

The Black Lion:

Chapter 5 - The Long Road Home - Part 1

By John McCabe

In the days that followed, it was apparent that something had changed between father and son. Druss came to the realisation that he needed to find his own path. He would still hunt vampires or nosferatu where he found them, but it would not be his one and only goal. He had seen how his father had become consumed by this single task. No matter how noble a calling, it asked too much as far as Druss was concerned.

Matheus had asked what he had meant about taking people from him. Druss had admitted he was not entirely sure but that his father had a bad habit of driving the women in his life away whether he wanted to or not.

“I understand what happened with my mother but when was the last time you saw Asturi or Aralia or Matalia without me having to drag you along? I think you need to get away from this place. Go north like you always said you would. Make a fresh start”.

“When did you decide it was alright to start giving your father advice? It’s supposed to be the other way around” said Matheus smiling. Seeing that Druss was waiting for a more serious answer he added. “I’ll think about it. What about you, what are your plans?”

Druss shrugged. “Probably head south, Karamaikos sounds interesting. I hear there are plenty of vampires and nosferatu there too, even Glantri if you want? We can go there”.

Matheus shook his head. “No, my place is here”.

Druss knew then that it was not only the task of slaying the undead that obsessed his father and kept him here. It was also his mother. While she was here in the Heldann Territories, Matheus would not leave. Druss felt sorry for his father for the first time in his life. His father was strong, powerful and wise but he was trapped here and there was nothing he could do to free himself.

Druss had asked his father to return with him to see Aralia and Matalia again, but he refused, explaining that he had betrayed his mother and could not look at the child now without feeling guilt. He had only gone back the first time to introduce Druss to his sister and the second time because Kesi was with them, but he had no intention of going back again. Druss was so very disappointed in his father who had simply laughed at this.

“When you find out that your parents aren’t perfect, that’s when you know you’ve grown up. Congratulations, Druss, despite your mother’s concerns you’ve made it. You’re a man now. You choose your path, make your decisions, live with the consequences. Come back and see me in a few years and tell me you’ve made no mistakes”.

They were both silent for a while, when Druss spoke. "Is there any way I can help Kesi?"

Matheus rubbed his bearded face and then folded his arms. "You had a chance to help her, but you wouldn't".

"That wouldn't be helping her" said Druss annoyed. "Is there a way to bring her back, remove the curse, bring her back to what she was?"

"No".

"Are you sure? You don't look sure. Think harder, don't just say the first word that comes into your head. Imagine that it's my mother we're trying to save. Is there a way, any possibility?"

His father looked at him for a long time. "You don't know how much I want to punch you in the face right now. Do you know that?"

Druss smiled. "I know, I can tell".

Matheus gave him a reluctant smile. "I don't know that there is, but we can talk to Mika. If there's a way, which I seriously doubt, then she would know".

They had gone to Mika later that day and she seemed intrigued by the question. She brought them into her study and began pulling books off the shelves. Druss watched as she put her spectacles on and rested her chin on her hand as she flicked through the pages of numerous books with the other.

Matheus left shortly after, but Druss remained and stood beside her peering over her shoulder at the lines and lines of text, broken very occasionally by a piece of art or a diagram. He had grabbed her some parchment, a quill and a bottle of ink when she had asked and helped her to carry a pile of books over to another table by a window for some natural light. She began scrawling notes on the parchment while he watched with growing hope. His reading lessons had been short and there were few words he could make out.

Mika turned to him, "Druss, this could take a while, you better go home".

"Can it be done? Has it ever been done?"

"Well, there are stories, but they are extremely old so I'm not entirely sure if they are truth or legend. Wishful thinking, if you like".

There was nothing he could do here, so he thanked Mika for her efforts and left her to her studies.

It was exactly sixteen days later when Mika came to tell him what she had learned. It was not the news he had expected, and his hopes were somewhat dented. She told him that she was inclined to think it was possible to return someone to humanity that had been turned by a nosferatu. Unfortunately, she was not in possession of the book or books that explained exactly

how this was done. She would need to go to Freiburg where they had a larger collection of books and added that the quest for this knowledge may involve going to other libraries in other countries, it might even require access to a private library.

Druss looked at her. "When do we start?"

She smiled sympathetically. "You really loved her" and noticing she had used the past tense adjusted the sentence and said, "I mean you really love her. Druss, look, I hadn't planned on going to Freiburg till the end of the year, but I can bring that forward and go in a few days. However, you need to understand, this could take a long time. I must find the information if it even exists. I need to know which books or parchments may contain this information and then I need to find out where they may be. After that there is still no guarantee that we can get access to the information. The book may be lost, destroyed or in the library of someone not willing to share it. What I am trying to say is there are a lot of variables, and it is a daunting task with very little chance of succeeding". Seeing that she was crushing all hope, she quickly added "But it wouldn't be the first time that a task thought impossible was completed" she smiled, hoping it was a reassuring one.

"How can I help?" he asked.

"Give me time and space. When I have any clues about what we'll need or books that we have to get our hands on then I'll let you know. And Druss, this could take a really long time". She seemed reluctant to douse his hopes again but felt she had no choice. "Even if we do everything we need to do and save her, you could be an old man, while she'll still be in her early twenties".

"Twenty-five" said Druss not put off by the challenge. "She always used to complain that she was older than me. Well, the truth is I sometimes called her my old lady and that would make her mad, but in a good way. Don't worry Mika we'll find the cure and I'll be her old man. That's two things that will make Kesi very happy".

"That's a good way of looking at it" she smiled. "Now go, I have a lot of reading to do".

He was feeling restless again, so he took his horse and leaving Grauenberg he rode north towards the Altenwald forest. He had to be a bit more careful as he was not travelling with his father or the Experten, so he would not benefit from their protection. Matheus gave him some advice about which trails to take and what to look out for, but he was just repeating things that Druss already knew.

"Don't worry father, you've taught me well. I remember".

He enjoyed being out in the wilderness, so he tried to stay away from most of the larger towns and villages and only went in if he needed to top up his supplies or visit friends. Further north,

he found a smaller ferry than the one at Freiburg to cross the Elber river, setting up camp for the night after he had travelled a few more miles.

When he came to the river his father had shown him previously, he knew to follow it further northwest and he would find the crossing to his father's cabin. He sat on the horse not moving, for so long that it snorted with impatience. He pulled on the reins and headed downriver towards Nordenham.

He could see it in the distance and steeled himself unsure what he would find. This was where it had all begun. He rode up to the open gates and passed the guardhouse to the right. Three armed men in chainmail with tabards of the Heldannic Order watched him ride past. They looked bored and gave him little more than a passing glance. There were two horses tied to a hitching post, saddled and ready.

He passed by several buildings on his left and right, the homes of the population of Nordenham. The road opened up into a village square with the stables and blacksmith to his left. Up ahead he saw the line of businesses with the covered walkway. He dismounted outside Olson's Alehouse and Inn and tied the horse to a post before climbing the steps and then stood in the doorway. He turned and looked back at the way he had come. His father had told him how he had met his mother. A customer exited Olson's and gave him an unfriendly look. Druss walked in and straight to the end of the bar where his father had sat that day.

A short woman with her blonde hair in a single plait was behind the bar, and it took him a moment to realise it was Dura. He smiled at her and took his seat.

She looked at him quizzically. "What'll it be?" she asked.

"Nothing, thank you".

"Young man this is a bar, we sell drink, food and rooms if you need one. What we don't want is people taking up seats from paying customers".

"You don't remember me I know. I was very small when you last saw me".

She looked more closely but it had been many years, and she could not recall. "Give me a clue".

"You were good friends with my mother and father. She used to have a business just up from here and my father used to sit right here".

The shock of recognition turned into a cautious smile. "Druss, is it really you? Oh my", she said moving back along the bar to the hatch so that she could come around to his side. "Let me take a look at you". She held both his hands and seemed very happy to see him. "It's been so long. How old are you now?"

"Twenty-five".

“Has it been that long” she asked stunned. “Come here, sit with me”. She took him over to one of the tables used by the customers to eat or play cards.

They spent the next two hours talking and he was delighted to finally meet his ‘Aunt Dura’. Things got a bit tense when they spoke of the Heldannic Knights. Olson had been captured during the fighting and shipped off with hundreds of others to lands unknown and Anya, who had been one of her best friends, had joined the Order. She made it clear that she did not hold this against Druss and could not believe that he had only seen his mother once, and recently, since she left him to join the Order in all that time.

“How old were you when she left?” asked Dura, angry, before she even heard the answer.

“Two”.

“Two?” her jaw set tight, and she pursed her lips. “You think you know somebody. Take a real liking to them. She was like a younger sister to me, your mother. Such a sweetheart but strong, a good businesswoman. Well able to look after herself. I thought Matheus was a great match for her. He’s a good man your father. I don’t know what went wrong. Your father was arrested by the Knights but then we heard that he had escaped. You were born, your mother was so happy, so proud”, she smiled her eyes glistening as she looked at him. She wiped her eyes, her face resumed that business like expression. “But then it all went to hell in a hand basket. I lost my Olson, your mother, my mind”. She sighed then and clasped his hand. “Your father how is he?”

“He’s good. Still hunting vampires. It’s all he does now really”.

She detected the undercurrent of dissatisfaction. “What are your plans this far north?”

“I’m going to my father’s cabin for a while. After that?” he shrugged.

“Well, you’re staying here tonight. I’ll get you some more food, you’re so big and tall now,” she said still holding his hand. “I’ll fix you up a room and we can talk some more if you’re not too tired to talk with your Aunt Dura”.

“That sounds great” he replied.

He stayed another day with Dura who suggested that he go back to Ethengar for a while as things were still a little volatile with the Heldannic Knights who were enjoying their victory a little too much and rubbing it in everyone’s face. He told her about Moglai Khan and the turmoil going on there. She shook her head at this, muttering that perhaps her people in Rockhome were right to keep themselves to themselves.

He went from there to his father’s cabin and then up into the valley of the Grove. He found some of the statues of the petrified trolls his father had told him about and finally arrived at his destination.

Aralia was happy to see him and asked inevitably about Matheus, thankfully, a thrilled to see him, Matalia interrupted, and he spent the rest of the day telling them of his adventures and the outside world. He had brought a new dress for his sister who wore it for the two days he remained. When Matalia asked about Kesi, he told her that she was sick but that when she was better, he would bring her back to visit again. He tried his best to explain his father's absence to Aralia. It was a very uncomfortable experience as he was torn between somehow justifying Matheus not being there and not saying that he had regrets about having a daughter with a woman not called Anya. When he left this time, he told them that it might be a few years before he could return, that he needed to find the ingredients to help Kesi, which could take some time. Matalia had nodded solemnly, handling this disappointing news with growing maturity.

Arriving back in Grauenberg many weeks later he went straight to Mika who had some news for him. Her research had sent him to the Soderfjord Jarldoms in the Northern Reaches where he needed to find one of the wise women there and secure a wooden stake imbued with rune magic. While he was there, he befriended a warrior from Ostland called Red Falco who assisted him in finding the wise woman who gave Druss what he needed in return for helping her.

Then it was back to the Experten, Mika in the Heldannic Territories who sent them on a journey to the desert land of Ylaruam in the hope of finding a book or parchment that would reveal more details. The journey to Ylaruam took a couple of months and Druss was dismayed by the loss of time. Had they been able to contact Mika they could have saved a lot of time and travelled straight there from Soderfjord. She had agreed and had given him a magical scroll. Mika had another and they were a matched set. Whatever was written on one would appear on the other. "Another way for you to practice your reading and writing" she had said to him.

Journeying south by ship to Surra-Man-Raa, a port city in the Emirates of Ylaruam they had sold their horses for camels and taken on a young woman called Husniya as a guide. They discovered quite quickly she was a thief and kept a wary eye on her. They arrived in the capital city Ylaruam itself and sought out the bookseller. Finding him was not too difficult but getting him to speak of his more valuable collection required patience and diplomacy. Druss's friend Red Falco reminded him a lot of his old friend, Kashin in Ethengar. The same bull-headed approach to resolving any conflict.

In the end the bookseller had agreed to check his collection for the information they sought but in return they had to take a rose and a note to the daughter of a rich merchant. This proved quite difficult with Red Falco who they had to persuade to stay in one of the Inns while Druss and Husniya, the Ylari thief delivered the rose and the note by sneaking into the heavily armed compound. They received the return note from the young woman that was vital for their assignment to be deemed completed and then went back to the book seller. He was extremely happy with their success and kept rereading the note, pressing it to his chest and then reading it again. Druss had to clear his throat on several occasions before the man apologised and took a rolled-up parchment from a shelf and handed it to him. It was slightly damaged and in a

language Druss could not understand. The bookseller had shrugged and assured him that was all he had on the topic of Nosferatu.

Using the scroll Mika had given him he explained what had happened and then as best he could, he copied the writing on the damaged parchment in the hope that the Experten could translate it. It took another day of sitting around and waiting before he received a reply. The parchment had detailed the requirement for the flesh of the nosferatu responsible for turning Kesi to be burned away completely. This would be accomplished when he drove the rune imbued stake into its heart, as the rune contained fire magic. This was cause for relief as it corroborated the other information Mika had managed to research. The damaged parchment, however, went further and explained how the bones and teeth needed to be ground up into a powder. The writing on the bottom section of the parchment was cut off mid-sentence leaving them in the dark about the rest. The language used, however, gave them a clue for where to look. It was spoken by the people of another land far to the west called Sind, another land with a vast expanse of desert.

This was a huge undertaking as Sind was many, many miles away and they had no idea where to start. Mika told them to start out and she would do what she could to narrow down a possible location for the other piece of the parchment, assuming it had not been destroyed.

Fortuitously they had met a magic user while travelling across the Republic of Darokin, in the city of Selenica. He had used some of his magic and through some kind of divination, determined that the parchment was still intact. He gave them a Y shaped stick and told Druss how to use it. Held lightly in his hands it would point in the direction of the parchment. In return for this they were to act as his personal bodyguard until he was safely home. More weeks of travel across the lands of Darokin followed before they spent a week in Darokin City itself, the home of the mage.

They were joined by Vardon, a priest of Asterius who was interested in seeing for himself what kind of land and people were in the far west. They followed the trail south of Lake Amsorak and spent two days in the city of Akesoli, preparing for the next leg of their journey, which would take them into Sind.

Arriving in Sayr Ulan the capital city, they lost some days when Husniya got food poisoning and was unable to travel.

Vardon was interested in the variety of spices available here and the type of music played by the people. He bought himself one of the long necked stringed instruments called a sitar even though he had no idea how to play it. He was fascinated with the men who could charm snakes when he discovered that they did not use any magic. Although he was a priest, being of Darokinian descent he had an entrepreneurial spirit and was planning on buying some wagons to go into business for himself.

With some experience dealing with the extreme heat of the Alasiyan desert of Ylaruam, they were able to put this to good use, purchasing camels and joining up with a caravan that took them in the direction the Y shaped stick was pointing. They journeyed close to the Salt Swamp, finally arriving at the town of Khamrati. As they were leaving the stick swiveled slowly in Druss's hands clearly indicating that they had come close to where the parchment lay. They were led to the hut of an old man, with several young children. They did not have much food or wealth, so Druss and his friends gave them enough to support them for many months.

The conversation then shifted to why Druss and the others were there, and the old man had been surprised at the incredibly long journey they had undertaken. He rummaged in a pile of clothing and their meagre belongings producing a rolled-up piece of paper which he had held on to knowing that it was somehow valuable. He cried tears of joy that he had been proven correct. He and the children travelled with the group back to Sayr Ulan where a modest home was purchased for them to live.

Druss made contact with Mika using the magic scroll and she translated the parchment again. The next step after grinding up the bones of the dead nosferatu was to combine it with the blood of a nosferatu and holy water. The nosferatu had to be alive when the blood was being drawn and as if things were not difficult enough, the nosferatu had to be of the same sex as the victim. In this case they needed the blood of a female nosferatu. The mixture then had to be given to Kesi as the sun rose, at a time and place when there were few or no clouds in the sky. Kesi would need to drink the mixture and then allow the rays of the rising sun to bathe her. If all went well, she would be cured.

"And if all doesn't go well, she'll be burned to a crisp" said Red Falco unhelpfully.

Now that they had the knowledge of what to do, they now needed to begin the process. To do this they would have to get the blood of a female nosferatu and then find the one that started it all. To do that, they would need to find Kesi and get her to identify the one although Druss was quite sure it was The Priest.

"Maybe if we just find a friendly one, she'll give us the blood if we ask nicely," said Vardon.

Nobody thought that was very likely but the best place to look would be where they were said to be in great numbers. That to Druss's knowledge, meant the Principalities of Glantri, Karameikos or the Heldannic Territories. It was decided to go to Glantri as it was on the way.

As Glantri was not a place friendly to clerics they would part ways with their friend Vardon who decided that he would return to Darokin city. They took a ship at Akesoli across Lake Amsorak to the port city of Akorros on the other side. From there they journeyed north, saying farewell to their cleric friend but picking up a magic-user, who wanted to earn some more money to pay for his studies at the Great School of Magic in Glantri City.

Druss learned from the magic user, Arsène, that to find the most nosferatu, they had to journey from southern Glantri to the northern principality of Boldavia which had a dark reputation.

They stayed two days in the strange but delightful Glantri City with its canals instead of streets and where magic was viewed by all that lived there as a normal everyday thing. Streetlamps that lit up when the sun fell, gondolas that could propel themselves through the waterways using water elementals, strange little winged creatures and other oddities perched on the shoulders of magic-users who went about their business. The windows of shops contained all kinds of interesting things to lure the customer in. One that caught Druss's eye was a bakery that sold pastries made by invisible beings. He stood there watching as the dough was twisted and small containers of sweets and spices were sprinkled by unseen hands and then placed in the ovens.

He had by this time become the owner of multiple magical weapons and items and the thought had occurred to him to sell these in one of the many shops that bought and sold magical items. He decided against this in the end, as each blade had a particular creature it had been enchanted to fight. One was useful against lycanthropes, one against undead, another for creatures that could regenerate and the final one was forged to kill magic-users. This one he kept out of sight while in Glantri.

In Boldavia they managed to get some possible leads. There was a woman who lived in one of the villages who was suspected of being a nosferatu. Druss made his approach and decided despite the way they had all laughed at Vardon's suggestion that maybe if she was friendly, they could just ask. Going on instinct he had done just that. He was met with a surprised but amused look and invited to dinner by Lucette. She was a very tall woman, almost six feet, her hair was black, her skin, unsurprisingly to his mind, pale. She reminded him of Masarai the Experten back in the Heldannic Territories, although he could see no tattoos.

They had sat at a long eight-foot table. She at one end and Druss at the other. They had eaten their meal and drank their wine. He looked closely at what he hoped was red wine before drinking it under her watchful eye. He wore a talisman that would protect him from evil, so he felt reasonably secure, and she had not asked him to remove his weapons, so either she was trustworthy or was far more powerful than him.

He had expected that she would ask the party to undertake some quest in return for her cooperation, but she had not. In return she had simply asked "Blood for blood. I give you some of mine and you give me some of yours".

He was unsure about this request. After a moment's hesitation and holding her gaze without blinking, he agreed to her terms. She used a blade to make an incision in her arm and then allowed the blood to flow into a glass bottle that he handed to her.

"My turn".

He was a little surprised when she handed him a glass vial, that would require comparatively little blood to fill.

“You thought I was going to bite your neck and take my fill?” she asked enjoying the fact she had wrong footed him.

“What are you going to do with it?” he asked, concerned that she would use it for some dark art.

She had only shrugged “I don’t know yet. A keepsake perhaps. What you are attempting to do intrigues me. I am torn between wanting you to fail and hoping for Kesi’s sake that you succeed”. She had put a stopper on the small vial and put it away in the folds of her dress close to her breast.

Taking a barge south along the Dol-Anur River, Druss had resisted the temptation to visit friends and family in Ethengar. The party had been asked to accompany two dwarves who had been in hiding in Boldavia and needed help returning to the dwarven nation of Rockhome. They had remained on the barge before changing over where the Dol-Anur met with the Street River and again changing rivers to journey up the Krandai river until it entered one of the small lakes. From there they sailed up along the Styrdal River to Fort Denwarf where they were allowed to proceed.

With four magical swords in his possession, Druss traded them all for a single sword. The original bartering involved only three of his swords and the dwarves had been unsure about making the exchange but when he had thrown in the sword that was enchanted to kill magic-users they lost their reservations. The dwarves of Rockhome had no love for mages and were sure they could put it to good use. In return he received a longsword that had the appearance of being made from smoke. Once he handled the sword, however, it solidified into a black metal that started a debate amongst the dwarves about how it was forged. Druss called the sword Doom.

It was after many months of travel passing through the land of Ethengar that had settled down under its new Khan that he finally reached Grauenberg in the Heldannic Territories. Red Falco had returned to the Northern Reaches as had the others to their respective homelands.

The road had changed him greatly. He was a very experienced adventurer now and a seasoned fighter. His face bore a four-inch scar on his left cheek and was just about visible under a full black beard. He met Matheus and noticed he was about two inches taller than his father now and almost as large, his own physique being more like a great cat as opposed to his father which was more like a bear. When it came to their wrestling bouts, however, the ‘over the hill fighter’ still had his number and was able to beat him.

He had to be persuaded to take two weeks to rest and recuperate before going to find Kesi.

“Druss, it has been a few years now since Kesi was turned, two more weeks won’t make much of a difference” Mika had assured him. “You must be at your best. It would be a shame to fall at this final hurdle after all the effort. Have you given any thought about where to begin?”.

“I know just where to start”.

He had arrived back in Landfall and went straight to his grandfather’s bakery. They stayed up a few hours past midnight talking. Things had changed and the ladies of Fallen Alley led by Annie had broken away to become independent. This had happened after she had been badly disfigured by a high-ranking member of the main guild in Landfall. The man had been punished but it had not been enough to prevent the split. A month later the man’s body was found in the bay by fishermen.

Druss went down to the piers every night for three months, always as the sun was going down, and every night for three months he returned an hour after sunset. A few evenings into the fourth month, the magical sword Doom vibrated gently in its scabbard. He turned his head and there she was. It was a disorientating experience. She had not changed at all. How she looked now was exactly how she had looked in his mind's eye. Whenever he thought of her, she was laughing and smiling that strange sarcastic smile.

“Kesi?” he asked, his voice croaked as he spoke. Was she really here?

“Hello pretty boy. I see ye’ve got hair on yer face now” she said admiringly reminding him of their conversation many years ago now. “Ye here to make a fresh start with me?” She moved closer and then sat down beside him, her legs dangling with his off the edge of the pier.

He put his hand on hers and rested it on her thigh, she felt cold. He told her about his adventures and his quest to collect the items and the knowledge he needed to get her back. She did not seem to think it was possible, but his optimism was infectious, and he soon had her on board. She told him where her master was, the nosferatu that had turned her, The Priest. She would have to remain behind and could not help him as upon his command she would turn on Druss. They had parted as the sun was rising again the next day. He promised her that he would return. Before she left though she said “Loose de beard. It hides yer face, and I always liked yer face”.

He had set out with the intention of finishing this quickly, the rune enchanted stake secured by his side. He had found the nosferatu in its hiding place in the hills of Freiburg almost right under their noses, but while he was dealing with its servants, it fled knowing it was outmatched by the determined hunter. He went back to Grauenberg to see if his father or the Experten had any leads. News that a young priest had gone missing in the Capital caused more of a stir now that they were informed by Druss that the Priest had been so close by. Druss was there with Masarai when several more priests went missing around the Notre Dame of Vanya’s Cathedral.

“He’s playing with us” said Masarai. “He must have another place close by, maybe even here in the city”.

Druss had hoped that Kesi would appear again to tell him where the Priest’s new hiding place was, but she did not. Two more Experten came into the city but were under orders to keep a

low profile so as not to worry the civilian population. They were unable to locate the menace and soon civilians began to be targeted, their bodies were not located.

Druss offered his theory on what was happening. "I think he's going to turn all these people and when the time is right, he'll turn them loose".

"Sounds plausible" said Masarai. "It's what I'd do".

He needed to find Kesi so that she could lead him to his quarry, so he went back to Landfall to see if she was there. He arrived as the sun was setting and walked straight to their spot on the piers. He could see her sitting down, her legs dangling. He stood a few feet behind her.

"I'm sorry I disappeared. I got scared. He wanted to kill an Experten to send a message. He was going to leave the body hanging over the entrance to the Cathedral so that everyone would know that they weren't safe. I didn't want to be involved and I couldn't get away with Masarai and the others around". She turned and looked at him "By the way mon, I'm not happy with you spending so much time with her".

"It's purely professional".

"Doesn't look like it to me".

"Help me find the Priest and we can end this. Then I won't have to be around her" he smiled resting his hand on the pommel of Doom. A soft blue light was being emitted from the blade.

"I think your sword likes me".

"The Priest, Kesi, where is he?"

She had told him where to look with the utmost reluctance afraid that her master would kill him, but he insisted as there was no other way to help her.

Kesi and her master were attuned, so she was able to know by instinct where she needed to go. They left Landfall and went to the hills southwest of the Altar of Vanya mountains. The Priest had several coffins hidden all over the Heldannic Territories and even outside its borders. He was a very meticulous man and liked to have back up plans. Kesi stayed out of sight while Druss entered the lair, a small cabin used by woodsmen, built up against a hill. He thought he had him cornered and the nosferatu tried some spells against him, but Druss was an experienced fighter and had several magical items, not least of which was Doom. When the nosferatu attempted to escape in gaseous form, Druss was able to follow in the same way exiting through a chimney like fissure coming out at the top of the hill. Once there the nosferatu changed into a bat and Druss could only watch as he disappeared into the night sky.

Kesi arrived then and stayed in the coffin her master had left behind. The next night they worked out where he was and tried again.

Druss chased the fleeing creature for months all the way to the Altan Tepes mountains, north of Karamaikos but close to Ylaruam, dispatching every undead assassin sent to stop him. As they got to what had to be his final refuge and likely his last stand, Druss made preparations to enter the mountain.

Kesi had been here before and had pleaded with Druss to give up the chase, warning him there were worse things than the Priest here. She asked him to return to Landfall and wait for her master to turn up again, although she confessed there was no guarantee he would, at least not in Druss's lifetime. He had gone into the mountain, walking through caves and then what looked like ancient corridors with marble pillars. Kesi was with him, so he had no early warning from Doom as the blade was glowing brightly in her presence. Kesi touched his shoulder indicating they were close and held back as he walked into an ornate chamber of unknown purpose where he finally came face to face with the nosferatu once more.

It was shocked that Druss had found him again, but at the same time unconcerned. According to Kesi her master had taken up residence with a powerful Lich under whose crypt Druss had followed his quarry. Kesi was forced from the shadows when her master called "Show yourself you traitorous wench".

She had gone to him like a chastened dog, her body language submissive and flinching as though she expected him to strike her.

Druss remained calm. He held the sword Doom, his shield Haven and readied himself for the fight. The nosferatu looked like it was waiting for something to happen and seemed unnerved when it did not. Druss charged him then and he leapt away calling Kesi to aid him. She was under his control but managed to resist the call long enough for Druss to close the distance and lop an arm from the nosferatu who screamed in agony. The Priest launched his own attack, but the grim-faced hunter was unharmed and undeterred. Another slash of the powerful sword sent the nosferatu's fingers scattering across the floor like so many dice. The wicked sword pierced and sliced the Priest's body until it was a quivering wreck on the stone floor.

Druss drew the rune enchanted wooden stake from his belt and with no hesitation drove it into the heart of the creature. The body convulsed silently in what seemed to be pain, before the rune on the stake glowed, the magic activating. The stake burst into flames which spread quickly, consuming the body. He stood back as an acrid smoke issued from the corpse. It was foul and he covered his mouth so he would not inhale it, stepping back to allow the magic to complete its job.

Kesi stood by his side, her arm linked with his, a smile bright and wide on her face. This nightmare was coming to an end. Once the flames had died out, Druss gathered the bones and teeth from the pile of ashes. Nothing else remained, not even the stake.

It was as they were leaving that Druss found out what the nosferatu had been waiting for. The Lich made its appearance then, exuding such malevolence that Doom was pulsing madly at his

side. He shoved the satchel containing the remains of the nosferatu into Kesi's hands telling her to get out and then turned to face his adversary, Haven raised in defence.

The Lich, Oirtulev was toying with him, after sending dozens of lesser undead to test him, it cast some powerful spells which immobilised him completely. His strength, experience and magical items could not help him. He turned his head to look for Kesi, but she was gone. He knew that this was the end and hoped that she would find her way to Mika who would perform the ceremony. Searing agony wracked his body and several strange humanoid type creatures came into sight. Carved from a black, glass-like rock they tore the armour and clothing from his body. The golems at the silent bidding of their master, the Lich, shackled him to a large stone table. His mind raced, wondering what vile magic was to be performed and if his eternal spirit would be forfeit.

Then the Lich spoke "I thank you for this entertainment. It was a pleasant distraction. You should be proud of yourself. You have done what few others have managed to achieve. You got my attention". It walked closer then, the stench of decay and dust filling Druss's nostrils.

It ran a bony finger along his chest before pausing above his heart. It pressed hard, the long nail piercing the skin and drawing blood. "I could kill you I suppose, rip your soul from your body and cast it adrift in limbo to be feasted upon by the creatures that dwell there". Oirtulev pulled his hand away, a small stream of blood was running from the wound on Druss's chest over his rib cage and onto the stone table he was lying on. The Lich walked around the table to stand close to his head. "You who have hunted shall become the hunted. I only need to decide on the form that this should take". The Lich chuckled to itself, a strange inhuman sound that only sent chills of fear through the living. "No one can accuse me of lacking a sense of humour".

The leathery skin stretched tight over his face seemed to gleam as he began to utter the words of a powerful spell.

Druss felt his skin prickle painfully as the spell took effect, his stomach lurched, and he managed to turn his head sideways just before he vomited. He gagged and spat out the residue trying to clear his mouth. The mutterings of the Lich continued, and Druss's muscles tightened and cramped up. He was forced to cry out in pain. The Lich paused the spell and laughed evilly before proceeding. Druss's body spasmed, his back leaving the table, the chains rattled as he arched in pain. The pain left his body and he lay flat on the stone table again, his body soaked with sweat.

"Almost done" cackled the Lich.

More muttered words in an ancient language and the pain returned. Druss cried out again in nerve burning agony. The cry changed and became a roar, no longer human, something bestial.

The Long Road Home - Part 2

Anya awoke from her sleep with a sharp intake of breath but remained lying down. She opened her eyes in the darkness of her room and knew she was not alone. She turned her head and looked over to the window and saw that the wooden shutters were open, the light gauze curtain flapping gently in the nighttime breeze. The room was dark but there was a darker vaguely human shaped blob to one side of the window. Her hand moved under her pillow and gripped the handle of the knife. She began to mutter the words of a spell when she was interrupted by a voice coming from the darkness.

“Ders no need for any drama. I’m not here to do ye harm. Druss needs our help”.

It had been a long time, but Anya recognised the familiar accent. “Kesi?”

She removed a cover from the gem that had been enchanted with a continual light spell and the room lit up immediately. Kesi had not moved from her position and was waiting for Anya to ready herself, throwing on a warm dressing gown and moving around the side of the bed, the knife still held in her hand.

“What’s going on Kesi? What’s happened?” asked Anya, dispensing with the other question of how Kesi had breached the defenses of her place in Altendorf. The young woman was dressed in loose-fitting black leggings, shin high boots and a black shirt.

“Come here Kesi, you look cold, I’ll get the fire going and you can tell me what’s going on”.

Kesi smiled at the offer, knowing that the fire would do little to improve the paleness of her complexion but appreciating the motherly instinct being displayed. She took a seat next to the fireplace impatient to get started with the story but knowing that another ten minutes would make no difference at all.

The Serving Brethren assigned to Anya had prepared the fire earlier and it only required a spark before it was ablaze and filling the room with its welcome heat. Anya had laid the knife down and turned now, taking Kesi’s hands in her own and drawing her closer to the flames. “By Vanya you’re freezing”

“I’ll be just fine, don’t fret but I can’t say de same about Druss”.

“Where is he Kesi, is he hurt?”

“He’s far from here and he’s ok sorta. We were chasin De Priest and ran into a big nasty. Druss was captured and somethin terrible happened. I had to run and get help, der was nothing I could do, I’m sorry” she said despairingly.

“From the start Kesi, The Priest?”

Kesi told the story of the nosferatu, they called The Priest, how the Experten had first encountered him and how Druss had been hunting him to find a cure for Kesi. She almost

reluctantly gave up this last piece of information afraid of the reaction she would receive from the priestess of Vanya when she knew exactly what kind of creature was sitting beside her.

Anya's hand moved to the holy symbol that hung from a chain around her neck, something she very rarely removed.

Kesi sat and waited. If she wanted Anya's help, she would have to allow her to feel confident enough to know this was not some elaborate trap.

"What made you come to me? Did Matheus turn you down? I don't understand".

"De last time I saw Matheus he said if we met again, he'd kill me and den ders de Experten. Dey ain't known fer talkin to undead, just killin em. I heard about de problem yer knights had in Freiburg with vampires in dat crypt where ye keep all yer important dead people. I didn't want der to be any confusion dat I was a part of all dat. No, ye were de safer bet and you're his muma".

Anya quickly got dressed and told Kesi to remain in the room while she went to see Landmeister Hauerfang. She would need to ask for his permission to take a leave of absence.

Fritz Hauerfang had obtained the position when the previous Landmeister Georg Löwenstern died of a stroke when Altendorf was captured briefly by the Partisans until Fritz led a counterattack and retook the town. He was relatively young at thirty-one, about the same age as her son, Druss, and he was no fool.

"What's this all about Reverend Mother Arendt?" he asked, pouring himself some hot tea.

Not one for lying, she simply told the truth. "I have received word from a reliable source that powerful magic wielded by a Lich has been used to turn an innocent man into a nightmarish creature".

There was a very strong chance that Anya would have been prevented from undertaking the quest, if it sounded too personal. The good of the Order came before anything personal.

"A Lich, here in the Heldannic Territories? Have the Experten look into it."

"No, Grand Knight Hauerfang, it occurred somewhere north of Karameikos, close to the border with Darokin and Ylaruam".

"Karameikos? I don't see how that is of concern to the Order".

"Ordinarily I would agree Grand Knight but the form that this nightmarish creature took is what caught my attention".

Fritz a tall, powerful man sipped his tea and smiled knowingly. "Ok, I'll bite what kind of nightmarish creature are we talking about?" he asked, raising the cup to his lips again.

“He was transformed into a strange hybrid of man and beast” she looked at him letting him wait a second before proceeding. She could see a way that this might work and wanted to make sure the lure was appropriately baited. As he lifted the cup to his mouth and took a sip she spoke, “A Black Lion”.

He sputtered and the tea dribbled down his chin. He quickly wiped it away and gave her a questioning look. “Did I hear you correctly?”

“Yes, Grand Knight, the person I am going to help has been turned into a Black Lion. I don’t know what this means exactly but it might be a sign. At the very least we must investigate, no?”

The Landmeister had tried to convince her to hand the mission over to another ‘younger’ Knight as Anya was fifty-four now, but she reminded him that she had been by his side in Altendorf and had given him a chance when he was still wet behind the ears. Now that she was ‘old and gray’ she expected his support.

“If Vanya wills it” was he reply, and she had been given to go ahead to speak with the Abbot of the Experten to secure some help and then to set out and locate the creature immediately.

Matheus was arriving back at Grauenberg after his morning run in the surrounding hills. His friends had tried to discourage him from this activity coming so soon after the raids on Ethengar that had been staged by the Knights in response to the slaughter of Heldannic Missionaries who had been trying to spread the faith of Vanya in their land. Matheus had laughed at their concerns. “I’d feel a lot safer out here with room to move than locked up like a fish in a barrel. Thanks, but no thanks”.

As he approached the gate a pair of riders joined the road just ahead of him and he followed them in. Dressed in full plate armour and wearing the black and white colours of Altendorf, he wondered what the Heldannic Knights were here for. He kept behind them as the horses trotted up the main street and followed when they cut diagonally across the square towards the Experten compound.

He slowed down to a walk as they entered the secured area and went to the water pump to get himself a drink after he had poured the first bucket over his head. He ran both hands across his head smoothing his hair back before wiping the excess water from his beard.

A young squire called Hermann Adalard approached him with a greeting. The respect he had for the older man was evident. Matheus had known him since he was the valet for the Grand Knight in command of the 3rd Glory of Vanya. He had carried out his duties in an exemplary manner and was now under training to become a Knight.

Matheus returned the greeting with a nod and then began to walk towards the Knights who had dismounted. The Experten Mika, was walking out of the building that housed them to

welcome the arrivals. He could see that the lead Knight was a woman and her companion stood slightly behind her in deference to her authority.

“Take care of the horses will you” said Matheus in a low voice. Hermann, eager to be asked, stepped forward to take the reins and lead the horses away but he first determined how long the visitors would be staying so as to ensure the horses would be ready for their departure. The male replied that they were staying till the morning.

Mika cast a glance at Matheus but did not address him. Then she led the two into the building where they could discuss the reason for their arrival.

He sat and watched as Reinhold, Lothar and Klaus were summoned to the office of the Abbot to see Prior Weide who usually ran things when the Abbot was in Freiburg, which was most of the time. He knew their skills and specialties. “Magical enemy, lycanthrope with a sprinkle of possession maybe”.

Hermann sat beside him, a sword resting across his legs, as he carefully removed the burrs from the blade with a small hand file. He looked at the grizzled older man and at the three Experten as they disappeared into the building.

Later that evening Matheus was summoned.

He walked into the building and joined the Knights in a room he was very familiar with. A room with a long wooden table made from oak that they usually convened at to make plans before setting off. He took his place at his usual spot down at the back on the left-hand side. The Experten looked at him as he took his seat.

Prior Weide was seated at the head of the table, so he was able to get another look at the two new arrivals. He was ready this time, so he was not put out by the presence of Anya. She gave him a polite nod and returned her attention to the Prior. The man with her he did not know. He too was in his fifties with short gray hair that had once been blonde. He had a strong Thyatian nose and solid forearms encased in leather bracers which he rested on the table.

“Matheus is our best tracker, and he can ensure that you reach the area where you can carry out your enquiries”.

Anya looked at him again and smiled.

Enough with the dimples, Anya, you’re killing me, he thought grimly.

Her companion was examining him closely.

“Matheus, the Reverend Mother and her Knight Bachelor will be leaving the morning after next. You and the Experten gathered will assist in every way that is asked of you. There has been a very interesting occurrence that will be explained shortly”.

Anya noted that Matheus was named ahead of the Experten as those that would assist her. She was very surprised at this and looked at the three Experten who did not look in the least upset. Upon invitation she spoke of the Black Lion and her belief from what she was told that a very powerful Lich had performed the magic. They were to see if the story was true, tackle the Lich only if absolutely necessary and locate the creature. It was to be captured and brought back to Freiburg for study.

They were to journey to Tameronikas in Ylaruam by ship and then take the arduous cross-country roads and trails into the southwestern highlands to the town of Parsa and then into the Altan Tepes mountains. None said it but the feeling was that they hoped they were not undertaking this journey for nothing. This Black Lion whatever it was or how it came into being, had better be real.

Eyes opened at the sound of boots scuffing along the corridor, the sound of keys rattling, a nervous chatter. The smell of stale sweat, and worse, stained bodies and clothing. The door swung open halfway but then got stuck like it always did. Guttural growls of annoyance and several seconds while the visitors attempted to force it open all the way. Once inside, they paused to see where he was. Eyes closed but for the barest of cracks he watched as they entered and then as they had been ordered, forced the door closed again. It was easier than opening it and once done they turned to look at him again. They carried sacks of stinking meat, but his stomach growled, nevertheless. A slab of meat was thrown towards him, and it landed with a wet bloody splatter close by. He resisted the urge to move, although if you looked closely, you might have seen his large nostrils flare and twitch. A second lump of meat was about to be cast towards him, but it fell not two feet from the booted foot of the one that had tried to throw it. The other laughed at this and spoke in a language he did not understand. The figure moved forward carefully to pick up the meat and try again. His body tensed in readiness, a little closer and he could act. They had always been careful not to get too close, to always stay out of range. The chains had pulled tight on the collar he wore the first time he had tried to charge them. After the initial terrified yelp, their confidence had returned when the stout collar and chains held. The figure picked the dripping meat up and moved back again to safety his companion saying something that sounded mocking. Once more the figure stepped forward to hurl the meat with more accuracy. His foot came down on a spot wet with blood and as he threw the meat his foot went out beneath and behind him. Landing hard on the cell floor face first. He was barely aware of the cries of warning from his fellow jailer, though he could just about make out the sound of chains rattling. It was almost musical. This was followed by something with inhuman strength grabbing him and then excruciating pain as his head was pulled from his body.

The chain pulled tight again as the other cowered back and then prepared to run from the beast and the headless body of what had once been his workmate. Friend was too strong a word. Did he even have friends? He stumbled back as the beast raised a huge arm and hurled

the dead body at him. It connected with stunning force, and he lay winded on his back, gasping painfully, his chest not rising to its fullest, his limbs not listening to his command even if he had been coherent enough in his thoughts to command them.

All he could think right now was, what happened, why can't I breathe? The sound of chains, that roar he had enjoyed provoking but that now caused him such great terror as he knew it was close by and he was defenseless. The beast went into a frenzy, pulling hard on the chains that snapped and cracked each time he tested them. They were holding but they would not hold forever. He tried to clear his head, fighting to stay calm, to breathe, to recover enough to get to his feet and out of the room to safety. The din was deafening but he could expect no help as they were so deep underground and besides, they had often teased the beast mercilessly. He was not too smart, but he wished right at this moment that they had not done that. His breathing began to return to normal, with a groan he eased himself to a sitting position, with a cough he opened his water filled eyes, blinking. A low growl made him wish he had not bothered. His screams of terror and pain echoed about the room and carried someway up the long corridor but no further.

When he was done feasting on the rancid meat, he stood to his full height of well over eight feet and walked to the door that had always proved so troublesome. Grasping the edge, he pulled it back contemptuously, causing it to smash loudly against the wall, one of the rusted hinges exploding. The collar was still around his neck with two feet of chain like an embarrassing dog collar. It was not a priority right now. His instinct was to get out, find the light, fresh clean air and something else. He growled in frustration, there was an image there, a place and another like him? No not like him, another different but important. He tried to cling to the image, make it solid but the harder he tried to grasp it the more quickly it faded.

He burst through doors and cut through bodies, numerous bodies, more than he could count, if he could remember how to count. Most screamed and ran, some tried to fight but it would have been better for them had they run. He paused, his clawed fist still buried in the chest of one who had chosen to fight but now lay lifeless on the ground. Sniffing the air, he felt a thrill he had not felt in so long. Pushing forward to the source of his excitement he exited the dark cave and stood outside. The wind was howling here, with flurries of snow making visibility difficult. He looked back into the cave but there was no one following him. He turned back to the view before him. Mountains, as far as his keen eyes could see. He set off in a direction that seemed right, his powerful body carrying him away into the darkness.

Matheus sat at the campfire as the food was cooked, on the outskirts of Parsa. The town was made up of huts and tents but as it was a busy caravan stop it had two buildings made of wood and stone to cater for those that preferred to have solid walls around them when they slept. The Makistani people here were very similar to the people of Ethengar though they were a lot

friendlier to outsiders. He watched Anya who was talking with one of the Experten, Lothar. They had not spoken much, and rarely had a chance to be alone.

The long journey by ship had taken months of travel, during which time Glantri, that homeland of magic-users, had declared war on Alphatia, another land with a surplus of magic-users. Thyatis, a long-time enemy of Alphatia declared war on them and was joined in this by the Heldannic Order.

“I guess we’re at war now gentlemen” said Lucinius drawing some grunts of what might have been laughter.

Matheus stayed alert, his ears listening for anything out of the ordinary even though he was not on duty. He made sure not to look into the flames. If they had any trouble, it would take his eyes vital seconds to readjust to the darkness.

“You really don’t remember me, do you?”

Matheus looked across the flames to Lucinius who had spoken.

“What?”

“I said you don’t remember me. To be fair there were quite a lot of us. At least at the beginning but your little ambush soon changed that”.

“What in Frey and Freyja's name are you talking about?”

Lucinius gave a forced laugh, clearly false and not trying to be anything else. “Fair enough. I see I’ll have to remind you”.

He adjusted himself by getting more comfortable and began. “Imagine if you will, a large contingent of Knights scouring the land for rebels. They find the lair, at least they thought it was the lair, with the benefit of hindsight it was most clearly a trap. But we had a leader then who was many things, some great some not so great. One of these not-so-great attributes was his obsessive interest in catching a particular criminal. When he thought he was close he ignored all the warning signs, and we allowed him to ignore the warning signs because we knew he could be a vengeful sort if he thought you were trying to undermine him. We went in after the criminals but got caught up in an ambush with walking corpses, dozens and dozens and dozens of corpses. A few big rocks were thrown from ledges above for good measure and a sprinkling of oil to seal the deal and all those Knights were wiped out. All that is except one” he said pointing to himself.

Matheus answered without emotion, “Congratulations”.

Lucinius gave a mock bow.

Anya joined them then, sitting beside Lucinius.

This simple act annoyed him.

“Aren’t you curious as to how?” asked Lucinius as Matheus stood to leave.

“Not really”.

The trim Knight put his hand into the flames grasping one of the logs and held it up for Matheus to see. “I’ll give you a clue”.

Matheus, unimpressed, walked away from them to take over guard duty from Hermann even though it was not his turn.

He could hear Anya whisper angrily to Lucinius and he smiled. That’s my girl, he thought.

She joined him later as he was finishing his shift. She moved a strand of hair from her face. He smiled at this. Even though they were both now in their fifties there was a special tension there that usually only lasted in the early stages of a relationship. Perhaps because they never finished going through that early stage, it persisted.

“I’ll take over now, you get some rest”.

“The Reverend Mother still taking her turn even this far into the campaign, I’m impressed”.

This drew out Anya’s dimples.

“Don’t” she said reading his mind. “Don’t say it”. It was said with all seriousness but there was a smile there too.

“Let Lucinius take this shift. I’m sure he won’t mind. Seems overly fond of you I’ve noticed” said Matheus unable to hide the hint of jealousy. “Scraping the barrel with that one”.

“Don’t let emotion cloud your judgement Matheus, he’s a good man, fought in the arenas in Thyatis. He went through a lot after that ambush. I didn’t know him before, but I heard he came out of it a changed man”.

“My heart bleeds. You mean he cracked under the pressure, and you have to hold his hand” he snorted.

“We lost a lot of good people, Matheus”.

He cocked an eyebrow, his look was incredulous.

“We both lost good people” she amended accepting the rebuke.

“Like I said scraping the barrel”.

A large bat swooped past, and she swatted at it. Her sudden jump caused Matheus to chuckle. She put her hand on her chest and started laughing.

“You two make a great couple. Anybody ever tell ye dat?” said Kesi walking towards them.

When it was time to move, Kesi appeared in her dire wolf form. She was known to the Experten, who knew that she had died so she had to stay out of sight until then. In this way she was able to guide them up into the mountains where she believed the lair of the Lich was.

“I’ve never seen you with a dire wolf before Matheus. Are you sure that thing is trained” asked Reinhold, the Experten who specialised in possessions.

“She’s my son’s” he answered before he had a chance to think of anything better to say.

Lucinius joined them.

“Where is Druss?” the Experten asked.

“Oh, you know, spreading his wild oats. I’m sure we’ll catch up with him again” he replied aware of Anya staring at him.

“That thing got a name?” asked Lucinius. His hand went to the hilt of his sword when the dire wolf growled low.

“Nos”.

“Nos? That short for something?” asked Lucinius taking a step back.

Matheus shrugged “You can ask my son if you ever meet him”. He turned and looked at the dire wolf. “Let’s go Nos, let’s find this big cat and then get home in time for dinner”.

When they finally arrived there, however, they could see that there had been a landslide and if there was a cave entrance it was now buried under many tonnes of rock. Matheus had a look around and found the tracks of very large humanoids, most likely ogres.

While they searched around the area, Kesi’s wolf body transformed into a gaseous state and seeped in between the fallen boulders. When she returned later that evening, she confirmed to Matheus that there were many dead ogres but no Druss. He stood near to where the cave entrance had been and tried to envision where his son may have gone. He walked along a ridge, the wind picking up, forcing him to squint. Whatever tracks had been made were long gone, disturbed by the elements and passing humanoids. Just as he was about to turn back, he spotted it. It was only a partial track, but he could make out the paw print of a very large cat, made some time ago. He judged the creature that made it was moving on its hind legs, but with so little to go on he could determine no more. He followed the likely path further along and could see that the trail was descending into a valley. He informed the others, and they too began to descend thankful to be heading down from the heights and the elements.

Large nostrils flared as he picked up a scent. The snow was falling more heavily now, and he was forced to shake his head occasionally to remove the snow from his mane. His thoughts were jumbled, confused. He moved forward but carefully as the scent he detected was familiar. Huge figures appeared from the cold fog. Each one was roughly twice as tall as he and ahead of them, ran the source of the familiar smell. The large dire wolves growled and closed on him rapidly at the urging of the giants. His muscles bunched and he raced away leading them on a merry chase over rocks and across ridges. Whenever they got too close, he turned and faced them, his taloned hands making them yelp in pain, but they persisted, nipping at his hind legs, trying to wear him out and pull him down. One leapt for his throat, but he grabbed it midair, another clamped its jaws on his ankle, and he roared, using the body of the struggling wolf to smash his pack mate. Both bodies fell away, broken and still but more wolves closed, snapping and howling. He climbed up a high ledge, his height and reach an advantage over his four-legged foes who had to find another path up to where he was.

The giant figures arrived at the scene but seemed to be enjoying the sport and did not interfere except to encourage the pack to try harder. He roared at them from the ledge, his clawed hands open exposing the long nails on each finger. One giant, not as sporting as his companions hurled a large rock at him. It narrowly missed but shattered into shards. He turned his head away and used his arms to shield himself from the projectiles. Time to move. The long powerful limbs carried him along a ridge. He could see a ravine ahead and judged that he could make the jump. Sliding to a stop on the other side he crouched behind a rock and waited, the snow continuing to swirl about his body.

He peered around the rock when he heard the wolves. They paced at the other side, close to the edge but whimpered in frustration as they could not follow him across. His eyes narrowed as he saw the giants' approach, they made noises he did not understand. They stopped with the wolves and made more noises, communicating with each other. One, the same one that had thrown the rock made to step across the ravine. Even for his long legs he would be at full stretch. When his fur lined boot was about to touch down, the Black Lion sprang from his hiding place and attacked the limb as it landed, the claws of his hands opening large gashes on the giant's knee. He screamed in pain and pulled back, lost his balance and fell into the ravine with a pained shout. The other giants were momentarily taken aback but raised their weapons and moved forward. The Black Lion darted away into the swirling snowstorm.

Matheus led them down from the heights, following the path of least resistance. The tracks were long buried in the snow, and he had been extremely fortunate to have found the one he did. They saw the frozen body of a dead dire wolf but there were no tracks or indication of what had killed it. They continued down doing their best to avoid the humanoid tribes that called these mountains home. It took them another week to reach the Selinna pass, stopping off at the village of Flowerhill for rest and to check with the locals if the Black Lion had been seen. The pass itself was a long gap in the Altan Tepes mountains that allowed travel from the

city of Selenica in Darokin to the west to the town of Parsa in Ylaruam to the east, where they had stayed before they had ventured into the mountains.

Worrisome news about the invasion of Darokin by desert nomads and their leader known only as the Master had reached them. The cities of Akesoli and Akorros situated on the west and east side of Lake Amsorak, respectively, had fallen to the desert nomads and Darokin's legions were forced to retreat to Darokin City. Any troops stationed in the area and all able-bodied men and women were heading there to help in the fight. They could not find anyone who had seen the Black Lion and Kesi's attempts to scour the area in her animal forms turned up nothing.

They continued west along the pass until they reached Selenica. The city was on full alert and troops had been sent to Darokin City leaving only a bare minimum of soldiers behind to protect the city. In one of the Inns, The Maidens Virtue, they met a dwarven warrior who was heading away from the fight and back to his people in Rockhome. He happened to mention a black lion creature he had spotted and put it down as one of the creatures that had been summoned by the Alphatians to attack Glantri. He had seen it in the Canolbarth borderlands north of Nemiston.

"I'd stay clear of the Canolbarth Forest itself if I were you. The elves aren't too friendly to visitors stomping around in their forest uninvited. If that creature has gone in there, they'll take care of it, don't you worry. Unless you lot are bounty hunters", he laughed. "Then maybe I can see why you'd be upset".

It took them a few days to reach Nemiston and Matheus left them at the small stone bridge over the Avalon River to find rooms for the night, while he went north and scouted around looking for some tracks. Anya went with him.

"What will we do if we find him?" she asked.

He looked thoughtful "I really don't know. If he's still in there and we can communicate with him..." he looked at her.

"And if we can't?"

"One thing at a time Anya. We have to find him first". He sighed. "You know we haven't even seen him. Just half a footprint back in the mountains. It could have been anything".

"You have your doubts. I understand that but Kesi said it happened, that he was changed".

He did not seem entirely convinced. "They loved each other so I suppose she wouldn't lie would she".

"She seems like a good woman".

"Except for that awkward fact about her being undead".

“Yes, well nobody’s perfect”

“Joking now, are we? That’s new” he grinned. “You’re starting to lighten up in your old age”.

“Yes, well Hochmeister Van Klagondorf has been making some amendments to the Code of Conduct, so you know, I’m optimistic”.

When she saw he did not understand she elaborated. “He’s been going through each Code and in some cases easing the restrictions. He’s getting closer to the one about celibacy and there are rumours he might do something with that to encourage more people to join the Order”.

“I don’t need the permission of any damn priest” he said annoyed. “You’re my wife and there’s nothing he can say about it”.

She smiled to show she understood his anger. “I know that, but I’ve taken my vows...” She saw his expression darken but she pushed through. “I’ve taken my vows” she repeated. “But if he relaxed this vow then I wouldn’t be breaking them”.

He shook his head at this and seemed about to reply but decided against it. “Let’s just find Druss, alright?”.

At the end of the day, however, they had found nothing, and he sat down near a brook to refill his waterskin. “Maybe I taught him too well” he grumbled.

“You think he’s sentient enough to cover his tracks?” asked Anya mopping her brow with a small towel.

“That or the dwarf was wrong about what he saw”.

They continued west travelling parallel and about a mile from the road to Darokin City with Matheus watching out for any tracks. Kesi arrived every few evenings when the sun was gone. With spring coming the days were getting longer and her presence shorter. There were suspicions amongst the others about where she went and how she was able to keep up with them even though she did not have a horse. The Experten kept these suspicions to themselves as they trusted the wisdom of the Reverend Mother. Lucinius was snide in his comments, but it seemed even he did not suspect the truth of Kesi. Hermann was seventeen now and had shown great maturity, validating the decision to allow him to journey with them to gain experience. Everyone agreed that when the time came, he would make a fine Knight.

They cast around for the next two weeks looking and listening for any sign but with nothing to show for it.

“This is a waste of time” grumbled Lothar, the lycanthrope hunter. A short burly man he had three parallel scars from high on his left cheek to his chin. “We’ve travelled a very long way for this, and we have absolutely nothing to show for it. We haven’t even seen the damned thing. No one has!”

Nobody could argue with him. Matheus and Anya would have given up long ago too if they had not known the truth. Nos the dire wolf whined softly.

“Even the wolf agrees with me” he laughed scornfully. “Remind me again what the plan was if we caught up with it?”

All eyes turned to Anya, the Reverend Mother. The mood was tense.

Matheus answered for her, “We’re going to Darokin City. I have a friend there who has an item that will help us when we do”, he emphasized do, “catch up with this creature that is most certainly a sign from Vanya. Or do you doubt this Lothar?”

“I just want to know that we have a plan” answered Lothar backing down.

“Reverend Mother” said Matheus to Anya indicating that it was time to go.

As they got closer to Darokin City they were urged to either turn back or make haste as the Master’s forces were within a week's ride of the city walls.

“Are you sure about this?” asked Anya and not for the first time.

“There’s something I want to get that might come in handy when we find Druss. In the meantime, there’s going to be one hell of a fight. I missed the last one. Not this time”.

She regarded him silently with a slight look of worry. “Priorities Matheus, priorities”.

They entered Darokin City which was thronged with people. The evacuation of non-combatants was still under way and carts carrying ballista bolts and barrels of oil were being brought to the walls. There was no room in any of the inns as mercenary groups who had answered the call from all over were being billeted there.

Matheus made some enquiries at a bright red, two-story establishment called ‘The Eastern Palace Inn’ and then waited. It was not long before Ansel showed up. After the warm greeting between the friends, he turned to Anya.

“It’s great to see you all again I’m sure we have plenty of stories to share. It's certainly been a while”. He turned to Matheus “You weren’t joking, she’s a real stunner. I can see why you went to all that trouble... and those dimples” he winked.

Matheus had to step in and whisper in his friend's ear.

Ansel turned back to her. “Reverend Mother” he said clearing his throat and bowing respectfully.

They found a table and Matheus told Ansel all the recent news. “We’ll wait for better times to talk about the rest” Matheus assured him. “Do you still have Marguerite’s collar?”

Ansel held the glass of wine in his hand. He was leaning so far back that the chair was balanced precariously on its back legs. He nodded. "Yes, I should have. Rorc took, or should I say stole the axe. Had a fascination with it. Very unhealthy. You remember what that thing could do?"

Matheus nodded. "Not a good idea to carry that thing around, but well, Rorc wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer".

Ansel brought them to his place in the city that was in the area known as Silver Class Housing. Everything in Darokin revolved around money, the better the area the more valuable the precious metal it was named after. He was very proud of the place and told them that his son Matthew, who was a very successful adventurer, had helped him to buy it two years ago. "He's a brave lad. Why he and his cousin are manning one of the air ships defending the city".

"You've got air ships?" asked Anya.

Ansel was nodding, pleased. "Oh yes, not as many as Alphatia or indeed the Heldannic Order but they're top class from what I'm told. I prefer my ships to stay in the water. Preferably in the waters around..." He looked at Matheus and waited.

"Ierendi" said Matheus laughing.

"Yes, that's right. I see you haven't forgotten".

"Ansel here has a fascination with the islands of Ierendi. He plans on retiring there when he finds himself the right woman" said Matheus explaining things to Anya.

"Let's see now. The collar, it should be right here". He pulled a large chest away from the wall and looked at them. "Keep this to yourselves" he smiled before pressing on a panel of wood. The small plank popped out and he took an empty cloth bag out before replacing it. He stood up and opened the bag and began rummaging inside. "Here it is". He took out the thick black leather collar and handed it to Anya.

She looked closely at the engraved images and spirals. "What are we supposed to do with this?"

"It's a lycanthrope collar or something, it's so when we get Druss to change back to human form, we slap the collar on him to stop him from changing back. Then we see about removing the curse or spell or whatever it is that was done to him" explained Matheus.

"And how do we get him into human form?"

"Not sure about that part yet but I'm working on it" he grinned.

"Well, I suppose it's something" she answered trying her best to hide her doubts.

The Long Road Home - Part 3

He had entered the forest after some men came at him from a nearby village with weapons and burning torches. The dogs had reached him well ahead of the men who were approaching on foot. He was forced to defend himself and the yelps of pain from the wounded and dying dogs reached the men who shouted in anger at him. Steel tipped arrows were shot at him, one hitting him in the forearm. He snarled in anger dropping the body of the dead dog and pulled it from his arm. There was a battle going on in his mind. One envisioned ripping the men to pieces and devouring their bloody remains, the other was urging the body to turn and run into the nearby forest. He watched the men get within eighty feet then he turned and sped away from them into the tree line. He stopped some distance inside the forest and waited at a tree to see if he was still being pursued. The men shouted curses into the forest but that was all. They themselves did not enter.

Going deeper, the bushes and shrubs disappeared from the forest floor as the branches and leaves high above became thicker, blocking out the sky. With no light getting through there were no plants and so the forest floor was relatively clear in the growing darkness even though there were still hours of daylight left.

He crouched and listened to the sounds of the forest. The wind as it moved the trees and their leaves, the sound of some small animals and birds. The sound of water was what interested him. He was thirsty and made his way to the source of the noise. A river came into sight, the water looked cool and inviting. He lowered his head to drink and was stopped by the reflection looking back at him. A large mane of black hair, powerful shoulders and deep-set blue eyes, the long feline nose of a great cat, complete with whiskers and large white teeth. The reflection shattered when his face broke the surface, and he began to drink. Again, he stopped himself, this time with a growl of what could have been irritation. He drank again but this time used his great clawed hand to scoop water into the waiting mouth. Another victory against his bestial side.

A noise to his left caused him to turn his head. He watched with keen interest as the deer lowered its head to the river and began drinking its fill. It had not noticed the feline humanoid. With his thirst now sated, his hunger pains returned. Just as it moved, the deer became aware and quickly launched itself away from the river in panic. His bestial side rose strongly, and he did not try and hold it back this time as his hunger was too great. He covered the ground quickly gaining on the deer with each passing second. It darted around the trunks of trees and sped across a small clearing to the trees on the other side. It had almost reached them when something hit it hard and dragged it to the ground. The end came quick, and he tore lumps from the warm body feeling his strength and energy return. He had had nothing to eat since he escaped the ogres. "Yes, that is what they were called" he assured himself, although he did not know how. Images came to him of places and people, but they did not seem familiar to him. It was very confusing. He had not eaten since he had escaped from the mountains and been

pursued by the frost giants and their pets and had been given no time to eat the wolves he had killed. He passed through fields of wheat and turnips, but they promised not to fulfil his desire for real food. Then the men from the village had come after him when he had tried to take some of their fluffy white sheep.

The darkness of the forest seemed to grow and deepen but as it did, he noticed the light from somewhere increase and drawn by this he walked towards it. The trees in this area were a multitude of colours, white, green, red, blue, orange and many more. It was strangely soothing, and he leaned against one of them, resting his body and was soon asleep.

The noise of some creature woke him some hours later. He tensed in readiness, prepared to defend himself again. He saw movement and his eyes narrowed and focused on it. Several figures in white robes and carrying wooden staves were making their way through the forest to his right. He did not move and lay watching to see what they would do. They were moving away and would disappear from sight in a few more seconds so he decided to follow. His hunger had been satisfied so the bestial side was content to allow the other to take charge. He followed them for perhaps a mile until they came to a trail, that would have been invisible to all but the elves that lived here or indeed to creatures such as himself that were sensitive to such things. They moved more swiftly along this, and he followed for a time, but something made him turn away and head north. He watched as they disappeared and then went the way he was being drawn.

He walked carefully through forest that began to thin out. The trees were mottled and unhealthy looking, some clearly dead and there was no sound close by of any woodland animals. He noticed the body of a dead elf, still wearing armour, a sword clutched in his dead hand. Several splinters of wood like arrows but much smaller were stuck in his neck and hands. He moved on until he was standing on some hills at the edge of a large plain that stretched out for a few miles to his left, right and ahead of him.

He broke from cover and began to walk across the grass. He felt strong and powerful, like nothing could challenge him and so he did not feel threatened. He heard shouts of battle, and his curiosity got the better of him. His stomach rumbled reminding him to find another deer or something similar sooner rather than later.

The hills ahead had a strange quality that made him feel uneasy and exposed out in the open. He stopped and scanned them for any signs of movement, but he found them difficult to focus on. The sounds took his attention again and he walked across the short stubby grass and loose stones leaving no trace of his passing. The terrain became more broken, and interspaced with tough looking scrub bush, that had few leaves but plenty of thorns. He heard a strange hissing noise and shouts from what he had come to gather was the elven language being spoken. He fought to keep the beast at bay. It wanted food and so he moved closer.

Three figures, clearly elven were fighting against scrub bush that was moving on long hairy legs. Two elves were prone on the ground and more of the plants were converging. No, not plants,

spiders. Large three-foot spiders, green with irregular brown stripes were swarming forward and on their backs were small humanoids firing small bows. The end was not long in coming, the elves were soon peppered with arrows and over run. He did not think the spiders would taste very good, so he moved away to find something more appetising.

There was very little to eat on this hilly, sparsely covered area of the forest and he was forced to return to the deeper woods in pursuit of prey. The choices were plentiful but so too was the danger. The elves came out whenever his presence was detected, and he had no choice but to run before them. He had wounded several when they came too close but some small part of him knew that killing them outright was not the thing to do. Other creatures too were a target of the elves, some that he had seen before like small dragons, wyverns, two headed giants and strange things that he had never seen before like the large black cat that had multiple legs and two tendrils on its shoulders. Like the hills it was difficult to focus on and seemed to be in more than one place at once. This one was quiet and stealthy, and he had to keep a track of it in case he became its next meal. Other things were not so subtle. A large bull like creature that ravaged the area, had dozens of elves appearing from the homes in the trees to drive it away. Two overzealous hunters got too close and were caught in the blasts of steam that shot from the creature's nostrils and they were turned to stone.

Even though there was not a lot of food available on the sparsely forested patch with the strange hills he was drawn to it. His bestial side thrived in this environment and grew stronger making it harder to leave. Sometimes he encountered groups of elves, but they seemed more intent on preventing anything leaving the area like the strange little people and their spiders, so he was able to slip past quite easily. Getting out was rather more difficult but they were relatively few in number and there were many places along the border of this scar in the forest where he could pass unnoticed.

Moving across the plain and back towards the hills he had to cross some canyons. He knew from his time in the area that elves and other strange creatures called this place home. These elves dressed in cloaks of grey and brown that matched the rugged environment they were in. Then there were the wicked little people and their spiders that always harassed him whenever he was there. He had tasted several spiders and was happy to be proven wrong, the meat on the upper legs was quite tasty, though the rest of the flesh on the body and abdomen had a bitter aftertaste that he did not enjoy. The small creatures with their wide slit like faces, filled with sharp teeth he simply crushed, biting some in half but rarely consuming them.

Another group of elves entered the plains from the northern border. They were keeping close to the tree line as moved along the northern edge, and they were heading to the canyons where he had seen the other elves. He was about to leave when he saw the sleek black form of his feline rival, the large six-legged panther. A low growl rumbled in his chest, and he stalked his prey.

He kept to the edge of the canyon, stopping every so often to check the location of the six-legged cat. He looked down and saw a small, cloaked figure moving hurriedly along the canyon floor. He blinked at this scenario, something echoed in his memory. The strange thought angered him making him feel unsettled. Then he spotted the dark form of the panther moving like smoke through the rocky terrain above the figure below. Memories invaded his mind that had no bearing on his reality and seemed to belong to someone else. Even these thoughts made him crease his large brow. Such thoughts. Wasteful thoughts. Time wasted thinking when time could be used hunting and feeding. He snarled loudly, scattering the images to the four winds, more loudly than he had intended. The smoky black form of the cat had stopped, and he could see even at this distance the cold hard stare of his enemy. The figure on the floor of the canyon had stopped too but the walls had the effect of echoing the roar making it impossible to determine where the danger lay. The figure, running now, disappeared around a bend in the canyon. He looked back but his enemy was gone.

“Not this time” was the strange, uncommon thought that sprang to mind.

He leapt to the floor of the canyon and moved quickly across to the other side, leaping high on to a shelf of rock and again to the top, a total combined height of twenty feet, with such ease. He sniffed the air but found himself looking at the ground for tracks. A dizzying experience as two different approaches collided in his animal brain. He reached out and grasped a rock to steady himself. Once the feeling had passed, he moved along the edge of the canyon again, nostrils flaring for any scent.

He travelled about two miles and stopped. The wall of the canyon to the left, visible from his position on the right side had several caves. There was no movement from any of the openings but the elves that he had seen earlier in the day were just ahead on the same side of the canyon as he but upwind of him. His ears twitched as he picked up the whispered sound of their voices. One of them moved carefully down into the canyon while his companions pointed their bows in the direction of the caves. They had not seen him.

He watched as the elf moved up to the caves and after a few seconds chose one for closer inspection. He disappeared and a short time later came back into view. Sitting and watching a thought interrupted him. “Druss”. The word, the sound made no sense to him. It did not sound like the noise any animal made and he had never heard it before, but then where had the thought come from? The bestial side roared in his head, dismissing the useless word. Food, we must have food. The elves will do. Yes, they are small but all five of them should ease the pain. Long sharp claws appeared slowly from his fingertips in readiness as he crept closer.

The elves were talking. The one that had returned was showing the others something that seemed to have excited them. It looked like they were deciding what to do next.

He looked to the cave when his eye was drawn by movement and saw one of the elves that he had seen in this area before, perhaps even the one that the six-legged cat had been stalking. He, for he assumed it was a he, was looking up at the ridge seemingly aware that the other

elves were there. Of the gathered elves on the ridge, one had dropped out of the discussion and was looking past them, high in the sky. He lifted a hand and pointed at the bright light that was streaking through the sky, more prominent now that the day was coming to a close and night was approaching. His efforts drew the attention of the others who stared at the light as it grew larger. There were snatches of muttered conversation filled with uncertainty.

He gazed at the glowing ember, growing larger with each passing second. Another memory splashed across his vision. A large fiery sphere, the clouds around it were purple and orange. He could see the light reflect off water and almost feel the cool water around his legs. There was laughter too, female.

A faraway thump, a muffled sound that sounded like a mortal blow. Sometime later, the ground shook, loose scree slid from the side of the canyon and small rocks followed them as a tremor passed through the land. A wind blew from where the shining light had impacted, small dust devils coming to life around his legs, stirring up dust and dried leaves. There was still some light in the sky, but a tall dark pillar was rising and as he watched it seemed to expand until it became the darkness.

When the morning came it was subdued and still. He awoke from his slumber, a place he had found under a shallow ledge. His legs were covered in a powdery ash, and more was falling from the sky. He waited two hours for it to stop but when it showed no signs of doing so, he left his shelter and went looking for food. He went down to where he had seen the elf in the cave and peered into the darkness. The walls closed in around him and he felt uncomfortable, trapped. Nevertheless, he forced himself to go further in. His nostrils flared, his ears swivelled but he was alone. He wondered what it was that had excited the elves. What had they found? There was nothing here. Nothing except for small, green mushrooms with speckles of purple. He turned up his nose at the thought of seeing how they tasted. Meat, this body needed meat. He turned from the cave, feeling the tightness in his chest, due to the enclosed environment, ease. Back out in the open, the ash still fell, and he soon gave up trying to shake it from his mane. These hills had little to eat but with the falling ash he could not hope to find even his usual meagre scrapings. This time the bestial voice uttered not a word as he left the plains and entered the forest once more.

No longer happy to inhale the ash filled air, he resorted to checking the ground for marks. He saw tracks ahead of the five elves he had seen the previous night, and they were heading north. The small grumbling voice in the back of his consciousness, could think only of food. They may have food, or they could be food, it reasoned.

Over the passing of many days, perhaps weeks the animals of the forest were moving out of his hunting area. He had managed to keep himself satiated and had found where the elves had gone. They had some small buildings on the ground but like all smart animals put their homes high in the trees, safe from predators. But even in these homes they could not escape the grey ash that had fallen, covering everything, choking the light from the sky, the life from the plants

and animals and ultimately those that depended on all of these things. Even when the ash had stopped falling, the sun never really shone as bright. The sky had a film over it that prevented any of the warmth getting through and he could see that the trees were suffering.

He had begun to go farther afield in his search for food and as fate would have it, he encountered his enemy. It looked a lot leaner now, the rib cage was showing more clearly and the two tendrils protruding from its shoulders looked lethargic. It had a stressed, eager to be fed, look on its tooth filled face, patches of ash clung to its hind quarters and underside as it moved through forest floor that was mired in places in a thick gunk that had once been dry ash but was now mixed with the moisture from the forest. It looked a pitiful sight.

It saw him at the same time, and he briefly wondered what it saw. Noise, loud to their ears but no doubt what others may have called stealthy made them turn their attention warily away from each other. Elves, lots of elves, were coming their way. Some were carrying bundles and boxes, young and old. They were having a hard time getting through the quagmire which was not quite so bad deeper into the forest where the trees had provided an effective canopy from the ash.

His enemy looked back at him and then backed away. It had found an easier source of food. He himself was heading in the opposite direction. Despite the gnawing hunger, he did not want to eat elf. His bestial side railed against this unfathomable decision, but he held it at bay, for now.

Through the cloud of his bestial instincts, something nagged at him. Something called conscience. What this word was, he did not know, but he recognised the feeling. A feeling so out of place in his current circumstances as to be a novelty. But with it came a responsibility. The elves were in danger, and he had to help them.

He caught up with them easily. Compared to him they were shuffling forward slowly. The group had lost its form and was beginning to stretch out and break up into small clusters. He had to be careful here. He had been chased away by the elves many times before and they had shot him with painful, stinging arrows. To them he was a monster, a creature of dark dreams to be feared and so he had to follow them in parallel without being detected. Offering his protection from a distance while trying to stay hidden from those that had grown up in these forests and no doubt knew every leaf and branch. Or at least they did. Now it had changed and was no longer that welcoming place they called home. It was a distressing experience for them, like watching a loved one become sick and weaken visibly and being powerless to alleviate the suffering or remedy the situation. The elves did not seem as confident in this new environment and so he was able to approach undetected ever watchful for his enemy.

The day passed without event, the elves tired now, were making camp for the night and had found some trees to shelter them until the morning, although it became impossible to know when that was, in the gloom.

As some of the stragglers were catching up with the others, the enemy struck. He had suspected it would. If he had planned the attack himself that was when and where he would have and so he was in position when it came. The large creature bolted suddenly from its hiding spot and pinned a struggling elf beneath him. One savage bite of its huge jaws and the elf was dead but before it could grab its prey and flee, it was hit by the large form of the Black Lion.

The elf currently known as the Shadow Slayer, he had been known by many different names before, ran forward when he heard the death cries of his kinsman. He was from Clan Grunalf, but he was helping Clan Long Runner move southwest in the hope of linking up with the other tribes. There had been meetings between the Clanmasters to determine the best course of action, but the Long Runners were determined that leaving the Canolbarth forest was not one of them. Until this decision could be made however, they were forced to find someplace more hospitable, a place where they could find fresh drinking water not corrupted by the ash and decay that was taking hold. The other stragglers were racing past him to the safety of the trees calling out for help. He lowered his bow at the strange sight of the two creatures snarling and shredding each other with claws and teeth. One he recognised as a displacer beast, the two tendrils attached to its shoulders were whipping the other creature and opening terrible wounds. The other creature stood on two legs and appeared to be some kind of lycanthrope. A hideous cross between man and lion. He needed more than an arrow for these two abominations.

A terrible pain erupted across his side and along his back as his enemy whipped him with the tendrils, the bony protrusions at the end opening long bloody wounds in his body. He grabbed one and bit down hard, straining his neck muscles until it snapped away in his mouth. The displacer beast let forth a high-pitched squeal of agony and tried to break free. It kicked out with all six legs, scratching and pushing his foe away.

He got quickly to his feet, his enemy poised and waiting, one tendril whipped around threateningly while the stump of the other mirrored this move but only succeeded in leaking blood. He shot forward sure of a death blow but hit nothing. How had his enemy moved so fast? The displacer beast shimmered like a heat wave as it circled him, blood and saliva dripping from its mouth.

The ground came alive as the roots of the trees burst from the surface like so many gigantic earthworms seizing both creatures in their grasp and constricting tightly on limbs, necks and bodies.

The displacer beast was forced to the ground, all six legs pinned beneath it. The man lion was clawing at its restraints and somehow resisted the building pressure of the roots to force him to the ground.

The Shadow Slayer, or Nuanda as was his true name, concentrated hard on the spell. He needed to buy time for the others to get to safety and then he would join them.

Encouraged by the resistance offered by his foe, the displacer beast too began to exert pressure by using all six legs to power itself to its feet. Its remaining tendril broke free and whipped around at the roots and vines binding it, breaking several. It was enough. It spotted the lone elf and made a choice, propelling itself forward towards him. This time it would not be stopped.

Nuanda retreated as the last of the roots fell away and he did not have time to try another spell. He drew his longsword, a gift from his clan, and found some refuge in the exposed roots of a nearby tree. When the displacer beast stuck a claw in to snag him, he struck it hard. The roots around him offered some protection and prevented the large carnivore from snapping him up easily. His initial success ended when the tendril caught him across the neck and shoulder and he grunted in pain, before slicing at it with his sword. The displacer beast came again, its jaws snapping closed, much too close for comfort. It stayed in place, trying to force itself forward, shifting left and right as it attempted to slide its shoulders passed the obstruction provided by the roots of the tree.

Nuanda stabbed at it again as best he could in the limited space, scoring a hit on the beast's chest but not deterring it in the least. Then it screamed in pain, and he was sure it was from nothing he had done. Suddenly the large head was pulled back away from him revealing the lion man hybrid, which had grabbed the displacer beast by the hind legs and was dragging it backwards.

The displacer beast squirmed and tried to turn to bring its teeth to bear but its foe anticipated this and moved aside, using the momentum to twist and fling the displacer beast hard into the trunk of a large tree. There was a sound of meaty contact between flesh and bark. The displacer beast roared in agony its ears went flat against its head. It faced its foe, but the fight had gone out of it. It wanted nothing more than to escape. It backed away, one of the legs in the centre of its body was bent at a distorted angle, clearly broken.

Nuanda waited. It seemed obvious the creatures were insane with hunger and were fighting over who should get to eat him. The huge lion man turned away from his defeated opponent and regarded him in an unsettling way. Not because he was sizing the elf up as his next meal but with a hint of intelligence and dare he say it, humanity. This creature would have little difficulty reaching the trapped elf and they both knew it. He felt sure the others had gotten to safety by now and was prepared to face whatever end was in store for him. The beast touched a wound, one of more than half a dozen on its body and looked at the blood on its clawed hands. Was that a nod? Surely not, not from this mindless beast. Then although its prey was there for the taking it turned away from him. Going in the same direction as its foe. He was speechless and checked his body for any other wounds. Easing himself out from the scarred and crushed roots, he turned and resting a hand on the bark of the tree that had shielded him, he

gave it thanks. Hearing the shouts of his clansmen high in the trees he jogged quickly to join them lest the displacer beast return or the other changed its mind.

He moved steadily west. This defied explanation as this route would bring him closer to the impact site, the source of what appeared to be the corruption taking place in the trees and plants of the forest. He began to encounter other creatures amidst the dying forest. They were ugly and wore a disjointed assortment of armour. Some of the language he understood. The word, orc and goblin came to mind but again he did not know from where or what they meant. With food scarce he found that they were easy to kill and despite an unpleasant notion that this was wrong he ignored this and fell in line with his bestial side which was leading the way now and doing so successfully, finding food and staying alive. As he had dispatched another small group of non-elves, he had heard a noise and turned to see that one had escaped and was trying to hide behind a tree. He charged forward to claim this next mouthful and watched as the small humanoid climbed up the tree to escape. Not to be outdone he had been forced to adapt and found that climbing a tree was not so difficult after all. The humanoid that stank of what was that word again? goblin, ran along the branches of trees, leaping from one to the other before he finally had it cornered. It had jumped from a branch and was now somehow stuck in the air. Not falling and not moving. But when it spoke the voice tinged with fear it had not been goblin as he had expected but elf. Another elf, even now with things in the forest so bad? He had called off the chase and dropped down to the forest floor and headed south. There was nothing here anymore, all the food had gone, and he was forced to concede control once more to the bestial side.

He finally cleared the forest where things improved, and he was able to find food but then the people came for him again. Sometimes they were people trying to protect their animals. He recognised this desire from somewhere, but his animal instinct laughed uproariously at this, at him for feeling compassion for food. Sometimes the people that came for him were different, tougher, harder to kill and sometimes they hurt him and so he moved around a lot. He was about to kill one of these people dressed head to toe in a hard shiny skin that he battered and peeled off to expose the soft flesh inside. The man for he recognised him as such, whimpered and pleaded for his father's help. He had withdrawn confused by the word, retreating to a cave he had found and sat contemplating it. Father, such a simple word and he knew on some level it was a part of where he had come from, what had created him. He struggled with this and remembered it was one of two parts. Father and ... but he could not remember the other part and it frustrated him. His animal side roared with laughter at his fruitless and more importantly pointless attempts to make sense of these "words" as it scornfully called them. "No more words, no more meaning beyond surviving and killing and eating. No more words" the voice shouted with finality and this time he listened. There would be no more words.

“What dat means is yer givin up an going home?”

Matheus and Anya looked at the stricken woman, stung by the words and not appreciating that she was accusing them of giving up on their son.

“Kesi, it’s been almost two years now with no news of him,” said Matheus.

“Wrong, ders been plenty a news, mon. We hear it all de time, de Black Lion, who else could it be. Bounty hunters up from all over de land, tryin to capture de beast for some mages experiments, tryin to get his skin, trying to kill my Druss. Your son, unless you’ve forgotten”.

Matheus had been about to verbally take her head off, when Anya stayed him with a gentle hand on his forearm.

“Kesi, we’re not giving up on him, but things are happening back home. The Experten that went into Glantri have not returned, so we must assume the worst and that they have been lost” she explained, referring to the rumours that the deceased Reverend Mother Grauenberg had returned as a vampire and when a black carriage thought to be carrying her was spotted, they had gone after it and to date had not been heard from. “Lothar and the others returned home when we heard that news, but we stayed. But now we hear of a terrible plague that has hit Freiburg. I know I can help them. I have been blessed by Vanya. I promise when we have things in hand I will return and continue the search”.

Kesi turned on Matheus. “What’s yer excuse? Why’re ye givin up?”

Matheus had more than a few grey hairs now, but his great strength had not left him. He slammed his fist down hard on the table, cracking it in half. The two legs on either end propped it up in a V shape and they stood at either side.

“No one’s giving up. It’s dangerous times, the war took a lot out of everyone, armies are crippled, Thar’s legions are on the march, the land is as lawless as I’ve ever seen it. I have to make sure Anya gets back safely. Druss would understand, and I know my boy can look after himself. Aye, I’ve heard of them bounty hunters and mages looking for the Black Lion, but that’s all their doing, looking and bleeding from what I’ve heard but they haven’t caught him, and they won’t. Not my boy, not Druss”.

“Well, I’m not goin anywhere. I’ll find him an when I do, he’ll cure me, an we’ll get married and have those children we’ve talked about. Lots an lots of children”.

Anya smiled warmly at this. “He’s lucky to have you Kesi and we’re glad you love him so much”.

“Even if you are a blood sucking...” muttered Matheus under his breath but there was no real malice there.

“Hush now, my love,” said Anya. “Kesi, we’ll be back as soon as we can but if you find him first then you know what to do with the collar?”

“We never did finish dat part of de plan” answered Kesi critically. “But I’ll find a way”.

“Hey, I would have thought of something once we found him” replied Matheus.

“Only we didn’t find him” she answered her anger building again.

“Yet”.

She looked at him and nodded in agreement. “Yet”.

Darokin was in a bad state, the city itself had been under siege by the Master and his desert nomads. When the combined forces of Karameikos and the Five Shires arrived, they had finally managed to lift the siege and drive the enemy forces into retreat, sending them back to Sind. When the meteor had struck north of Lake Amsorak on the border with southern Glantri they had been knocked from their feet. Hundreds of people had been killed or injured by collapsing buildings and walls. Then there was the darkness that followed due to all the debris filling the air and blocking out most of the sun. Kesi who was restricted to nighttime excursions due to her ‘condition’ as they called it, had been secretly happy about this as it meant she was able to get about a lot more freely than usual.

If all that turmoil was not enough, then to that you had to add the emergence of King Thar of the Broken Lands and his humanoid horde. They had left the desolate Broken Lands and launched raids on what was left of the southern region of Glantri before pressing forward against Glantri City itself. It was felt that before too long the mages there would drive them off due to their magical superiority and then they would look for a softer target. That target all agreed would most likely be Darokin. Although they had given much already in the defence of Darokin City against the Master and his forces, the Five Shires were sending an army for the anticipated attack from Thar. They knew that if Darokin fell then they would be next.

Kesi had gone out every night looking for Druss, but it was a lot of land to cover by herself, so she tried to divide it into grids as Matheus had suggested and search each one in turn. She had been around the southern border of Alfheim as that was where the dwarven warrior they had met mentioned possibly seeing him. Then she had gone in to the Canolbarth forest itself, but it was an extremely dangerous thing to do as the elves had an intense hatred for undead creatures and there had been one close call in particular that had almost done her in. She had come to a spot in an elven village where they were performing some kind of ritual around a tree of some significance to them. Whatever magic was emanating from the area sent her into convulsions and she barely made it to a hiding place where she could gather her senses. From then on, she was on her guard, but the forest was huge and with no rumours to follow she had left and returned to Darokin to continue her search.

Alfheim refugees were fleeing their land, as the condition of the forest worsened and had gathered into two main groups, one going north to Wendar and the other south to Karameikos.

Some elven adventurers had left Darokin in answer to the call for assistance from the group that were heading south to help guide them through the difficult pass in the Cruth Mountains.

Kesi had been forced to feed to keep her strength up and had kept this aspect of her 'condition' to herself. Although Matheus was fully aware of this need, he did not pry once she had assured him that 'they were all bad men'. With the arrival of countless humanoids to the area she had found a new source of food, one that no one could have any issue with her using. She and Matheus had forged an unlikely bond and he had organised to have several coffins built and distributed to a few carefully chosen locations. She had been using The Priest's coffins up to this point, but he had none that she knew of in Darokin and needed them to rest and recover her strength.

When the Hin army from the Five Shires arrived, Anya and Matheus took that as their opportunity to leave. They had hoped to take advantage of one of the sky ships still in service in the defence of Darokin when the Master had been defeated but with the arrival of this new menace that option had been removed and so they turned once more to Matheus's friend Ansel.

A few years after Ansel had left Matheus in Pflenzen he had gone to Karameikos with his sister, and they had met Jean-Pierre Stibbons the brother of Marguerite, the werebear. Ansel's sister Maria had hit it off with him and they were married soon after. They had only one child, a son they named Ponder. He had shown promise as a youth with magic and had studied in Karameikos eventually becoming an apprentice to Teldon, head of the Magician's guild there. When he had started his adventuring life he had teamed up with his cousin, Ansel's son, Matthew. Ansel was tight lipped about his relationship with the boy's mother, but he did share that it was strained due his gambling addiction and by the time he finally got it under control she was long gone. Matthew had been there to help him get back on his feet and pay off his debt to the local guild about which he was very cagey, but all knew what kind of guild he was referring to.

"You should go see my father, I knew there was a reason you two got along so well," said Anya poking fun at his attempt at being mysterious.

Ponder had grown in power and experience over the years and was in a position to use his magic to cut down the distance and time Anya and Matheus would need to return to Freiburg. With the war between the Empire of Thyatis and Alphatia still being fought there was no safe way to travel back to the Heldannic Territories by the shipping lanes that would take them into the centre of the conflict and there was no easy route by land because of Thar's humanoids and the fighting taking place between the Khan of Ethengar and the Heldannic Knights.

Ponder was not at all familiar with the Heldannic Territories having never been there but he had been to Dovefell, a town in the north of the Kingdom of Vestland close to the border. From there they could either get a longboat or travel by land if that seemed like a better option. Anya was nervous at the prospect of being teleported into a lump of granite or miles high in the sky,

but Matheus seemed his usual calm self. They all gathered to watch while Ponder began the incantation. One moment they were there and then one after the other as Ponder finished each spell, they disappeared, first Matheus and then Anya.

Kesi was surprised to feel an emptiness at their absence. They had been like a family the past few years while they looked for Druss and now, she was pretty much alone. Not a feeling she had felt in a very long time. She left Darokin City that evening and headed north to feed.

Now that the Alfheim elves had left their forest it was not as dangerous a place for her to enter, indeed she found its foreboding stillness a welcome change after spending so long surrounded by people who may at any moment discover what she was and attempt to kill her.

Even though the trees were visibly dying they were still able to provide her adequate cover from the sunlight. She bounded through the forest in her dire wolf form and except for the occasional group of elves, she found no other living creatures. She moved northwest, changing into a bat when she needed to cross any difficult terrain but always returned to her wolf form. As a nosferatu, running water was an issue for her so she sometimes had to locate a bridge in order to cross a river. So long as she had the chance to rest in her coffin, her endurance during the night was boundless, but she also needed to eat, and it had been a few days since she had last found anything. Her last victim had been one of the elves who had been checking through the ruins of Alfheim town, the place she was using to rest during the daylight hours. If he had come during the day, he might have caught her unawares, but he was moving about in the night without a torch. She had been standing at the back of a room in a house when he came in the front door. She knew elves had an ability to see in the dark by detecting heat and she also knew that because of her 'condition' there would be no heat. He entered what he believed to be an empty room and never left it again.

She went to the northwest border of the Canolbarth forest and once more entered the huge open plains of Darokin. This area was the breadbasket of the country, where they grew all types of crops which they shipped out all over the world. After the meteor had hit however most of these crops had not been harvested so there was a food shortage that to this day had not yet been remedied.

All the villages in the area had been abandoned, the inhabitants had fled to the safety of the towns further south or to Darokin City itself. The area was awash now with thousands of humanoids, looting and destroying homes, while the main part of their force was engaged with the mages of Glantri City. She fed freely here while she continued her search and considered this her small contribution to the defence of Darokin. She moved all around picking over every place between the Streel River and the western border of the Canolbarth as far south as the village of Wrasseldown. She listened in on the conversations and learned that the grain silos had been emptied and the normally easy-going farming community had to accept troops from the Darokin Legion who had built up barricades and defences. She had shaken her head at this. She had seen the humanoid army further north, a part of it, and she knew that anyone staying

here would die. She had offered this information to the people gathered in a tavern one of those nights, but she could tell that they had not really believed her.

She returned to the Canolbarth to rest and avoid the day and had decided to fly to see where the meteor had impacted which was further north. A huge crater now dominated an area that had once held towns and villages, now it was home to humanoids, a large roughly circular scar in the landscape. She saw that the huge humanoid army had grown with more streaming into it every day from Southern Glantri. Whatever had happened in Glantri City it was obvious they were preparing for a move south, Anya and Matheus had been right. She had gone south as fast as she could, to warn the towns and villages in the path of the great army to flee or buckle on their armour.

Within two weeks Darokin had sent forth its legions, supported by the Hin army and some forces from Karamaikos to hold back the invaders. They built up fortifications and dug long trenches using whatever natural features of the land they could to their advantage. The land was wide and relatively flat so they did what they could to funnel the approaching army to a narrow point so that they would not be out flanked, setting up their main force around the town of Ansimont. It was the narrowest point on the plains with the Streel River to their right and hills and forests to their left. The city of Akorross had been reinforced in case the horde tried to come at them from that direction. If they did not and came as it was hoped to engage with the main force, then the troops stationed in Akorross would come in later in the fight and attack their flank. After that they had to hope that the humanoids grasp of military tactics was rudimentary at best.

It was late in the winter and the snow began to fall as a dark smudge appeared on the horizon. That dark smudge grew larger, the sound of battle horns filled the air along with the battle roars of all manner of humanoid from goblin to troll to ogre and everything in between, along with more than a few giants.

The humanoids charged the line of Darokin's Legions, a wall of bristling twelve-foot pikes, while the archers sent volley after volley into the massed formations of the humanoids. It was enough to force them into a temporary retreat, but they came back at them again and tried to break through.

Kesi made sure not to use her wolf form not wishing to be mistaken for one of the many goblin mounts on the battlefield. She had to stay out of the action during the day but at night she went beyond the frontlines and did what she could to sow panic and disharmony. Her favourite tactic was setting fire to a sleeping troll or while in her wolf form, she would howl which set the goblin dire wolves off and had them howling all night. More than a few goblins and wolves were killed by grumpy ogres trying to get a good night sleep. She was also of use during the night as some of the humanoids were quite happy to fight when they had the advantage over the humans who relied on torches to see. She was able to warn the sentries and take out numerous orcs who did not have the weapons necessary to harm her.

The defenders were holding the line but taking casualties all the time, something that the humanoids were less concerned with, due to their superior numbers. So, it came as a relief when thousands of riders dressed in heavy plate and carrying lances crossed the ford at Ansimont and pierced the flank of the humanoid army, cutting a deep swathe and trampling bodies under the iron shod shoes of their horses. A surprise for everyone including the human and his defenders. No one had expected help from the Heldannic Knights and yet here they were. A mighty cheer went up and they began to push the humanoids back, dozens of them falling with every few feet they lost. The humanoids put up some resistance at first but as more fell, the panic began to spread, and the force finally broke and ran from the field of battle. They followed them north, driving them back into the Great Crater.

Fort Fletcher was in a sorry state but enough of it remained to organise a new defensive choke point to keep Thar and his humanoids out of Darokin while they made repairs to its defences. Amongst the Heldannic Knights were Anya and Matheus who had stayed true to their word and returned. They all went back to Darokin City and were welcomed by a jubilant crowd. The Heldannic Knights had won friends here and it would not soon be forgotten. With only a few days to rest, however they had received orders to return to the Heldannic Territories to aid the Thyatian Empire in their war against the Alphatians. This time Matheus had agreed to stay, and with Kesi's natural charm he found it easy to convince Anya to stay for two more months.

The Long Road Home - Part 4

Kesi spent a few days in the ruins of Ardelphia, a city in northern Darokin that had been destroyed by orcs more than one hundred and fifty years ago. The Legions of Darokin had tried over the years without success to reclaim the city. She shared it with the humanoids, bandits and darker things that now called the place home. She was in the loft of an old temple that was being used as a base by one such group of bandits who spoke of many things. She was only half listening as she had already chosen her next meal, when they began talking of a dark beast that was more lion than man. They had seen it in the area and had decided against hunting it as it did not seem worth the reward that was being offered for its capture at the time. She made a note of the one who seemed to be the most knowledgeable and waited for her chance to have a one-on-one chat. Her chance came when he was in a side room that served as the bandit's latrine. He managed a barely whispered gasp of surprise before he was knocked unconscious. She took him far from the temple to a ruined cottage on the edge of the city. The roof was open to the elements and some pigeons had made a nest now that spring had returned.

The bandit awoke with a groan of pain and when his vision cleared, he saw her on her hunkers watching him closely, a look of mirth on her face.

"Who are you?" he asked, trying to take in his surroundings to see if she was alone.

"I'll be askin de questions, mon. I heard ye talkin about de Black Lion. I want to hear more about dis".

He stifled a laugh. "You let me go little lady and I just might forget all about this". He held up his wrists giving her the opportunity to cut his bonds and release him.

"Those bindings are fer your safety, little man. Now, de Black Lion. When did ye last see him?"

He looked to be getting angry. "Let me go now before I get free, and I won't be so friendly. At least not the way you'd like me to be" he threatened.

She stood slowly and walked towards him and took his bound wrists in her hands. "De Black Lion".

"Untie me first".

"And you'll play nice?"

He nodded, so she pulled at the knot and the rope fell to the ground. She stepped back and waited.

The man looked at her. Although tall, she was not particularly strong looking and except for a knife she was unarmed and was not wearing armour. His hand went to the scabbard at his waist to the hilt of the sword. She had not even disarmed him. That should have set alarm bells ringing in his head, but it did not. He pulled out the sword and she merely smiled.

“Ye said ye’d play nice” she reminded him.

“Yeah, well I lied”.

The smile faded from her face to be replaced by a scowl of anger and she moved with such speed that before he could react, she was standing right in front of him, grabbing his sword arm at the wrist. She jerked it violently and the sword fell with a clang to the stone floor.

He screamed in pain, and she shoved him to a sitting position. As he grasped the bruised limb, he whimpered. “Please”.

“De Black Lion, tell me all you know”. Her tone was firm.

He nodded.

“What’s yer name?”

He seemed surprised by the question. “Tomin”.

“Tomin, please don’t lie te me again. Ye wouldn’t lie te a friend would ye? An we are friends, aren’t we?” she said gazing at him with warm friendly eyes until he fell under her spell.

She had been tempted to feed but instead chose to send him in his charmed state back to his friends with the implanted desire to steal all their best loot and meet her in Darokin City.

He had told her that he had seen the creature twice and going by his description it had to be Druss. The first time was when they were in the abandoned village of Rennydale to see if there was anything to eat left behind and it was headed north towards the Broken Lands but maybe two days later, he saw it again and it was headed back southeast in the direction of Favaro.

She had gone to Favaro and then to Dolos before re-entering the Canolbarth. She had been warned that there were other elves in control now called Shadow Elves. They were not at all friendly and had even attacked the Heldannic Knights when they passed this way to help Darokin and its allies push the humanoids into the Great Crater. To the people of Dolos she was an attractive young female and very lightly armed. They were concerned for her safety and advised her to go home. She insisted that they tell her at what point of the great forest the Black Lion had entered and then when she was sure she was not being observed, changed form and flew through the night air. She had a hopeful feeling that the search was coming to an end, but she tried to keep this under control.

She fluttered in amongst the trees, stopping every once in a while, to get her bearings. She had been told that there were many small villages dotted around the area but the biggest was Shieldtree, home to clan Red Arrow, at least it used to be. The clan had left with all the others and the shadow elves now laid claim to it.

She stood now on one of the walkways that connected the trees high above the forest floor. There were signs that the Alfheim elves had been here not so very long ago. There was much

they had to leave behind, as the journey they had to undertake would be arduous and they had to abandon a lot of things that may have been precious to them. She stood in the bedroom of one such place, admiring the silk curtains, the finely carved furniture and some nice pieces of jewellery. She pocketed some of these things and could almost hear Druss hissing at her, "Kesi, what are you doing?" This thought brought a smile to her face. She moved to the next house and saw four elves on the far side of the raised platform, so she decided to get a closer look at these shadow elves.

They looked at ease and to her eyes they seemed not much different to the Alfheim elves she had seen. Smaller perhaps, not as robust. Their ears were slightly larger too and she wondered if their hearing was better. She made sure to take extra care and stepped lightly using all her skills as a thief along with her supernatural abilities. She knew enough about the elven language to know when it was being spoken but had only a handful of words. When they looked like they were heading back to the forest floor she followed. They moved very quietly, and she took her time and matched their pace. She did not want to change form at this time in case she lost sight of them in the tangled branches of the forest.

One of them whispered something and the other three took arrows from their quivers, while the leader looked like she was preparing a spell. She did not have long to wait to see what they were hunting. The shadow elf finished her spell, and a burst of pale greenish flickering fire enveloped the large beast that had until a few seconds ago been resting. It jumped up with a startled roar and tried to wipe the fire away. This did not help. The other three elves fired arrows and all three hit.

Kesi stepped forward, it was him, it was Druss, it had to be. How many eight-foot Black Lions were running around in this part of the world. She could not help herself, she was so overcome with joy at finally laying eyes on him that she allowed her concentration to lapse. Druss roared in pain, the elves drew another arrow each, the branch she stepped on cracked and they all turned their heads to face her. She used her speed to dodge two arrows but the third hit her in the hand, piercing her palm. The sound of Druss running in the opposite direction caught the shadow elves attention and they ran after him. He was easy to follow in the dark forest as his form was lit up by the greenish fire.

Kesi pulled the arrow from her hand and changed into a dire wolf. She sprinted parallel to the elves, overtaking them but not gaining any ground on Druss. She had no idea of the geography of the forest and so had no clue where he might be headed. She could not try and cut him off and so was forced to follow and hope that he remained lit up long enough for her to catch up with him. She saw the flames sputter and die and kept on to the point where she had last seen him, hoping there would be some trace of him that would allow her to follow. She could hear the shadow elves coming closer, they could not see her but if they were close enough, they may be able to see the body heat of Druss.

"Time for some help", she muttered and focused on calling for it.

The elves had slowed down and were moving forward cautiously. Three of them had their bows bent back and ready to fire, the fourth was uttering the words of a spell. When she finished, Kesi could see her look about and then silently point, directing the others. She seemed to know where Druss was, but how?

The arrows, she thought. They had hit him with arrows and the lead shadow elf was now homing in on the arrow heads that must still be stuck in his body.

They were moving faster now, listening to the lead elf who seemed to detect every turn that Druss took and adjusted their path through the forest. They entered a small dark clearing, the elves scanned the surroundings and were able to pick him out by his body heat. Kesi could see him too, on a branch ten feet from the forest floor. He was waiting for them to pass underneath and was unaware that they could see him.

The shadow elf began casting another spell and this time the others put aside their bows and began casting spells of their own. This was not good.

White sticky strands shot from the fingertips of the lead shadow elf, hitting Druss and securing him to the tree in a magical web. The others had conjured glowing white arrows that appeared at waist height and sent them shooting forward into the helpless figure of Druss. He roared in pain and tore at the sticky substance.

The shadow elves were preparing more spells and Kesi was moving forward now to engage when her help arrived. Scores of shrieking bats came from all directions, converging on the shadow elves who shouted in surprise, their spell casting ruined. As the bats attacked them, Kesi darted in and began stabbing at them with her knife. When a gap in the assault showed itself, the shadow elves broke and ran, pursued by the bats.

Kesi turned to Druss who had almost broken free and climbed quickly to where he was. "Easy easy, dey're gone now" she tried to reassure him, but he roared, and she knew that if he could have, he would have attacked her. She quickly took a brooch from her pocket and reached into his mane and secured it with the clasp. It was one of the black lion brooches she had made and under the circumstances it seemed very appropriate. Then she stepped back quickly out of reach as he broke free completely. She leapt from the branch to the ground just ahead of him and ran behind a tree. He roared again but seemed more interested in getting away, disappearing into the depths of the forest.

She went back to Darokin City with a spring in her step. She had told Anya and Matheus all that had transpired but was a little disappointed when Anya told her that the range on the spell, she had hoped to locate Druss with, was quite limited. "I thought once I put de brooch on him, we'd have no trouble tracking him down".

"You did good Kesi, better than any of us," said Matheus. "We'll find him now, you'll see".

“I think we can assume he is still in the Canolbarth so we’ll start where you last saw him and maybe Matheus can track him” said Anya adding to the positive note, Matheus had struck.

“Maybe Ponder has something more powerful to help us find him again?” suggested Kesi.

“It’s worth asking” agreed Anya.

Anya and Matheus had gone to Matthew’s home in the Gold Class residential area the following morning just before noon. He had bought it from a family who had panicked when the Master had attacked and who wanted to leave the city but needed funds urgently to escape and settle someplace safer. They had thought it prudent at the time and had not expected the city to remain standing. Matthew had bought it for a very reasonable price as they were in no position to haggle too much for a better deal.

Ponder had been able to assist with the use of a crystal ball he owned and could confirm that the brooch was at least still in the forest. He could also determine that there was some water nearby and suggested calling in to see a friend of theirs that ran a clothing business in the city called ‘Silk & Satin’. The friend was an elven woman called Hallístra Jhalavar who was most gracious, inviting them in and offering them some refreshments. The business itself sold all manner of clothing but was particularly well known for its silk evening gowns and scarves.

“Now, what do you need?” she asked smiling, knowing they were not here for a dress.

Deciding it would be best to be completely honest with her Anya said “We are looking for my son. He was cursed and we believe he is somewhere in the forests of Alfheim”.

“Aengmor”.

“I’m sorry?” asked Anya.

“I hear the shadow elves have renamed the nation Aengmor” the elven woman explained, stirring her lemon tea with a small metal spoon.

“Oh, I see” Anya continued. “Well, my son was transformed into a Black Lion and...”

The elf stopped stirring her tea.

“...well, we’ve been trying to find him for I don’t know... a very long time”. She looked suddenly tired. “We managed to get a brooch on him, Kesi did”.

“Who’s Kesi?”

“She and my son are together, but she’s resting at the moment.”

Hallístra nodded. “A Black Lion you say, interesting”.

“Ponder used magic and determined that he’s still in Aengmor, near some water”.

“A waterfall” said Matheus clarifying.

“Yes, a waterfall”.

Hallístra nodded sipping her tea. “Sounds like the Sump and Weir”.

“You know it?” asked Anya

She nodded again.

“And you can take us there or at least draw a map?”

Hallístra appeared thoughtful. “A map won’t help, the shadow elves would cut you down but...” she paused “...well I can go and take a look for you”.

“No, we go too,” said Matheus.

She looked at him understanding his desire and shrugged “If you insist but I can’t vouch for your safety”.

“You don’t need to worry about our safety”.

“Forgive my husband, we’re anxious to find our son, we’ve been searching for a very long time”.

“Husband, since when were Heldannic Knights allowed to marry?”

“It’s been permissible for a few years now, but we only got around to making it official recently” smiled Anya looking at Matheus.

“Alright, we’ll go together. When would you like to leave?” asked Hallístra.

“Tonight?” asked Anya.

“Let’s say two days, I’ll need to gather my gear and make some business arrangements. Is that acceptable?”.

“Of course,” said Anya.

“I’ll see you back here in two days” she said showing them to the door.

They met as planned and took the main road to Favaro. Only Matheus and Anya showed up and they told Hallístra that Kesi would meet them there.

The elven woman thought this was odd but said nothing. Out of the fine garments they had seen her in originally, she was almost unrecognisable now dressed in chainmail armour, a long brown cloak and her long brown hair was tied back from her face.

“So how do you propose we get in without getting turned into pin cushions?” asked Matheus as they trotted along the road at an easy pace.

Hallístra smiled “Oh, it’s a big forest and the way I see it the shadow elves will be happy to be rid of one more dangerous critter. You’ll be doing them a favour”.

“And how will they know we’ll be doing them a favour? Maybe they’ll shoot first and ask questions later. I heard that’s what they do”.

“You have to understand that they have a long history with the Alfheim elves. A long difficult history”.

“You’re very understanding. I thought you’d be upset about what they’ve done to the forest. It’s dying, they can’t have wanted that”.

“I’ve been all over, and I’ve seen humans kill each other for less. A homeland is worth fighting for. You have to expect some sacrifice”.

“Where did you say you were from?”

She looked at the huge man. “Oh, you probably never heard of it. It’s a small place”.

“Try me. I’ve been all over”.

“Matheus” said Anya in a cautioning tone.

“We’ll reach Favaro in about three days unless you want to push the horses. Then we’ll leave the road and go into the forest to Elleromyr. We’ll leave the horses there and go on foot to the Sump and Weir which is about a day and a half travel”.

Even from a distance they could see that the forest was in a very bad way. Anya looked closely at Hallístra and could see something there. Wherever she was from, she seemed effected by the state of the forest and if this woman was a friend of Matthew and Ponder then she could probably be trusted. Despite this there was a nagging feeling which she shared with Matheus by way of a simple glance. Riding into the forest they had to take it slow in the gloomy shade of the trees. The ground was uneven and the roots protruding from the ground could easily trip a horse and its rider.

When they came to a wall of thorn bushes and ditches with no obvious path through, they followed Hallístra who seemed to have no trouble navigating the maze-like outer defence that was standard for all elven towns and villages.

What a wicked web we weave, thought Anya looking again at Matheus.

Matheus watched Hallístra and could see she was at ease. He had his suspicions about that but what was more important was finding Druss and getting him safely home.

Once they passed the outer defences, they arrived at the sturdy wooden palisade of Elleromyr and walked to the gate which had been left open by the departing elves. There were exquisite examples of the work of Clan Erendyl, renowned as master artisans and artists, that had called

this place home. You would find it difficult if not impossible to find a surface that did not have some filigree or other carved expertly into the surrounding homes and trees. They climbed up the ramp after securing the horses in a stable that had been used by the clan's elven horses.

A figure stepped from the darkness and all three drew their weapons. Matheus noticed the speed of the elven woman who had her bow out, an arrow ready to fly moments before even his sword was drawn. This made him regard her with a lot more respect. He had been forced to reappraise her yet again. She was not at all the person she appeared to be.

"Sorry, it's just me. Didn't mean to startle ye, mon" said Kesi standing before them.

"So, you're the famous Kesi" said Hallístra lowering her bow.

"At yer service".

They slept that night in one of the elven homes and started out the next day. Kesi was already gone and Hallístra looked at Anya and Matheus for an explanation.

"She's keen to find Druss," said Anya.

They could hear the sound of water about an hour before they finally saw it. There was a cliff face to climb and Hallístra grasped the edges of her cloak and levitated to the top. "See you up there" she called back to them.

Matheus turned to Anya with his arms outstretched, "My love".

She stepped into his arms, and he walked up the rough wall like a spider, getting to the top in seconds.

They were on the west side of a deep chasm a mile wide that the river drained into. The water cascaded over the edge into the dark depths, hundreds maybe even a thousand feet below. Separating the river from the sump on the east side was the weir. At almost two miles long, it was a twenty-foot stone dam that kept any boats from spilling over the edge and in the past had been patrolled by Alfheim elves as the area was known for its menagerie of aquatic monsters. The towers that were spaced evenly along its length stood empty and silent except for the roaring sound of the water.

They had to raise their voices to be heard but Hallístra was indicating that they go to one of the small paths that led down to the bottom of the sump.

Matheus had a look around for tracks and found several that were likely the booted feet of elves. He looked up at them when he found the tracks of something else, something much larger and gave them the thumbs up. Anya took a gemstone from her bag that had been enchanted with a light spell. The elf would have no trouble seeing but she and Matheus would need its light to descend safely along the trail that was slick with water and wet moss.

A bat flitted close by and landed in a dark corner. This did not seem to draw Hallístra's attention as it was a likely place for bats to congregate. It was no surprise to Anya and Matheus when they saw Kesi waiting for them.

Hallístra drew up short at her presence. She was surprised and looked at the others. "How?"

With the noise of the water all around them it was easy to pretend they did not hear her.

They moved further down with Matheus leading the way along the path which was wide enough for three people. His sword was drawn but he was not yet sure if he would use it. How could he strike his own son?

A large figure moved to the edge of the light from Anya's gemstone. The eyes shone in the darkness, and it roared, hands held wide, large claws extended. It was him. They had finally found him.

Matheus readied himself and called Kesi to be ready with the collar. "Anya".

She stepped to his side and began casting a spell to remove the curse that the Lich had cast.

Nothing happened.

Druss came closer.

"It didn't work!" she shouted.

"Try something else" he urged.

She cast another spell to dispel the enchantment that had turned her son into this mindless beast but still he stalked closer.

"It's too strong Matheus. We need to get out of here now!"

Kesi darted to the front her hands empty trying to show she meant no harm. "Easy pretty boy. We're here to help ye".

The Black Lion paused only briefly and then swatted her aside. The blow struck and she hit the ground hard, momentarily stunned.

It passed by her and straight to Matheus.

Hallístra moved forward as they moved back and cast a spell opening a dimension door just as it was stepping forward. It slammed shut and the beast was gone.

"Thank me later, up up" she indicated where the fight would continue, her feet already lifting from the ground as her cloak activated, levitating her rapidly back to the surface.

Kesi was back on her feet and was running up the path back the way they came. "I can't believe he hit me. Mon is he in so much trouble when I get him".

They could hear Druss roar savagely as they reached the top. He was moving further east towards the Weir, and they could see Hallístra was leading him away. She was about forty feet from the ground, and he could not reach her. When he looked to be giving up, she dropped quickly to the ground to make him chase her and then she ran leaping into the air once more, using the momentum to quickly levitate away. “Here kitty, kitty” she taunted him.

“What’s the plan?” asked Anya.

“Still thinking”, answered Matheus moving to the front.

Hallístra had moved to the top of the Weir and was waiting for the beast to join her. She cast another spell and three more exact copies of herself appeared. It jumped and grabbed the top of the wall pulling itself up and roared at her again.

“I thought you’d be happy to see me again” she smiled, “All four of us”.

It pounced suddenly, and she cut it too close before moving away and one of her images dissolved as a clawed hand struck it.

“Ok, ok, all three of us” she said in mock apology as she once more levitated out of range.

Matheus reached the top of the wall with Kesi and Anya not far behind. He had put his weapon away and moved forward like he was about to engage in a grappling contest.

“Matheus, what are you doing?” shouted Anya uncertainly.

“Don’t worry my love, I have a plan”.

When Druss turned his back on Hallístra to face his father she cast another spell. White sticky webbing enveloped the Black Lion who was caught up in the strands. A slight wind from the turbulent water moved her levitating body closer to the others but out over the river, her bow was now drawn. “We’re running out of options here big man” she shouted.

Druss tore at the webbing and just as he was free of the last of the sticky strands, Matheus barrelled into him, knocking him to the ground. He leapt to his feet and clawed at his father's thigh opening a gash. Matheus ignored the wound and stepped in behind him, claspng him around the waist in powerful arms and lifting him from the ground. Druss twisted and then grasped the forearms of his father, the claws biting deep as Matheus walked to the edge of the Weir and over the edge dumping them both into the river.

“Matheus!” screamed Anya running forward and searching the water. She could see bubbles and their struggling bodies below the surface.

Kesi too stepped to the edge but was unable to help. When she was alive, she was a fantastic swimmer but because of her ‘condition’ she was unable to cross running water except at a bridge and that included swimming in it. She could only pace up and down looking very distressed.

A yelp of surprise caught their attention. They were just in time to see Hallístra plummet from the air, her cloak fluttering up over her head as she too disappeared into the river. They could see her get pulled by the force of the water towards one of the gates and ran to pull her out.

Soaking wet and lying on her back, wiping her wet hair away from her face. She looked fatigued but managed to ask, "What happened?"

Anya looked around and noticed they were not alone. She touched Kesi on the shoulder, and she too saw about a dozen elves that had appeared from nowhere. At first, they were just standing there observing, some had bows drawn. They looked very unsteady on their feet, and it took a few seconds for them to realise that the women could see them. Anya readied her sword and Kesi drew her knife, while Hallístra climbed to her feet.

"Stand down, stand down" said Hallístra raising her hand and the shadow elves slowly lowered their weapons.

"A little help here" came a familiar voice.

Kesi was breathing deeply like she had run many miles and looked at Anya apologetically. Anya looked at her concerned but ran to the side of the Weir where Matheus was calling them. With one hand he was holding tightly to the side of the wall, his fingers splayed trying to grip the surface with great difficulty. With the other he held the limp body of a very large man.

The shadow elves and Kesi seemed to have lost so much energy and strength that it was left to Anya to try and haul both men out. Druss was unconscious but still breathing. One of the elves draped a cloak over his naked body which was laced with scars.

Matheus was sitting beside Druss, blood streaming from multiple wounds but grinning. "I told you I had a plan".

"How did ye do dat?" asked Kesi.

"Cats don't like water" he laughed. "I didn't think it would be so true".

"That's not what happened" said Hallístra. "The magic in my cloak failed. All our magic failed. Whatever spell was cast on Druss must also have failed. By Rafiel I feel so tired. Something has gone seriously wrong".

"That would make sense. My ring wouldn't work, and I couldn't get a grip on the side of the wall," said Matheus.

"Let me try," said Anya trying a spell of healing on her wounded husband without success. She was shocked. "Even my magic from Vanya does not work".

"Alright everybody stop panicking. I've never had much magic and I've been ok".

Hallístra managed a smile, but she looked weary beyond belief. "I'm happy for you human but for us it is doubly troubling. I can barely walk more than five steps without the need to rest".

Kesi too had been affected, none of her shape changing abilities would work and she felt drained of energy and her breathing was ragged.

Matheus took the lead, taking the magical collar from Kesi and fastening it around the neck of Druss who was still unconscious.

"Matheus, the magic doesn't work", said Anya stating the obvious but shook by the fact she had lost contact with her immortal patron.

"It doesn't work now but if the magic comes back, it will. Don't worry my love, everything is going according to plan", he assured her.

The next part of the plan was for Matheus to get back to Elleromyr as quickly as he could, to get their horses. They would use these to transport everyone back to the town to rest and recuperate and hopefully by that time magic would have returned. As weak as all the elves were, a bigger concern for them was the undead Kesi who seemed to be at death's door, strange as that sounded.

It was a hard slog for Matheus who reached Elleromyr in a single day and he was tired by the effort. At almost sixty-two years old, he was forced to admit that his prime years were well behind him.

All the carts and wagons had been taken by the Alfheim refugees when they left the land so he did what he could to construct some frames to tie behind the horses that could be dragged along the ground. By securing leather strips and bedsheets he would be able to fit maybe five elves on each as they were quite a small race of people, standing around five foot four inches on average. He had very little qualms about stripping the required materials from the homes of the elves and he knew they would not look kindly on him using them to aid their mortal enemies.

It took two such trips before everyone was in Elleromyr and assigned their accommodation. Anya had to fall back on her skills as a healer and use time tested remedies to help with Matheus's wounds. For Druss she could do nothing but make him comfortable. He was covered in scars, but all his wounds had healed. They had put him on the floor as none of the elven beds were big enough for his huge frame. The shadow elves just needed someone to bring food and water to them as they were in such a state of exhaustion. Kesi was spending more time asleep as the days passed and Anya did what she could to force her to take some water. In the end she had to wet a cloth and drip some passed the cracked lips of her mouth.

"I don't think it's water she needs" said Matheus drawing his knife.

When everyone was settled, he had gone back to the nearest village outside the border and was able to get some food and information. The loss of magic seemed to have been more

widespread than just Aengmor. The most popular theory was that the Glantrian and Alphatian mages had been hurling so much magic at each other that they had used it all up and that it was gone forever.

When he returned to Elleromyr he told the others what he had heard. This possibility troubled Anya greatly.

“What if they’re right Matheus? What if magic never returns?” she asked, her voice low.

He shrugged. “We’ll manage”.

“But if magic doesn’t return” she looked at him clearly upset, “that means I wasted all those years for nothing. I gave up my son, and you and for what? If magic doesn’t come back, if I can’t commune with Vanya again, then it was all for nothing”.

“Don’t think that way. When your magic was working and I’m thinking about that time I fought with that lupin, you healed my wounds and saved me. If you hadn’t become a cleric of Vanya, then I might not be here”.

She smiled and gave a gentle laugh. “So you’re finally prepared to admit I saved you”.

He hugged her tightly. “Keep that to yourself though. I have a reputation to protect”.

They heard someone groaning in discomfort and turned to see that Druss was sitting up. His face was drawn, and he looked like he was extremely stiff, grunting each time he repositioned his body until he was sitting up. “How did I end up on the floor?”.

His mother moved quickly to his side and Matheus laughed heartily. “You’ve been gone from us for I don’t know how many years and that’s your first question?”

Anya had prepared some food but urged him to only eat a little to begin with to see how his body reacted. He did not listen and wolfed down the food in front of him, spooning more from the bowl his mother had laid out. She gave him a disapproving look but did not try to stop him. He moved to sit by Kesi’s bedside, and she awoke a few minutes later. Her eyes were a narrow slit, but she saw him and moved her hand slowly towards his. He grasped it and leaned in to kiss her gently. His parents told him all that had happened and what still had to be done. He touched the collar around his neck as they spoke.

One evening as the night began to fall, Druss was lighting the lantern when his mother’s small gem that she had left on the table began to glow weakly at first and then more brightly as it reached full illumination. The three looked at each other with hope and waited to see if the collar would work. It was a nerve racking few minutes, but he remained unchanged. Then they went to see how their patients were. Kesi’s breathing had improved, and it was the same with the shadow elves. As each minute passed, they seemed to recover from their sickness. Matheus walked to a tree and put his hand on the bark. The others looked on as he went up the side of the tree like a spider. They were cheering in delight and in the morning, Anya performed her

meditation to Vanya in order to receive her magic for the day. She began healing Matheus's wounds that he had received while trying to restrain Druss. Her mood lifted greatly, and she was in much better form. With further rest and recuperation, the others regained their strength and their magic.

Hallístra and the other shadow elves prepared to return to their subterranean home to check on their people, while Druss and the others made plans to leave the Canolbarth to see what could be done about the curse that he was under. It had been decided that they should try to help him before Kesi. She had left the bag containing the scrolls and books that detailed how to restore her to life, in the Heldannic Territories and that would be the next stop after they went to see Asturi in Ethengar.

When they left Hallístra and the other shadow elves they decided to take the most direct path back to Ethengar by following the western border of the Canolbarth forest until they came to the Blackwater River which they followed up into the Black Hills of the Broken Lands. Kesi could not go with them as she needed to rest in a coffin, and she had none in Ethengar. Some consideration had been given to her travelling with them in bat form but the risk of being exposed to the sun was too great. She would make her way back to the Heldannic Territories and await them there.

Matheus had gambled that the number of humanoids would be vastly reduced as most had answered the call of King Thar and as far as was known most of the humanoids were still in the Great Crater where they had been forced to find shelter after the failed campaigns against Glantri and Darokin. Then it was through the foothills west of the Dwarfgate Mountains and apart from the odd occasion when a handful of orcs were encountered and dealt with, all went well. Matheus cut some of the ears off the dead orcs, which appalled Anya. A few more days of travel and they entered Yakkas tribal land and Matheus presented the ears as a gift to the clan leader who was pleased. Anya understood the cultural significance of the act but looked at her son and shook her head as discreetly as she could. What kind of people had she left him with? she wondered.

Then they rode along the banks of the Streel River north to Kaeruts land and peeled off from there when the men had determined the time of the year and the likely location of Clan Jogatai. They hoped that Asturi with her arcane knowledge of animal spirits would know what to do about the curse on her grandson.

The three of them rode towards the yurts with Anya in the middle. The camp dogs came out barking and growling at the strangers but when Matheus and Druss dismounted and allowed them to check out the newcomers they calmed down and began wagging their tails. Anya was happy to stay on her horse, a gift from Hallístra the shadow elf.

There were a few familiar faces and many new ones. It had been more than ten years since Druss had been to see them as he was so caught up in trying to find a cure for Kesi. For Matheus it had been even longer and of course it was the first time that Anya would be

meeting all these people who she had only heard about. In particular she was looking forward to finally meeting Matheus's mother Asturi.

Berke was still there, older of course and he still had a limp though it was not as pronounced. He had married and was the father of five children. He greeted them as they walked into the camp and gave orders to some of his older children to take the horses and look after them.

Jogatai the clan leader arrived then and more through custom and tradition, than genuine happiness to see them, welcomed the men back. Anya was not wearing anything that would make her stand out as a Heldannic Knight as relations between the two nations was still volatile and unlikely to ever improve. They were invited to attend his yurt later in the day where he would put on a feast for them. They accepted graciously and went to find Asturi.

A woman of around forty years old stood at the door to the yurt, smiling brightly at their arrival. She wore light brown robes decorated with images of horses in a darker brown colour.

"Loi-Tan?" asked Druss.

"So, you haven't forgotten me" she said greeting him.

She brought them in to the yurt, which was dimly lit, and Druss went straight to Asturi who was sitting near the centre wrapped in furs. She looked very small and frail now and was around eighty years old. He leaned in close to her, her eyes were still closed.

"Hello grandmother" he whispered.

Her face cracked in a smile that was missing a few teeth now. He looked at her with love and a little sadness, remembering her when she was so much younger.

"My grandson has come to see me again. It has been many years, but I knew I would see you before the end". She reached out to touch his face and he remained still but smiling. She touched his bearded chin and neck, her hand resting on the thick leather collar. "There's a story here, I'm sure. Do you still enjoy telling stories?"

"I think you'll find this one is the greatest yet".

"I'm sure I will" she smiled. "Foolish child".

Matheus came close too, and Asturi looked at him with eyesight that was fading. "It's good to see you Mother".

She nodded and asked, "and this one?"

"This is Anya, mother, my wife".

Asturi nodded and looked like she was thinking. "Druss's mother?"

"Yes".

“Pretty, you should have had more children, but I suppose my grandson was too much of a handful” she laughed, the sound chesty. She coughed a little to clear her throat and Loi-Tan stepped in to give her something to drink. She took the clay cup and sipped the liquid.

They sat down while she recovered and spoke with Loi-Tan who told them all that had happened. Matheus was interested in the news about the tribes and how things were, but Druss was more interested in hearing about his childhood friends. Berke, he had met already but she told him about Noyon who had left to become an adventurer. Waruni had been gone many years now and lived in the Emirate of Makistan in Ylaruam. Druss was very surprised that she had left Ethengar and asked why.

“She met someone she really liked but her family did not, so she left with him” she said looking amused. “You’d like him, her husband”.

“Oh?”

“Yes, I’m sure you’d have a lot in common. He reminds me a lot of your old friend, that Maghurs boy. What was his name?”

“Kashin?”

“Yes, that’s it, Kashin. He’s very like Kashin, they could almost be brothers” she smiled, her eyes full of mirth.

“What happened to the Maghurs?” he asked. “The last I heard all the fighting age males were killed”.

“Yes, that’s correct. Well, most of them were. The smart ones or the lucky ones got away”.

Druss did not enjoy thinking about this. He and Kashin had been very close friends, but his tribe went up against the Murkits and lost. All the males over the age of twelve had been killed and everyone else had been dispersed amongst the other tribes. “Kashin was a great friend, but he wasn’t always smart. He was so bull headed sometimes”.

“No, he wasn’t smart, that’s true but he was lucky” she said slyly. “He met someone that persuaded him to let her do the thinking sometimes”.

He looked at her not sure what she was saying. “Kashin?”

Loi-Tan nodded. “Yes, you remember how persuasive Waruni could be”.

“He’s alive?”

“Yes, with Waruni in Makistan, they have a few children and seem quite happy last I heard”.

“But you did not come here to talk about times passed” interrupted Asturi who seemed to have regained her focus. “There is something important that brings you hear. Tell me of it”.

She listened as Druss told her about the curse and how he had been transformed into a lion like creature against his will. He sometimes had control but as time went by the spirit of the lion had triumphed. She seemed amused by this and had told him that the spirit of the lion and the wolf were linked closely to him. She had seen it. If he had become a shaman, one of these would have become his spirit guide. She told him that these two animals had had a big impact on his life amongst the Ethengar and he nodded his head in agreement smiling at this.

“So, you seek to gain dominance over this spirit that has been made to manifest inside you?”

“No, I seek to remove this spirit, cast it out. I have my own life to lead”.

She closed her eyes and was quiet for a time. Druss recognised the pattern and waited. He looked at his mother Anya who was watching and gave her a reassuring look letting her know that all was well.

Asturi spoke again, her voice cracking. Loi-Tan again handed her the clay bowl and once she sipped the liquid, she was able to continue. “The Night of Spirits would have been a good time to do this but that is many months away. I know my grandson”, she cackled. “I know he does not have the patience to wait another year”. She looked around the room, her gaze resting on each of them before moving on. “We will go to the Land of the Black Sand, to the top of the World Mountain. There, we will cross the bridge into the Spirit World”.

Anya looked at Matheus. “Black Sand? Should I be concerned?”

“My mother will protect him”.

“You can come too, mother of my grandson. There will be undead to deal with while I smooth a path”.

“It may be necessary to gain the approval of Khanistar” said Loi-Tan in a low voice, addressing Asturi.

“Not necessary but yes it might be appropriate. There are other things in play here. You spoke of a Lich that performed this ritual. Khanistar may provide some perspective on this, but she is not known for her charity. You will need magical items or ancient tomes or texts to offer in exchange for whatever help she can provide”.

As it turned out, Asturi was too frail to make the journey and Loi-Tan had taken her place.

“Yamuga the Yurt Dweller is letting me know that my time is short,” she said. When she saw the look on the face of Druss she chuckled. “Oh, my grandson. You did not think that I would be here forever, did you? The wheel turns, life continues even when it comes to an end for some. When you and that young woman have children, ah you thought I did not know?” she said laughing at his surprise. “That new life will be” she paused, “think of it like this. We who are family are made from a fabric. When my life unwinds you will use the threads of me to weave a new life in your son or daughter. This is as it should be. My life has been long and interesting, but I am tired”.

Loi-Tan had led the three of them to the edge of the Land of Black Sand warning them of the dangers. It was as it looked, a cursed place, full of spirits and death, even the winds that blew could cause madness. It was not a journey to be taken lightly. She had a staff with the head of a horse carved at the top. She had raised it high with one hand and had shouted some words of power. They were instructed to stay behind her and not stray from the path. If, when the path was not clear they were to stay as close behind her as possible. The spirits of this place would try to get them off the path and if they succeeded then they would be lost.

The land itself looked like it had been scorched by fire. Nothing grew there, the rocks and boulders were warped and although they looked smooth, they were extremely sharp. The ground was covered in a black sand that gave the area its name. It fell freely from your hand if you picked it up, but this gave the eerie impression of your very life running out, so no-one did this more than once.

Loi-Tan had warned them that they would be passing the yurt of a powerful hakoman called Ckartai. He had lived in this area for a very long time and had gone insane and this made him unpredictable and dangerous. They had seen his yurt and passed by but although they could hear a crazed laughing that sounded almost painful, they did not see him.

They came to the base of the World Mountain, tired after all the travel. Matheus and Druss erected the small yurt that they would spend the night in. Each of the poles was carved with images or glyphs and the fire pit in the centre once it was lit gave off a blue light. Loi-Tan cast some magic and mere minutes later something landed on the roof of the yurt. They watched as that something made its way along the roof, causing the fabric to bulge, until it reached the central pole where there was a gap to allow the smoke to escape. They waited until the head of a small creature peered in and satisfied with what it saw it dropped into the room spreading its small wings to slow its descent. A small creature that looked like a tiny three-foot-long dragon. It seemed to have purpose and was not merely looking for some food. It moved rapidly across the floor to Loi-Tan who did not seem at all afraid. It climbed into her lap as she sat and then stood, its forelegs resting on her chest. The lizard like head with glinting white teeth came close to hers and she began talking to it. It hissed and growled, and she spoke in the Ethengarian language. The conversation was short, and the small dragon flapped its wings until it was close to the top of the tent pole. Sharp talons grabbed on to the wood and it scrambled out the hole, back on to the roof. The tent sagged as it pushed itself off and then returned to normal as the dragon flew away.

“What just happened?” asked Anya.

“A messenger from Khanistar. He wanted to know our purpose and will carry my words to his mistress” replied Loi-Tan.

The little dragon had appeared again the next morning with word that they could proceed in relative safety.

As they climbed further up the dark mountain, they could see numerous towers dotting the landscape and overlooking them. They were of an odd design not like the towers of Freiburg that Anya was used to seeing. These were tall, comparatively slim constructions with stone barb like protrusions around the circumference of each tower like the thorns of a rose bush. Around the top of the tower were jagged teeth or talon like additions, possibly for defence or simply for the aesthetics, Anya was not sure.

Dark shadows and other things that seemed more substantial prowled in the dark ravines and crevices of the mountain, but Loi-Tan appeared totally at ease. She moved along the rocky terrain using her staff as an extra limb and climbing steadily higher. They walked for perhaps two hours when the trail began to widen out and led under a stone arch to a courtyard of sorts. They were unsure if it had been the ruins of an ancient temple or castle or simply a random occurrence of nature that looked manmade.

They walked to the natural doorway and into a long corridor that was lit with torches. No sand from outside was to be found on the floor and it was clean and without any other decoration. At the end of the long corridor was a heavy curtain that had been parted. Each side of the curtain was secured to the wall by a thick rope made of gold thread.

They walked into a roughly circular chamber that made them stop in their tracks. They had not been expecting to see a well-furnished room, with a number of chairs and cushions scattered about the floor. There were five smooth red pillars trimmed in gold at the base and where they touched the ceiling, in a half circle towards the back of the large room. The ones at the centre had thick silken curtains hanging between them. There was torchlight behind them that provided a tantalising glimpse of glittering objects and the bookshelves beyond. To their left were three window like openings, the central one was quite large, approximately twenty feet wide while the other two were more modest at around six feet wide.

The sound of something being dragged along the ground came from the direction of the pillars and the silken curtains. They could see a human shaped form approach and pull the curtain aside revealing what they assumed was their host or perhaps a servant sent to greet them.

She was as an attractive woman of Ethengar or Ochalean heritage. A faint blue tattoo that covered most of her face including all of her forehead and eyes down to the bridge of her nose where it diverged to either side of her mouth to her jawline. The way the tattoo curved on her cheek and jawline was reminiscent of the design of the towers. She wore long intricate earrings, and her hair jet black was adorned with golden hairpins that glistened in the torchlight and tinkled like miniature wind chimes whenever she moved her head. On her head was a strange golden head piece with edges that curved up like the ends of a crescent moon and the centrepiece was the face of some terrifying creature, a single red ruby on its brow. Around her neck was a finely crafted thick golden necklace, inset with two more red rubies. The train of the light blue gown she wore trailed behind her about twenty feet. The gown was open at the front exposing her chest and some cleavage. She did not look like a servant.

Loi-Tan made the introductions to Khanistar, a blue dragon and the ruler of this land, who was appearing before them in her human form. She spoke to them in Ethengarian so Anya had to rely on the mood and tone to determine how the meeting was going. Khanistar wanted to hear more of what had transpired and asked questions that probed into whatever Druss could tell her about Oirtulev and where his lair was located. She remained standing for most of the talk but walked to the large window like opening and looked out across the land.

“I can do what you ask but I want something in return”.

“Name your price” replied Druss somewhat recklessly.

She smiled. “This friend that was transformed into a nosferatu. Her story interests me as does your quest to search for a cure. Is it all true?”

“Yes, it is. I spent many years tracking down the books and parchments but before I had the chance to use the knowledge I was cursed”.

“I want that knowledge. That is my price. Bring those items to me and I will provide the guidance you seek”.

“When I have used them to help Kesi, you can have them” he agreed.

“And I can trust that you will do this?” she asked, her long slender fingers played with a ring on her other hand, turning it around and around.

“Of course. I give you my word, but I can’t be sure it will work for Kesi”.

She nodded her head. “You strike me as an honest man, and I know that your shaman friend vouches for you. Very well, you see if the information you have obtained is correct and then give the items to me in return for my help”.

“Will you give me the information now or do I have to return with the books before you help?” he asked.

“The information you have may be of no use, in which case the information I give you will be of no use. You see, in order to use the information, you will need to return here and if I do not allow that ... well, then you won’t”.

“Would it be at all possible to perform the ritual now so that they don’t have to make the long trip back here?” asked Loi-Tan respectfully.

“I may consider this request for whatever magical items you have. If I am suitably impressed, I may be persuaded”.

“You can keep this collar” offered Druss.

“Yes, but not enough”.

“There are other items I picked up while I was adventuring but not here”.

Matheus offered his magical ring that allowed him to climb walls like a spider.

“Trinkets” she complained.

Anya could see that Druss was getting annoyed and asked him what was going on, so he explained. She spoke in a low voice that only he could hear, and he looked at her before nodding.

“I am sorry that we have wasted your time oh mighty Khanistar. If I had the magic to give you, I would. With your blessing we will leave now”.

Khanistar’s dark blue eyes narrowed. “What of my help?”

“I will return with the knowledge if it works as we agreed,” said Druss and turned to leave. “Unless...”

“Unless?” she asked.

“My father has friends in Alphatia and Karameikos. There’s no guarantee of course and they may even be dead, the recent war was devastating, and a lot of people were killed but maybe they’re alive and if so, they might be able to help”.

Khanistar glided towards him, the train of her long gown swaying behind her like the tail of some great serpent. She seemed to grow in height until she could look Druss, who stood six feet eight inches, in the eye. “I help you now and you will give the knowledge to me?”

“You have my word”.

“Say it again” she demanded, a faint hissing note detectable in her voice.

He met her gaze without blinking. “You have my word, that once I have used the knowledge to cure Kesi, I will hand it all over to you”.

“I believe that you will”, she smiled settling back to her previous height.

Khanistar told Loi-Tan what was needed, and Druss agreed to take the items to the ruined town of Hayavik where he would meet a messenger sent by Khanistar.

They left the dragon’s home and proceeded to the narrow stone bridge that led to the spirit world. Anya and Matheus had to stay behind as they did not have a spirit guide and it would mean death if they tried to enter without one. Anya had spoken up, concerned that Druss did not have one.

“Oh, but he does” replied Loi-Tan reaching up to take the collar from his neck.

“Uskull” said Matheus when she looked at him.

There was a small click and the collar fell into her waiting hands.

Druss looked at her with concern and touched his throat where the collar had been. She handed the collar to Matheus and took Druss by the hand even as his body began to stretch and transform, the clothes bursting and clinging like rags to the huge body of the Black Lion.

Loi-tan looked incredibly small and vulnerable beside the beast who followed her willingly into the Spirit World. As far as Anya and Matheus were concerned, they just faded from existence.

They were in a flat land of white mist that came up to Loi-Tan's knees. Druss was more aware of the powerful body he was inhabiting this time. In the past it had been all he could do to gain even a glimmer of control. With Loi-Tan with him he was thinking more clearly but could hear the faint bestial voice deep down inside his mind.

As they walked, the mist began to clear and they were now in a large open plain, with long grass. There were several clumps of trees scattered around the savannah and animals moving about in large herds. A horse came trotting up to them and then reared up on two legs. As it stood on its hind legs, the body transformed until it stood like a man. Loi-Tan laughed with joy and hugged the humanoid figure.

They moved about the savannah until the instinct to chase one of the large herds of herbivores began to pull on Druss. Loi-Tan helped him to resist this impulse and began muttering words of power, her staff held firmly in her hand. Even though she was telling him to resist, they were still walking closer to the animals who were grazing contentedly on the long grass. Druss found the strain building and the bestial voice was growing louder.

“Loi-Tan” he snarled, letting her know he was having a real problem.

“A little longer, Druss. Just a little longer” she urged.

They walked closer still to the animals that did not seem at all spooked by the approaching carnivore.

Druss was struggling hard now. His mouth began to water at the thought of the meat he would soon be tearing from the body of whichever animal he dragged to the ground. His eyes darted about, looking for one that showed any weakness.

Loi-Tan's horse spirit guide was watching him closely, a large wooden club was held now in its hand, the other was ready to move her behind him, away from the slaving beast.

The bestial voice was growing stronger, he felt himself being buffeted about. “Wait, just wait” he shouted gritting his teeth. “Words, no more words” it roared climbing out of the void and closing on him.

They were about sixty feet from the herd of animals. One or two had turned their heads, tails flicking away the flies that were trying to land on them. Loi-Tan had been speaking the words of her magic in a low voice, but she began to speak more forcefully now. More of the herbivores began to pay attention, still not fleeing but beginning to look agitated.

“Now, Druss, let it go, let it hunt” she shouted.

The Black Lion beside her roared in triumph and exhilaration. The horse spirit stepped to her side and moved Loi-Tan behind his body as the beast began to exude a black haze, like its body was heating up and ready to explode in the direction of the grazing animals. Whisps of smoke billowed around the huge body as he crouched and growled in excitement. The herbivores finally lost their nerve when the huge creature launched itself forward covering the ground between them with an incredible burst of speed. The black smoke around its body trailed behind for a moment before merging once more with the body.

Loi-Tan watched the Black Lion choose one animal while the others scattered for their lives and then turned to look at the naked body lying in a foetal position in the long grass.

Anya and Matheus were sitting close by the stone bridge waiting. Matheus had built a fire with the bundle of sticks he had brought with him knowing that they would find none in this place. The fire would not last too long, but it would provide some comfort. As the fire burned down to the embers, two figures appeared in front of them in the same way as they had disappeared. The forms grew more solid, and they saw that it was Loi-Tan and Druss. They appeared unhurt. Druss had managed to gather some rags that had fallen from his body and used it to cover himself.

“Well?” asked Anya, hopefully.

Druss nodded. “It’s done”.

The Long Road Home - Part 5

They arrived back at Matheus's cabin after many weeks of travel. It had taken far longer than it should have as Moglai Khan had invaded the Heldannic Territories and was laying siege to Grauenberg. The city's defences had managed to hold them off, so Moglai had switched tactics and sent his men riding across the land, hitting targets and taking much plunder.

Anya was biting at the bit to get back to Altendorf but had to trust Matheus and follow him along the more circuitous route up into the hills and passing close to the town of Thurgau. From there it was north to Pflenzen, still keeping to the hills and off the much flatter terrain that would favour the highly mobile Ethengar, until they reached the cabin. They would stay there a few days to rest and then he would go with her to Altendorf where she would report for duty before going to Freiburg.

Over the past few years while Druss had been adventuring, he had returned to oversee the building of an extension of sorts to his father's homestead. It was a small circular stone structure that they had covered with the soil they had excavated. Grass and other plants found in the area had grown back to help disguise the structure so that it appeared to be part of the landscape. Stone steps led to three underground levels. At this deepest level there was a tunnel that led north and came up somewhere in the Altenwald forest. It was a sturdy structure with a number of secret doors and panels where he put his more valuable treasure. When Kesi had fled from the Lich she had come here and made sure that the books and parchment were put away safely. It was also a place that Druss had made arrangements for her by placing a coffin so that she could rest and recover her strength if needed.

They were, however, at this time using his father's cabin while his parents were gone. They were going over the writing's again to make sure that they had not missed or misunderstood any instructions. It was up to them now, as a few years back the Experten had chased what they believed was the undead Reverend Mother Grauenberg across the border into Glantri. None of them had returned and this had included Mika. She had known of Druss's quest to help Kesi and without her it was up to them to finish the job.

"Ok so we need to carry out the ceremony as the sun rises and complete it shortly after," said Kesi. "So, I'm thinkin we should find a nice place with a beautiful view, just in case it doesn't work. I want to enjoy seein the sun again for the last time".

"It'll work" said Druss gruffly.

"So, any ideas where?" she asked.

He nodded. "The Altar of Vanya".

"Not happening, mon".

"Too high", he agreed.

Spreading out one of his father's maps on the wooden table he leaned on it looking for a suitable place. "Ah ha, I have just the place".

Kesi wrapped both her arms around his right bicep and rested her chin on his shoulder. "Where?" She looked to where he pointed, two ancient volcanoes that were no longer active.

"The Red Fangs" he said grinning.

"Ha ha very funny. Now find somewhere else".

He thought for a moment. "You know, it doesn't have to be anywhere high up. We always watched the sun set on the pier in Landfall. We'll just see it rising this time" he suggested.

She shook her head. "How bout Zehlendorf? It was our first ferry together an if we go down te de end of de pier, down where de rocks are, we could see de sun rise der".

"Yes, that sounds like a good place and it's quiet".

They gathered everything they would need and checked again that they had not missed anything. Once they started this, Kesi would be in danger, so they needed to be sure they got it right. Some of the bones of The Priest were ground up and placed in a small container to which they added the blood from Lucette, the female nosferatu. It made a sticky goo not at all easy to consume so they added a little holy water as detailed in the text. Kesi climbed into her coffin that Druss had loaded on to a cart and they set out early that morning hoping to be in place for the sunrise in three days.

They joined the road leading to Altendorf but passed quickly by, hoping they would not meet any trouble on the way. Anya and Matheus had offered to come with them, but they had respectfully declined, wanting to do this alone. They arrived at Zehlendorf as the sun was going down and he pulled up near some stables and waited for the last of the light to disappear. Then he carefully opened the casket to find Kesi with her eyes closed and her hands resting on her chest.

"Beautiful".

She opened her eyes, smiling and offered him her hand. Climbing down from the cart they walked around the streets and Druss had some food.

She sat looking at him. "What about me?"

"What you want isn't on the menu".

"Right well, you enjoy dat an I'll get somethin te eat".

"Wait, I've got it right here. Don't say I'm not prepared" said Druss pulling a bottle of what looked to be red wine from his satchel.

She was grinning wildly. "Is that what I think it is?"

“Only the best for madame” he replied, placing a glass beside her and then pouring some of the contents into it.

“So romantic” she cooed.

Later in the night they left to arrive at their chosen spot, well before the sun rose. Kesi was shivering but it was not from the cold.

“I thought undead didn’t get scared” he joked.

She did not answer but pushed herself close to him for comfort.

They passed by the docks and went out along the shoreline towards the sea. Across the Elber River they could see the lights of Freiburg and Druss thought of his parents who he knew were waiting there for them.

The sound of the ocean could be heard outside the small circle of light from his light stone. They held hands and he laid out a blanket on the spot they would take to wait. The wind ruffled the hair on her head and he leaned in and kissed her. Then he took out the small container and added some more holy water.

“I can’t believe I’m doin dis. How can dis work? It’s so crazy, mon”.

“It’ll work”.

They sat in their usual position with Kesi sitting between Druss’s legs and leaning back against his body. She held the container in both hands, afraid that she might drop it. The persistent thought came back to her that she should drop it and find somewhere safe. This had to be a cruel joke. Drink holy water mixed with bone and blood and then wait for the sun to rise? What could go wrong?

“It’s almost time” said Druss softly.

There was a light visible in the sky now, indicating that the sun was just beginning to peak over the horizon and would be with them any second now. A new day with new possibilities. Would it be her last she worried.

The darkness began to fade almost imperceptibly at first but then more quickly. The sound of the waves faded a little as they gave all their attention to the light.

“Bottoms up” said Kesi swallowing the contents and wiping her mouth as the first rays fell across the landscape. A deep orange and red, the dark shadows of the clouds where the sun had not yet hit.

“A blood red sky, appropriate” she said trying to hide her fear with a joke.

As the sun rose, the red and orange made way for the brighter clearer light of the day, she closed her eyes. She felt the heat on the skin of her eyelids and face and waited for the agony.

She was at peace, she was with the man she loved and if this was how it was going to end, then so be it. It was perfect.

Anya and Matheus sat on one of the benches in the central Plaza facing the Cathedral to Vanya. They too were watching the sun come up and hoping that all was well, and that the magical ceremony had worked. When the sun was well and truly risen, they stood.

“We’ll know soon enough” said Matheus as they walked to the ferry to await, they hoped the arrival of two people.

They walked through the streets which were beginning to show signs of activity. The smell of fresh baked bread was already in the air. They had stopped off at the newly opened Bartholo’s bakery. Anya’s father Jakob had returned to Freiburg and expanded the business. The shop would not be open for another couple of hours and so he joined them, leaving the shop in the capable hands of his apprentice.

They arrived down at the pier and could see the ferry approaching. It would be another forty minutes before it landed.

As it drew nearer, they could see the tall broad form of Druss and at first it looked like he was alone. This caused murmurs of concern from Anya until they could see Kesi standing in front of Druss but lost in the shadows of his cloak which he had spread around her. As they got closer, she raised her hand and waved, a bright white smile visible.

Kesi still looked twenty-four, the age at which she had been turned. Druss although younger than Kesi by a year looked older now and would be thirty-eight in a few months. They spent a few days in Freiburg but went back to Matheus’s cabin where Druss had left a lot of the items he had found while adventuring. One of these was a potion that he had not used until he was sure that Kesi could be saved. He drank it now and the years fell away from him until he was ten years younger.

Kesi stroked his face appreciatively until Anya laughed and shouted, “Get a room you two!”

A few months later they left and went to the Pearl Islands to visit Kesi’s mother. The Pearl Islands had taken the opportunity to declare independence from the Empire of Thyatis who they calculated were too battered and bruised from the war with Alphatia to do anything about.

They walked to the graveyard that was just outside a small village and close to the sea. Druss stood beside Kesi as she put some fresh flowers on the mound. The piece of wood that showed who was buried here was tilted to one side, so he fixed it. “We can get a stone one if you want?”

She nodded. "Well Muma, I'm here. I told ye I would be, an look who I brought. This here be Druss, my husband. I wish ye were here Muma, I wish ye could be here te see yer grandchild be born" she said cupping her growing belly. "We're movin back te de island for a while so I'll come see ye every day. I've lots of stories for ye muma. Druss is good at tellin stories, and he'll tell ye some too. Ye'll be laughing so loud I'm sure de thunder will rumble in de sky".

When the child was born, a girl they called Asturi, they returned to Ethengar with Anya and Matheus. Asturi was very happy to see her namesake and honoured that they should name their first born after her. Anya used that moment to suggest that she come and live with them. It did not take too much persuading as Loi-Tan had taken over the duties of tribal shaman and with the prospect of more grandchildren to keep her busy, she accepted.

When they left, they returned to Matheus's cabin which was not seeing much use as Matheus was spending less and less time there. For Asturi it was a solemn occasion, the place where she had last seen her husband alive and also the place where she had been forced to kill him when he had become a vampire. She looked at the bow hanging, pride of place on the wall and told them of the day when she had been visited by her spirit animal and had laid the bow aside to pursue that path. "I always thought my son would take it up. Perhaps my grandchild will".

Asturi had wanted to stay behind in the cabin with her memories while they went on to the Grove but had been convinced to come along for this final part. There were some signs that people had been there, as some of the cabins had been restored. Anya groaned in discomfort, her hands on her hip, "Hot springs anyone?"

The idea was enthusiastically agreed upon. After they had enjoyed the hot water, Anya suggested that they go and see the 'jealous dryad'. Druss and Kesi piped up that this was a wonderful idea and Matheus mumbled something about wishing he had a few more years to live but that the sixty odd he had lived so far had been good.

Three generations of Ironclad walked through the forest to the large pine tree of the hamadryad Aralia and her daughter Matalia. Sprites and pixies flitted about the branches and trees very interested in the small bundle that Kesi held. She kissed the hand of the child as it touched her face. That simple act caused much chattering excitement from their sidhe audience.

Aralia stood at her tree, waiting for the visitors to arrive. She was accompanied by Matalia who was a grown woman now and greeted them very formally. Her mother looked on nodding in satisfaction, but it did not last long. The noise from the young child and the presence of her brother brought that to an end. She hugged her father, Matheus and then her half-brother, Druss. She squeezed him tight and whispered, "Good to see you again, my brother". After that she walked to Kesi who smiled at her when she put out her hands and asked, "May I?"

She took the little girl and fussed over her, gently touching her face. "Hello, little one. I'm your aunt or cousin, I'm not sure exactly but it's so nice to meet you".

Then she moved to Anya and took her hand before bowing respectfully. "It's good to finally meet you. Druss speaks very highly of you".

Anya then finally came face to face with her romantic rival after so many years. Aralia did not seem to be in anyway jealous and Anya knew exactly why that was.

Anya walked to Matheus who looked like he had something more to say even though he had already told her about Matalia. They had been reminiscing all that they had been through, even that time when Anya had stabbed him in these very same woods. He had told her what had happened and after the initial surprise she had composed herself and said, "I wish we could have had our own daughter, but Druss was about all I could handle".

Asturi and Aralia seemed to have an instant bond and the normally reserved hamadryad was very friendly and respectful to her. They sat on a log near her tree and spoke for a long time.

Matalia had been going further and further from her mother who was concerned that she had "Inherited her wanderlust from her father".

"It's an affliction that all the Ironclads have", chuckled Asturi. "I should know, I have three generations to deal with. You keep an eye on this one", she said to Kesi pointing at her namesake still in the arms of Matalia. "I don't know how much longer before I am called but I do know that I don't have the energy to take another one on".

That visit changed a lot of the long-term plans made. Druss and Kesi went to live in his father's cabin full time. Asturi had taken up residence in the Grove so that she could be close to Aralia. She also found that daily dips in the hot springs did wonders for her joint pain.

Anya's role within the Heldannic Order was fully administrative and she needed to be in Altendorf or Freiburg to carry out her duties. Matheus would spend a few days with her in the cities but when he grew tired of the bustling streets, he could be found in Nordenham. Anya knew that if she wanted to find him, she need only go back to the place where she had first seen him all those years ago.

There were still people alive that remembered Matheus and one such man joined him at his place at the bar in Olsons Alehouse and Inn. He ordered two pints and when they arrived, they spoke about the old days. Eventually the topic came around to Anya and he asked, "What ever happened to the Harpy?"

"I married her".

Druss and Kesi added to the family, two sons and another daughter. The children always enjoyed spending time with their Aunt Dura in Nordenham.

Anya had managed to pull some strings and get Olson shipped back to the Heldannic Territories from a place he and many others had been taken away so many years ago. He was an old man now, much older than he should be. Anya was relieved to discover that he still lived. He had

been spared much of the manual labour that had taken the lives of many of the others because he had a head for numbers and organising and so he had been given jobs that took advantage of these talents. He was a quiet man now and never spoke about what he had been through. He never did say too much to Anya whenever she was there, but he did enjoy the children that always seemed to be around. Dura, with her dwarven heritage was well able to keep up with the children and Olson seemed content to sit on his chair on the veranda that ran along the front of his business and watch them play.

Every month they all came together in what was now known as the Ironclad cabin. A handful of dwarves had extended out the old cabin with stone mined locally. One evening when everyone was gathered for the meal Matheus told them about a group of adventurers that had passed through Nordenham on the way north.

Asturi was sitting beside Matalia and took her by the hand. "Wanderlust" she whispered smiling, though all heard.

"... and they spoke about a sinister black blade that had been seen. It was clearly magical, and it hovered above a depression in the ground, above what looked like a stone well" said Matheus pouring himself some water.

Druss knew right away what it was. "Doom" he said excited. This was the sword he had gotten from the dwarves of Rockhome in exchange for several magical weapons he had picked up. When he had encountered the Lich Oirtulev, all his belongings including the sword had been lost to him, until now.

Kesi wiped some food from the face of their youngest child and then gave him a look. "Don't even think about it, mon".

"I'll only be gone a few weeks, maybe a couple of months" he replied.

She handed the child to Matalia and then folded her arms looking determined to hold her ground, but in the end, she relented. "Fine, but I'm goin with ye".

"I wouldn't have it any other way".