a look of resignation, his breath still coming in gasps but beginning to slow down.

The goblin flinched, when Druss moved closer his hand extended, but unless he wanted to end up at the bottom of the ravine he had just come from, he had to remain still. Druss dabbed the cream on the nearest wound, a badly injured, blood smeared elbow. The goblin looked in surprise at Druss as the ache disappeared and then at the wound as it closed. Druss put the jar beside the goblin and then took a few steps back.

The goblin looked at him and slowly sat up as Druss walked away. Then turning his back on the goblin, he jogged back to his cave.

That night as he sat beside his fire, he wondered if he had done the right thing. He knew that the men of his tribe would not be happy that he had let such a hated enemy live. The other possibility was that the goblin would sneak up on him while he slept and kill him.

In the distance a wolf howled. He pushed aside these thoughts and crawled out of his cave. The sky was bright with a moon that would be full in the next night or two. He raised his hands to his mouth and howled as loud as he could. The second one he dragged out and undulated to the last of his breathe before lowering his hands to his sides.

A rustle of movement in the undergrowth fifty paces away caught his attention. He thought he saw the glow of eyes like those of a mountain lion or perhaps a wolf, reflecting back the light. His instincts told him what it likely was, and it was not a lion or a wolf. Despite this he walked back to his cave and blocking it up for the night he slept.

In the morning, he walked outside and stretched his back. He walked down to the stream and filled a bowl with water before returning to prepare something for breakfast. He was running low on food and would have to see if he could catch some game or locate some plants to eat. He noticed that his rope was coiled up neatly and left hanging in the branches of a tree close by his cave. The pot of healing salve was balanced on the same branch. He took it down and opened the lid. It was practically empty now, most of the salve had been used by the goblin. He had his breakfast and then went to see if he could get some food for later. He decided he would pass by the wolf den and see what they were up to. He climbed to his usual spot but could see no activity. The older wolves were probably out hunting, and the young were most likely tucked away in their den.

He spent a few hours looking for any sign of small game. He had seen some around his camp but did not know where they actually lived. He did not need to know before, but now that he was hungry, he did. He found some burrowed holes and by the spoor determined they belonged to gerbils. He walked around and found as many of the holes as he could and blocked most of them off. For the plan to work he needed to know where they would exit from. Then he decreased the size of the hole he had chosen so that the sack he had brought would cover it entirely. Once this was done, he gathered some twigs and dry branches and placed them at the lowest hole and stuffed them in before setting them alight. It took a few minutes, but he could see the smoke begin to issue from a variety of spots that he had located and blocked and a couple that he had not. The bag at his knees moved as some of the fleeing gerbils chose the

wrong option. He pulled the sack closed when he felt he had more than a couple and then walked back to his cave. He had the distinct impression he was being watched so remained on his guard.

He returned to the wolf den later that day conscious that he only had two more days before Asturi returned for him. He climbed up to his viewing spot and peered over. The wolves were back, and the pups were outside playing or feeding at their mother who lay on her side. The wind shifted and was now blowing towards him. He noticed but was not bothered by this. The wolves had known he was there before and seemed unconcerned. He saw ears twitch and heads swivel as they sniffed the air, catching his scent. He had the urge to go down to them but knew that this would not be a safe course of action. With young pups in the area, they would be at heightened levels of alertness and aggression. He was about to turn away when thoughts of Asturi returning soon intruded. He had told his friends he had seen the wolves last time, so to do the same again would be nothing special. True he had the added encounter with a goblin to delight them but because he did not kill the goblin when he had the chance it was a story, he could not tell.

He stood up on the edge but rather than head back to his camp he climbed over and walked slowly towards the wolves. "This is a bad idea" he thought, "but it will make a really good story" he assured himself.

He made sure to make no sudden movements. The wolves saw him coming and began to get agitated. The pups ran to their mother, all except one that walked a few tentative steps towards the new smell. It was quickly guided away with a bark from its alpha mother.

He stood, with his hands by his side as two wolves came to investigate, and they were absolutely massive. Up on the ridge he knew they were big but down here and only thirty paces away he got a better idea of their size. He fought down his urge to run and instead he got down on his hunkers and putting his hands on his knees, he waited.

Two of the wolves got closer and began growling, indicating quite clearly that they wanted him to leave.

Instead, Druss raised his hands to his mouth and howled.

The wolves stopped in their tracks, the growls cut off and their heads tilted sideways in surprise and interest. He howled again and they appeared confused.

This creature did not look or smell like a wolf, but it did sound like a wolf.

To his delight one of the wolves gave a short answering bark. It seemed to Druss like a bark of recognition rather than aggression. They whined uncertainly but did not attack. In the end they retreated to the den but kept him in sight.

"Now that's a better story" he murmured to himself.

Rising to a standing position he walked slowly away and climbed back over the ridge. He was so lost in thought at this wonderful event that he almost did not notice the figure walking parallel to him. He glanced to his right and saw the goblin. It stopped too and waited.

He started walking again and the goblin kept up, but still keeping its distance. He arrived back at his cave and stopped at the entrance. He turned and could see that the goblin had stopped at the edge of the clearing, waiting.

Druss did not know what the goblin wanted but he did not feel like he was in any danger. The goblin could have tried to ambush him but had not.

He walked into the cave and started preparing the gerbils for dinner. The smell wafted out into the surrounding environs and his stomach rumbled in anticipation. He leaned forward from his sitting place and could see that the goblin was still there. He picked up one of the skewered gerbils and stood up.

“Hungry?” he asked lifting the cooked piece of meat high so that the goblin could see it.

The small creature did not indicate it understood until Druss shouted again “Food?”

Then the goblin nodded his head in answer and waited.

When Druss waved his hand inviting the goblin in, it scurried forward but still eyed the young child nervously.

Druss resumed his seat and when the goblin arrived at the entrance, he indicated that he too should sit. The goblin looked around the small cave and then moved uncertainly inside, taking his seat at the indicated spot. Druss picked up the other skewered gerbil and handed it to the goblin. A moment passed where he regarded Druss but when the young boy took a bite from the gerbil, the goblin followed suit and did the same.

“Good, yes?” Druss asked.

The goblin did not seem sure but nodded yes, revealing those sharp, jagged teeth. He must have been hungry because he finished the gerbil in two bites.

Druss could see that the goblin was looking hungrily at the other skewered gerbil but was waiting for the go ahead. Druss picked up another cooked gerbil and handed it to him. This was devoured just as fast.

Druss shook his head disapprovingly “Slow down or you’ll give yourself a stomach-ache”.

The goblin belched, causing Druss to break into laughter. The goblin smiled that unsettling toothy smile. They sat in silence until all the gerbils had been consumed. The goblin’s hunger had been sated and he sat there looking at Druss, with what seemed a questioning look. He said a few words in his own language but Druss did not understand. The goblin seemed



disappointed and rose to its feet. It said another word which may have been thank you or goodbye or something else entirely different and then walked out into the night.

Druss blocked up his cave and went to sleep again untroubled and happy.

He awoke later than usual on day six. He would be going home tomorrow so he lay there for a few minutes trying to decide what he would do for his last full day. He got up still undecided about this and removed the barrier. He walked out and stood at the entrance stretching his body. In a couple more years if he was to return to this spot, he would need to find a bigger cave. He noticed something on the ground to one side of the entrance, a piece of wood. He stooped to pick it up and realised it had been carved into the likeness of a wolf. It was crude but quite beautiful all the same. He smiled and looked around for the goblin, spotting the small creature at the edge of the clearing.

He raised his arm in greeting and called out "Hungry?"

The goblin appeared to recognise the word this time and nodded its head, taking a few steps forward. He followed Druss into the cave, apparently feeling more confident this time. He took his seat and waited.

Druss looked at him and shook his head "Next time you need to bring some food, ok? I can't keep feeding you".

The goblin showed no indication it understood what was being said but seemed to understand the tone and lowered its eyes. Druss set about heating the water and added the last pieces of meat to the vegetables already there.

He looked at the goblin while the food was heating up and then pointed to himself "Druss. My name is Druss".

The goblin gave a toothy smile understanding and pointed to himself "Smythe".

Druss returned the smile and pointed at the goblin repeating the name "Smythe".

Smythe nodded eagerly and in its strange voice pointed at him and said "Drash".

"No, it's Druss".

"Drash".

"D-R-U-S-S" he repeated slowly.

"D-R-A-S-H" said Smythe carefully.

Druss sighed "Close enough" and then held the small carving of the wolf up "Thank you for this. It's good".

Smythe nodded "Naroosh".

Druss had no idea what this meant, “You’re welcome” maybe, but repeated the word “Naroosh” liking the sound of it.

They spent the day together, wandering about, Druss showing Smythe some spots he liked and Smythe took it all in. Druss was only seven and although he was by no means and expert on goblins, he got the impression, not only because of his height but his mannerisms, that Smythe was a very young goblin. He had no way to ask or determine if this was true, but he felt he was right.

Druss took out his bow for some target practice and Smythe seemed to light up, eager to participate. After he fired a couple of arrows into a small target, he looked at the small goblin.

“Want to try?”

Smythe took the bow and marvelled at the beautiful lines of its construction. He took the arrow offered to him and with incredible ease fired an arrow into the centre of the target.

“Wow, you’re good” said Druss, admiring the shot.

Smythe took several more shots until a tight cluster of arrows protruded from the target. He looked up at Druss, smiling and handed the bow back to him.

They went down to the stream and caught some very small fish to eat. It would not be much more than a snack, but it would have to do. Asturi would be arriving back tomorrow, and she would bring some more food so he would eat then.

As they cooked the fish, Smythe looked at him and said a few words in his own language. The only word Druss understood was “Naroosh”. This did not help as he did not know what the word meant.

Smythe repeated the word and Druss shrugged his shoulders to show he did not understand.

The goblin thought for a moment and then howled, in an excellent rendition of a wolf and then he repeated the word “Naroosh”.

Druss’s brow creased and he thought he understood. He took the wolf figurine from his pocket and held it before him “Naroosh?”

Smythe nodded his head vigorously, repeating the word.

“You mean, wolf,” said Druss.

It was Smythe’s turn to look puzzled until Druss pointed at the figurine and repeated the word “Wolf”.

“Naroosh, yes” said Smythe before trying out the new word “Wolf”.

With his time running out he decided now would be a good time to see the wolves again. Smythe seemed to know where they were going and was almost skipping with excitement.

When they got to the viewing spot they crouched down and waited. As much as Druss enjoyed watching the wolves, Smythe could barely stay still. It seemed that at any moment he would lose control of himself, walk down to the wolves and maybe even take a pup home. Druss wondered where home was for the young goblin.

He looked at the little goblin and grinned. "Naroosh, yes?"

Smythe nodded eagerly, "Naroosh, yes".

They spent about an hour watching the wolves before they went back to the cave, but this time Smythe came with him. He had showed Druss where he had been staying and it was a pitiful sight. A few twisted branches leaning against some rocks with leaves and dirt thrown over it.

"Needs some work" Druss had said, hands on his hips.

In the end and with only one night left, he had invited the goblin to stay with him.

Smythe snored but after some annoyed prodding from Druss, he turned on to his side and began breathing more easily.

In the morning there was nothing much left to eat, just a few dry crusts of bread. Druss soaked them in some hot water and while he did this Smythe went outside. He returned about thirty minutes later, just when Druss had thought that he had gone back to his own tribe. He had a handful of the small fish from the stream they had fished yesterday. It was not much but Druss smiled and showed his gratitude for the effort. These were added to the meal and once ready they tucked in, washing it all down with some hot tea.

He knew his grandmother would be here today, so he began packing up. Smythe noticed what he was doing and sat down watching him.

Druss noticed this and pointed to himself and then away "Druss, going home".

"Home?" asked Smythe, his expression showed confusion.

Druss took up a small stone and drew a rough picture of a yurt on the ground and then two more. He pointed at it and repeated "Home".

Smythe seemed to nod in understanding.

As Druss looked around the cave, he noticed the wooden wolf figurine that Smythe had given him. He picked it up and was about to place it in his pack. He stopped and looked at Smythe. "Thank you for this".

Smythe perhaps understood the context and meaning, nodded his head, smiling in return.

Then Druss picked up his bow and quiver and without any hesitation handed them to Smythe.

The goblin took the items but did not seem to understand that he was being given a gift in return.

Druss held up the figurine again and then pressed it against his own chest, "Druss" he repeated. Then he put his hand on the bow that Smythe held and pressed it into the goblin's body "Smythe".

Understanding registered on the goblin's face. He held the bow and quiver of arrows and seemed at a loss. It was apparent that nothing like this had ever happened to him in his life.

Druss began to get the horse ready, laying his packed-up gear nearby.

Smythe looked on and seemed to understand that the young boy would be leaving soon.

Druss turned back to the goblin "My grandmother should be here soon".

Smythe looked at him uncomprehending.

Druss knew this but kept talking anyway. "I have to go back to my tribe, but I'll come back here again. I'll try and come back soon. You should probably go back to your people too. They must be worried about you". He turned away to look at the direction he expected Asturi to come from.

Smythe stood and walked to his side and waited.

Far in the distance, he could see her coming. He turned once more to Smythe and held out his hand.

Smythe considered the offered hand and then lifted his own.

Druss grasped his hand "Friends".

Smythe tightened his grip and Druss could see by his face he was considering the word before he tried it out.

"Frienzz"

Druss smiled "Good enough. You better go now but I'll come back some time and if you're here we can go see the wolves, the narooosh".

The small goblin smiled at the word and nodded "Wolf, yes".

Then Druss took the reins of his horse and walked to meet his grandmother.

As he drew near to her, she smiled "Well, I see you're still alive. Your mother and father will be happy about that".

He smiled in return "It's good to see you Asturi".

She looked him over and rummaged through a satchel for some bread which she handed to him. "Here".

He took the offered bread and bit into it savouring the taste.

As they rode side by side, she noticed something missing. "Your bow, what happened to your bow? Did you forget it?"

He looked at her and considered his answer. Would he tell her the truth or lie?

"I gave it to a friend".

"A friend? What kind of friend would you meet out here?"

"He gave me a gift".

She noticed that he had not answered the question but let him change the topic.

"A gift, eh? Must be special to be worth a bow and a quiver of arrows. Let's see it then".

Druss took the wooden figurine from his pocket and handed it to Asturi. "It's a wolf".

"So, I see. Very nice" she said.

He could tell by her expression that she thought he had got the worst of the deal and was a little annoyed by this. "He made it himself. It's a wolf but he calls it a naroosh".

Her face hardened at this. "This friend of yours. How did you meet him?"

"Well, a mountain lion attacked him, and I saved him and then he fell down a ravine and I helped him out and I used your salve, and it was really good, and it healed all his cuts".

She regarded her grandson, her eyebrows arched high, "Seems to find himself in a lot of trouble, this friend of yours. What's his name?"

"Smythe".

"...and what tribe does Smythe come from?"

"I don't know Asturi. I don't think he has a tribe. I think he might be alone".

"Then maybe he should be coming with us".

Druss looked at his grandmother and then straight ahead over the head of his horse. "I don't think that would be a good idea".

Asturi waited for him to say more but he stayed silent.

After about an hour of silence, Druss asked "Can I go back again, Asturi?"

"Maybe, next year" she replied.

“Maybe before then?”

“I don’t think so Druss. We’ll be moving to our wintering spot in a few months, and I don’t have the time to bring you back here again this year”.

“I can come back myself. I know the way”.

“When you are older you can but not while you’re still so young. Your mother would not be happy with me letting you stay there alone as it is”.

“...and my father?”

She turned to look at him and smiled “Your father is different. You remind me of him”.

Druss smiled, for him this was a massive compliment. “Does that mean, yes?”

“We won’t have time Druss. No, not this year”.

Druss looked disappointed but she remained firm. She was happy to encourage his growth and independence, but it had to be managed. What she did not know was that Druss was already making plans to return. He had been paying attention to the landmarks on the way out, but he was being extra observant on the way back.

Despite being eager to return to the cave and to his goblin friend it was also good to be back in his grandmother’s yurt and to sleep once more in his own bed. His friends were excited to see him and hear about his adventures. He meant to leave out all mention of his encounter with Smythe but accidentally mentioned the mountain lion attacking a goblin. He told the story as it had happened but ended it by saying that the goblin had fallen to his death down the ravine.

He was back to herding the sheep and his friends noticed his accuracy with the bow. Smythe had given him a few tips in the couple of hours they had been practicing and the improvements had been noticeable.

Their clan went to the horse fair, which was in a new location this year, closer to the Streel River. As it was a more central location, there were other tribes there such as the Murkits and Maghurs, present. They met some children from these tribes and after a brief feeling out period, where they stood at a distance eyeing each other up, they finally got over this and were playing and taunting each other with a competitive zeal.

The children of the Maghurs tribes wore wooden beads woven into the plaits in their hair. One of them was a boy around Druss’s age called Kashin. They got on well and shared the same boisterous sense of humour that involved a lot of rough and tumble. Kashin also liked Waruni and this caused some tension when her brother Noyon got overprotective like he always did. It escalated quite quickly, fists were flying, and they ended up rolling around on the ground until finally Noyon got the upper hand and pinned Kashin making him yield. To everyone’s surprise Waruni got involved and started shouting at her brother to leave Kashin alone. She berated him

for picking fights with children they had only just met and told him that she was tired of his behaviour. Noyon was dumbstruck initially but then got angry with his sister and began to shout back at her.

Druss helped Kashin to his feet, and they walked away with the others to find some food while the siblings argued. Khuushuur was a particular favourite, perhaps because it was something they only had at this time of year. It consisted of ground meat, beef or mutton, mixed with onions and herbs, all wrapped up in some dough which was folded over in a half circle to seal the food inside. Once this was done it was fried in oil. The children stood around while these were being prepared their mouths watering in anticipation and then ate them while they wandered around the yurts and stalls.

The competitions held at this time were mainly directed at the adults but about fifteen years ago it had been decided to allow the children their own version of the competitions in wrestling and archery. Children had always been the predominate riders in the horse race, as they were lighter, and the races usually involved children anywhere from five to thirteen years old. Berke entered the ten-mile horse race with Loi-Tan and about three hundred other children. They finished the race covered in dust but smiling brightly. Druss entered the archery tournament finishing second behind a girl from Clan Atikai of the Murkits, called Jamal, while Noyon took part in the wrestling. He placed very high finishing in the last ten and went looking for Waruni to tell her the news. He found her talking with Kashin near a stall that had colourful ribbons for sale. He was tired from the competition so with a scowl he stormed away and returned to his friends. Apart from that one incident they all had a marvellous few days but like all good things, the fair ended, and it was once more time to part ways.

Druss had decided he would see if Smythe was still at the cave so began making some preparations by putting some food aside and going over the route in his head. They had moved on from their previous camp, but he felt confident he could still find his way back. A few nights later and he awoke in the dark. He lay there and listened for a while for any signs that his grandmother was awake. He could hear her breathing softly and he hoped that she was sleeping deeply. He got carefully to his feet and crept towards the flap of the yurt.

Just as he reached it, Asturi spoke "Seven days Druss".

His heart was pounding at being caught and then with excitement when he realised, she was letting him go.

"Seven days" he agreed.

He could hear her move and could make out her form in the darkness of the yurt as she rolled away, turning her back to him.

He turned to go when she spoke again "And Druss, your mother doesn't need to know about this ok?"

“Ok, Asturi” he whispered.

“Foolish child”, she grumbled, but he was already gone.

He got his horse ready and was more at ease now that he was no longer sneaking away. He loved his grandmother, he loved that she trusted him and knew he was able to look after himself. The thought did cross his mind that he had said he would be her brave lion and take care of her, but he justified this course of action as necessary to becoming an even more fearsome lion.

It took him longer than usual to reach the cave as he had taken extra care not to get lost. There were times when he did not see any familiar landmarks and began to think that he might be lost but his gut told him he was headed in the right direction. He was relieved to see that he had been correct when he began to recognise the land around his cave.

Smythe was still there and was happy to see him. Druss was happy to see him too but also worried that if the young goblin was still here it must mean that he had no family to go home to. After a cramped first night, they set to work the following morning digging into back of the cave to make it a little bigger. They dragged out rocks and soil until it was spacious enough for the two of them.

He had tried to get Asturi talking about goblins without making it too obvious he was asking. He also tried the same tactic with his friends and brought up the Gostai goblins hoping to learn more. Asturi knew some goblin words and taught them to him when he asked, explaining it might be useful for him to know. As careful as he thought he had been, he suspected she knew that Smythe was a goblin.

They spent the days practicing with their bows and visiting the wolves. Smythe had been going most days and had managed to get them used to his presence so that they could approach very close. The pups were a little bigger and braver too as they came right up to them sniffing and poking around their legs as they crouched. The older wolves watched but did not feel threatened as they grew accustomed to the young ones who sometimes brought small fish for the pups.

The allotted time past too soon and it was time for Druss to go home. With a few more words in the vocabulary of both friends they agreed that Smythe would wait, and that Druss would try to come back again as soon as he could.

It was another couple of months before he did return, and it was when his clan had gathered with the others at the wintering site. Asturi had been a little more determined this time that Druss could not return to the cave. The weather was due to get worse and if he did not get lost, he might freeze to death. He insisted that he had promised his friend and if the weather was going to be as bad as Asturi said then he needed to bring some warm blankets for Smythe.



She looked angry and had been about to shout something at Druss but closed her mouth again without letting the words fly. He heard her mumble something about “unusual friends in strange places”. He knew she sometimes had visitors from the clan asking about their future, some glimpse of their fate to be revealed. The answers were usually quite cryptic, and he wondered if she had made a prediction on his own future.

He took the furs to Smythe who looked like he had never received such a gift. Smythe preferred to venture out of the cave at night, when he could see extremely well unlike the day when he seemed uncomfortable. They spent most of the short winter days in the cave, Smythe enjoying the feeling and warmth of the furs. Druss did not mind, it was cold and the wolf pups were spending more time in their den so there was not much to see anyway. Instead, they talked and slowly day by day, learnt each other's language so that they could better communicate. It was like opening the door to a new world. He had only heard of the Gostai goblins from his people's perspective and was excited to learn more from Smythe. The goblin too was interested in the clans and was amazed that Druss still lived with his grandmother. Goblins did not usually live to the ripe old age of whatever age Asturi was. Druss had laughed long and hard at this. He knew Asturi would not be happy with being described in this way.

Smythe had told him that he had been separated from his tribe when they had encountered some “Ethies” as the humanoids called the people of Ethengar. They had fled west and Smythe had hid behind a clump of grass. He had tried to follow but realised he would have to cross Ethie land on foot, so decided to hide further up in the hills until he could decide what to do. One of his plans had been to tame a wolf and use it to carry him back to his tribe. It was still a work in progress with no suitable mounts available. He had learned from members of his tribe by watching them tame and handle wolves but had no real-world experience of his own. He dreamed of someday becoming a wolf-rider, a great warrior.

When Druss returned to his clan, he did not have much to tell them. They began to think he was a little strange, going alone into the wilderness and sitting in a cave all day.

“You know Druss, I think you would make a really good Hakomon” joked Berke. “Have you learned any magic yet?”

The weather got quite bad, and Asturi would not allow him to go back to the cave. He knew that this time she meant it, so he let it go. He worried that his goblin friend would find it difficult to survive on whatever meagre supplies he could locate at this time of year.

When the spring brought a thaw, and the clans began to move more freely, he asked his grandmother about going back to the cave.

“Enough, Druss” she said annoyed and then dropping her voice to a whisper “This friendship you have, it cannot last, and you'll only get him into trouble if he stays around”.

“But he's my best friend. We're going to be friends for life. You don't understand” he complained.

She gave a short sympathetic laugh “Friends for life. When he grows up and finds out what he is and how the world is you will both go your separate ways, Druss. This kind of friendship is extremely rare, and I must admit I have never seen anything like it but there is no future in it. It will only end badly, if not for you then for him”.

“Did you ask your spirit guide about my fate?”

“I don’t need to Druss. It is obvious to any who wish to see”.

He was angry with her and withdrew into himself, assuring himself that as wise as his grandmother was, she did not know how things were with his life. He would prove her wrong. He and Smythe would be friends for life.

Druss spent a lot of time honing his archery skills and was easily the best amongst his peers and one of the best even amongst his clan. He was also almost constantly on horseback even when they were out taking care of the sheep. He was thinking too of Jamal, the archer who had beaten him in the competition. He wanted another chance to compete against her, a chance to win first prize.

Asturi had told him that his father Matheus was a renowned wrestling champion amongst the Ethengar people and so he began wrestling with Noyon who had proven he was the best amongst the children. Noyon was two years older than him, but Druss had inherited his father’s genes and stood eye to eye with him. In return he gave Noyon archery tips which improved his marksmanship.

They were far to the west, close to the border of Yugatais land when his eighth birthday came and went. It was late in the evening when the sound of howling wolves and the whooping of goblins was heard. They swept into the campground firing off flaming arrows and causing chaos with their sudden arrival. Asturi had turned to Druss “Stay right here, just like last time. There's no circle this time so pretend the yurt is the circle. You don’t leave, no matter what”.

“What if the yurt is on fire?” he asked.

She was in a hurry and held her impatience in check “Yes, that’s the only time you leave”. Then she muttered some words of an incantation while she beat on her shamanic drum, then securing it to her belt she held out her hand. A flaming sword burst into existence, the tongues of flame licking the air but not burning her. With one last glance at Druss, she ran from the yurt to aid her people.

Druss stood there for a moment considering his options. He could hear the goblin raiders racing about outside dealing death and destruction. He grabbed his weapons and followed Asturi out of the yurt. He stood at the doorway to assess the situation and then placed an arrow to his bow without thinking.

A goblin ran across the campground forty feet from him with a torch in his hand. He was about to set a yurt alight when an arrow from Druss pierced his chest. The young boy sought another

target and walked around the circumference of his yurt, justifying that he had not really left it if he was just outside. A flaming arrow hit the yurt near him, he looked for the archer that fired it and saw the goblin sitting astride a wolf. This was a wolf rider, Smythe had told him about them and dreamed some day of becoming one. Druss let an arrow fly hitting the surprised goblin in the shoulder and knocking it off the wolf. The large canine turned to check on its rider and Druss pulled the burning arrow from the yurt and threw it to the ground, stamping the flames out. He looked at the goblin and could see it was hurt but had managed to climb back onto the wolf. Just then some of his clan's horsemen came galloping in and gave chase to the fleeing goblin.

Druss ran from the yurt "Well it was kind of on fire", he rationalised and looked for his next target. He heard some human shouts and ran in that direction. They sounded like children, like his friends. He came upon the scene of Berke lying bleeding on the ground and Loi-Tan being grabbed by two goblins, a wolf stood nearby.

An arrow hit one of the goblins in the back and it wailed in pain, trying to reach back and pull it out unsuccessfully. Druss sprinted forward, his knife in his hand and was on the other goblin before it knew what had hit him. He stabbed the creature repeatedly until it stopped moving and then looked to Loi-Tan. She had a look of relief on her face that turned to fear as she looked past him. He turned his blade ready. Something flashed before his eyes, connecting with brutal force against his head. A white streak of pain and then blackness.

## Latchkey Kid - Part 5

He awoke in darkness, his head throbbing painfully. He lifted his hand and touched the lump where his forehead met his hairline. There was blood on his fingertips, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped. There were groans of hurt people and he peered through the gloom of the yurt where they had been confined. He recognised the faces of his clan and sought his grandmother but there was no sign of her. Berke was unconscious, Loi-Tan was at his side, his head on her lap. There were other children and several adults, mostly women including Asturi's sister, Nominar. They whispered to each other, and he was able to gather that there were dozens of goblins and most of the clans' warriors had been killed, including Nominar's husband, Loi-Tan's father, Ortu. Druss looked at Loi-Tan and could see she had been crying. Noyon had been captured also but he told them that he had seen Waruni run and hoped that she had escaped.

Five goblins entered the yurt shouting and pushing aggressively, ordering them to their feet. He got a good look at them and was able to confirm his hunch that Smythe was only a child. They were a little taller than him and wore clothes similar to that worn by the Ethengar people themselves. They barked orders and poked people with wickedly sharp rusted blades, even when they were moving as directed. They seemed to enjoy inflicting pain on the much larger humans and pushing them around. Loi-Tan shouted in protest as she was dragged away from Berke who lay prone on the ground unmoving. Two goblins spoke to each other, and Druss knew enough of their language to understand they were going to kill his friend as he was too injured to walk.

As one of the goblins drew its knife, Druss shouted, "No" in the goblin language.

It turned to him, its face contorted in surprise and then anger. How dare a human child order him about.

Druss's mind raced for some way to save his friend, sorting through the jumble of goblin words he knew. "Bad luck" he cautioned in the most ominous voice he could muster. "Bad, bad, bad" he continued shaking his head and shrugging as if he did not care what the goblin did.

The goblin stopped. He looked annoyed but uncertain. The fact that Druss spoke the words in goblin had thrown him.

"Nose, big" exclaimed Druss, starting with his hands around his nose, slowly expanding with a hissing noise before exploding outwards dramatically "... and booom".

The goblin scowled and looked to his companions for advice but received none. He turned from Berke and grabbed Loi-Tan, dragging her out of the yurt. Druss followed them out and was shocked at the carnage. Many of the yurts were ablaze and had been ransacked by the filthy creatures, their contents strewn around all over the ground. The goblins were brandishing newly acquired weapons and one had the dress of a woman on its head, like long flowing hair.

Much to the amusement of his companions, it spun around making the dress flare out. The goblins rolled around laughing and holding their bellies.

There were quite a number of dead goblin bodies but alongside them were several of his clan. The prisoners had their hands shackled in chains and then they were being loaded into two covered wagons.

Druss counted about fifty goblins and about twenty wolves, some of these were huge, almost twice the size of the others, with large heavy heads, they growled and snapped at the humans. The goblins were cackling with glee, clearly enjoying the victory and the spoils of their attack.

The wagon he was in was being pulled by two yaks. It set off away from the village with a sudden jolt. Druss peered between the gaps in the side of the wagon, taking in the sights and trying to see if Asturi lay among the dead. His heart sank at the possibility. She would not have let them take him without a fight, but she was nowhere to be seen.

The wagon they were in trundled across the land for hours. Druss fell in and out of a troubled sleep, woken regularly by the cramped conditions and the moaning of hurt people. When the light of morning began to break the goblins set up camp for a few hours to rest the animals before continuing. His stomach began to rumble, and he could see hunger on the faces of the others too. Whatever the reason for their abduction feeding them was obviously not a priority. He could only make out the occasional word spoken by the driver of the wagon they were in, but it was nothing useful. The caravan carried on until once more night fell and then after a few hours of travel in total darkness the wagon came to a stop.

Druss could see nothing, but he knew that the goblins had no such difficulties at all. His time with Smythe had shown him that if anything a goblin was at an advantage during the hours of darkness. One or two torches were lit, and he could make out that they were in a crude looking village of some type. There were some rough looking yurts but in the goblin style with badly repaired tears and festooned with the skulls and bones of butchered creatures. A gasp of fear came from one of the women, Oruni as she saw what looked like human skulls. Oruni was the mother of Gokti, the young boy who Druss had fought and beat. The woman who had complained to Asturi and was shocked to learn that her boy was older than Druss. Gokti was not with her now, but she had been assured that he was in the other wagon with Noyon. A strange kind of assurance but in some ways, it was preferable to the uncertainty of Gokti being left alone in the village with the dead.

Although they were hungry, the thirst became a problem and the people trapped in the locked wagons overcame their fear and asked for water. When this failed, some of them begged. The goblins just laughed and lashed out with sticks to quiet the feeble requests.

When they were eventually allowed out of the wagons, after they had travelled two more days in the cramped and stinking conditions, some of people had to be helped out and some simply rolled to the edge and fell out. They were weak from the lack of food and water. They had had

to urinate and empty their bowels while in the wagon. It had been an absolute nightmare and extremely distressing for everyone. The humiliation of it all had given way to the necessity of the bodily function. Druss had heard his people talk of the goblins with hatred but had been unprepared for the level of inhumanity displayed by the goblins. It made him appreciate just what an anomaly Smythe was.

The chains that bound them were secured to a thick piece of wood like the stump of a tree, in the centre of the goblin camp. He looked around and could see that the camp lay in a shallow depression, so that any light from the few torches would not be seen. He had hoped that there was a band of warriors on the way to rescue them, but the more time that passed, the more this hope faded.

They had moved on to a new spot around every second day and always at night. The days bled into each other, and it was only because Loi-Tan had tied a knot in a strip of fabric from her dress that they were sure it had been twenty days. Twenty days since everything had changed, their village destroyed, their family slain or captured. Twenty days since he had seen Asturi alive.

They had been given some water, but it was barely enough for everyone. The first time there had been none for the ones at the end of the queue. Those at the front had gulped water from the bucket they had been supplied and when it was emptied it had not been refilled until the next day. No matter which goblin was filling the bucket, it was only ever partially full. One of the goblins took pleasure in spitting in the bucket as he placed it on the ground within reach of the ragged humans. He laughed evilly when they scrambled for the water not caring what he had just done. This one seemed to take more pleasure than the others in tormenting them. They called him "Fat Face", but Druss knew his name was Seralba. "Fat Face" had huge sagging cheeks like a gerbil with a mouth full of food. Although they hated to see him around, he was also the cause of much snickering and laughter amongst the prisoners. It was not much, and they had little reason to laugh but it helped to keep their spirits up and hopeful that they would find some way to escape or be rescued.

The food when the goblins remembered to feed them, was not much better, and no one was exactly sure what it was they were eating. People gagged as they ate, their imaginations made some fearful they were cannibalising a dead clan member from the other wagon. Druss gave little thought to this. Food was food, so long as it stayed down, and if he was not overly sick then that was good enough.

One of the prisoners, recognised some of the features of the surrounding land and was sure they were in Yugatais tribal land. That they had some idea where they were made little difference to Druss. He looked around the camp to see if there was a likely route to escape. It was a pointless exercise as the next day they moved camp again and he had to start from scratch, but it kept his mind active, kept him from sliding into despondency and dwelling on the fact that this might be the end and there was no point in struggling anymore. He could see that

some of the others had given up and had a lethargy about them that would soon spill over into death.

The next camp had a lot more goblins and there were dozens of normal wolves and about ten dire wolves or “Dar-Naroosh” as the goblins called them. The prisoners were secured to a central stump, and most had learned by this time to huddle near the centre as best they could to avoid passing goblins. Unfortunately, someone had to be on the outside and they would routinely receive random kicks or slaps.

A goblin approached carrying their bucket of water for the day. He was doing his best not to spill any water, his tongue stuck out in concentration and effort. Only a small goblin, the bucket was comically huge in his arms. He plopped the bucket down nearby causing a little water to slop and splash over the edge of the rim.

The others moved forward to get their water for the day with Druss somewhere in the middle. He was looking ahead as he shuffled forward waiting for his turn. There was no sign of Fat Face and the small goblin stood by as each person drank their share. When it was his turn, he picked up the ladle and drank his fill. He looked at the goblin who was holding his gaze. A spark of recognition and joy as he recognised his friend, recognised Smythe. The young goblin shook his head as discreetly as he could, and Druss showed he understood by nodding and then handing the ladle to the next in line.

He sat back down and watched until all had drunk and then Smythe took the empty bucket away. Druss watched him leave and once again began to take stock of his surroundings. Smythe was here. He had finally left the cave and found his way home, back to his tribe. If Smythe was here maybe, he could help them to escape. The problem was that there was now a much greater number of goblins and wolves too and Smythe was only one goblin. A very young and small goblin at that.

Smythe returned later in the day with their food and the others noticed that it had improved. It was still left over goblin food, but it seemed a little bit fresher than what they had become used to and had fewer bite marks. This continued for three days, they received water and food and each time Smythe was bringing the best he could manage. On the fourth day he was stopped by Fat Face who watched him walk towards the humans. His heavy eyelids giving him a sleepy, sly look. He stuck out his foot and Smythe stumbled spilling most of the water onto the ground. The goblins nearby cackled and snickered. Smythe got back to his feet and brought what was left of the water to the human captives. There was barely enough for three people so those most in need were pushed to the front. The others would have to wait until the next day before Smythe could return with another bucket.

Several orcs arrived at the goblin camp late one evening and got into a heated discussion with the goblin tribal leader and shaman. Druss listened intently trying to make out what they were saying. The orcs were much larger than the comparatively puny goblins, but they were

outnumbered. There was much Druss could not understand as the conversation switched from goblin to orc and back again.

“What are they saying, Druss?” asked Loi-Tan, who knew he had been practicing the humanoid language with his grandmother.

He looked at her, a look of concentration on his face “I think they’re trading or selling us for supplies”.

There was a gasp and murmurings of despair from some of those gathered.

The orcs were as big as a fully grown human male and they walked in amongst the captives appraising them as if they were cattle at a market. People shrank away as best they could, trying not to catch the humanoid’s attention. The orc leader was carrying a long thin wooden stick and would tap someone on the shoulder and the two orcs that were following him would separate that person from the group and load them onto one of the wagons. When Oruni and Gokti were separated she screamed in terror as she was taken away and put with the others. Gokti was shoved back by the goblins who did not look like they were getting a fair deal.

The big orc came to the last few humans in the group. Druss stared hard at the large orc, his face calm. The orc paused in front of him and grunted in amusement. He turned to the others and said something that caused them all to laugh. Then he turned back to Druss, and backhanded him across the face sending him sprawling. The orc was no longer smiling. He cast his eyes over Nominar and Loi-Tan before tapping Loi-Tan on the shoulder. She did not show any fear and walked bravely away as she was led by the orcs to an unknown future.

When the orcs finally finished and went away for food and drink, the remaining clan took stock of the situation. Just over half had been taken by the orcs and were awaiting transportation. It was mostly young females and a couple of the younger males that were taken. Druss felt powerless, he closed his eyes and imagined what his father would do. He opened them again with no solution and joined the others around the tree stump, dragging his chains behind him.

Smythe came to them later that evening with food and water. With their much-reduced numbers there was plenty of both for everyone. Gokti was crying and Nominar did what she could to soothe him. Druss was the only one eating, the others had lost their appetite.

Smythe came to him that night, while the noise from the drunken orcs and goblins carried across the camp. The others were asleep or at least pretending to be. Druss was not sure what was going on, but Smythe was carrying a bucket.

He knelt down beside Druss, his eyes gleamed in the almost complete darkness. He examined the locking mechanism and began to pick at it with two twisted pieces of metal. A small click and Druss was free.

In hushed whispers Smythe spoke. “We go now. Somewhere safe. Smythe and Drash. Smythe and Drash, friends, yes?”



Druss nodded and smiled “Smythe and Druss, great friends, yes”.

This seemed to please the young goblin greatly and he took a goblin cloak from the bucket and secured it around Druss’s shoulders, pulling the hood up to hide his features. Then he stood to lead Druss away, but Druss did not move. He turned to the clan that had become his extended family. Three or four were now clearly awake and were watching the pair closely.

Druss looked at Smythe and then pointed at the others. “Family, come too”.

Smythe shook his head “Too many, no good, Smythe and Drash be dead. All be dead”.

Druss was about to insist when Nominar spoke “It’s ok, Druss. You get away and get help. It’s the only way”.

A noise from the humanoid festivities caused them to turn and look in that direction. Figures from the camp were walking toward the prisoners in the covered wagon. Two orcs, they carried large jugs of what was most likely alcohol, and they were laughing and joking at the expense of those within.

Druss felt Smythe grip him tightly on the upper arm “We go now” urged the young goblin.

Druss turned back to Nominar and the others. “I’ll get help, we’ll come back”.

When Nominar nodded, he allowed Smythe to lead him away, through a maze of yurts and sleeping wolves. One wolf raised its head and sniffed the air, the beginnings of a growl rumbling from its throat. Then smelling only goblin it went silent and dropped its head back to the ground and watched the two as they moved away.

Once clear of the camp they found somewhere to crouch down and decide what to do next. They had been travelling for so long with the goblins that Druss had no idea where they were or how long it would take to get back home. His first thought was to have Smythe guide him back to the cave, where they had first met but on reflection decided that finding people from any tribe from any of the scattered clans would have to do. Smythe had gone back into the goblin camp and returned with a wolf mount. It was better than nothing, but it was not big enough to carry them both. A dire wolf would have been better, but Smythe was not yet up to the task of mastering these beasts.

They journeyed back east, using the sun as it set in the west as their marker. Druss was at a disadvantage in the pitch black of the night but trusted his goblin friend. They also had to be careful not to stumble across any groups. If it was goblin or orc then Druss would be in trouble but if they came across Ethengar tribesmen, then Smythe would be. He spoke with his friend about the fate of his people in the goblin camp. What would happen to them and where the orcs were likely to take the others? Smythe had no idea but assumed that they would be used in the mines or as servants.

It was about a week later when they woke after a night of heavy rain. With no materials at hand to build even the most basic of shelters, they had huddled together for warmth under their cloaks, not daring to light a fire. The wolf stood up and shook itself dry, spraying the two youngsters with water. Smythe opened the cloth sack containing their food and handed some to his human friend. Druss took a bite and made a face but then reminded himself that he had eaten worse and took another bite.

Later that day they came to a pool of water, and they refilled their waterskin. The wind was blowing strongly in their faces and the wolf whined. A little later they too caught the smell of fire and proceeded cautiously. They came around a curve in the hills and could see a destroyed village, the yurts were still smouldering. The only signs of life were two chickens and a camp dog that barked loudly at the two newcomers and the wolf but fled when its courage failed.

It looked like the Gostai goblins had been busy and had hit another clan quite recently. They had a look around the camp but there was no one left alive. A horse had been killed and partially eaten and there was no sign of the rider, but he could see that the saddle was lined in wolfskin, a clear sign to Druss that this was a Yugatais camp.

Smythe told him that his people were always fighting with these "Ethies". When they found a dead man, he was quite happy to see that the large gold earrings had not been taken. Kneeling beside the body he pulled them from the dead man's ear lobes, a delighted smile on his ugly face. Druss looked on disapprovingly but said nothing. Later they managed to catch one of the chickens and after wringing its neck set about preparing it for cooking.

Smythe had found two bows and handed one to Druss. The bow Druss had given him as a gift had been taken by one of the more senior goblins and Smythe had been very upset but powerless to prevent the theft. In one of the yurts were some broken wicker cages, one was intact and held a large goose. They decided to keep the goose alive for now until they needed to eat it.

They were about to leave the yurt they had slept in that night, when a beating of wings and the hiss of a large creature made them jump back inside. They peered out from the flaps of the yurt as far as they dared, to see what it was. A large two-legged lizard like creature with wings and a long tail that ended in a nasty looking spike. The small scales on its body were pale blue but white along the chest and belly. The noise of more wings signalled the arrival of two more of the creatures that Smythe identified as wyverns. Once on the ground one of them did an awkward side hop to get close to a dead horse and then began feasting on the carcass. It ripped a chunk of the flesh free and then raised its head, the snout dripping with blood and proceeded to swallow it whole. Druss watched with fascination as he saw the throat bulge, showing the passage of the meat as it passed through the long neck into the winged lizard's stomach. Once it had finished swallowing it tore another piece of meat free and repeated the process. The other two wyvern were a little smaller and moved around by beating their wings to carry them the short distance to whatever corpse was in sight.

Druss and Smythe were forced to stay put. The wyverns were feeding, and the hope was that once they were full, they would leave, and the friends could continue. It took about an hour of gorging themselves before the wyverns finally did. A frightening screech that sent a shiver down his spine and caused the wolf to whine softly, and they leapt one at a time into the air, the wings beating strongly. Once airborne they circled the ruined camp once before heading west towards the Colossus Mountains.

It was late in the evening before they left the safety of the camp. The encounter with the wyverns had made Druss realise he had given no thought to any danger coming at them from the sky. He had been so focused on goblins and orcs it had never occurred to him there could be other threats. He had heard of wyverns and dragons, but he had never seen any come anywhere near his clan's camp. The only dragon he had seen had been flying very high above. He smiled when he thought about the looks on his friends faces when he told them this story but almost immediately remembered that unless he got help there would be no friends to tell it to. The smile faded, his young face was serious once more.

Later that night with the sky once more clear and the stars bright, they left the camp. The wolf detected it first and turned his head issuing a low growl. Smythe sitting in the saddle, touched the wolf's neck and it ceased. Druss could see nothing in the dark but standing so close to his friend he could see him pointing at something. "Hurt Ethie" Smythe whispered.

Druss took a chance and lit a small lantern he had taken from the Yugatais camp. The flame took and Smythe cursed quietly and shielded his eyes. Once it illuminated the area, Druss moved to where he could see a small human figure. It was a child about the same age as Druss. He did not seem to be moving but Smythe seemed sure he was hurt and not yet dead. He approached slowly and touched the head of the child who groaned quietly. Druss moved the lantern and could see a broken arrow shaft protruding from the boy's leg. He was at a loss for what to do. He did not know anything of the healing arts and there were no adults to offer assistance. In the end they managed to rouse the boy and get him to stand. He seemed out of it and was not making any sense. The night time trek was put off and they walked back to the ruined camp to wait for the morning.

The next day, the boy awoke. He looked around confused and scared and then groaned in pain. He calmed when he saw Druss who greeted him in his own language. Smythe and the wolf sat patiently to one side and the boy seemed not to notice. His brow was damp with sweat and his eyes were red and bleary. Druss had cut away the leggings when they had returned to the yurt and could see that the area around the wound was red and very hot to touch. It was obviously infected, but Druss did not have the confidence to remove it, afraid of doing more harm than good.

He gave the boy some water and once his thirst had been quenched, he was able to talk more clearly, his distinctive bright green eyes clearing. His name was Temur and he explained that his camp had been hit by Gostai goblins. The horsemen of his clan, which included his father and

older brother, had gone in pursuit and while they were gone, the goblins had either circled around or a second group had attacked the camp again. He looked around the yurt and spotting the goblin and the wolf, he tried to move but flinched, the pain from the arrow sending agony shooting up his leg. He was looking for a weapon to defend himself and looked at Druss with suspicion when he did not immediately react to the presence of a hated enemy. Druss did his best to explain the situation and told his story, but it was clear that Temur was not convinced. Smythe spoke with Druss in goblin and Druss translated for Temur.

“He says he can take the arrow out”.

Temur thought for a moment, he looked unsure but then nodded his head. The goblin spoke again, and Druss translated.

“He says it’s going to hurt”, said Druss who then spoke to the goblin.

Smythe moved forward slowly and crouched beside Temur examining the wound. He then walked to where they had butchered the chicken the other day and started looking at the feathers. He shook his head and walked to the wicker cage that held the goose. Reaching inside he yanked two feathers one at a time from the bird and returned to Temur.

Smythe cut off the ends of the feathers and then moved back to the wound and began easing it open.

Temur gritted his teeth and looked around until he found a piece of leather which he put in his mouth and bit down. The perspiration broke out on his forehead, and he passed out with the pain. Smythe looked at him briefly and then resumed his work. Druss leaned in to help and could see the barbs on the arrow. To just pull the arrow out would cause enormous damage and Temur could bleed out. Smythe eased both ends of the feathers into the wound placing the end of the feather over the tip of the barbs which swept backward. Once each barb was covered with the straw like quill, he gripped the broken arrow shaft and gently removed it. He looked at it and smiled before placing it to one side. He then returned to the wound and poured some clean water into it to wash any debris out. Once he had wiped away the blood, he stitched the wound up and then placed some clean rags that Druss had handed him on to the wound. Then he wrapped it up as best he could. When Temur woke up again, Smythe showed him the arrowhead. He took it from the goblin’s hands and looked closely at it. His fear and anger had gone, and he seemed more relaxed. If they had wanted to kill him, they could have, but it took further conversation with Druss to finally accept that Smythe was “one of the good guys”.

Temur’s father and brother returned two days later. They were accompanied by the Yugatai shaman, a stern man, with hard dark eyes, a large aquiline nose and robes which were adorned with eagle feathers. Druss and Smythe had remained in the hope that they would return and therefore help him rescue his clan from the Gostai. Of course, Smythe and the wolf had already departed swiftly when they saw them in the distance. Temur true to his word had not

mentioned anything to his father, the Khan of the Yugatais, about the young goblin. His father was very angry that his people had been attacked but relieved that his son had survived. He thanked Druss for his assistance and agreed to help him. The band of goblins they had been chasing had fled over the border into Glantri, which had forced them to return. The cursed magic-users cared nothing for justice and would not permit the horsemen to continue. Temur's father hoped to take out his anger on this other band that had Kaeruts captives.

Scouts were sent out to gather more help. In the meantime, a large warband of over a hundred warriors were assembled and they rode swiftly to where the goblins were encamped. On the second day they met Asturi and Bakalgu the Hakomon along with around forty Kaeruts from other clans who had received word from one of the Yugatais scouts. Druss was relieved to see her, but the reunion was postponed until they had rescued their people.

Early on the third day they swept into the goblin camp, which was half empty, many of the wolf riders had fled at the sight of so many Ethengar horsemen. The remaining goblins, which included young and old were quickly slain. Druss was riding on Asturi's horse and clung to her waist as she rode amongst the panicked goblins. They found the prisoners but only half, the others including Oruni and Loi-Tan, had been taken away by the orcs days ago.

Nominar had told them that the orcs had left soon after Druss and Smythe had escaped, which was roughly a week ago, maybe more. One of the goblins had been spared long enough to tell them their likely destination and then slain. According to him the orcs were headed to the border with Glantri.

The leaders of the Yugatais and Kaeruts forces gathered together to discuss what they were going to do. Temur's father, Vasilas thought it was pointless following them into Glantrian land. He had already tried that a few days ago and had been forced out. Those vile mages did not like the Ethengar and did not worship the immortals but seemed to have no issue with humanoids crossing their border. The obvious answer was that the humanoids were working with the mages. That and the fact that they had around a seven-day head start made it extremely unlikely they would be able to rescue them. Pride however would not let him desert them and he agreed to accompany the Kaeruts, sending half his force back to ensure the safety of his son, Temur, the remaining clan and the prisoners they had rescued.

Asturi rode with the others in pursuit and took her grandson with her. "You'll be safer with me" she told him.

The Ethengar warriors rode with multiple spare horses, which allowed them to change to a fresh mount when one got tired. They moved swiftly across the land, their trackers having little trouble following the signs left by the orcs. Smaller bands of humanoids saw the large group of humans crossing their land but dispersed quickly. There was little time to rest and after almost dozing off and slipping from the saddle of his grandmother's horse, Druss looped his arms into her belt so he would stay in the saddle even if he did fall asleep.

On one of the few occasions when they did stop to rest Asturi looked at him thoughtfully while they rested. "You've had a very interesting few days, eh boy?"

He nodded and smiled. "It's been fun".

"Fun? Foolish child" she admonished him. "Loi-Tan and the others are still in grave danger, and you talk about fun".

The smile disappeared "I'm sorry Asturi".

She sighed and after a brief pause replied "No, Druss. I forget sometimes that you are still a child. You have been very brave, but you are still a child". She caressed his head gently with her hand. "This friend of yours. The one you met at the place".

"Smythe".

"Yes, Smythe. Where is he now?"

"I don't know Asturi, but he helped me escape and he helped Temur. He took the arrow from his leg".

Asturi nodded "I know he helped you escape, my sister told me". She shook her head in disbelief. "Incredible, I would never have expected that from a goblin of all creatures".

"He wants to be a wolf rider".

"Does he now and how old is he?"

"Five I think".

"So, like you a child but not". She could see he did not fully understand so she explained. "Goblins are different to humans in a number of ways but in the case of how they age, your friend will be considered an adult in about four or five more years. They are like animals in a way. A young goblin has to grow to maturity more quickly than a human in order to survive. Your friend is only five in goblin years but closer to fifteen in human years. Do you understand?"

Druss nodded and then sighed. "I wish my father was here".

"His skills would be very useful in a situation like this" agreed Asturi.

"He said he would come back when the vampires were dead, but he's been gone a long time now" said Druss quietly.

"There must be a lot of vampires" she replied.

He thought on this for a moment. "When I get older, I'm going to help him to kill them. Then he can come and spend more time with you and my mother".

She smiled at this "That sounds to me like a good plan". She looked around then and could see the men were getting ready to continue the chase. "Mount up, it's time to go".

They followed the trail of the orcs right up to, and without any pause over, the border into Glantri. They found the orcs encamped half a day's ride further on. Druss marvelled at the coordination of the warriors. They reminded him of birds in flight. Like a large flock of birds that turned and flowed as one. The warriors were the same, they thundered over the ridge and down in amongst the startled orcs. Arrows were fired from the saddle, the hakomon Bakalgu let loose fireballs and small flaming spheres that hit their targets with unerring accuracy. The orcs though were made of sterner stuff than the cowardly goblins and after they had absorbed the first wave, they fought back. Druss felt the horse he was on stumble and fall, he and Asturi were thrown to the ground. He hit the ground hard and rolled away from the kicking horse that remained lying on its side, its nostrils flaring in fright and pain.

He saw Asturi on her knees, she saw him and then sneered, exposing her teeth. She leaned forward, stretching her arms out in front of her. He looked on in shock as his grandmother quickly morphed into a large tiger. She roared at Druss and then leapt over the wounded horse and into the battle against the orcs. He jumped to his feet and searched for the wagon containing his clan, and spotting it he ran forward, trying to be as unobtrusive as he could. He was only a child, as his grandmother had reminded him, not yet a man. He would need to be smart here and stay out of any direct conflict. He ran to the back of the wagon, the people inside rushed to the grill at the back, they look relieved. "Quick Druss, open the door, quickly", shouted Oruni barely containing herself.

He grabbed the large bolt, pushed it up and then tried to drag it back and out of the lock but it was stuck. He stuck his fingers into the grease around it and smeared it around the bar and then tried again. It began to move slowly at first and then it snapped back quickly, jarring him. Oruni and the others pushed the door open and were just climbing out when a big orc arrived to stop them. It grabbed Druss by the shoulder and pulled him roughly away. Stepping forward it grabbed the door of the wagon and would have slammed it shut but Oruni stuck her arm out to stop him. The door crushed her arm, and she screamed in pain as the orc pulled the door open again in order to try and slam it closed again. The others behind Oruni surged forward behind her to prevent the door from closing and she was shoved forward as the orc forced the door closed again. She grunted in agony as her torso was crushed. The orc leaned heavily against the door and shouted at the humans, spittle flying.

Druss crept behind him and pulled the orcs own knife from its scabbard. He stabbed the orc in the back of the thigh, and it shouted in pain, turning to face him. Druss slashed out with the blade, cutting the orc across the hand as it tried to block it. The others in the wagon took their chance and pushed forward, spilling out onto the muddy ground. The orc ignored them intent on the young human who had hurt him. He strode forward and Druss turned and ran. The orc pursued him, blood streaming from the wound in his leg and hand.

Druss was trying to find a place where he could escape from view in order to change direction without being detected and double back, but the only place he could see was a group of huts further on. He ran into a crude shelter hoping to find a window or backdoor but there was none, so he climbed under a table to hide instead. He looked at the knife, still stained with orc blood and listened carefully, keeping his breathe even. The sounds of an intense battle, weapons clashing together, the growling of wolves, the roar of a tiger and the screams of the wounded and then another noise closer by. He saw the orc from the knees down as it stood in the doorway of the shelter. It took a step inside, and he held his breath. A drop of blood hit the hard stone floor. He could hear the orc breathing as it walked around the room and finally as it stood in front of the table where Druss crouched. There was no way past the orc so he waited to see what would happen, the blade held tight in his hand. Suddenly and with a grunt the orc seized the edge of the table and flipped it away leaving Druss exposed. The young boy grinned and shouted "Surprise" and then lunged forward intending to stab the orc in the groin. Instead, he was batted to one side and sent sliding along the floor to crash into some crates.

A low angry growl came from the doorway and something large entered. Druss had hit his head the blood was streaming from his forehead and into his right eye. He had spent enough time around wolves to know whatever it was, it was not a wolf.

The orc walked backwards away from the tiger and tried to lift the table and use it to create a barrier between it and the large feline. The tiger had huge teeth exposed, its lips pulled back in a threatening grimace. It looked at Druss but returned its attention to the orc. The body tensed suddenly, and the tiger flung itself through the air, into the table and the orc. Druss quickly got to his feet and ran for the doorway as the screams of the terrified orc began.

Once outside he paused at the doorway, wiping the blood from his eye and looked around. It was then he saw a large wolf with a goblin rider trotting towards him, a red scarf tied around his waist, it was Smythe.

"Drash, need help?" he asked with a smile, offering his hand.

Druss clasped wrists with the young goblin and swung up behind him and onto the back of the wolf. More orcs were arriving, but the wolf ran at some speed and got them into the clear. They looked back at the shelter, Druss had just emerged from and spotted the tiger. The six orcs had weapons drawn, preparing to take on the big cat. Druss slid off the back of the wolf and took Smythe's bow and an arrow. He quickly sent an arrow through the air but missed, the arrow hitting the ground a foot from one orc. He spoke to Smythe quickly in goblin but did not have all the words to make a proper sentence, so he kept it simple "Big cat is grandmother, help".

Smythe looked confused but trusted Druss, in one movement he took the bow back and kicked the wolf into a sprint. He had travelled maybe ten feet but had already sent an arrow ahead of him and was preparing another.



Druss unarmed but unable to stay out of the fight ran after them. His eyes scanned the ground as he ran hoping to find a weapon before he got to the fight. He found a spear with a rusted tip lying in the mud beside a dead orc. He could see that Smythe was keeping out of range from the orcs, sending arrow after arrow into them and retreating when they tried to get close. Druss closed the distance heading for his grandmother who was swiping a claw at an orc, her ears flat against her head. An arrow hit this orc in the shoulder, and it stumbled forward into the tiger's range. Large claws raked open its face and throat and it fell dead. The remaining four orcs beat a hasty retreat and they let them go. The tiger bounded back towards the wagon and then looked back at Druss indicating he should follow.

The tide of the battle had turned most clearly in their favour, the bodies of orcs littered the ground and the rest had fled further into the hills of Glantri. The Ethengar had lost about eight of their men but had rescued all the prisoners. The tiger walked up to Bakalgu and slowly changed shape until Asturi stood once more in her human form. Druss looked around and spotted Smythe at the edge of the camp, sitting comfortably on the wolf. He raised his hand in thanks and Smythe mirrored the action by raising his arm. Loi-Tan joined him standing at his side.

"Tell me that that goblin isn't wearing the sash I gave you" she asked folding her arms.

"I... uh" he mumbled.

A call came from his grandmother, so he turned from Loi-Tan, and muttering an apology, he ran to Asturi and the Hakomon.

"This is my grandson, Bakalgu. This is Druss".

Bakalgu held a staff, the extremely long fingernails of his right hand drummed against the wood. "A brave boy Druss, you do your grandmother, Asturi proud".

He and his friends had heard a lot of stories about the mysterious Bakalgu and to finally be standing in front of him, Druss could only nod uncertain how to respond. He found himself studying the strange little man rather than composing a suitably respectful answer.

"He doesn't say much does he" Bakalgu laughed unexpectedly.

"Oh, he talks plenty when he wants to", replied Asturi as she stepped forward and put her arm around her grandson's shoulders.

They did a quick search of the orc camp and Druss retrieved the knife, that he had dropped fighting the orc. Some of the men lit torches and began setting everything alight, while others gathered up their dead and dealt with any wounded. Asturi healed the wounds of the most badly hurt including Oruni. Druss was scanning the hills and trees for Smythe when Asturi called him to her. Less than an hour later and they were riding back onto the Sea of Grass and home.