

# The Black Lion:

## Chapter 4 – Growing Pains - Part 1

By John McCabe

The aftermath of the attack by the Gostai goblins took a long time to recover from. Kogatai had died of his injuries soon after and as his eldest son, Jogatai had been named as the new clan leader. Although he looked like his father he was not as charismatic as him and had found it difficult to adjust to the role. Under his father he had always been a reliable man but so far it was not certain if he had the kind of character required to lead. The misgivings of several clan members had been put aside to give him the chance to grow into the role.

Berke had been left lame in one leg and Loi-Tan who had always laughed at him no longer did so. He had attempted to save her from being abducted by the goblins and although he had ultimately failed, she had been affected by the attempt and seemed determined to repay the act.

Asturi had been unable to help Druss and those taken by the goblins, as she too had been grievously injured in the fighting. They had thought her lost only to discover her buried under the bodies of several goblins and their wolves. She had begun travelling more and more to the Land of the Blacksand and Druss was left to his own devices much of the time, spending more time in the company of Noyon and Waruni.

When the date of the next Horse Fair arrived, they were all keen to take part in the competitions but none more so than Druss who was determined to take first place in the archery tournament. Jamal of the Murkits tribe was there although his other friends had hoped she would not be, therefore giving him an easier path to victory, but Druss would not have been happy to win without besting her as defending champion. The match came down to the two of them but once again she won. Druss reacted in frustration and broke his bow over his knee. Jamal eyed him coolly but then allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction.

Berke entered the horse racing along with Loi-Tan and finished safely but nowhere near the front of the pack. Noyon entered the wrestling and was surprised to find that his first opponent of the tournament was Kashin of the Maghurs. Either he took his opponent lightly or Kashin had improved because to everyone's shock Kashin won the bout knocking Noyon to the ground and out of the tournament.

They spent the remaining days grumbling about what a terrible tribe the Kaeruts were. They had won none of the competitions and after the losses suffered to the Gostai goblins they were feeling very low. Even Berke had nothing to say to cheer up his friends.

Druss had recovered enough from his disappointing loss to seek out Jamal and offer his congratulations. She had accepted it with grace and complimented him on his skill with a bow. There was much talk of a warrior who was making claims about his right to rule the Murkits, a

man by the name of Moglai. She had mentioned the internal disruptions but was sure that this Moglai was an upstart and would soon be put back in his place. As the clans departed, he assured her that he would win the next time they faced off. She had laughed at this and told him that she would be waiting for him.

Druss spent his ninth birthday on the border of the Land of the Blacksand. Asturi had once more entered the ravaged and cursed land with several others including Bakalgu the hakomon. After a few days there he left and journeyed back to the place where he had first met Smythe. He found himself there on several occasions but had only met his goblin friend there twice as it had become far more difficult and dangerous for the goblin to travel so far into Kaeruts land. Smythe and his tribe were now based in the hills south of the Wendarian range on the northern border of Yugatais land. Druss spent several nights at the cave and when the time came to leave, he left the odd trinket or gift to let Smythe know he had been there.

When Druss returned to his clan, he had a run in with the new leader, Jogatai who was not pleased that he was spending more time out of camp rather than fulfilling his duties. The argument had escalated, and Druss had spoken back more forcefully than he should have, considering the importance of the man he was addressing. Jogatai had beaten the young child up quite badly during which time he reminded him that he was a barbarian, not of true Ethengar descent and most certainly not a true Kaeruts. These words had struck home worse than the slaps and kicks.

He went to his yurt hoping his grandmother had returned from wherever or whatever had her so occupied these days, but she had not. The yurt was cold and dark and there was little food. Asturi had always had most of her food provided by the clan but since she had been gone much of the time and Druss had not been fulfilling his duties Jogatai had commanded that nothing, but the bare minimum would henceforth be given.

He boiled some water and threw in some vegetables that had seen better days while he chewed on some stale bread. He began to get angry, thinking about the injustice of it all. He had been trying very hard to make everyone accept him, to make the clan proud by placing so high in the archery, he had even been the one to get help and save the others after the humanoid raid. Without his help and the help of Smythe then there would not be a clan for Jogatai to lead. Where was Jogatai when he was needed? Where were all these great and fearsome warriors, that relied on a child and a hated enemy in the form of Smythe to save them?

His mood darkened and his face contorted to match. And where was Asturi, where was his father, where was his mother? He flung the ceramic bowl across the yurt and it smashed against the center pole. He flinched when one of the fragments struck him in the face unexpectedly. He touched his cheek and looked at the drop of blood on his fingertip. He made a decision then to do what he needed to do to survive, he would do the work he was required to do and take care of the flock. He would stay away from Jogatai as much as he could, he would

no longer cut his hair and would let his mane return. If he was not considered a Kaeruts then he refused to look like one.

The people of his clan noticed this but very few made any comment, putting it down to all that he was dealing with. Asturi returned for weeks at a time before disappearing again and never once suggested he cut it. The food situation improved when she was there, and it was obvious, she had had stern words with Jogatai about his leadership skills. This was not well received but it was enough for Jogatai to make sure he had little to no interaction with Druss.

Druss put his name down for the archery competition the following year at the Horse Fair but when he found out that Jamal had not entered the eagerness left him. She had broken her arm and was unable to compete but was there to see him win the tournament. His friends and indeed the Kaeruts in general congratulated him on his victory but he did not feel the thrill. He had beaten many fine archers, but he had not beaten Jamal. She too congratulated him on the win and said she would be back next year to regain the title she had not lost. It was a gentle goading, and he took it in the spirit it was intended.

The following year, however, the trouble with the “upstart Moglai” as Jamal had called him had proven to be more serious. The fighting that had broken out between those that supported his claim to the leadership of the Murkits and those that supported his uncle Atikai had worsened. Because of this there were very few Murkits at that year's Horse Fair and this did not include Jamal. Once more he would be competing, and she would not be there.

Druss qualified for each of the rounds but dropped out before the end. He did not want to win this competition if it happened without besting Jamal. He was passing by the table where the names for those entering the wrestling were being taken. He had trained with his father and had seen plenty of competitions and so knew the rules which were quite straight forward. Only the soles of your feet and your hands could touch the ground. If your opponent managed to force any other part of your body to touch the ground, such as your knee or elbow, then you lost. He walked up and placed his mark and was told to return for the qualifying rounds early in the morning.

Noyon, when he heard that Druss had entered, was at first confused, then surprised and then angry. He had confronted Druss and demanded to know what was going on. “We had an agreement not to compete against each other”.

“I don't remember agreeing to that” Druss had said.

Berke, who was not one to usually take sides or make any attempt at being the sensible one, approached Druss.

Druss was going through some warmup exercises and could see him hobble towards him, his lame right leg not quite clearing the ground and dragging along.

“Nice morning” said Berke by way of opening the conversation.

Druss threw him a look but continued with his stretches. He knew why Berke was here, and he was in no mood for it.

“You know you could have won the archery” said Berke, who then continued when he could see Druss was not going to engage. “Why did you drop out? I thought you wanted to show you were the best?”

Druss stopped stretching and gave an impatient sigh “Jamal wasn’t there, so there was no point”.

“So? Who cares. You would have won and could boast all you wanted. No one would know or care that she wasn’t there”.

“I care” growled Druss. “Why are you here Berke? Did Noyon send you? Is he still whining? Is he so afraid he’ll lose to me?”

Berke was a little taken aback by the force of his friends' irritation. He grunted with the effort of moving his body closer to Druss. “Noyon is fourteen almost fifteen and you only just turned ten. He’ll probably be competing against the men next year, Druss. It's a mismatch”.

Druss turned away from his friend and resumed his warmup “Then he has nothing to be worried about”. With a sigh of resignation Berke left Druss and walked back to the festivities.

Once all sixty-four boys were paired up the wrestling tournament began. All the matches took place at the same time, which made the field quite crowded. As it turned out Noyon need not have worried about losing to Druss, instead he lost to a tall burly boy called Essen of about thirteen years old. He lay on the ground a moment after being thrown there, looking at the sky. Despite the fact he had just lost he could hear his sister Waruni encouraging him, telling him how well he had done. He got slowly to his feet and walked off, his face tight and angry.

Druss was one of the youngest to take part and after qualifying past the opening round became the youngest. He had beaten a Yugatais youth who outweighed him by quite a few pounds but moved like a yak harnessed to a wagon. Druss expected to be out muscled by his older and heavier opponent, so he did not try to match him, instead relying on his speed and shockingly fast reflexes. The next round would be later in the afternoon and so he wandered off to see the finals of the archery which were setting up. An older boy from the Taijits took first prize with some fine shooting but nothing to match Jamal. He stifled a yawn and turned to greet Loi-Tan who had some food and drink for him.

“How do you expect to be at your best if you don’t eat?” she asked.

He smiled and gratefully accepted the bread and meat, washing it down with some mare’s milk. He had expected her to start talking about the wrestling and why he had entered but she surprised him by asking about his grandmother.

“Can I ask you to talk to Asturi for me?”

He looked at her surprised "She's your aunt, why do you need me?"

"It's about being a shaman, animal spirits and things like that" she explained.

"What animal spirits, you mean tigers?"

She swallowed nervously "Tiger spirit for Asturi but I ..."

Druss looked at her "Go on" he encouraged.

"I think I may have a horse spirit", she said at last.

He looked at her with a smile on his face "A horse spirit? You?"

She nodded and Druss erupted in laughter.

The nervous look on Loi-Tan's face became hurt and angry. She looked at Druss so intensely, but even so, it still took him a few seconds to stop.

He wiped a tear from his eye still smiling "I'm sorry Loi-Tan but that is funny. You must agree".

She still looked angry "Funny how?"

"Horse spirit, Loi-Tan?" He asked as if the answer was clear. When he could see it was not, he went on. "You've entered the horse race for the past three or four years now and have finished nowhere. Gerbil spirit I could believe, but not horse".

She got control of her emotions understanding the humour in what Druss had said. She looked around and then back to Druss. "That's because the last two years I've had Berke with me. I can feel it, I can feel the horse ready to give more, ready to carry me to the front but I always have to hold back, pull on the reins. I can't leave Berke". She looked at Druss before adding "He didn't leave me".

With understanding he answered, "Ok, I'll talk to Asturi, she should be around here somewhere".

Loi-Tan looked happy.

"But Loi-Tan, you need to talk to Berke. He likes you and I know he would understand. He wouldn't want to hold you back".

"I will" she replied, "and good luck today, we'll all be there to support you".

"All of you?" asked Druss in amusement.

"Well almost everyone. I think Noyon is still not happy with you".

Druss was competing against a Kaeruts boy from another clan that afternoon and once more he was victorious, qualifying for the next round scheduled for later that day. His friends all cheered him on, but Noyon was not amongst them.

In the evening he went up against a boy from the Maghurs and beat him too. He had expected to be outmatched in physical strength and to be more dependent on his quickness, but he had realised quite quickly during the second match that the gap in strength with the older boys was not so great. "You are your father's son," said Asturi by way of explanation.

He had mentioned Loi-Tan to his grandmother and asked that she speak with her.

Asturi had smiled at this. "Good, I was wondering when it would happen. You are your father's son, Druss and Loi-Tan follows in the footsteps of the women in our family. All is as it should be".

Druss went to the area put aside for wrestling and was preparing for his match when Kashin showed up. He shook his head in mock disgust. "How dare you defeat one of our finest warriors, but we'll get you. You have Brogahn in the next round".

Druss smiled in return, happy to see him. Kashin had been defeated in the second round and decided to see how his friend was getting on. He playfully grabbed a handful of hair, which had grown long. "Still think you're a lion I see".

While they were engaged in banter, Noyon walked up to them. He still looked annoyed but was trying to hide it. He looked like he was about to speak but then turned and walked away. He did not even acknowledge the presence of the Maghurs boy.

Druss shrugged at the questioning look from Kashin and then took his spot opposite his opponent, another boy from the Maghurs tribe, the much-heralded Brogahn. It was a much tougher contest. The boy had been watching Druss and had not fallen for some of the tricks that had worked before. Despite being three years younger, Druss was able to match the strength of the older boy and had superior balance. After a minute or two the Maghurs boy stumbled and was forced to his knee, the contest was over. Druss would progress to the final four that evening.

He walked back to his grandmother's yurt passing Jogatai on the way. The clan leader stopped to look at him as he walked by. Druss bit his tongue, trying to be respectful as Asturi had asked, and said nothing but nodded his head in greeting. Jogatai's face seemed strangely angry.

Loi-tan and the others came to meet Druss and walk him to the semi-final. She remained behind at the bidding of Asturi, while the others went with Druss. Again, Noyon was not there, but Waruni was, and she was accompanied by Kashin and Berke. When they arrived at the wrestling area, the two Maghurs Druss had defeated, Brogahn and Jebe, were there. Kashin greeted them and introduced everybody.

Druss would be facing a boy from the Taijits, while the Maghurs had one last competitor, Tuli who was up against a boy from the Yakkas, a boy called Bataar, who had won last year and was defending his title today. He was very good, but Kashin was sure Tuli would win. As before the matches would take place at the same time with separate judges.

The Taijits boy was not as strong as Druss, but he was just as fast. He also had more experience but the same could be said for most of the boys, as this was Druss's first competition.

There was a large crowd gathered to watch and cheer on the youngsters. They roared in appreciation of the skill displayed by Bataar, the Yakkas boy who made short work of Tuli.

Druss could hear Kashin and the others' disappointment as once more their tribe tasted defeat. The Taijits boy grasped him around the waist and tried to lift him, but Druss twisted and hooked his foot on the inside of the Taijits leg to prevent this. He could hear the boy straining fruitlessly before he was forced to give up on the move. Once he had both feet on the ground, Druss broke the lock, by twisting his upper body and as the Yakkas boy pushed forward, he stepped aside but left his foot behind to trip him. The boy fell to his knees and looked up as Druss offered his hand. With a rueful smile he climbed to his feet and congratulated him. Druss was now in the final.

He returned to the growing group of supporters, predominately from the Maghurs tribe. Loi-Tan and Berke stood slightly apart as they were quite boisterous and loud, although Waruni had no such issues and was in the thick of it, standing by Kashin's side. Noyon had finally made an appearance and nodded to Druss. Druss wondered briefly if he was here to watch the final and support him or to keep an eye on his sister Waruni, before returning his focus to the task at hand.

Bataar, his opponent in the final, was strongly built with ruddy cheeks. Unlike Druss his head was completely shaved except for the fringe. He slapped the backs of his thighs as he moved to his spot on the field.

Druss blocked out all the noise and walked to stand opposite Bataar. He guessed the boy was about thirteen, his body a good combination of strength and agility. He looked like he had been doing this all his life.

At a command from the referee, Bataar stepped forward and Druss met him. He was very strong, much stronger even than he looked. Druss pushed and broke the locks, but Bataar was relentless. He grabbed Druss and tried to turn him over or shove him to the ground but each time like a cat, Druss would land on his feet or hands. They locked arms around each other's backs, standing chest to chest, legs tripping, feet stumbling but still both remained standing. Five minutes and the battle was still being fought. Bataar was trying to wear out Druss, trying to tire him but it was not working. He grabbed a single leg and with a grunt heaved Druss to one side, but once again Druss used his hands to prevent defeat. As Bataar tried again, Druss twisted and grabbed Bataar's right leg at the knee with his left arm and leaned on his head with his right to keep Bataar on his hands and feet. Then he twisted and lifted the leg higher while moving in a circle until Bataar was forced to one knee. The judge raised his arm to indicate the match was over, Druss had prevailed.

The Maghurs boys cheered his victory and surged forward lifting him up on their shoulders. It was exhilarating. He saw Loi-Tan and Berke. They looked on smiling but separate, not really part of the moment. Waruni was with Kashin, Noyon had made himself scarce once more, but Druss did not care. He had won the match, beaten all challengers and stood triumphant. That Noyon did not want to share in the moment mattered not. Druss had new friends, new brothers. Ones that did not begrudge his moment of success but celebrated and reveled in it with him.

It was the beginning of a new phase in his life. He spent more and more time with the boys from the Maghurs tribe. Berke had come along initially but soon dropped out. They spent a lot of time riding about the steppes and camping, spending several days near a prominent hillock, called Bargha. Close by the intersection of the Streel and Krandai rivers, it was a high, windy spot in the Sea of Grass, but the view was breath taking.

He went back to his camp from time to time, always careful to avoid Jogatai but not always successful. The anger Jogatai had displayed only grew and it was only the fact he was the grandson of their shaman that kept him from being driven from the camp or worse. Asturi was in her yurt when he arrived. He knew she was there by the thin trail of smoke issuing from the roof vent. She was in the process of adding some salt to a pot of food and did not look up as he entered.

“Clean up, food will be ready soon”, she commanded.

He looked at his hands, his bare arms, the front of the leather tunic he wore. He had not noticed it until now, but he could do with a wash. He did the best he could with what was at hand and then sat with Asturi at the table. She ladled some of the broth into his bowl while asking. “Where have you been these days?”

“With friends”, he replied eyeing the ladle as it emptied the contents into his bowl. His stomach growled and his mouth watered but he resisted the urge to grab the bowl, hoping his grandmother would put more in. She did not disappoint, and he thought he could detect a faint smile on her lips. His hunger could no longer be denied, and he pulled the bowl closer and began shoveling spoonfuls into his open mouth.

She chuckled “Either my cooking has improved, or you are ravenously hungry”.

He grinned at her between scoops of his spoon, slurping down the contents and quickly emptying the bowl.

“Hunger is the best sauce” she laughed, taking his bowl from him and refilling it.

She watched as he tucked into the second bowl and cut him some slices of bread. “Who are these friends?” she asked.

“Just some boys I met at the Horse Fair. You met Kashin I think”.

“The Maghurs?” she asked, placing a spoon into her bowl.

He detected a note of something, distrust? He looked at his grandmother and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "The Maghurs boys, yes. Is that alright?" he asked.

Asturi could hear a slight challenge in the question. She met his stare and smiled "Well it could be worse, at least they're not goblins". She had expected him to at least smile at the joke, but he did not.

He finished off the food and brought the bowl to be washed. "Thank you for the food, Asturi it was very nice".

She nodded and allowed him to walk from the yurt without another word. "Foolish child", she muttered, concerned.

He was gone again many days, riding across the steppes with his brothers. The internal fighting within the Murkits tribe was intense but they made sure to stay out of danger.

"With any luck, they'll wipe each other out and we can take their land", said Jebe. A stout boy who looked like a barrel with legs.

Kashin had asked Druss about Waruni whenever he returned after spending a few days back in the camp. Druss had teased him about this, but Kashin did not mind and insisted that when they were both of age, he would ask his parents to approach hers and propose a marriage.

Druss had been surprised at this. Waruni was very pretty he could admit but he saw her as a sister and found it funny that Kashin was so enamored with her. He thought about it a bit and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, she does seem to like you, but you'll have to get past Noyon first". He could see Kashin's face cloud and he retreated into thoughts he did not share with anyone.

In the distance they saw a large number of riders, perhaps fifty and something else, coming towards the hillock they had once more chosen as their campsite. They grew nervous when they realised that they were Murkits. The hillock was on the border between Maghurs and Murkits land with no tribe claiming full control over it, nevertheless, they were children and sometimes in war children got hurt. Despite this they held their ground and awaited the riders. Druss smiled inwardly. Good he thought. No one whining or talking about running away.

The riders slowed as they reached the top and spread out surrounding the boys in a loose circle. One man dismounted and walked towards them, a huge tiger close by his side. As he came closer, he smiled in greeting. "What are you boys doing up here?" he asked.

"What business is it of yours", replied Kashin hiding the alarm in his voice at the sight of the great cat that displayed two long dagger like teeth protruding from its upper jaw. "We go where we want, this is not Murkits land".

It was a foolish reaction. The boys were armed with knives and bows, the men wore armour and carried swords and lances, the huge cat alone could tear them all to pieces.

Druss considered their options should things go south quickly. There were not many. They could attack and die or jump on their horses, ride away and hope they were not pursued.

The man considered his response but did not appear to be angry. "It is a beautiful spot, I can see why you do not wish to share it", he replied removing his helmet and turning to enjoy the view.

The boys were tense, so Druss decided to de-escalate. "We're about to have some food. You can join us if you want?"

The man turned back, his eyes glittering. "That is very hospitable of you. I accept" he replied with a nod. The rest of the men dismounted and quickly set up camp while several remained on watch. The hillock provided an excellent view of the surrounding land, and it would be difficult for an enemy to approach unseen.

They ate in silence, exchanging a few words with the leader of the men who introduced himself as Moglai Khan. Some of the boys threw discreet glances at each other but Moglai's smile showed they were not discreet enough. Thunder rumbled from the skies further to the southwest from the direction of the swampland called the Mucks.

"Ah Baba Yaga travels in her magical cauldron. You boys should return to your people. It is not safe to be travelling around at this time". He noted the looks of defiance among some of the boys and added "but I will leave that decision to you. You should be able to determine these things for yourself and to learn how to deal with the consequences".

Moglai and his men gathered up their things and then left the boys alone on the top of Bargha. Once more the thunder rumbled, this time sounding a little closer. No one said anything but they too gathered up their things and set off home.

## Growing Pains - Part 2

Druss rode with his friends across Maghurs land and then travelled alone across Murkits land until he reached Kaeruts tribal land. He had seen signs of the internal conflict that had caused Jamal to miss the Horse Fair and he hoped that it would all be resolved soon. He thought of Moglai Khan and wondered what Jamal would make of him. She did not seem to like the idea of him challenging the established order.

It took many days before he arrived back with his clan. His clan? They used to feel like they were, but with the passage of time, he felt this was less true. Madutai had left with his mother to join another clan. Berke and Noyon had drifted, and he did not feel as close to them as he once did. Waruni seemed destined to join Kashin and the Maghurs at least that was what she kept telling Loi-Tan. Ah Loi-Tan. Once his childhood friend, perhaps his first friend, the first to accept him into the clan, she had embarked on her training as a shaman with Asturi as her guide. These days she spent more time with Asturi than Druss did. She too was drifting away from the group, taking her first steps into adulthood. Druss thought back to the time his grandmother had said his friends would not be his friends forever. At the time he had been annoyed by these words, but again she had spoken the truth. Everyone had their path in life and very often these paths diverged. He wondered where he was destined to go. Back to the Heldann Freeholds or remain here in Ethengar? Would his father return for him and would he see his mother again?

When he returned to the camp, he was greeted by some with a look of surprise. They had obviously not expected to see him again. Most were happy to see him, and he delayed seeing his grandmother to talk with them. Jogatai was not happy to see him and ignored Druss when he raised a hand in greeting while he crossed the camp ground. Once he got back to the yurt, he saw that things had changed here too. He immediately recognised the changes, in particular, the area that had once been his for sleeping.

“Ah look who’s back” said Asturi in what he felt was a mock greeting and insincere. She pulled him into a warm hug, and he dismissed this thought. She held him for many seconds before releasing him, with a smile. “My grandson lives, all is as it should be”, she said before adding, “Foolish child”.

It had become a term of endearment and something she would no doubt always say even when he was no longer a child. He smiled in return and then looked to the changes that had been made.

She understood “You’ve been gone a long time, grandson and Loi-Tan has been staying with me some of the time. Do not despair you will always have a place with me here”.

He returned to helping with the clan’s flock after Asturi suggested it. Berke and Noyon had the task in hand but welcomed his company. It was not the same for him though. He felt that he had outgrown the job. He had been through so much and seen so much that it was like trying to

put something back in a box that would no longer fit. He wondered if it was the box that had gotten smaller, or it was he that had grown too big.

He took the opportunity to go to the Land of the Blacksand with Asturi and this time Loi-Tan was going with them. It was aptly named, a desolate region that had no grass or plant life and even the animals gave it a wide berth. There were other shamans from other tribes present, both young and old. Whatever it was that had brought them here Druss was not informed. They began their chants and incantations while banging on their drums. They lit fires and hung garlands of ribbons and other materials on mounds of stones. Loi-Tan was caught up in the atmosphere, but Druss grew bored. He walked to where his grandmother was, at the edge of the cursed land, the world mountain looming large far behind her. She saw him coming as she spoke with one of her peers. He was not sure what he was going to say. Their eyes met and no words seemed necessary. She knew he was leaving again and gave him a nod to show she understood. He smiled, glad that she knew him so well, eager to be off, but also feeling guilty that they did not share the same interests. He had been a little jealous that Loi-Tan had taken up residence in the yurt, his yurt, but now he was glad that she was there, glad that Asturi could share this part of her life with someone who could understand it.

He mounted the horse and even though deep in thought headed unerringly back west to the cave. He stayed there for two weeks. There was a new litter of pups, but they were several months old now. He could see signs that Smythe had been there but not for many months. He had left a new, more finely crafted figurine but this time of a lion, a lion with a full mane. He smiled, his friends carving skills had improved.

He returned for a few days to his clan's camp but left soon after, joining his friends, Kashin and the others, in Maghurs land. The fighting amongst the Kaeruts had gotten even more intense but it seemed that Moglai Khan, the man they had met, was in the ascendance. His rival was on the defensive and losing ground all the time.

There was also conflict between the neighbouring Yakkas tribe and the Taijits. Unsurprising as they had never really been on good terms. The whole country seemed to be in turmoil as if some unseen hand was moving events. Kashin told Druss that the Yakkas would be defeated as the Taijits were led by Krugar Khan. He was a great warrior and a clever leader. Praise indeed thought Druss who knew that Kashin was very reluctant to give any praise to anyone who was not Maghurs. Druss was the only other exception, thanks to his success in the wrestling tournament.

The group of boys decided one day to get tattoos. One of the girls in their camp, Sirona, had agreed to do this for them. They had all agreed to get animal tattoos on their upper arm, just below the shoulder. On the left they would have a dragon, a powerful symbol and a respected creature amongst the Maghurs. On the other arm they were free to choose. Kashin stood beside, Sirona as she sat beside Druss. She was deep in concentration, her hazel eyes intent on the picture taking shape.

“Move, Kashin, you’re in my light”, she grumbled before pushing him away.

He leaned forward, squinting, “What is it?” he asked.

“What does it look like”, answered Sirona impatiently.

“Rabbit?” he asked.

Druss merely smiled. Kashin was always goading when he was not fighting, but he knew his friend well enough. Such occurrences between all the boys of the group were a common thing.

“It’s a lion, now get out of my light”.

Druss could not see how the tattoo was proceeding and looked at Kashin for some indication.

“Not bad, Sirona. Might be your finest work yet” he said resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Off, wait till it’s finished”, she admonished.

When she was finished, she sat back on her stool indicating to Druss that she was done. He raised his arm to look at it and smiled. It was a lion, rearing up on its hind legs, claws extended. He handed her a gold earring as payment which she tucked away inside her tunic.

On the day Druss was eleven years old, they spent the day swimming in the river, his birthday passed without notice. He was with his Maghurs friends, his tribe within a tribe. They had begun to range far and wide into other tribal lands, gathering sheep that had become separated from their flock and sometimes, separating the sheep from their flock and returning with them to Maghurs land. It was a time filled with danger and adventure. Sometimes they were pursued by shepherds who were not at all happy that the sheep were being stolen, on other occasions they harassed orcs or hobgoblins, setting fires and stampeding their herds. Brogahn earned his nickname “The Fearless” because of the things he got up to, things that left even Druss and Kashin shaking their heads. He had an uncle or grandfather, it was unclear which, by the name of Rogahn after whom he was named. The day he returned with the helm of an ogre warrior after a dare to steal it was the day this name began to be used.

They drifted about in this way for most of the year, finding places to camp, places to explore and trouble to find. They were far up into Yugatais land, following the banks of the Dol-Anur River and fishing. They had seen some strange activity and suspected that foreigners were in their land. Following the small group and getting to within earshot they had not been able to understand the language they spoke. The group consisted of six armed men and two who looked more like hakomon than fighters. They were using magic to move the raft more swiftly up the river, creating wind where there was none. The boys followed them at a distance keeping the ridge of the bank between them and the foreigners. The boys discussed notifying their elders, attacking them themselves, waiting for them to settle down for the night and then sneaking into their camp and stealing what they could.

It was late in the day, and they had decided to see if they could steal something. They were not the only ones with this plan and before they had the chance to engage a large number of shadowy figures descended onto the small party. They were halfway across the river before the alarm was sounded. It was too dark to see exactly what was going on until one of the foreigners let loose a flaming ball of fire that lit up the darkness, revealing goblins and the larger hobgoblins accompanying them.

Kashin cursed at this turn of events and was leading the others back to a better place to observe the slaughter. Druss stayed where he was scouring the leaping snarling wolves to see if any of the riders was Smythe. His horse snorted in discomfort and wanted to move away with the others, but he pulled on the reins forcing it to stay. The raft burst into flames and the men could be seen fighting the swarming mass of humanoids. A strange popping noise to the right of Druss caused him to pull the horse around to face it. A woman in short robes appeared not ten feet away, she looked at him in panic, her face blackened with soot. She could see he was only a child and did not seem to be a threat, so she relaxed.

A shout from the bank, in a language Druss understood, and he knew they had been spotted. She gathered her robes and walked towards Druss, raising her hand. He clasped her forearm and helped her onto the back of the horse. The horse was finally allowed to leave, and it was more than happy to do so, breaking into a face trot while it adjusted to the added weight.

Kashin and the others were waiting for him and were already preparing to ride away. They rode into the hills away from the river and did their best to leave no trail. In the total darkness of the night, however, they were at a real disadvantage. The woman spoke in her language and pointed to a shallow cave. It had a large overhang that would provide shelter from rain but not deep enough for them to be hidden from sight. She was insistent and Druss backed her up when the others wanted to keep going. They rode to the cave and calmed the horses. Druss slid from the saddle and held the reins as the woman climbed down. She rolled back the sleeves of her robe and began muttering words, her hands and fingers making shapes and patterns in the air. Rocks and boulders materialised before them but seemed not quite solid, faintly transparent.

They could see the mounted goblins come around the bend in the trail where they paused briefly and looked around. The boys were tense, hands-on weapons and prepared to fight. The strange eyes of the goblins passed over them without seeing them and then they were gone, urging the wolves to continue the chase.

They stayed where they were for a few minutes, the boys muttering questions and theories about what had just happened. The woman looked relieved and turned to the boys smiling. She spoke again, it sounded to Druss like a gentle language with no hard edges. Now that he could get a proper look at her he could see that her clothing and some of her hair was singed. The cloth on her shoulder was scorched away showing that her shoulder and one ear had been burned by the fire she had escaped. She reached into a small pouch and brought forth a small

bottle, which she uncorked and drank. The tight look of pain on her face disappeared in relief as the burns healed. The boys looked at each other, some in disappointment that they had not secured this treasure.

They found a place to rest that night, with Druss and Kashin keeping first watch. The woman had drawn a rough map on the ground, and they could understand that she was trying to continue north and cross back into Glantrian land. None of the boys were willing to go any further with her. They had cooled noticeably on helping her any further when they found out that she was Glantrian. Some wanted to leave now and go back to the place where the raft had been attacked by the humanoids. Maybe they could find something of use, something the goblins had missed. Druss looked at the woman and seemed to find something familiar about her. It had been many years since he had seen his mother, he hardly thought of her at all these days, but he did now. The woman had black hair and a strong jaw line, she looked at him while the others were talking, as if understanding what they spoke of and the look she gave him asked, "Are you going to abandon me too?"

The decision was made, and the boys mounted up, steering the horses back towards the river. Druss sat on his horse, hands resting on the horse's neck.

"You coming?" asked Kashin.

Druss shook his head "I'll catch up with you later".

Kashin regarded his friend and then gave a hostile look to the Glantrian mage. He kicked his horse, and it sprang forward eager to catch up with the others.

The woman spoke again, and Druss looked at her, thoughts of his mother once more brought to the fore. He gave her a smile which she returned and then offered her his hand once more to pull her up behind him.

They followed the Dol-Anur River further north before crossing to the other side. This surprised Druss as he had been expecting to stay on the left bank until they reached the border with Glantri. Once on the other side of the river they then proceeded east further into Yugatais land. She could see the look of confusion on his face and started speaking again, that familiar smile on her face. That night they slept under the stars and thankfully it was relatively warm. In the morning the strange woman, took out a small book and spent the morning reading it. It was another two hours before they continued. She seemed keen to stay away from any Yugatais clans, which did give him some concern that she was not to be trusted. But these thoughts went away as he justified them. She was Glantrian in a land that hated her. Besides she reminded him of his mother, and he would help her get to where she needed to go.

Many days later he could see a gray mound far in the distance. Eventually as they drew closer, he could see it was a large structure that was built to look like a massive lion sitting down, the two front paws stretched out before it. The woman leaned forward behind him and pointed at it. He turned to her and smiled as she touched the tattoo of the lion on his arm.

The building itself was surrounded by a ten-foot wall with towers spaced along it, each one twice as high as the wall. The great mouth of the lion was open in a roar, the eyes of the great beast sparkled like gemstones. They followed the wall on the south side around to the back where there was a gate and portcullis. Without seeing anyone present, Druss watched as the portcullis was raised. The woman whispered some words of encouragement, and he urged the horse forward.

He could see the back of the lion, its tail swept away to his right. The lion itself was on a mound and this was surrounded by a garden and several wooden benches. The weather within the walls seemed more pleasant. There was only a gentle wind and the sun seemed warmer. Several plants and flowers grew in neat rows beside the path. He grabbed the reins tightly as the horse whinnied in fear, and a large lion wandered in front of them. More great cats of different types could be seen, a sleek black panther, a heavily built tiger and two mountain lions. The woman laid a reassuring hand on his arm, and he continued around to the front of the lion. Between the paws of the stone lion structure was an open doorway.

Two men came out to greet the arrivals. One was a tall man who wore a black skull cap and purple robes. The other was of average height with eyebrows that met in the middle. While the tall man seemed friendly, the other seemed annoyed by their presence. They spoke in that same language that Druss could not understand until the tall man caught his attention by speaking to him in Ethengarian.

“Now my young friend, Saferell tells me you helped her escape certain death. I am in your debt, it is most difficult to find good pupils”, he smiled. “This is Saferell Bedeau, I know you have met but now you have been properly introduced and our scowling friend is Marcus LaFarge. Don’t be put off by his demeanor, he is a talented mage and one of my finest pupils”. Marcus, looking pleased for once, was smiling. “And I am Sargon of Lion Castle” said Sargon as he finished with the introductions.

Druss was unsure about this chance to speak. He had been comfortable knowing that no conversation would be required but now that he could communicate, he did not know what to say. Marcus, the grumpy one, said something to Sargon who turned and spoke firmly to him. Sargon then made arrangements to have the horse taken to the stables and Druss was invited inside the lion structure. He and Saferell laughed as Druss craned his neck backwards as they passed beneath the head of the lion and entered the doorway between the paws.

They sat at a round table and ate some dinner while Sargon translated for the others. He seemed most pleased with the lion tattoo on Druss’s arm. Saferell had thought it a remarkable coincidence that her rescuer would bear a symbol so like that of her master. She had decided that she would take Druss to meet Sargon. Sargon himself had not been happy about this, chastising the young woman gently. “The boy's people will be looking for him. You may have caused unnecessary worry”. Saferell did not seem bothered by the words.

Druss was invited to have a bath and he realised somewhat embarrassingly that as far as these foreigners were concerned, he stank. The Ethengar people rarely washed and used yak fat in their hair. He had a bath and found he enjoyed the experience. Then he was given a tour of the building, the library full of books, the laboratory full of glass beakers and tubes, but his favourite was in the head of the lion, peering out from the eyes. At a word from Sargon the faraway hills were now close by. He could see the grass moving from side to side as the wind blew. He turned to Sargon who was happy with this response. "These windows are magical Druss, they allow me to see faraway places such as those hills but also other lands. Would you like to see?"

Druss nodded and Sargon proceeded to utter words of magic. The view from the red windows changed and Druss could see a busy street, filled with people and stalls. He could hear no noise, but he could see clearly the people as they went about their business unaware that they were being watched.

"This is Marilenev, although I believe it is called Specularum now" he said with a shrug. "How about somewhere closer to home". He muttered some other words and the image blurred and then refocused again to show a clan village. People walked around, but they seemed to be organising, preparing for battle. Everyone was wearing their armour and many were already mounted. "Murkits clans, there's some conflict there, but I'm sure it will all be resolved soon enough", said Sargon with a smile. He could see that Druss was tired and took him to where he would sleep for the night.

He had spent two days there and on the morning of the third he woke to find some food on a metal plate resting on the bedside table. Druss was a light sleeper and was a little unnerved that each time someone had placed it there without waking him. He dressed and then made his way down to the garden. The large cats looked at him, but he felt safe enough to ignore them and walked to where his horse was stabled. Saferell walked over to him smiling and said something he did not understand. She said a few more words and then rested a hand on his shoulder. She seemed to be saying goodbye.

Sargon joined them and was able to translate. "Saferell asks if you are leaving us".

When Druss confirmed that he was, Sargon twisted the silver signet ring on his finger thoughtfully. Druss noticed it was adorned with the head of a lion, a nice piece of jewelry.

Spotting this Sargon smiled, "You have good taste my young friend". He reached into a pocket in his robes and took out a glass bottle and a silver brooch, adorned with the ubiquitous lion head. "Take these items as a gift. A thank you for bringing Saferell back safely to me. The brooch is a token, a souvenir of your time here and the contents of the glass bottle you can drink when you decide that you want to start reading books. I see you are not the biggest fan" he chuckled, "but trust me, they can hold great knowledge and wisdom in their pages. Someone who does not read has no advantage over someone who cannot read. Something for you to mull over, eh?" he smiled.

As he left Marcus came down to see him off. His arms were crossed, and he gave a halfhearted smile. Druss did not like or trust this man, but once he left, he would no longer have to be concerned about him. He left through the portcullis in the east wall at the back of Lion Castle and continued in that direction, knowing he would eventually reach Kaeruts land. As he reached a hillside he paused before descending to the other side. He turned back to look at the castle and was surprised when he could not see it. More magic no doubt.

As fate would have it, he crossed paths with Temur and stayed a few days with him and his family. He decided to say nothing of the Glantrian mages within their borders. Sargon had seemed like a good man and Saferell reminded him of his mother. Marcus though, he would have no issue with whatever the Yugatais would do to him if they ever caught him.

He finally caught up with his clan further east and went straight to his grandmother's yurt. She was there with Loi-Tan who she was instructing in some shamanistic ritual. He stood quietly in the doorway. Asturi was aware of him but continued with the lesson. Loi-Tan had a small metallic piece of metal, called a mouth harp and she was strumming on the metal wire to produce a vibrating noise. Asturi had used it sometimes when she needed help entering a trance. He sat down just inside the yurt and waited. The noise from the harp proved its potency and he was soon fast asleep, his chin resting gently on his chest.

The next few days he spent loitering around the camp getting under Asturi's feet. Jogatai did not want him taking care of their flock and Asturi was too distracted by preparations she was making and teachings she was delivering to Loi-Tan to tackle the issue. Druss was past caring at this stage. He was waiting for either his father to return for him or for the opportunity to leave this land himself.

Loi-Tan was able to sit with him at times when Asturi had finished with her for the day. She had changed a lot since taking up her education with Asturi, more mature and thoughtful. She was not as talkative as she used to be and the roles they had assumed when they were younger were now reversed with Druss doing most of the talking and Loi-Tan the listening. He asked about all the time she was spending in and around the Land of Black Sand.

Her lips tensed in contemplation before she spoke. "Remember those attacks we had, the one with the mountain lion when Ransen was killed?"

He nodded.

"And remember the time the camp was attacked by spirits and some of our people were killed?"

He nodded again remembering the time Asturi had placed him inside a protective circle with instructions not to leave. "Asturi and Kogatai spoke of a blood feud".

It was Loi-Tan's turn to nod "Yes, that's what we thought but it goes beyond that. The shamans of several tribes have been targeted by evil spirits, called into service by members of the Haijik

tribes. Their shamans have been conducting terrible ceremonies involving human sacrifice. The most powerful of these involved using the most innocent in these ceremonies. The more innocent, the more powerful". She looked at Druss to see if he was following.

"When you say innocent, you mean?"

She nodded "Yes, children".

"Why?" he asked disturbed by this thought.

"The Haijiks are not as numerous as the other tribes, their herds and flocks are smaller, their warriors are not as great, but they were always known to have powerful shaman and hakomon and now we know why. Their shamans are using the blood of innocents to summon the most terrible of spirits to do their bidding and the hakomon are said to be in league with foreign hakomon, learning their ways and dark arts".

"You mean the Haijiks have allied themselves with the Glantrians?"

"No, not Glantrians, these hakomon come from a land far to the east. They are called Alphetians and they have been at war with the Thyatians for many years".

Druss knew nothing of these Alphetians but had heard of the Thyatians. They were from a land further south and had a respected reputation as warriors. His mother Anya was originally from these lands but had moved to the Heldann Freeholds with her family when she was older.

He leaned back, putting his hands on his hips and stretching his back and then rolled to his knees, intending to leave the yurt and go to his own which was pitched close by. With Loi-Tan deep into her training it made sense for her to move in with Asturi on a more permanent basis. This meant that Druss had to find alternate arrangements. It suited him just fine. With his own yurt he was free to leave whenever he wanted with no fear of waking Asturi or indeed having to ask permission. With no responsibility to look after the clan's flock he spent his free time on the outskirts hunting and bringing whatever he could back. Although Jogatai did not want Druss around, he had decided he would do what he could to provide for his clan.

When the clan had moved further east, he had taken the opportunity to go to the cave where he had first met Smythe. The goblin was not there, and Druss had removed the flat rock at the back which was where they left any gifts. The small hole was empty. He had placed the potion bottle that Sargon had given him and remembered his instructions. "When you are ready to start reading, drink the potion. Those that do not read have no advantage over those that cannot read". The number of books that Druss had seen in his life he could count on one hand with fingers to spare, never mind read. That was until he had seen what was to his eyes a vast library of books that Sargon, in his lion-shaped fortress, possessed.

He looked now at Loi-Tan, and he considered the fact that she was more scholarly than he was, which would not be difficult, and he was sure she would have enjoyed reading those books. Maybe he should give the potion bottle to her, whatever good it might do for him he thought it

would probably benefit her more. That seemed like a good idea. The next time he was at the cave he would retrieve it.

“Speaking of spirits” she laughed. “I can see that your spirit is restless. You are eager to be out of here. I suppose it was always this way. You never really settled, did you?” she asked with compassion. “Not really. Not for long”.

He felt uncomfortable under her gaze and stood, causing her to laugh gently. He bid goodnight to Loi-Tan and walked out of the yurt, standing outside for a few minutes, enjoying the stillness of the evening. He was walking over to his yurt when he saw Waruni coming his way, so he stopped and waited. He expected her to walk over to the yurt as she was close friends with Loi-Tan, but she walked past it and straight to him. She asked him if he intended to go to see his Maghurs friends in the coming days. He had been non-committal saying he would see them again but was not sure when. She had asked that when he did, that he would allow her to go with him.

“Waruni, I don’t think that’s a good idea. Noyon would be angry and what about your parents?” he asked, trying to dissuade her.

“Druss, please. My parents will not commit to a marriage between me and Kashin. I think they have been listening to Noyon. You know how much he detests Kashin”.

“What can I do, Waruni? Jogatai already hates me, if I get involved in this then it will make things worse”.

“They won’t know. I’ll go with you, and they’ll never know. They’ll think I left by myself, they won’t know you helped me. Once I’m with Kashin I won’t be your responsibility”.

“Waruni this is a bad idea. Maybe you should listen to your parents. I’m sure they know best”.

Her pleading tone shifted, and she became angry “Well, if you won’t help me then I’ll just have to go by myself”.

Druss shrugged “Good night, Waruni” he turned away from her then and entered his yurt.

The next day he stayed around his grandmother and Loi-Tan. Waruni called over to see Loi-Tan and made it very clear she was not happy with Druss by ignoring him. When Asturi asked him when he was leaving, Waruni was unable to stop herself from glancing at him waiting for his reply.

“Maybe tomorrow morning, maybe the next, I’m not sure”, he said conscious of the fact Waruni was there.

Asturi grunted. “Be careful now Druss. There is much more danger now with all these clan and tribal wars, things are very unstable at the moment. I’d ask you not to leave the camp, but I know not to waste my breath. Loi-Tan is correct you have a restless spirit”.

He shot a look at Loi-Tan who did not meet his gaze. She looked embarrassed, she knew Druss would not be happy to know that she and his grandmother were talking about him. Eventually she looked up and gave him a weak smile.

The next morning, he rose early his preparations having been made the previous evening. He carried the saddle bags filled with his food and equipment and walked to the horse. Waruni was there wrapped in a warm cloak. He looked at her but barely paused and got the horse ready for the journey. Waruni said nothing, she merely looked at him while holding the reins of her horse, watching as he fastened the saddle.

He paused and sighed "If you're coming then make yourself useful and put the bridle on him".

She did as she was asked, a barely contained smile on her face, her heart thumping in her chest.

"You're not worried you'll get into trouble?" she asked as they left the camp, the horse breaking into a trot just as the sun was coming up.

"I'm always in trouble Waruni, haven't you noticed" he replied sternly but then allowed himself a smile when he saw the eagerness on her face. "Your first time away from camp by yourself?"

"First time" she nodded in agreement.

She showed some signs of regret on the third day and kept asking Druss if she was doing the right thing. "Waruni, I'm almost eleven. You're..." he looked to her to answer.

"Thirteen" she supplied

"Yes, thirteen" he said.

"So, why am I asking you?" she asked. She read his look and thought for a moment. "You're right. I'm almost a woman now I can decide these things for myself". She sat straight in the saddle ignoring the reality of her situation. In her culture it was almost unheard of for a girl to choose her own husband without the input and support of her parents. She was breaking tribal protocols and perhaps even bringing shame on her family. She changed the subject and they spoke of other things then, stopping later that day in a small depression, where they would spend the night, the horses nearby.

Several days later they arrived at the camp of Kashin's clan. It was a much larger gathering of people, but they did not seem as wealthy as their own clan. Druss noticed Waruni taking all this in and wondered if this would change her mind about Kashin. Druss was known by a lot of the Maghurs who greeted him, eyeing Waruni with curiosity. When Kashin arrived, Waruni's doubts seemed to disappear, and Druss busied himself with the horses while they fawned over each other.

Later they met Kashin's parents who welcomed Waruni warmly but made it clear that without the consent of her parents they could not allow her to stay, she would have to return home.

She was devastated by the news and broke down in tears. Kashin put a protective arm around her which impressed Druss, and reluctantly told his parents that he would abide by their decision and bring Waruni back to her people first thing tomorrow morning.

Druss knew his friend well and was not at all surprised to learn that although they were leaving, they would not be returning to Kaeruts land. Kashin and Waruni would head off on their own but were asking Druss and all of Kashin's other friends to join them. They would start their own clan. Druss did not think this idea would get very far but he was intrigued enough to go along with it and see just how far it would go. Kashin was delighted with this vote of confidence, and they left camp early the next day bringing as much as they could without raising too much suspicion.

They journeyed south, which was a calculated risk. On the one hand they were hoping to move beyond land occupied by any tribes but in doing so they were more likely to encounter any one of the humanoid tribes that also called the land home.

The experiment lasted about six days before a rag tag group of men came across the small group of children. Their leader was a large, bearded man called Ashok. He was a jovial type of man when he wanted to be, but the very fact he was the leader made it clear that was not the only thing he could be. He was impressed with their attempt at independence and encouraged them to join his clan. They would not be tied to any one place and the rules, what rules they had, were few and fair. When Ashok and his men moved on Druss and the others went with them.

The integration into their new family was a gradual process. Ashok gave them tasks to do, and they fulfilled them. This mostly involved scouting humanoid camps and then standing back as the warriors would charge in killing and scattering and riding off with the spoils. That was fine at first but then the raids were against other Ethengar tribes. This was explained away because they were not Maghurs or Kaeruts and so fair game. They spent many months at this activity until the time came to settle down for the winter in caves to the south. News that Moglai Khan had managed to overcome his rival and unite the Murkits reached their ears. This meant almost nothing to most, but Druss wondered how Jamal would handle this toppling of her world and if indeed she was still alive. He hoped that she was.

One evening around their campfire Ashok had joked that he had intended to sell them as slaves but that they had proved so competent and useful to his motley crew that he had changed his mind and taken them in. The men laughed as did Waruni and some of the boys, but Druss and Kashin knew that behind the smile and jovial exterior it had been a serious consideration.

Ashok was a burly man who had the habit of scratching his belly while considering his next action. He was never without his spiked metal club that he would swing almost absent mindedly while taking in his surroundings or lecturing one of his men. Speaking of his men, it had taken Druss and the others a few days to realise that there were actually some women amongst the group. A hardy group that had discarded most signs of femininity. They were from

all over and all had a similar tale or the absence of a tale that only fueled speculation that they had come from a troubled past. Some had been wrongly accused of crimes and fled their homeland. Some had spent time in prisons. While others had fled from an abusive spouse or situation. At least that was the story they told, and the youngsters were in no position to question, even if they did have their doubts.

When they were not raiding small settlements of humanoids or stealing the animals from the occasional Ethengar clan, they would fall upon merchant caravans passing through the Sea of Grass from distant lands. The rewards were varied but usually profitable and Ashok was at his most jovial on these occasions lavishing his men with expensive fabrics, barrels of wine, cases of tea or whatever bounty they had managed to claim.

It was while they were questioning one of the terrified merchants who was hopeful, he would be spared if he appeared tranquil about his present circumstances, that Kashin learned that the Murkits unified under Moglai Khan had turned their attention to the Maghurs. Kashin and his clan brothers were livid and made plans to return to join the fight, but Ashok smoothly diverted this desire and persuaded them that they would be better served staying with him. Explaining that he knew of some Murkits clans and because they were like a family to him, he would share in their desire for revenge. They would seek out Murkits clans and raid them while this Moglai and his men raided the Maghurs land. If they were successful enough, then Moglai would be forced to stop his plans of conquest and return to defend his people. The Maghurs boys were not entirely convinced but agreed to Ashok's plan for now.

Things did not go smoothly and the raids that had previously proven very successful with minimal injuries or losses became a memory. The Murkits had been through a tough few months with an internal conflict that had hardened their warriors and people. Ashok lost quite a few men and Kashin lost two of his Maghurs brothers Jebe and Tuli. They were holed up now in some caves hidden amongst the hills south of Lake Talkai.

Kassar one of Ashok's closest men, but also one who was allowed some leeway when it came to questioning or at least advising on a better course of action, was at this very moment letting Ashok know that things had taken a turn for the worse and perhaps they were better advised to leave the area for the time being, at least until things had settled down and they managed to replace their losses.

Druss noticed that Ashok was scratching his belly and gently swinging his spiked club while Kassar spoke. He noticed some nervous glances and realised that Kassar was on thin ice. The stress of the situation was clouding his judgement, and he was speaking in a way that could be construed as challenging Ashok. The burly leader must have come to the same conclusion because he suddenly swung the heavy weapon at Kassar, catching him completely unaware. He grunted in pain and fell to his knees, the spiked club stuck in his skull. Ashok still holding the other end, kept the dying man from falling. Ashok looked angry and used his foot to kick the

dead man off the end of his weapon. The others were silent and averted their eyes so that Ashok would not see them as challenging his position.

“Take this cur from my sight” he growled. “Dump his body where the vultures can feed on him if they would stoop so low”.

The mood had deteriorated badly and the remaining men and women, now numbering twenty seven muttered under their breath. Druss was close enough to hear plans to swarm Ashok and pull him down, but no one was volunteering to lead that charge. Others discussed simply melting away when they could and leaving this land which was now getting too dangerous. Their plans of escape were thwarted with the arrival of a large contingent of Murkits warriors that sat silently on their horses about two hundred feet from the cave entrance.

Ashok was full of bile and anger now. He roared at the assembled warriors and challenged them to come forward. He felt confident that if they were to engage in the confines of the cave, they could hold them off. He also seemed to think they had enough food and water put by for a prolonged siege. He had clearly gone insane.

Waruni and the others gathered at the back trying to decide what to do. Kashin and the other Maghurs spoke bravely about fighting their Murkits enemies at last. Waruni was pleading with them to see sense and reminded them of the small tunnel that led north, a tunnel that although too small for an adult to crawl through should be passable by any of the youngsters so long as they removed anything bulky and stripped down to their undergarments.

Druss crouched beside his remaining friends, Kashin, Waruni and Brogahn listening. Escaping seemed like a long shot but staying would without question be the end. He listened while Waruni used all her charm and sense to slowly drag the Maghurs boys back from the idea of facing the Murkits. She tried to explain that they needed to escape and live to fight another day. That there would be better opportunities to fight but that they had to be smart about it and take an opportunity that would end in success. Most likely the Murkits would just light a fire at the cave entrance, and they would all die from smoke inhalation.

Kashin looked at Druss who had not spoken. They shared many similarities in personality. They both detested authority but while Kashin was prone to butting heads with it, Druss simply ignored it and worked around it like it did not exist. Kashin tended to be hot tempered while Druss was calm. This situation called for calm. Druss nodded in agreement with Waruni and the matter was settled. They would wait for the right time and then they would sneak away.

While Ashok paced the front of the cave hurling the occasional insult, the other men sat or sprawled on the ground awaiting what seemed to be the inevitable end. The children crouched at the entrance to the small tunnel with Waruni given first place in the queue. She was shaking in fear but crawled forward. Her legs had not yet disappeared when she squealed quietly and reversed position, pulling strands of spider web from her hair. She was having a panic attack and kept uttering “I can’t, I can’t” over and over.

The boys looked concerned until Brogahn took the lead and moved into position. "I'll lead the way and get rid of the cobwebs, and you follow, ok?"

Waruni, her eyes wide with fear, managed to nod her head.

Brogahn looked at Druss and Kashin. "See you outside" and then he crawled forward quickly disappearing into the darkness.

Kashin put a hand on Waruni's shoulder indicating she needed to go. She swallowed nervously but once more crouched down at the escape tunnel preparing herself for the ordeal. A shout came from behind and two of the bandits strolled forward. They pushed their way past Druss and Kashin and peered into the tunnel past Waruni.

"Rats deserting a sinking ship" said one, a man by the name of Rubin, originally from Minrothad if the stories he told about his past were true.

"Well Rubin, what do you think?" asked his companion Tenner.

"A tight squeeze but might be doable" judged Rubin.

The youngsters looked at the men trying to hide their disappointment. Things were not going well and if either of the men attempted to crawl through the tunnel, they would most likely get stuck and then no one would be getting out.

Druss looked at Kashin, his fingers hovering over the handle of his knife. Kashin understood and nodded in agreement. Before they got the chance to carry out this new plan, more men arrived saying that there was movement at the front, someone was coming. Maybe the Murkits wanted to parlay, strike some deal, maybe they would be allowed to leave in return for all the loot they had stolen. These and other ideas were thrown around by the men.

With no other choice the youngsters walked back to the main chamber to see how things would unfold. The men at the cave entrance began to move back, muttering that someone was on the way. Ashok took a few steps back and began smoothing his tunic as if he was preparing to meet a special guest and wanted to look his best.

A huge man entered the cave and stood at the entrance for a second taking in his surroundings and letting his eyes adjust. A tall, broad man he had long dark hair tied back and a full beard. He was unarmoured but two hand axes were secured to his belt.

Druss's mouth fell open in shock.

Matheus walked a few steps into the cave totally focused on Ashok. "Let my son go".

Ashok was surprised at this request and looked around not sure who this man was talking about. He saw the shocked look on the face of Druss and understood. He scratched his belly and smiled "He's my son".

“Prove it”, said Matheus, his eyes unblinking. “Are you willing to die for him?”

The smile fell from Ashok’s face, this was not at all the conversation he had anticipated. All his prepared lines were not appropriate to this situation, and he frowned trying to catch up with this fast-moving turn of events.

The huge man was walking towards him now, making no move for the axes on his belt. “Your life for his”.

Ashok had expected some conversation, a back-and-forth discussion on what was going to happen, what the options might be, but this was not how it was playing out at all. This man was walking straight up to him and did not seem at all concerned with the two dozen armed men surrounding him. Uncertainty gripped him, he felt his bladder quiver, his heart began to beat faster. On reflex alone his hand went to the spiked metal club by this side. The huge man closed the distance, a powerful uppercut smashed into Ashok’s chin. His head flew back, his body went rigid, and he was forced up onto his toes, the club falling from his splayed fingers.

The men gathered had seen situations over the years when someone would inevitably challenge Ashok for his position. They had never seen anything like this, had never seen anyone treat Ashok as they were seeing him being treated.

Ashok dropped back to the soles of his feet and leaned forward unsteadily. Matheus pulled his head down into a head lock and gripping his hands tight lifted the bandit leader from his feet using his neck as a lever. Ashok was a big, heavy man, and his neck was not up to the task. With an audible crack, the neck was broken, and Ashok’s body went limp. Still holding the dead man, Matheus looked at Druss and pointed at him. “You, outside”. Then he allowed the body to fall in a heap at his feet.

No one moved. No one had expected what had just happened and no one was sure what to do about it. Druss grabbed Waruni and Noyon by the hand and dragged them with him.

Matheus glanced at them as they departed. When he judged that they had exited the cave, he removed the axes from his belt. “A few more of you have to die now, so let’s get started shall we”.

Still the men did not move. What was happening? Who was this man? He must be insane. While these thoughts bounced around, the stranger, father of Druss engaged, axes swinging and people dying. Their survival instincts finally kicked in and they attacked, scoring some hits but losing men left and right. Then there was a shout as more men entered the cave. The Murkits had joined the fray and swept around the big man, like a river around a large rock. The battle was short and brutal.

Druss and the others stood outside in front of a large group of mounted Murkits who eyed them coolly. He was relieved to see his father emerge from the cave still brandishing his axes. He had several wounds and was stained with blood, but he seemed fine.

“The father has redeemed the son”.

Druss looked up at the man who had spoken. An armoured Ethengarian warrior with great presence. A large tiger with long dagger-like teeth sat beside the horse. There was no doubt who had spoken. It was the man they had met on Bargha all those months ago. The man who Jamal had called an upstart, the man who had united the Murkits under his banner by defeating his uncle and reclaiming his position, Moglai Khan of the Murkits and beside him sat Jamal, his rival in the archery tournaments. Druss smiled at her in recognition and although she remained stony faced, he could see her eyes glint in return.

Moglai waited for Matheus to join them, and Druss noticed that his grandmother Asturi was also present. She stood beside the hakomon Bakalgu but made no move to approach them.

“Druss son of Matheus” called Moglai.

Druss looked at the Khan of the Murkits as his father, standing behind him now, placed his hands on each shoulder, his fingers draped over his collar bone.

“Who else do we have here?” asked Moglai.

Waruni spoke up first “I am Waruni of clan Jogatai of the Kaeruts and this is my brother Noyon”.

Druss held his breath, looking at his friends and then to his grandmother to see if there was any indication, she would reveal the truth. The Murkits were at war with the Maghurs so there was some uncertainty to how they would treat Kashin.

Kashin rested a hand gently on Waruni’s arm and spoke, looking at Moglai Khan who sat on his horse waiting for the introductions to be completed. “I am Kashin of clan Hougan of the Maghurs” and true to his nature he added “and I defy you Khan of the Murkits”.

The wind seemed to stop blowing and time moved slowly as Moglai considered his response and the others awaited it. Druss almost laughed out loud at the gall of his friend, but it was he knew a foolish thing that Kashin had done.

“Give the boy a horse” ordered Moglai. “Go, Kashin of clan Hougan of the Maghurs. Join your people and prepare for the war that will soon follow. I am sure we will be speaking again”.

Kashin looked at Druss who nodded to him. Matheus’s grip tightened on his shoulders to restrain any attempt his son might make to join his friend. Kashin leapt onto the back of the horse provided and without another word urged the horse away from the group.

Only then did Asturi approach them and she looked relieved.

“Hello Asturi” said Druss embracing her.

“My grandson lives” she whispered, her head beside his. “Foolish child”.

### Growing Pains - Part 3

Druss stayed with Asturi and Waruni while his father spoke with the Khan of the Murkits. He sat on a small mound of earth close to the lake and watched birds with long legs move carefully through the water and then pause when they had located something to eat. The long beak darted forward skewering the water and the small fish before gulping it down. The sun was beating down now but there was a cool breeze blowing. Waruni sat with him, silent. She too was taking in the surroundings. They regarded each other with a half-smile. It looked like the adventure was over and they would soon be returning home. In the circumstances, neither of them was unhappy with that prospect.

When Matheus returned to them, they sat around the small fire Asturi had made to cook their meal. They would be heading north back to Kaeruts land in the morning. Druss was unsure what was going to happen next. Would his father be leaving again soon, and would he be taking Druss with him? He decided it was a question that could wait. What will be will be.

It took several days to reach the campground of clan Jogatai. The camp dogs came out to greet them sniffing around the hooves of the horses, taking care not to get trod on. Some people called out in greeting, including Asturi's sister, Nominar.

Word got around quickly, and all members of the clan were soon surrounding them including Waruni's mother, father and brother. There were tears of joy from the parents and a reproachful look from Noyon. Matheus had a long talk with Jogatai who he knew from when they were both children.

The children gathered later in the day to reconnect and get the details of all that had happened. All thoughts of adventure had been purged from Waruni. She was happy to be back home. After the scolding dished out by her parents, she seemed content to await their decision on who her future husband might be. The intense feelings she had for Kashin were subsiding. She still had strong feelings for him but more like a brother or close friend. The war between the Maghurs and the Murkits was only intensifying, which caused only sadness for her. She was dismayed by the carnage, brother killing brother and hoped for a day when the tribes would be united as one family.

Berke and Loi-Tan had tales to tell too. Loi-Tan's were quite interesting and involved her studies under Asturi. Berke on the other hand told stories that could be described as quite boring and humdrum. They mostly revolved around his time taking care of the sheep and yak, but they were infused with so much humour that he had them all rolling around in laughter till their stomachs hurt.

The question of how long Matheus would stay and what he planned for Druss was answered later that evening. Asturi was sitting inside her yurt with Matheus when he entered. She smiled so he knew then that he would be leaving with his father. He had always wanted to but now that the moment was here, he was not so sure.

They stayed one more night and on the morning of the second Druss stood at the entrance to his yurt. He was ready to go, his knife by his side and his bow and quiver secured on the saddle of a horse his father had brought with him. The talk with his friends was quite subdued as no one was sure if he would be coming back.

When the time came to leave, Asturi spoke. She looked a little sad. "Have a safe journey and don't wait so long to come see me again. Don't be like your father. I'd like to see you more than once every one hundred years!" she muttered, giving Matheus a critical look.

Druss smiled "I will Asturi".

"You can call me grandmother. I think you've earned it" she said pulling him into her arms and hugging him tightly like she would never let him go.

As they rode away from the camp, Druss could not resist looking back every so often. His grandmother stood outside the yurt and waved whenever he did. Soon, however, he could no longer make her out and faced forward riding alongside his father.

Matheus looked at him and then at the bow on his son's saddle. "Any good with that thing?"

Druss nodded, squinting in the morning sun.

Matheus apparently satisfied, looked forward again. "Good, at least one of us is". He looked at his son again who was wearing a sleeveless leather jerkin. "What's with the tattoos?"

"Oh, just something we got done. The dragon is Khanistar, we all got one and then we all chose one for the other arm".

"and you chose the lion?"

"It kind of became my nickname, I asked Sirona for a lion, and she did this" replied Druss looking at the tattoo as he spoke. "A black lion".

"You may want to keep that covered up when we get home. Unless of course you like getting into fights." said Matheus.

As they were descending from the Sea of Grass and moving once more into the Heldann Territories, Druss cursed loudly, drawing a surprised look from Matheus. He then went on to explain that he had been given a gift from a mage who lived in a home in the shape of a great lion. He had left the gift which he believed was possibly magical in a cave and had intended to go there and give it to Loi-Tan but he had completely forgotten. He told Matheus where he had left it and his father barely recalled the place, even though he had spent some time there himself in his youth.

"Could we?"

"Go, back?" asked his father.

Druss looked at him expectantly.

“No” said his father shaking his head. “Too far and we have somewhere to be. I’m sure it’ll be there next year when you go back to see Asturi”. Matheus could see that Druss was not happy with this answer.

Druss looked away from him and sighed “What about my mother, are we going to see her?” he asked.

“Not right away but maybe soon”

Druss detected a note in his father’s voice. “You’re lying”.

Matheus pulled on the reins and the horse stopped. Druss stopped with him and waited. He could see by his father’s expression that he had been surprised at how Druss had spoken. He did not immediately respond to his question. “Look things are complicated. You were very young when your mother left and there is a lot you don’t know. Did Asturi tell you anything?”

Druss shook his head, indicating that she had not.

“Well, it’s a long story but it’s time you probably heard it but let’s continue and we can talk as we go, alright?”

Satisfied with this, the boy nudged his horse forward and his father began to relate the tale of how it was that Druss was left with Asturi and what his parents had been doing in the intervening years. Matheus had been caught up in a vampire war in Grauenberg with a vampire hunter called Erik Helsing. The Heldannic Knights had created an organisation of hunters called the Experten to deal with spawns of chaos and Matheus had joined their ranks. Anya, his mother, had been assigned to the province of Altendorf and had been fighting against the Partisans. It all got very complicated, and Druss took from it that his mother and father were busy in their own lives and very seldom if at all spent any time together. Druss was struck by the similarities with his upbringing by Asturi. Although a loving and caring woman, his grandmother was very much caught up in her own world.

As they approached the town of Grauenberg, Druss marveled at the amount of stone used to build the impressive walls. Impressive to his mind, having lived in a yurt made from animal hides and wooden tent poles for most of his life.

They passed through the gates bedecked in banners with the green and white colors of the province and Matheus pointed to the ceiling they were passing under, telling him about ‘murder holes’ where burning oil would pour from if the gates were attacked. Grauenberg had been attacked several times in the past by Ethengrian raiders making such defenses necessary.

Passing through the gates into the town proper, he gazed around at the numerous stone buildings with slate from the local mine used for the roofs. Some were businesses and shops, but most were people’s homes. A wide paved street led to the large open-air market at the

center of the town. It was usually filled with wagons and caravans from all over, but it was a lot quieter these days as the route through Ethengar was currently proving too dangerous and unprofitable to traverse because of the current internal conflicts and unrestrained attacks by bandits.

Matheus stayed in Grauenberg in a modest stone building close by the center of the town near where the Experten had their base of operations. Druss was left in the care of Hildegard Von Grauenberg who was a teacher and was to instruct Druss how to read and write. Added to this difficulty was his lack of practice in the Heldannic language through which the classes were taught. Hildegard's husband Horst was a businessman with a sideline in art. They had a young son of about three called Gerhard who sat in on the class with Druss and a few others while they were learning to read. He was a bright young child and was keen to be involved with the older children. Unfortunately, the older children, including Druss, were thought to be very unruly and therefore a bad influence on the young Gerhard. A year later he was sent to a clerical school in Thurgau for a proper education, one that his mother would not have been able to provide. Horst had suggested to Matheus that Druss be enrolled there too, that he would benefit from a disciplined upbringing.

When he was not with Hildegard, Druss went to where some of the Experten were training, a place where his father spent a lot of time. He was impressed by the long leather cloaks and the wide brimmed hats worn by the Experten.

Right at that moment, one of them was practicing with a whip while standing atop a raised platform with little space to stand on. She had unclipped it from her belt and was sending the barbed end through the air with a crack as it reached full length. It was like a live snake in her hand seeking out with unerring accuracy wooden pots placed on various wooden stands of differing heights. She spun and twirled generating tremendous force and all the time she retained her balance on the wooden stand.

Her name was Masarai and he was smitten. The men laughed and made good natured jokes about this warning him off, telling him that she would eat him alive. She was a tall striking woman, with hair so fair it was almost white. In contrast to her almost marble-like appearance she had several tattoos visible on her arms and neck.

Druss was greatly impressed with the Experten's martial skills but was somewhat dismayed when he found that they also seemed to enjoy reading books in order to research the creatures they were hunting. The Experten were known predominately as vampire hunters but some of them specialised in hunting lycanthropes, fiends and even witches. He knew his hopes of becoming one of them depended on him improving his reading skills. He thought now that perhaps he would use the potion bottle that Sargon had given him rather than give it to Loi-Tan as he had intended.

When they were at home, Matheus took out one of his many maps. He unrolled it on the wooden table and carefully smoothed it out. He had several such maps of different lands and

seemed to enjoy poring over them. Right now, he had a map of Grauenberg and the land around it. He was telling Druss places to stay away from, knowing from Asturi that Druss liked to wander. He warned him of the Frug Hak trolls that controlled the foothills north of Grauenberg. He warned him that foul creatures which had escaped from Glantri were also to be found in the hills. If Druss was concerned, he did not show it. He told his father about the adventures he had had. The dangers he had overcome and the friends he had made, including his friendship with Smythe. Matheus had seemed pleased by his exploits and chuckled to himself that Anya's concerns about her son becoming an outlaw had proven prophetic.

Druss found it difficult to find time to himself. His grandmother had warned his father "If you want my advice do not take your eyes off of him". Druss had taken it as a parting joke, but his father had not.

When he was not studying with Hildegard or with his father at the Experten training grounds then he was travelling around the hills and forests with him. There were only a handful of times when Druss managed to escape the watchful eye of his father and it was to go to the open market in the centre of town. Depending on what had come in from along the trade routes it could be very exciting and busy. Particularly on the day once a week, when the locals brought their livestock, such as cattle or horses, to buy or sell. He would watch the man in charge of taking bids who in turn would be watching prospective buyers who with a nod or a twitch of a finger would show they were making a bid. It all seemed very underhanded and sneaky as though they did not want anyone to know who had bought what animal and Druss was fascinated.

As a lone boy he ran into some trouble with other boys of around his age and older who decided he was a "blow in" and did not deserve the freedom of the town. They demanded payment. Instead, they received fists and kicks. One on one they were no match but by sheer numbers they overwhelmed him and poured on the beating until the patrolling Heldannic Knights broke up the disturbance. Druss returned the next day not put off in the least and the scene repeated itself. Each time however his opponents suffered bruised faces and loose teeth, but the feral young man kept returning. In the end they gave him a wide berth and no longer engaged with him. His father noticed the bruises and swelling on Druss and asked if everything was alright. Being assured by his son that everything was fine brought an end to the matter. Hildegard however insisted that Druss learn discipline instead of fighting all the time.

When he went to the Experten training ground Druss brought his bow and quiver and began regular practice. His father began to teach him to use a sword, though initially he used a wooden shortsword.

He had assumed his father would forget the talk of returning to the cave to retrieve the potion bottle he had left there and was happy when his father brought the topic up. They set out for the Sea of Grass the very next day.

There was much news from the tribes they met. The Murkits tribes led by Moglai Khan had triumphed over the Maghurs. They had been told that the Maghurs lands had been seized, all males over the age of twelve had been put to the sword and all the remaining women and children had been dispersed amongst the Murkits and taken in as family. The Maghurs were no more. Druss knew that Kashin was about the same age as Druss, maybe a little older. As Druss was twelve himself then it seemed that Kashin and Brogahn were very likely dead. He sat with this thought for a while until his father noticed, clearing his throat and indicating with facial expressions that they were in company, and he needed to be a gracious guest. Druss forced a smile and finished off the food provided to him by their host.

In the morning they continued on into Kaeruts land. As the land became very hilly, they spotted an ibex standing atop a ridge gazing down at them. The large horns of the mountain goat curved back indicating a healthy adult male. Druss howled like a wolf, but the goat was not perturbed. His father grinned "Not bad".

They reached the cave and Druss looked around the familiar landscape. It had been so long for Matheus that he did not remember the place though he did smile when reminded by Druss that he had been taken there by his mother. His father had laughed "That was a very long time ago now. A lot has happened since then".

Upon entering the small cave, Matheus stayed at the entrance while Druss went to the place at the back where he had hidden the potion bottle Sargon had given him. He removed the smooth rock and could not believe his eyes, the bottle was gone. He sat down on the ground after looking around briefly in the vain hope he might see it.

Matheus entered when he saw what had happened. He looked around at the small tracks on the ground. "Looks like goblins were here. Maybe one of them took it". He frowned at this possibility "Though I would have expected that they would have ransacked the place".

"Smythe", Druss responded. He looked at this father who was awaiting an explanation. "Smythe, he comes back here when he can. We usually leave gifts for each other. He must have found it and thought I had left it for him. I'm so stupid. I wanted to give it to Loi-Tan. I don't think Smythe even knows what a book is".

Before they left the cave Matheus noticed some very small wolf paw prints. "Smythe must have been carrying the little fella and then put the cub down here". He walked over to a corner near the entrance of the cave where there was a rock that was a natural bowl. He knelt down and picked a bottle up and upended it to show Druss that it was empty. "Looks like the wolf cub was thirsty" he grinned.

Druss slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand and asked, "He gave the magic potion to the wolf cub?"

"Looks like it", Matheus replied.

Despite the loss of such a valuable item, Druss started laughing.

They met up with clan Jogatai and were welcomed by all including Jogatai himself. Asturi seemed older but lit up when she saw her son and grandson had returned. "Twice in one lifetime, I am honoured", she joked.

They caught up on the most recent news involving Krugar Khan of the Tajits and his fight against the Yakkas, which had settled into small but frequent skirmishes. Moglai Khan had defeated the Maghurs, which they already knew, but was now turning his attention to the Hajiks. It had been confirmed that the Hajiks were summoning the darkest of spirits to do their bidding. In return for the services of these entities, countless people, predominately children, had been taken from rival tribes and sacrificed. Asturi and Bakalgu had been helping Moglai with this. They were both tough old people who had seen many terrible things but even they were disgusted by the level of depravity displayed by the Hajiks as had Moglai Khan who had vowed to wipe them out, every last one and ensure that no trace of them or their accursed ways survived.

Druss and his father stayed seven days in total "It's a good number", laughed Druss and his grandmother. Matheus looked on, determining that it was obviously a private joke shared by the two.

When they returned to the Heldann Territories they stayed briefly in Grauenberg before continuing to Pflenzen for a couple of days and reuniting with people that Druss did not remember but who remembered him. Then it was further east close to Nordenham but avoiding the village itself, to see some old friends of his father before they left there and went on to Matheus's cabin.

There were layers of dust everywhere, and they spent a few hours airing the place out. Druss loved the location of the cabin and spent a week exploring the place with his father.

One day Druss walked into the cabin and could see his father was deep in thought. He looked up when his son entered and without any prompting spoke.

"There's a place I'd like you to see. A place I once brought your mother. Would you like to see it?"

They left early the next day for the forest of Altenwald. Passing through the forest they headed up into a valley until they came to a clearing with many wooden structures around the edge of the forest. It was once a small community, but the buildings were in ruin, damaged by fire and the elements. No one lived here now. Matheus took him up to the hot springs and Druss could see his father was smiling, as though remembering a better time and replaying it now in his mind. He smiled too and his father noticed.

"I brought your mother up here. It's a place that has good memories for us. Mostly" he added with a hint of regret.

They stayed that night near the cabin that had once been his father's. A place his mother too had spent some time. He asked questions about her, not content with the answers his father was providing and pushed harder until finally with a sound of exasperation his father had said "That's all for now Druss. Some of what you ask is between a husband and wife, other things we can discuss when you're older".

Druss had accepted this, and they had eaten a small meal before going to sleep for the night. In the morning Matheus said, "There's someone I'd like you to meet".

They had gone deeper into the forest and Druss noticed a great stillness there. It was a comfortable feeling, and he saw several small creatures flitting around the bark of the trees on small wings. They were watching the two humans but did not seem to be aggressive or hostile. They walked on until they came to a group of trees with a large pine in the centre. A tall slender female figure appeared from the bark as if she had been waiting for them, her hair was a vibrant dark green and her tanned skin bore a similarity to leaves and bark. She smiled in delight and ran towards Matheus who received her delicately.

Druss was left standing there bemused "Who was this woman and why was she hugging his father?" he thought.

Matheus turned to his son, the tree like woman had her arm around his waist. "Druss this is Aralia. She is the Hama Dryad of this forest".

Before Druss had fully taken this in, a squeal of excitement forced him to turn as another person, a small girl dressed in a white silken material, ran towards Matheus and threw herself into his arms as he stooped to greet her.

"Matheus you came back. I knew you would come back but mother said it might be a long time" said the child excitedly.

Matheus embraced the young girl who seemed to be about four years old. He looked up at Druss who had not spoken a word and who seemed very uncomfortable in the current circumstances. "Druss, I'd like you to meet Matalia" he paused, "your sister".

Druss was caught completely off guard. "Sister?"

The young girl, Matalia, his sister, was looking at him with curiosity. Upon the urging of Matheus, she walked shyly towards him. She was a small slender child with elf like features, her hair was held back from her face with some flowers that grew in abundance around them. She stopped in front of him, her brother, and waited. He overcame the surprise news and knelt in front of her offering her his hand which she took.

"I've always wanted a sister" he smiled.

Matalia turned to her mother and father smiling happily. Druss stood then still holding her hand and walked towards his father and Aralia.

They spent the rest of the day talking, eating and laughing. Matalia brought Druss around the area and he noticed that she would not stray too far from her mother. She was telling him all about the plants and flowers and animals that lived there. All were her friends and looked out for her. When it came time to sleep Matalia went to her mother and Druss watched as they merged with the huge pine tree at the center of the clearing, disappearing from sight. Matheus and Druss spent the night under the branches of the tree and slept soundly.

They remained there for two more days, both Aralia and Matalia enjoyed their company and were sad when it was time for them to leave. They made promises to return soon.

Although Druss had very few memories of his mother, he still had great loyalty to her. He asked Matheus how it came to be that he had fathered another child. Matheus looked at him sternly but accepted it was a conversation he had invited by bringing Druss to see Matalia.

“Your mother and I loved each other. I’m sure we still do but she made a promise to her immortal patron Vanya that she would take her oath and join the order. You were very young when she left for Freiburg, and it was just the two of us for a couple of years. The vampire problem started getting worse and then the Partisans burned down the Cathedral to Vanya”. He looked at Druss who was listening intently. “It was too dangerous to stay, and I couldn’t look after you like I wanted to, so I took you to Asturi. Things went from bad to worse with the chaos spawn and the Experten were tasked with cleansing the evil. I joined them, even though they were part of the Heldannic Order, out of necessity. The enemy of my enemy and all that, you know?”

Druss nodded.

“Anyway, the Haldis Partisans began staging attacks all over the country. They really gave the Knights a scare, it was great”, said Matheus smiling. “But some of the worst fighting was up north in Altendorf, where your mother is stationed. I was worried about her, so I went there. I’m not sure what I thought I could do but well...” he looked at his son again.

“Did you find mother?”.

Matheus looked at him briefly “Yes, I found her”. He was silent for a while. “They call her The Harpy, your mother. She had friends in Nordenham, it’s a small place not too far from here. The fighting spread there and the Knights...” he sighed. “They did a lot of damage, killed a lot of people, some of your mother’s friends too. The revolt was eventually put down by the Knights. Nordenham is a shadow of its former self. All the freeholders in the province were put on ships and taken from the land in chains. They were uprooted from their home and replaced with hundreds of Hattian families loyal to the Knights”.

“Is mother alive?” asked Druss, interested in the tale but wanting to hear more about his mother.

“She’s alive but she’s not the woman I knew. She took her vows extremely seriously and used all her local knowledge to rout the Partisans from Nordenham and the surrounding areas” He shook his head, still finding it hard even after all this time to believe that this had happened. “Things went quiet then for a time. The Knights thought they had broken the back of the resistance, that they had won”. His face contorted in a vengeful sneer “but we weren’t done yet. They staged a big parade, spent weeks preparing it. A few of us went to Freiburg to make preparations of our own. We took up our positions and when the Hochmeister was in range one of our best archers, Agatha took the shot. She used an arrow with a powerful enchantment. It killed the old bastard and there was nothing any of them could do to bring him back”.

Druss watched his father closely as they rode. He was reliving the experience and was very much caught up in it. He had learned with Asturi that he needed to be patient. His father was telling the story and would eventually come around to talking about his mother.

“With the Hochmeister dead, we melted back into the crowd and made our way to prearranged spots to get out of the city. The Knights reacted more quickly than we expected, and we were pursued for days. It wasn’t a great idea in hindsight, but we planned on heading back north and disappearing into the Altenwald like we always did but they caught up with us around Nordenham. Poetic really, the place where it all began and all that” he looked at Druss with a half-smile. “They hit us hard, and I dropped a few of them” he sighed. “Your mother, Anya was there, The Harpy. I stayed away from her, I couldn’t kill her, and I hoped one of the others would, but I taught her well” he smiled with a strange sense of misplaced pride. “More help arrived from Nordenham, a contingent of Knights had been stationed there so we had to run again. We hoped to lose them in the forest, but they spent quite a lot of time trying to flush us out. Seems they took us killing the old fart quite badly. We spread out and started hitting them from all sides. Hit and move, hit and move. Somewhere in all that I came face to face with your mother. I had her pinned up against a tree and I was going to cave her head in with my axe when I realised it was her”. He looked again at Druss “Still beautiful...and those dimples”. He had a faraway look in his eyes and Druss thought he could see a deep sadness. Then his father laughed, a full smile on his face “I hesitated, and do you know what she did? She stabbed me! Can you believe it? She saved my life one time although I never admitted that to her” he smiled, “and she stabbed me. Well, that snapped me out of my reverie. I always told her those dimples would be the death of me and they very nearly were. I could have twisted the head off her shoulders but instead I threw her across the clearing. Can't say I enjoyed doing that”.

His father went maddingly silent again “What happened then”, he prompted impatiently.

Matheus chuckled “Impatient, aren’t we. Well, I didn’t kill her if that’s what you’re thinking. Some more Knights came to help her, and I killed them alright but not her. One of them tried to cast a spell of holding, nasty low way to win a fight but I suppose you do what you have to do. I buried my axe in his head, but I had to withdraw when more of them came. Your mother was screaming abuse at me. Nothing I want to repeat here. All I can say is she made it very clear

what she would do to me if she caught me. She's a woman of her word, so, I made sure she didn't. I was pretty banged up, so I headed to Aralia's tree, and she took me in. I stayed there, I don't know how long but long enough for the Knights to give up and go home. I stayed with Aralia and well that's how Matalia came along". He regarded Druss again. "I would have liked more children with Anya, your mother but the fates decided otherwise. I went back to join the fight thinking we had them on the back foot, but we were wrong in the same way they thought they had broken us. They replaced Hochmeister Stamhoffer with a new man. Like cutting the head off a hydra another one grew back but by all accounts, this one was more dangerous". Matheus shrugged. "As much as I hate the Knights, I didn't want to chance meeting your mother again, so I returned to Grauenberg and went back to killing undead. When I heard the news that Ethengar was having its own problems I decided I better bring you back. I don't know if that was such a good idea. Maybe we should leave this place and head north. It's nice up there I think you'd like it".

"I'd like to see her" said Druss in a low voice. "I don't even know what she looks like anymore".

"Well, she's stationed in Altendorf, and you can't go there but you could go to your grandfather in Freiburg. She might turn up there to visit but I can't say for sure," said Matheus.

Druss looked at his father "I'd like to go and see".

Matheus grunted in agreement. "You'll probably have to go alone. I stick out like a sore thumb and like I said I can't risk running into your mother. I'll give you directions to your grandfather, Jakob. He'll take you in and with luck she'll show up. If not, then he'll have some more stories for you about your mother. You seem to like them" he teased.

## Growing Pains - Part 4

Druss walked through the main gate of Freiburg and followed the main street to the central Plaza. He took out the map his father had given him and tried to make sense of where he was. He walked down what he hoped was a street that would lead to his grandfather's home and business. When he stood outside what should have been the place, he was unsure if he had read the map correctly after all. The place he stood in front of had wooden boards covering the windows and a heavy padlock sealing the door. He stood there for a moment at a loss when a female voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Need some help?”

He turned to look at the speaker, a young girl of about fifteen years old. She had a mass of dark curly hair that framed her face like a halo, brown skin and a sarcastic smile which showed off some of her very white teeth.

“No, I don’t” Druss replied.

“Looks ta me like ye do” she replied in an irritating tone. “What’s with de map, mon, ye some kinda idiot ye need a map?”

He folded the map up roughly and jammed it into his tunic and turning he headed off away from her not knowing exactly where he was going.

“Hey, hey don’t be in such a rush I’m just teasin. If ye want, I can show ye some place ta eat?”

He turned back to her, and she mistook his anger for confusion. “Ye were looking for bread or pastries from Jakob’s?” she explained, indicating the building they were standing in front of.

Jakob’s, was this his grandfather’s place after all? He decided to play along. “Yes, well I heard it was a really good place to eat”.

“De best. At least it was till Jakob disappeared an dey shut de place up”.

“Disappeared?”

“I tell ye what. I be kind of hungry and ye look like ye could do with some food too. Let’s get some food, you pay an I’ll tell ye all about it. Deal?” she asked, offering him her hand, with that sarcastic grin on her face.

He had come this far, so with a shrug he grasped her hand “Deal”.

Her name was Kesi and she walked him along the cobblestoned street away from his grandfather's shop and back to Stamhoffer Plaza, named in honour of the former Hochmeister who had been assassinated by the Partisans. She seemed to be in no hurry to find a place for food and they walked past several stalls and shops with food on display in baskets outside their

doors. She browsed briefly to consider what was on sale but then moved on when nothing seemed to catch her eye.

She stopped in the Plaza and shielding her eyes from the sun she looked up at the huge Cathedral to Vanya that was at this moment being rebuilt after it had been burned down by Partisans almost ten years ago.

Druss stood beside her watching the re-construction of the impressive building. "I thought you were hungry?" he asked.

"I always be hungry, mon" she grinned, with that weird sarcastic smile. She reached into a pocket and pulled out a piece of meat wrapped in a thin piece of cloth. "Here, have dis".

Druss took it and then looked back at one of the stalls they had just passed, recognising the food and its wrapping. "You stole this?" he whispered accusingly.

She made a dismissive sucking noise. "Pretty boy wanna pay den be me guest".

"What about Jakob? You told me you'd tell me about him".

Kesi sighed and turned from the Cathedral to look at him. "Some of de Knights came a knockin on is door an he was gone. Smart mon is Jakob. He cleared all out, never to be seen again".

"Why were the Knights looking for him?"

She sighed impatiently "What's it to ye, what do you care mon? Owe ye money or somethin?" and she laughed again with that annoying sarcastic grin.

"What's wrong with your smile? It's all crooked" he snapped. He was annoyed with the teasing and something about her unsettled him.

"What's wrong with me smile mon? Ye think I'm ugly? Ye can blame de horse dat kicked me".

He felt embarrassed that he had criticised her smile. "I'm sorry I didn't know and no I don't think you're ugly".

She looked at him, her eyes glinting with mirth. "So ye don't think I'm ugly. Dat mean ye think I'm pretty?"

His heart was thumping in his chest, and he sought to steer the conversation away. "How did it happen?"

"How did what happen?"

"Your face, you said a horse kicked you".

She regarded him with that same annoying smile. "Does it look like a horse kicked me mon?"

"But you said".

She laughed then and it was very loud, drawing looks from the other people close by on the Plaza. "I be joking mon" she said and thumped him on the arm. "Horse kicked me in de face? You crazy? Does it look like a horse kicked me in de face?" she asked, pushing her face forward for him to examine. "Dis face be purfect mon. Tell me I'm lyin" she challenged.

When he did not answer she once more broke out laughing. She saw his bemused expression, so she stopped and with a happy sigh said "Okay, okay, enough of dat. Let's take a walk. I can be yer guide. Show ye all de best places. Dat sound good?"

He allowed himself a half smile "Dat sounds really good, mon" he replied copying her accent.

She laughed "Cheeky, real cheeky, but I like dat mon. I like dat".

He spent the day with Kesi, wandering about the city. The streets were thronged with people and Heldannic Knights patrolling. Whenever they got hungry, she produced food, and he had stopped asking, from where. He knew he had been to Freiburg before as a child, but it was a very long time ago and he had no recollection. They walked all around the streets ending up in the Dockside district where they sat down on one of the piers, their legs dangling a couple of feet from the water. Some boats were returning from a day of fishing and others brought people or cargo in from some of the bigger ships that had dropped anchor further down the river at Althaven. They also watched people coming and going across the wide river on ferries and played a game where they would make up a story for each person. Who they were, what kind of life they had and where they were going.

Kesi told Druss her father was a marine in the navy and her mother was from the Pearl Islands. She told Druss all about the islands although she admitted she had not been there for a few years herself. "Someday I'll go back mon, maybe someday".

"Do you live in the city with your parents?" he asked.

She looked at him with that sarcastic grin that made him feel she thought everything he said was the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard. "No, mon, me parents not be around no more".

"I'm sorry".

She smiled at him "No mon, Dey ain't dead. Just gone. Muma on de island. Pupa?" she shrugged. "Me name is Kesi, right? Dat mean I was born when me pupa be suffering. I guess he was sufferin too much. Went sailing an never came back. A lot of ships go down in de Sea of Dread but me thinks he was lookin for a fresh start. Maybe dat's what I need" she said turning to Druss. "A fresh start" she repeated.

The sun was coming down, the clouds were orange and red, a warm breeze was coming in off the river. She grinned at him. "I need te go now, mon. I be tired. I've a busy dey tomorrow".

Druss nodded in agreement and stood up. He offered her his hand which she accepted “Oooh, a real gentleman. Your muma taught ye well” she teased as she was helped to her feet. “How old ye be?”

“Thirteen, but almost fourteen”.

“Almost fourteen, eh? We be made for each other mon” she grinned. “How about ye get some hair on yer face and we make a fresh start together? I’m thinkin we get a boat an head out onto de Dread and see wots wot”. She yawned then and rubbed her eyes. “I’ll see ye aroun pretty boy”.

Druss stood for a few minutes after she left and then walked back to the Plaza. The plan had been to stay with his grandfather but with Jakob gone, he had nowhere to go. He walked back through the market, which was now very quiet, as most of the people had packed up for the day and gone home. The warmth of the day began to evaporate, and it was beginning to get cold. He walked along the streets feeling very much like an outsider. The city guards walked around in pairs, and he found himself avoiding them and keeping to the shadows. He walked to the city gates and could see before he got too close that they had been closed for the night and would not be allowing anyone to enter or leave until the morning. With few options he returned to his grandfather's shop and prised one of the planks of wood off with his knife. He looked around to see if anyone had noticed and then he climbed in. He replaced the plank as best he could, tying it in place with a strip of leather. He stood in the shop until his eyes had adjusted to the darkness. His grandfather was gone but he thought he could still get the smell of fresh baked bread.

In the morning he removed the plank of wood and climbed out. After carefully replacing it, he walked to the Plaza and sat on one of the benches to wait. It was still quite early and not many people were about. The building works had resumed already so it was obvious the Knights wanted the Cathedral completed on schedule.

He watched as more people began to appear, some on their way to work, others setting up small stalls on the edges of the Plaza. So long as they were in keeping with the rules of the city the Knights allowed them to set up. That meant food, non-alcoholic drinks and trinkets were fine.

Kesi came from the direction of the Dockside district, and she had a small fold up table under her arm and was carrying some small bags. She smiled as she saw him, and he stood to greet her. She set up her small stall, laid out the jewelry she had made and sat down to wait. He looked at some of the pieces and had to admit they were quite nice. Kesi had made them from pieces of wood, leather, beads and pieces of coloured glass. Several were fashioned into lion shaped brooches in the hope of appealing to any passing Knights.

After a long day of trying to sell her wares, she had a handful of copper and some silver coins to show for it. It was not much, and she thought his presence had cost her some customers. She explained that the sight of a lone female would encourage people to buy more of her things.

Druss shrugged “Don’t worry I won’t be here tomorrow. So boring”.

“Cheeky boy” she grinned. “Let’s get some food”.

They walked amongst the stalls, Druss paid for his while Kesi did not. He had enough coins to do him for a couple of weeks, but it would not last forever. With the food secured they were walking to the pier to eat and were passing through the market when some sheep that had been bought earlier in the day and were being loaded on to the ferry escaped. There were shouts of fright and laughter as people jumped out of the way. Druss handed Kesi the small bag of food he was holding and began to round them up and turn them around. The owner who had been shouting in desperation arrived and looked at him appreciatively. “You look like you’ve done this before. Want a job?”

Druss looked at Kesi who shrugged.

Druss spent the remainder of the day keeping the animals in check and loading them on to the ship for the ferry crossing to Zehlendorf. Kesi tagged along and sat on the rail with her back to the ocean eating her food. Every so often Druss would look up at her and she would smile in support “Ya doin great, pretty boy”.

When the job was completed, Druss had been paid and was asked to return to the market in two days if he wanted to work again. Druss and Kesi stayed on the Zehlendorf side of the river and walked along the bank. They found a place to sit facing the river, Kesi sitting between Druss’s legs, his arms around her, his chin resting lightly on her head. The sun was going down once more, the sky orange and red and flecked with purple.

The silence was finally broken when Kesi murmured “Last ferry leavin soon, if we be goin back”.

Druss got to his feet and pulled her up. They walked to the ferry and then began running when they could see that it was about to leave. They leapt aboard laughing and happy. The ferry man smiled and shook his head muttering something about young love.

When the ferry docked on the opposite side, night had fallen completely. Lanterns had been lit and burned brightly, illuminating the streets and the city guards were on patrol. He walked her to where she stayed and then made his way back to his grandfather’s business. He was woken early the next morning to the sounds of chains rattling and the lock being opened.

“It’s a fine building, in good condition and in a great location” explained the male voice.

There was some talk of rent and about getting men to help with the unloading. Druss wedged himself into a corner until the people had left and then went outside. “Won’t be staying there

anymore” he muttered disappointed. He had met Kesi later on at the Plaza and while they were eating breakfast together, he told her the news.

“Dats no problem, mon. Ye can stay with me”.

She had shown him her place, it was in the basement of a laundry business run by a woman.

She had to sneak Druss in, telling him that one of two things would happen if he was discovered. Either the rent would go up or she would be kicked out, so he had to be discreet. Then she gave him a tour of the small room. “It’s cheap an it’s clean an it’s all mine. So long as I pay de rent”.

Druss went back to the market and found the man who was happy to employ him again for the day. Kesi saw him off and then went to the Plaza to sell some of her jewelry. They met up again later that day to have food once more on the pier, but they headed further along to their spot, which was away from the ferry landing and most of the traffic crossing the river. It was a glorious day and they spent it fishing and then swimming, when they gave up trying to catch anything.

He sat watching as Kesi dove into the water to cool herself. He enjoyed watching her, admiring her form, she was a great swimmer. When she surfaced, she stayed where she was treading water and looked at him expecting a compliment of some kind, judging by the contemplative look on his face.

Aware of this he asked, “Are you sure a horse didn’t kick you in the face?”

“Oooohh, cheeky boy!” cried Kesi, her arm sweeping along the surface of the water, splashing him in feigned anger. He dove in and they swam and splashed around until they were tired. As usual they watched the sun set and then walked back to their lodgings and slept.

They got into a routine then, Druss would get work in the market every few days and Kesi would sell her jewelry. He told her about his sister, and she fashioned him a beautiful piece that resembled the leaves of a tree and several small pinecones carved from wood. He held up the bracelet admiring it, sure that Matalia would love it.

On his fourteenth birthday they left Freiburg for the day and went down the Old Road to Althaven for a change of scenery. This was where the navy of the Heldannic Knights was located. It was also where all the ocean-going ships stopped to load or unload their cargo. On the way back to Freiburg neither was in the mood to walk the seven-mile journey and so they hitched a ride on one of the many wagons that was going that way.

The following month was the opening ceremony of the Notre Dame of Vanya Cathedral. Kesi found them a spot on the roof of a building where they had a good view of the proceedings taking place in Stammer Plaza. There was a heavy military presence and two lightly armoured Knights with heavy crossbows stood on the roof across from them. Kesi gave one of them a wave and he turned away satisfied they were not a threat.

There were speeches and fireworks and cheers from the crowded Plaza. Druss cast his eyes over all the people, but for the most part all he could see was the tops of heads. The podium was close enough that he could see the speakers, but he could not make out any details. Except for the family picture his father had, he had not seen his mother in a very long time and doubted he would recognise her even if he did. When the speeches were completed the doors to the Cathedral to Vanya were opened and a select few were allowed to enter first. The others would be allowed to enter once they had left. Druss and Kesi climbed down off the roof, she took his hand and they mingled with the crowd.

“Hold dis for me” she said handing him a small purse of coins. His eyes widened in surprise, and he put the pouch away. “Hold dis for me” she said a moment later, this time handing him a woman’s bracelet.

“Kesi”, he hissed in warning, “stop that”.

She looked at him with that sarcastic grin he had become very familiar with and winked at him. He looked around to see if the theft had been noticed but with so many people milling around it would be practically impossible. At the same time if they were caught it would be nigh on impossible to make a quick escape. Kesi led the way dragging him along towards the seats beside the podium which were now empty. Several people, including fully armoured Heldannic Knights, stood around talking.

As they got closer, Druss saw a woman he felt sure was his mother. He knew roughly what she looked like, but the description could fit many people, attractive, long black hair but it was the dimples that swung it. His father was always talking about the dimples. He approached her, Kesi by his side, still holding his hand. She was talking to a tall, important looking older woman, with hair that fell in curling locks. He caught her eye and her gaze swept past, a smile on her face due to the conversation she was having. Then the eyes swept back, as she felt she was being watched. She looked at him with no sign of recognition. With a sudden fleeting look of consternation, she forced a smile back on to her face and then returned to talking with the gathered Knights.

“Is dat her?”

“I think so, but I can’t be sure”.

“Pretty, I bet a horse kicked her in de face” she joked.

They stood there a while until the talking stopped and the Knights moved away surrounded by their bodyguards.

Kesi pulled Druss away “Come on pretty boy, it’s not her”.

They had walked back to the market and separated while they checked out the stalls. He knew she would likely get some things without paying but knowing how much she earned selling her jewelry he did not blame her. He paid for some things and then went looking for her. He saw a

short burly man talking with Kesi, who then suddenly grabbed her wrist and was trying to lead her away. She was trying to pull away from him and Druss noticed that no one was going to intervene. Walking up he did not ask any questions, he just hit the surprised man hard in the face with his fist. The man stumbled back with a startled cry and several people stopped to stare.

Kesi looked at Druss in shock and then the man growled. "Got a problem, have we?" he asked wiping the blood from his nose unsuccessfully and smearing it across his face. "Sticking your nose into other people's business, are we? I'll teach you some manners you little scrote" said the thug rolling back his sleeves and starting forward.

Druss reacted quickly and dove forward tackling the man around the waist and driving him to the ground with a grunt. The back of the man's head hit the cobblestones with a thunk and he did not move. When he felt the man go limp, Druss disengaged and stood up standing astride his fallen opponent. Kesi grabbed his arm and pulled him away. They walked at a brisk pace and disappeared down a side alleyway.

"What, was dat?" she asked.

He could see she was terrified. Not at all the emotion he had expected. "He grabbed you".

"Dat was Zeletnov. Ya don't go aroun bashin Zeletnov, mon".

He could see she was trying to process what was happening and grabbing him again by the arm they returned home.

She explained Zeletnov was part of the local thieves guild, like she was but much higher up. He was left pretty much in charge when the main body of the guild left Freiburg as heat from the new Hochmeister and his Heldannic Knights was getting too much. Zeletnov always had a problem with Kesi and expected more returns than she was providing from her jewelry and petty crimes. He had suggested on more than one occasion a way for her to make more coins. She had given Druss a blast of her scornful sarcastic smile when he had asked what he had asked her to do. "I'm not dat kinda girl" was her only reply.

She put out the feelers that evening to see what kind of mood Zeletnov was in and it was not good. The next morning, she and Druss left Freiburg linking up with some of her friends that were bringing a shipment to Althaven for export. They were sympathetic to her plight and promised not to mention to Zeletnov that they had seen her.

One of her friends was Cardia, a Callarii elf from Karamaikos. Solid and healthy looking she had blonde hair and blue eyes and was neatly dressed in a green tunic with golden leaf patterns embroidered on it. She flicked the reins, and the two horses began the journey along the road, pulling the wagon that was filled with boxes of ceramic figurines.

When they reached Althaven they went to a tavern called the Drunken Rat where Cardia spoke with a man who was well into his forties, of medium height and with a belly that betrayed many

fine dinners and wine. He was introduced to them as Rogan Aditer, the consul from the Minrothad Guilds and a sometimes merchant. He spoke with Cardia and gave her instructions while he dabbed at his mouth and face with a stained silk napkin. Business completed the trio left the tavern and brought the wagon to Althaven's wharf where the crates were loaded onboard a ship called 'The Wave Runner'.

Cardia was excited because this was the first time that she was going along with the cargo. She was telling them about her plans to buy a ship and go into business for herself. Halfway into the first day she was beginning to look a little sick and thought that maybe a small boat or barge to operate a ferry service might be a more reasonable idea. An hour later and looking decidedly green she swore off any type of seafaring craft and spent the rest of their journey below deck.

Alone on deck apart from a handful of sailors, Druss and Kesi sat on some crates and as had become customary, watched the sun descend below the horizon.

"Tell me again why we're going to Landfall" he asked.

"We need to stay low and let Zeletnov cool down, mon".

"How long will that take?"

"A long time, mon. We might be old and have grandchildren before then", she chuckled.

"You think about that kind of thing?" he asked surprised.

She looked at him, uncertain "Don't you?"

He shrugged.

She changed the topic back to Landfall. "We'll go with Cardia and deliver the cargo and then we'll see wots wot".

It was many days before they finally came within sight of Landfall. Cardia had recovered somewhat but had not changed her mind about ships and water. It was with much eagerness that she leapt onto the boardwalk before the ship was even tied up. She spoke with a man who met her at the dock, and she handed over some paperwork. He read over it quickly and then began barking orders to his team to begin unloading the ship.

Druss looked around as he descended the ramp, at the buildings along the waterfront. Most of them had upturned boats of various sizes instead of a normal roof. Kesi was smiling at him as he was taking it all in. "Hungry?"

He returned the smile and nodded.

"Stay close to me, this place will eat you all up if you go wandering around all doe-eyed like some lost lamb".

He made a fist which made her smile gently "Is dat yer answer te everytin? Stay close pretty boy, Kesi, got dis".

As they walked along the boardwalk and then onto the streets of Landfall, people called out in greeting to Kesi, who waved or called out in reply.

They walked up a narrow-paved street, lined with shops and buildings. There were a lot of women sitting out in front or calling down from the balcony of the second floor.

"Stop lookin aroun before yer head falls off" Kesi laughed pulling him close.

They stopped outside a bakery, the smell of bread and pastries made his stomach rumble. "Remember when ye first came to Freiburg an ye were lookin for some fine pastries?"

Druss nodded.

"Well, I got a surprise for ye mon. Have I got a surprise for ye" she grinned

They entered the bakery, just as a customer was leaving, a fresh baked loaf of bread tucked under his arm.

A tall slim man leaned on the counter, "Who's next and what would you like?" he asked the pair, smiling, before recognising Kesi. "Kesi, what a wonderful surprise. What brings you here?" he asked pleasantly.

"Well, I brought me friend here for some of yer pastries. He made a long journey to yer other place but ye was closed" she smiled.

The man looked at Druss "Oh is that so?"

"Dis be Druss" she said. Then turning to Druss she said in a low voice so only the three of them could hear "Dis be your granfader, mon".

Druss looked at the baker "Jakob?"

His grandfather winced and made a show with his hands to indicate he should keep his voice down. "Bartholo, is the name, young man" he said offering his hand.

Jakob or Bartholo as he was calling himself now brought them into the back room so that they could talk in private. Whenever the bell rang, he would leave them and attend to the customer.

"You didn't tell me my grandfather was here in Landfall" he said, a little annoyed she had kept it from him.

"Hey, I didn't know who ye were an besides, I might be a thief but I can keep a secret an Bartholo asked me to keep dis one".

"You knew my grandfather and you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't know if ye were really his grandson. Ye coulda been a spy sent to track him down or sometin. Ye know?"

"Ok but after a week, a month?" he asked, perplexed.

She shrugged "I kinda forgot about it. Don't sweat it, mon. Yer ere now. Eat some cake, it's really good".

He sighed and picked up the cake, which was oozing cream and honey, biting into it.

"Well?" she asked.

"Really good" he answered, all annoyance at having been kept in the dark forgotten

After Bartholo closed up for the day he brought Druss and Kesi for some food in a nearby tavern. It was full of women and men, many of whom greeted his grandfather. The women of Fallen Alley, as the street was known, were cursed with a sweet tooth and were some of his best customers. The men were a mixed lot. Mostly sailors or passing businessmen but there was also an element who sat in a particular corner. Well dressed, with oiled hair slicked back, one of them nodded to Bartholo who acknowledged the greeting.

The food was a mix of seafood and rice, courtesy of the Ochalean cook employed at the establishment. Over the course of the meal Druss and his grandfather caught up a little. Druss talking a lot about Asturi and his time on the Sea of Grass.

"You liked it there, by the sounds of it", said Bartholo. "I can see it would have some attraction, but I assure you you'll enjoy Landfall too. It's a bit rough for most people but once you settle in, I think you'll like it. There are some good people here".

He looked up then at an approaching woman. She was stunningly beautiful with a mane of red hair that hung in loose curls around her shoulders. She wore a nice clean purple dress, the colour slightly faded and a clean pair of shoes. Something quite rare in Landfall as few of the streets were paved.

"And here is one of my favourites. Annie, come join us" said Bartholo standing up and grabbing a nearby chair which he offered her.

Annie did not join them for the meal, but she was good company and was interested in hearing about Druss. Kesi she already knew, and Druss noticed more than one glance between them when the topic turned to family and parents. When she stood to leave, Bartholo left the table and stood behind her moving her chair away.

"Always the gentlemen, Bartholo" she smiled. "Your grandfather is a good man, Druss".

A call came to Annie from one of the oily haired men in the corner, and she turned to him and raised her hand to show she had heard him. Then she gave the trio a final smile and left to join him.

Bartholo spent the next few days showing Druss around Landfall and introducing him to some friends, but when the evening came, he would walk with Kesi down to the docks and they would sit on the pier like they always did.

The sound of shouting and cheering coming from a large building close by piqued his interest. Kesi tried to keep him in place, putting her hands on his thighs as she sat between his legs. "Sssh now, pretty boy. Let's enjoy de sunset".

"What's going on over there?"

She sighed "It's de drydock marina, dey have dances over der sometimes".

"That doesn't sound like dancing".

She growled low to show her displeasure that he was ruining the moment. "Dey be avin fights der too, sometimes".

"Fights, really? Can we have a look?"

She made an act of crying, her chest falling and rising "Why? Why do ye want to see de fights? Fightin is fightin" but she knew it was no use. "Fine, let's have a look den".

The drydock marina was a very large structure used for building or repairing boats. It also rented out for the dances Kesi had spoken of but on this night, there were fights. The place was packed with people, the noise carrying out to the quiet dockside as evening fell. Kesi gripped him tightly, her arm entwined with his. She allowed herself a stifled laugh at the look of awe and pleasure on his face. There were several sections, closed off with either ropes or barrels, depending on what was at hand. In these areas men fought and around the edges, people shouted and cheered.

On the way home that evening he spoke incessantly about the action and Kesi murmured a response every so often, but she was tired. His grandfather was awake and listened while Druss recounted the action to him.

Kesi shook her head "I be goin te bed".

As he watched her go to her room Druss turned the conversation to how Annie had known Kesi. Bartholo told him that her mother used to work in Fallen Alley many years ago which is where she met Kesi's father. By the look on Druss's face, he knew that Kesi had not shared this detail.

"Druss", he whispered "If Kesi didn't mention this then it's better if you forget I said anything. I'm such a dolt, I thought you knew everything about each other?"

"She says her mother is back on the Pearl Islands. I don't understand why she left her daughter here".

Bartholo looked slightly distressed. "Her mother died of a fever years ago and her remains were buried on the Pearl Islands as she requested. So, Kesi at least told you that part".

"No" Druss sighed, "She didn't. I thought they were dead, and she said they weren't. She said her father was a marine sailing on the Sea of Dread somewhere and that her mother went back to the Pearl Islands and that maybe she would go there herself someday because she hadn't been back in a while".

"Well, I don't know what to say. Her mother died and her father was a sailor alright but I'm not sure if he even knows Kesi exists".

So, what will I say to her?", asked Druss.

"Nothing, nothing at all. She has her reasons for telling her story the way she did. Leave it be Druss. If she wants to talk about it, then she will".

Druss accepted this advice in silence.

"So why did you decide to come to Landfall, it can't really have been to sample my bread and pastries" Bartholo smiled trying to introduce some levity.

"Some guy was giving Kesi trouble, trying to get her to do something she didn't want to do so I hit him". He looked at his grandfather. "She said he was some high-ranking man in the guild and that we had to get away and let things cool down".

"What's his name?"

"Veletnov or something like that".

"I think you mean Zeletnov. Short, fat man?"

Druss nodded "Yes that sounds right, Zeletnov". He could see Bartholo was a bit concerned about this and asked, "Is that bad?"

His grandfather smiled "Ah, it's a little bit bad but I think we can sort things out. Just leave it to me. I have some associates I can have a word with".

Two nights later Druss returned to the marina with a very reluctant Kesi but this time he took part as one of the combatants. He ended the night victorious and reveled in the congratulations hurled his way. Bartholo once again greeted them when they returned home. He looked at Kesi who shrugged her shoulders in defeat.

It became a regular thing for them then. After they sat on the pier to watch the sun go down, they would go to the marina and Druss would fight. She had to admit to feeling some pleasure at the fact that he was such a good fighter. Tough and skilled despite his youth. She could feel

the envy from some of the other girls that she, Kesi, was the one Druss looked to after each victory and not them.

On one of those evenings a group of newly arrived sailors attended. Their leader was a large, tall man, wearing a sleeveless tunic. He had a shaven head and a neatly trimmed goatee. A handsome man of sorts but for the cruel smile and a discolouration on the bridge of his nose, a faint blue.

When Druss had beaten a boy his own age, the man approached the corner post of the ring as Kesi was drying the sweat from his body. The large man seemed impressed and introduced himself as Garald and asked Druss to join him at his table. Kesi did not like the feeling she was getting but failed to dissuade Druss and was forced to walk with him. They spoke about the fight and about fighting in general. Garald liked the marina but said he was organising his own tournaments, and they would have more flair and less rules. While they were talking, Druss mentioned his father, Matheus Ironclad, and this seemed to wipe the smile from Garald's face. He began asking questions of Druss and seemed a little annoyed that Matheus had never mentioned the fight that they had had.

"It was a good fight, but we had to end it early because of a fire. Very unfortunate. I don't mind saying I was getting the upper hand but well it was called a draw because of the fire and the smoke. A real pity. Tell your father Garald was asking for him and tell him I want that rematch to settle things once and for all". He laughed then and had his mug filled again with ale.

As the men began to drink more, Kesi was finally able to pull Druss away. Garald raised a drunken hand in farewell and shouted after them "Tell Matheus I'm waiting for that rematch".

Druss nodded his head and allowed Kesi to lead him away. He had been impressed with Garald initially but less so with the drinking, reaffirming his decision to stay away from it.

Druss became well known around Landfall, though most only knew him by his fighting name "The Black Lion". One of the fight promoters had noticed the tattoos on his arm but took a particular liking to the lion tattoo. The Heldannic Knights were not well liked even in Landfall, so Druss became a kind of heel by default thanks to the tattoo, which was very similar to the lion rampant used by the Knights as their emblem. The fight promoter would play up the Heldannic Knight angle encouraging any and all to take a shot at knocking one down. Despite the fact that Druss was clearly not a Heldannic Knight, this nevertheless proved a successful tactic. The crowds would be thick around his fights all baying for his blood and encouraging his opponent, all to no avail. After a time, he got a begrudging respect from them and a notable following of supporters. Kesi first and foremost among them.

He sat on the step outside his grandfather's bakery, business was quiet as there was a storm out in the bay and the rain was quite heavy. Kesi sat by his side dabbing the bruised and skinned knuckles of his hands, with some ointment. He watched as some of the children chased small boats they had made and were racing them down the stream that now ran along the side

of the street, thanks to all the rain that was falling. Every so often one of them would stoop to dislodge their boat if it got stuck and then they ran after it whooping and laughing.

Kesi put some more ointment on her finger and began to dab the wounds. Druss seemed far away, while Kesi held his hand in her lap.

Bartholo came to the door and lit up a pipe. After a few puffs he noted the mood and asked. "Is everything alright?"

Druss looked at him and smiled but it did not reach his eyes. "How can you live here?" he asked. "I'm sorry grandfather I don't mean to be rude. You've been very good to me and Kesi, taking us in and cooking meals. I just... well, sometimes I can't breathe. I want to be out there". He indicated the far away mountains, the hills and forests.

Bartholo smiled and laughed gently "So like your father".

"I hope not" Druss replied.

Upon seeing the surprised look on his grandfather's face, he asked "Where is he? And where's my mother?" He shook his head in disgust, a hurt look on his face.

Kesi threw her arm around his shoulders "You've got me" she offered, hoping it was enough.

In the New Year, about three weeks after they had celebrated on the docks and all along the wharf with the people of Landfall, Druss told his grandfather that he and Kesi were going back to Freiburg. The decision came soon after Bartholo had told him that he had spoken with his associates and that the matter with Zeletnov had been cleared up. Druss promised that he and Kesi would return, and they boarded a ship the very next day.

When they got back home, Kesi seemed very happy, but Druss was still restless. He was at home when she returned that evening and told him that Zeletnov was gone, and nobody was entirely sure where. She could see Druss was still unsettled but not about Zeletnov. He had trusted his grandfather when he said the matter had been resolved. They spoke at length and agreed that he needed time out of civilisation.

The next day he purchased a horse and took the ferry across to Zehlendorf before joining a caravan to Altendorf. Then he set out across country, bypassing the village of Nordenham and following the river. He stayed in his father's cabin for one night and then ventured into the Altenwald forest to see his sister. He almost got lost but eventually found his way to the clearing where she lived with her mother. Aralia was delighted and impressed that he had kept his promise to return but glanced around the clearing hoping to see Matheus. Druss noticed this and gently reassured her that he would make sure his father came next time. Matalia loved the bracelet that Kesi had made her and wanted to go to Freiburg to meet her.

"Maybe when you are older" Aralia had told her daughter.

He stayed there almost one week, feeling his good mood return. He felt rested and rejuvenated by the journey and the stay. Sleeping out under the tree, sometimes with his sister who loved having him around and listening to his stories.

There were some tears when he was leaving but he promised that he would come again, with his father and maybe even Kesi, if Aralia would permit that. The hamadryad had agreed and Matalia gave him one more hug before he led his horse from the clearing.

When he arrived back in Freiburg, he was able to stick it about two weeks before he told Kesi he was going back to Grauenberg. She was not completely shocked and although she had tried hard to encourage him to stay, she knew it was a losing battle. Her heart leapt when he asked her if she wanted to come with him.

“Just try an stop me, mon” she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Kesi complained constantly about the horse she rode and groaned in pain every evening as she rubbed her buttocks and thighs. “Dat demon horse hates me”.

Druss had reassured her that she would get used to it and indeed she eventually did.

They rode through the gates of Grauenberg after a short chat with the guards who knew Druss and his father. They left the horses in the stables and when they found Matheus was not home, they walked to the Experten compound.

Druss and Kesi could hear the clash of weapons and as expected they found Matheus there putting some of the Experten and their retainers through their paces. They sat down and waited for the session to finish.

Matheus was stripped to the waist, though the hair on his chest and arms made it look like he was wearing a tunic.

“Is dat yer fader?” asked Kesi and when Druss answered that it was, she said teasingly “My, my”.

He looked at her sideways “Really?”

“Don’t worry pretty boy, I only have eyes fer you. It’s just good te know ye come from good stock” she smiled, that sarcastic grin once more prominent but which he had learned to read.

“Ah you’re back” called Matheus when he saw them. Druss introduced Kesi to his father who greeted her warmly. “How is Jakob?” he asked.

Druss merely said his grandfather was fine but was now living in Landfall. Matheus made no comment about the fact that Druss had been gone for over six months or that he had been with his grandfather in the notoriously dangerous port town.

He noted that Druss had grown and the signs that he had spent a lot of time fighting. "Have you been wrapping your hands properly?" he asked examining his son's hands. He smiled while clasping him on the shoulders, "You've grown, that's good"

Kesi spoke with Druss later about the muted reunion. She had expected his father to be happier to see him.

"That was happy" he laughed. "The only things that really get him going are my mother, long story, and undead. Vampires and nosferatu in particular".

"Strange family" she muttered.

"Well, there's your first and final warning right there. If you want to leave, now's your chance".

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment "I ain't goin nowhere mon". She stepped closer and hugged him tightly, ending it with a kiss.

## Growing Pains - Part 5

News inevitably came to them whenever a spawn of chaos was encountered and the Experten would ride out with their retainers of which Matheus was one. His skills and experience meant he was held in high esteem by the Experten and he would sit with them at meals. They would also ask for his input when it came time to make plans or strategise.

The war between the Heldannic Knights and the Partisans was still being fought but it seemed to exist in another dimension. The Experten had no interest in the war and rode around the land slaying undead. It was a very strange thing to behold. It was as if they could ride through a battlefield and the Partisans and Heldannic Knights would stop fighting, stepping back from each other to allow them to pass, before resuming the fight like nothing had happened. Nobody accosted the Experten or tried to draw them into the ranks to help in the war. They existed outside all of that, their only purpose was sending the spawn of chaos to eternal rest.

When Druss was fifteen, he rode with his father and the Experten when they were dealing with a group of vampires located in the ruins of an old building. It had been partly renovated by the landowner who had planned to open it up as a rest stop for travelers and merchants on the way to and from the nation of Wendar.

The Experten waited for full daylight to take on the infestation but were forced to venture deeper into the large building when they had dealt with the minions protecting the sleeping undead.

Druss was to keep to the rear with Travis and they carried extra supplies of garlic and holy water. Travis was an older man and very experienced, but he was coming to the end and was telling Druss that once he earned a bit more gold he would retire. Druss had a shortsword strapped to his side but was not expecting to use it. He carried his bow and a quiver full of arrows, most were silver tipped and two had a minor enchantment.

The vampire had charmed some local men who put up a fight defending the undead creature. The three Experten did not seem overly concerned with their survival but the retainers including Matheus did what they could to subdue them, hoping that by killing the vampire the enchantment would be broken.

As they went deeper into the confines of the old building there were more shadows and so more danger. Several traps had been set up in the form of collapsing piles of rubble and weakened floors. Matheus fell victim to one such trap disappearing with a splintering crack through the floor and out of sight.

Strange creatures, human but bone white and thin with hollow, lifeless eyes descended on the party then. One of the Experten, Mika raised her holy symbol and shouted a warning "Wights".

Masarai's whip snapped out striking a wight in the face and it erupted into flames.

The third Experten, Ventura, was armed with a shield and warhammer. He tapped the shield three times against the stone floor and a crackling lightning bolt forked out striking the undead and turning them into smoking piles of cloth and flesh.

Druss spotted, up on the balcony, the figure of man standing and observing the scene. He shouted a warning and Masarai was the first to react sending the whip streaking towards its target. The man grabbed the end of the whip and without much effort dragged Masarai forward and off her feet with a startled cry.

“Down here, foul one”, shouted Ventura stepping forward his shield held high.

The man leapt gracefully from the balcony landing in front of the Experten who tried to slam the shield down but was stopped by the hand of the shadowy man. The other hand raked Ventura across the face and he was then tossed aside.

A tall powerful man, he was bulky with big meaty hands. His face was covered in lumpy cysts and his nose was bulbous and ugly. Druss sent an arrow flying and it sliced across the man’s cheek, drawing blood.

Mika armed with her bastard sword charged forward, wielding it with two hands but the thick set man was fast and avoided the blow. She then smashed him in the face with the pommel of her sword and he hissed with anger, grabbing her wrist and twisting it savagely. She screamed in pain as he forced her to the ground.

The man turned to see what the others were doing, and it was then that Druss saw the long protruding canines. “A vampire”, he thought. This was it, his first vampire. He was surprised at how easily it had dispatched the Experten but he was relieved to see that Masarai and Ventura were getting back into the fight.

Druss prepared his next arrow, his second and last enchanted arrow and waited for the opportune moment. Travis had uncorked some vials and was preparing to hurl the holy water when he was hit with an arrow. He dropped the bottles, and one broke, the other spilling most of its contents onto the floor.

Up on the balcony was a bone white skeleton and it was drawing another arrow from its quiver. Druss sprinted along the side of the room, to the foot of the stairs that led to the balcony. The Experten could handle the vampire, he would take the skeleton. It managed to fire another arrow and he heard Masarai scream in pain. He collided with it shouldering it from the balcony to the floor below where the skull smashed into several pieces, the arms and legs skidding across the floor. He looked down to see Masarai pulling an arrow from her leg and that this time it was Mika that had been hurled across the room. Ventura was engaging the vampire who knocked the hammer away and was wrenching his shield counterclockwise. Ventura’s arm was caught up in the straps and he could not release the shield. He was struggling to stop the vampire from dislocating his shoulder.

At the back of the room, some rubble shifted, a plank of wood fell, and Matheus appeared from the hole in the floor. He was covered in dust and debris.

Druss drew back on the bow string but not fully and watched his father who was making no moves to draw his weapons.

Matheus walked towards the center of the room as the Experten was beaten down and the shield ripped from his arm. Ventura was gritting his teeth in agony and holding his damaged shoulder, his arm hanging loose by his side.

Matheus pulled a pair of leather gloves from his belt and putting them on walked up to the vampire who seemed amused. He raised his hands accepting the silent challenge from the bearded giant. Their hands were clasped together, palm to palm, the fingers folded forward trying to leverage and bend the others wrists backwards.

“You are strong for a human, but to me you are nothing but a fly” sneered the vampire. The smile turned to a frown when he brought all his strength to bear but found he could still not overpower Matheus.

Matheus began to push forward, one of the vampire’s feet slid backwards on the rubble strewn floor and a moment later he was forced to withdraw the second foot to maintain his balance. Matheus was muttering something to the vampire, but Druss could not hear. His father seemed to have the upper hand, so he was reluctant to interfere by firing the arrow.

The vampire was struggling loudly now, at a complete loss at how to regain the momentum. Matheus twisted and dragged the vampire to one side, so that he was stooped forward, then he smashed him in the face with his knee sending the head snapping backwards. He retained the hand grip, so the vampire did not go far. As the vampire tried to push back, Matheus used his forward motion to send the creature flying over his shoulder and crashing into the worm-eaten furniture.

The vampire seemed unhurt and was on his feet quickly.

This time Matheus drew his twin axes and waited. “Today is your day, boy”.

Druss took aim at the symbol of a burning brand embroidered on the vampire's tunic and let the arrow fly, hitting it square in the chest.

It shrieked in pain clutching at the shaft and then erupted suddenly into a cloud of smoke that billowed away from the big man, disappearing into a crevice in the wall.

Druss descended the staircase quickly, helping Mika to her feet and allowing her to lean on him as they went to Matheus.

“I think we were misinformed”, said Mika. “That was not a vampire”.

Druss was confused “What was it then?”

“Nosferatu” replied Mika.

“I don’t understand,” said Druss.

“It was a priest of some kind before it was turned, and it retained that power, which is why it could summon lesser spawn to serve it. It also had some enchantment that increased its speed. The boots quite possibly” explained Mika.

“What now?” asked Travis.

“We find the coffins and burn them of course” said Ventura, still in pain.

Travis nodded and went to where the nosferatu had fled in gaseous form. He went to work on the wall with a pickaxe, quickly opening a large hole. It led into another room which he did not enter, turning to the others and awaiting orders.

Mika and Masarai had dealt with Ventura’s shoulder and were healing some of their wounds before proceeding.

Matheus lit a torch and led the way through the opening Travis had made. They walked through several rooms before coming to a door that led to the basement. It was blocked and Travis went to work with his pickaxe once again. With the way clear, they went down the stairs, Masarai at Matheus’s shoulder her holy symbol at the ready.

They found four coffins arranged neatly along the far wall. All were empty and all were smashed by Travis, the remains set on fire. With no other coffins found and the nosferatu seemingly gone from the scene, they made their way back outside to the horses. There was still some daylight, so they headed back to the village to reassess their options. They stayed another day before going back to Grauenberg.

Kesi joined the group as a retainer and camp look out. She would remain behind with a few of the others watching the horses and gear while the Experten confronted the undead. Druss was happy to have her around more often though his father seemed concerned about the closeness of their relationship.

Druss saw his father pull a sheet of paper from a noticeboard in the town centre. After crumpling it up he threw it on the ground. Druss picked it up wondering what it was. It was a wanted notice, with a picture of a man by the name of Halvard Gudmundson. There was a large reward being offered for his head. He knew his father and this Halvard had been very close friends at one time, until life had got in the way.

The Experten went about their job and Kesi proved her worth by disarming traps and picking locks. She was very good at getting along with people and even the Hattian members of the group would treat her like a human being.

There was some concern when Altendorf was attacked by Partisans and briefly captured before the Knights regained control. A new Landmeister had to be appointed when Georg Löwenstern died. There was no word if Anya had been hurt or killed.

Matheus disappeared from Grauenburg for several weeks without any explanation, but Druss knew where he had gone.

Druss and Kesi went back to Landfall to see Bartholo as things were getting very intense in the Heldann Territories. Landfall could be a dangerous place to be but also a very safe place to be if you knew the right people. They stayed there for two months before returning to Grauenberg and taking up again with the Experten and Matheus, who had returned by then. Druss was informed that his mother was alive and well and still providing target practice for the Rangers of Altenwald.

They had only left Hockstein two days when word reached them that it had been attacked by Halvard's Partisans with the aid of a magic-user. The news seemed contradictory as despite the early success of the attack it seemed to fizzle out. Matheus was a brooding storm cloud grumbling about "people losing their nerve and not showing up to fight".

One morning while they were practicing in the Experten compound, Masarai approached Druss and without much warm up conversation asked him in her very direct way whether or not he was going to marry Kesi, that she could not be expected to wait for him forever. "You're, what twenty-one now and she's a little older. Neither of you are getting any younger. You wait too long then you shouldn't be surprised if someone else moves in and takes her from you".

He had broached the subject with Kesi who assured him that she was in no hurry to marry and that when the war ended one way or the other, they could have that conversation again. She asked him to go to Freiburg with her and he had agreed albeit reluctantly.

He had been in the Stamhoffer Plaza while she went into Dockside to visit friends when wizards began appearing in the skies all over the city. They began raining down fire and lightning and other powerful spells to sunder and crack the buildings and pavements. It was bedlam. People ran in terror from them, heading for the city gates, but Druss was running headlong into the flames and black oily smoke that had swallowed up the Dockside district. He saw buildings and warehouses on fire, the sails and rigging of ships as they too burned.

He found Kesi with her elven friend, Cardia in a place they always frequented, "The Stilted Lilly". It was a place that sold all kinds of beverages from all over the known world, in particular several types of coffee. There was no coffee being consumed today and he ran to them, grabbing Kesi to check she was ok.

"I'm fine too, in case you're wondering" said Cardia, her face streaked with soot and ash.

"We need to get out of here, fast", shouted Druss trying to grab them and return the way he had come.

A crashing whining noise of flames and splintering wood made them tense and look to the sky as a Heldannic warbird attempting to leave the fortress was attacked by a handful of wizards. It had barely cleared the high walls and was already spiraling out of control in the direction of the river.

“Come with me”, shouted Cardia, grabbing Kesi by the hand and expecting Druss to follow.

They ran quickly to her home, where she walked into an adjoining room. She unlocked a large chest, pushed open the heavy lid and then began pulling out clothing and throwing it over her shoulder.

“Cardia, we don’t really have time for dis” said Kesi worried her friend had lost her nerve and was panicking.

“Here we are. Our ticket out of this mess”, said the elven woman lifting a large, rolled carpet from the chest.

She carried the heavy carpet in both arms and pushed past them walking out the door to the street where she unfurled it on the ground. Druss and Kesi gave each other worried glances when Cardia sat down on the carpet. “Quick, get on board”.

“Cardia what are ye doin? We have ta get out of here now! Please” shouted Kesi, her voice tinged with a little fear.

Cardia looked at her patiently “Kesi, trust me. Magic carpet here, let’s go”.

Kesi looked at Druss and sat down behind her friend, joined by Druss who resisted the urge to make a run for the river. There was no way he was leaving Kesi.

When all three were seated, Kesi shouted over the noise of collapsing buildings and screaming people “Hold on tight to something”. She herself grabbed a corner, while Druss reached out and grabbed both sides of the carpet, feeling a little foolish. Kesi turned sideways and held tightly to him. “Ready?” shouted Cardia looking quickly back at them. When Kesi and Druss nodded, she turned back and shouted “Vrooom”. The carpet lifted smoothly from the ground and quickly ascended above the fire and smoke. They flew past a startled wizard knocking the wand from her hand. Kesi’s hand shot out and plucked it from the air and then they were away from the inferno and headed for Grauenburg.

When Druss looked down at the burning city and beyond, he saw thousands of men on ships crossing the Elber / Naga River and they did not look like Heldannic Knights. The war seemed to be finally reaching its crescendo and the Heldannic Order looked like it was in serious trouble.

When they arrived in Grauenburg landing directly inside in the Experten compound, Druss ran to his father and told all gathered what they had seen.

“Althaven was in flames too, at least it looked like it, flames and a lot of smoke coming from that direction”, said Druss. “It looks like the Partisans were crossing the river to lay siege to Freiburg. They had a huge number of men”.

The gates of Grauenburg were sealed and wary Knights patrolled the walls awaiting an attack. Some riders were sent to try and see what was going on and to report back. The Experten retired to their compound to await a resolution.

Cardia told Druss and Kesi that she was off to Wendar to seek greener pastures before she was forced into service by the Knights who would be very glad to have a magical carpet and a magic wand at their disposal. She departed later that evening with a wave and was soon out of sight.

Matheus was in a terrible mood and was constantly pacing up and down the compound muttering to himself, his huge fists clenching.

Druss heard the news first and watched as his father was told. Halvard's army had caused the Knights to flee into Freiburg where they were able to regroup. The attack wavered and the Knight's discipline, military tactics and stubborn self-belief propelled them to victory. The Partisan army was routed from the field of battle and Halvard Gudmundson had been captured. Some of the Experten had suspected Matheus's history with the Partisans. As a man of the Heldann Territories, as the Knights called the land, it seemed likely that he had friends amongst the Partisans but they did not doubt his commitment to slaying the undead.

Matheus, Druss and Kesi left the next day for Freiburg, arriving a few days later. The land all around the huge walls of the city was still strewn with the bodies of the fallen, the ground churned up and muddy. Huge pyres had been constructed and prisoners of war were carrying the bodies of their dead comrades to be burned. With so much death there was a concern the rotting bodies would induce a plague, so the work was carried out as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

They rode through the gates after presenting their paperwork and stayed in a place put aside for the Experten when they were in the capital city. It was going against protocol for them to be staying there as they were not full members of the Order, but Matheus did not seem to care. Kesi went around her old haunts gathering what information she could and told them that the Heldannic Knights had planned a public execution for the rebel leader, to take place in four days.

A gallows had been erected and at midday of the fourth day, Hochmeister von Klagendorf surrounded by a bodyguard of thirty heavily armed Knights read out the charges against the captured leader. The Plaza was filled to the brim with people, and it was hard to know if they were happy that he had been captured and was facing his execution or sympathetic that his fight to restore his family to the throne had finally come to an end. Druss stood beside his father and as both were well over six feet, they were able to get a view of the proceedings. Kesi

disappeared from Druss's side, unable to resist the temptation of so many packed bodies to practice her art.

When the Hochmeister had finished calling out the crimes, he declared that Halvard Gudmundson was to be sentenced to death by hanging. Druss got his first look at the infamous man and was impressed with his poise. He did not appear unduly harmed, but his arms were secured behind his back in chains. The guards clasped him at the elbows and led the condemned man up the wooden steps to his place on the platform. The executioner, a man of average height wearing a hood, placed the noose about Halvard's neck and pulled it tight. He then stepped back to stand by the lever and waited for the order to proceed.

Halvard turned his head and spoke some words to the Hochmeister who nodded. He then stepped forward to the edge of the platform but restrained by the rope around his neck and addressed the crowd.

"The Haldis clan does not end with me on this day. It shall return. You can kill a man, but you cannot kill an idea. Vengeance and justice will be served. No matter how long it takes".

There were some guffaws and laughter from the crowd, but the voice of a woman called out from somewhere "We love you Halvard".

The heads of many people turned as they tried to see who had spoken. More voices called out repeating the words.

There was a buzz in the air as some thought the leader of the Partisans would be rescued by his men. Up on the platform the executioner placed Halvard back on the trap door. Standing by the lever he once more looked to the Hochmeister who after casting his eyes over the gathered masses, gave the nod. The lever was pulled and the door beneath Halvard's feet fell away, the rope jerking hard and pulled tight.

There was a collective audible gasp from the crowd. Even those that had no love for Halvard had been shocked that the end had come to pass. After all these years, he had finally been captured and now he was dead. They stood there for perhaps five minutes unsure but then began to break up and disperse. After about half an hour, Druss still stood beside his father who had his arms folded across his massive chest. Kesi returned bearing all kinds of loot but respected the energy she was feeling and remained sombre.

Matheus started forward towards the body of his friend and took hold of Halvard as the executioner lowered his remains to the ground. Several Knights on duty moved forward and it was clear that they would not allow the body to be taken. Druss saw the signs and prepared to join his father in this fight, as pointless as it seemed.

"It's alright, I'll take over from here," said a strong female voice.

Druss saw that the Knights looked uncertain but then they relaxed their postures and allowed the speaker to enter the circle they had formed around the two men.

She was a Heldannic Knight Banneret or Prioress judging by the medals and awards on her armour. He glanced quickly at his father to get some idea what they were going to do. Matheus looked like he had been turned to stone. Druss looked back at the woman who was looking at him with a calm demeanour, some of the Knights falling in behind her. She looked battle hardened but still attractive and he recognised her as the woman he had seen at the opening of the Cathedral years earlier.

“You can take Halvard’s body down Matheus, but I can’t let you take it. You know I can’t”. She looked at Druss and he saw a spark of panic which disappeared so quickly he thought he had imagined it.

Matheus had not spoken so Druss decided he would. “What will you do with him?” he asked. She looked at him, her head angled slightly upwards as he towered over her. “And you are?” “Druss”.

The panic in her eyes returned, her eyes glistened with moisture as that simple word shook her badly. He saw her blink several times, her jaw tight. She cleared her throat “The body will be taken from here where it will be burned, the ashes scattered”.

“We want to take him there. If you will allow it” he added.

She nodded, careful to keep her back to the Knights in case they should see the look on her face. He saw that she had recovered her composure and was regarding him with a new emotion, something that looked like pride.

Matheus gathered up the body of his deceased friend and followed the Knights. Druss walked at his side, the Reverend Mother as he heard one of the Knights address her, his mother was walking just ahead of them. He found himself examining her as closely as he could. He had no memory of her as a child so apart from the old painting his father had secured away in a small box and that brief time at the opening ceremony of the Cathedral, he had never seen her. He was busy comparing her to the image he had built up over the years of her. She was not as tall as he had imagined, standing about five foot six. In his mind she always wore a dress, her hair hanging loose, a happy smile on her face. In reality she looked comfortable in plate armour, her hair was shoulder length, the fringe cut short and straight across her forehead.

When they reached their destination, a small walled courtyard, she turned to them. “You can put him there. I promise I’ll make sure he is treated with respect”.

Druss looked at his father, who still had not spoken. It was hard to be sure what his father was thinking at that moment. It was a stern look that could mean, “Yes I am listening to you with great interest” or “In about five seconds I am going to pull the arms off your body and beat you to death with the bloody stumps”.

He turned back to his mother and again stepped in “What will you do with the ashes?”

She seemed surprised by the question. "They'll be scattered to the winds".

"Can we have them? There's a place I'd like to take them. A more fitting resting place".

Her brow wrinkled "I'll see what I can do. Where are you staying?"

"The Knight's Arms".

She nodded "I know it. Tomorrow evening".

He turned to his father and spun him around and then steered him gently out of the courtyard and back to the Plaza.

When they arrived back, Kesi sauntered up to them stretching her arms and grunting softly "Well? All good?"

The Knight's Arms was an up-market establishment located in the Foreign District of Freiburg in the northwest of the city. It was frequented by people with a lot of coin, usually diplomats and embassy staff. Druss looked at his father with a wry smile, surprised to see him in anything but a leather jerkin with axes and a sword strapped to his side. He wore a dark blue tunic with white buttons and a clean pair of trousers. They went downstairs to the table they had booked for their evening meal. As they arrived in the dining area with Kesi eager to try the food in such a fancy place, they were approached by one of the staff who handed Matheus a note. He read it quickly and started back to their room. Druss gave him a questioning look.

"Not here, we're meeting someplace else".

They put on heavy cloaks to keep them warm for the short journey by horse drawn cart to Westberg. This was a small community that had sprung up just outside the city gates, along the Elber / Naga River. The Order was quite strict about anything that took place within the walls of Freiburg but in Westberg they allowed some of the activities precluded under the code of the Heldannic Order.

Once they were away from the city, Matheus explained the change of venue. Druss was just happy to be getting a chance to sit down with his mother, but Kesi was disappointed she had missed the chance to try "some a dat fancy cookin". Druss promised they would eat there another time. She looked at him with understanding. "An excitin time fer ye, getting de chance ta meet yer muma".

The cart made its way down the street which was bustling with people having a great time and moving from one Inn or bar to the next. They drew up at an Inn called "Joyce's" and walked inside. Druss looked around the room for his mother but could not see her. Matheus was already making his way to a vacant table, so the others joined him. They ordered some drinks and waited. Kesi broke the silence with observations and chatter, but Matheus sat straight and uneasy in his chair.

It was another forty minutes before she arrived and she looked very different, more feminine, without the armour. She too had made an effort equal to Matheus and was well presented. Kesi gave Druss a discreet smile. There was a very awkward start to the conversation, with Anya and Matheus being very courteous and polite. Anya knew of their work with the Experten as she was a member of the Heart, one of the four main branches of the Heldannic Order, which oversaw them. This meant that all those years Matheus had thought he had been keeping out of sight she had known all along where he was.

“If you wanted to stay hidden you didn’t do a very good job. Rule number one, go someplace where no one knows you and rule number two, change your name. You did neither” she laughed gently.

The friendly talk did not last very long, however, inevitably turning to the recent execution of Halvard. Anya had known Halvard and Elsa and was saddened to see that he had been captured. Matheus made this worse when he told her that he and Elsa had been married but he did not mention that they also had a son. She tried to defend her position, but Matheus would not hear of it. It was obvious to Druss that his father had been hurt by Anya leaving them to join the Order and was using the recent events to attack this decision.

“This is not why we’re here” interjected Druss in a low voice.

Anya sat calmly in her chair, her hands resting on the table, one atop the other. Matheus clamped his mouth shut to prevent the next volley of abuse from flying. Kesi interrupted the strained silence and started talking about the Cathedral of Vanya and Anya was happy for the distraction and for the chance to talk about the building which she admired greatly.

Druss shot his father an angry look and Matheus let his anger subside. A waiter came to their table, and they ordered some food and drinks. The conversation moved on through several topics, such as Druss’s time in Ethengar, his grandmother Asturi, his friend Smythe and the young wolf that had drunk the magical potion. Anya laughed at this tale, her famous dimples were on full display. He looked at his father who was staring at Anya with undisguised love. With civility restored, Druss and Kesi left the table, giving his parents time alone to talk. They walked to the bar and ordered another drink.

“It’s goin well, no?” Kesi asked once the drinks had arrived.

“I hope so. It’s not like they can fix the past and my mother is still committed to her vocation, but it might help heal some of the wounds” he replied.

“What about you, any wounds need healin?” she asked.

“No, I’m purfect mon, jus purfect”.

She hugged him tightly and pulled his head down to kiss him.

“Hey, hey. We’ll have none of that here. You want that carry on, you can get a room” shouted the bar man from across the counter.

Some of the patrons laughed at this “Come on Joyce you sound more like a Heldannic Knight every day. Brother Joyce we’ll have to start calling you”. Others joined in and Joyce accepted it in good cheer raising his hand in surrender.

When they felt they had left them alone long enough they walked back to the table. They were both quiet but seemed more at ease in each other’s company. They wrapped the evening up and Anya handed Matheus a leather bag that held the urn containing Halvard’s ashes.

“Where will you take it?” she asked.

“I was thinking the Grove” replied Druss.

She smiled at this “Ah yes, the Grove. Good choice. It’s a very special place”.

“So, we’ve heard” said Kesi teasingly.

“Right, well I have to get back now but I’m glad we got the chance to meet Kesi. You’ll look after Druss won’t you” said Anya blushing slightly.

“Ye can be sure a dat” she grinned, linking her arm with Druss.

They parted ways then and Druss thanked his mother for her help and saying he hoped they could meet again. She only smiled in response, and he understood from this that this was a one-time thing. They took the cart back to Freiburg and boarded the ferry to Zehlendorf the very next day.

They arrived at Matheus’s cabin and stayed the night before moving on to the Grove first thing the following morning. His father had wanted to stay at the cabin and allow them to scatter the ashes, but Druss knew the real reason. Going to the Grove meant being a stone’s throw away from Aralia and Matalia. Druss had insisted and Matheus, not wanting to make a scene in front of Kesi had agreed.

“She knows about Matalia” Druss told him. His father had not been happy about this. He was a private person and did not like people knowing his business. “She’s family” his son had reassured him.

They arrived at the Grove and Matheus suggested that Druss take Kesi to the hot springs. He remained behind and carried out some repair work on the ramshackle remains of his cabin.

“Just tear it down and start again. Fresh start. Make it better than before” suggested Kesi as she was leaving with Druss.

“What was that, offering my father advice on getting on with this life?” asked Druss when they were far enough away.

“Life? Wot are ye talkin about? I’m jus talkin about fixin up a cabin”.

Druss looked at her for a moment undecided, “Sure you were”. Then without warning he ran off ahead of her and shouted, “Come on last one there has to cook the dinner”.

“Hey, no fair mon. I don’t even know where we goin?” she complained running after him.

Druss had explained to Kesi about Matalia already, but he could not help giving her a reminder. “Try not to say anything about my mother. Matalia is too young to understand that we have a different mother, and I don’t want her asking questions about that. I want my father to come here more often so if there are no awkward questions, he might do that”.

“Too young? She’s almost fourteen. Ye tryin to control how things flow, pretty boy?” she said with a cocked eyebrow. “Dat never works. But don’t worry I won’t drop Matheus in the doo doo. Not intentionally, anyway”.

“Don’t make this about you and your father. This is different” he answered.

“De only difference is dat I didn’t have an older bruther to make him come back to me” she bit back.

“This was a bad idea. I wanted you to meet her but if you can’t behave then maybe we don’t go”.

She sighed “I’ll be good. It’s not de young one's fault she got caught between two mothers”. She had something on her mind and Druss was moved to ask her what she was thinking.

“We’re goin te have children someday, yes?”

He nodded, confirming what they had discussed before.

“When dey arrive, our boy and our gurl, you won’t abandon them will ye, ye won’t abandon me?”

“Of course, not”

When she had been satisfied, Druss picked up the pace so that they caught up with Matheus who was leading his horse ahead of them.

Kesi and Matalia got on very well. She was like a big sister to her, combing her hair and putting a fresh flower in it. She had also brought a necklace that she had made especially for her. Druss sat on a fallen tree and felt the stress leave his body. Aralia was on the other side of the clearing with Matheus talking. At bedtime he told Matalia the story of how he met Smythe the goblin. It was one of her favourites and she particularly liked how he fell down the ravine and got stuck because Druss would act the part of the young goblin being stuck and unable to free himself, grunting and whining in distress.

Matheus had told Druss his thoughts on meeting Anya again and because she had spent very little time with Druss growing up and had missed all the important milestones, she wanted him to tell her everything. He himself had missed a large chunk of his son's formative years when he had left him with Asturi to raise. Druss felt that the trip had been worthwhile as Matheus seemed more at ease and willing to contemplate returning, but only time would tell.

On the way back they found the highest point above the Grove which was up near the hot springs. Matheus stood on some rocks while Druss and Kesi stood close by. He removed the lid but then paused unexpectedly and replaced it.

"What's wrong?" asked Druss.

"I've changed my mind. I don't think it's right to spread them here. It shouldn't be our choice". He stepped down off the rock and placed the urn back in the leather bag. "I'll give them to Elsa. Let her decide what she wants to do".

It took them a few weeks to return to Grauenberg as they had to wait a few days to use the ferry which had been commandeered by the Heldannic Order for their own needs while their fleet was being rebuilt. The wizards that had attacked Freiburg had been identified as Alphatian and it was with their help that Halvard and his forces had almost succeeded in overthrowing the Order of Knights. Matheus had shared with Druss and Kesi that Halvard had paid for assurances from King Erul Zaar of Helskir, on the Isle of Dawn to send his fleet when the time was right. The King had betrayed Halvard and the free people. He had taken the money but had not fulfilled his side of the bargain. A thoroughly despicable man was Matheus's assessment.

Arriving back in Grauenberg they found that some new Experten had arrived to replace the loss of two members who had died trying to purge a coven of witches. It was very difficult to locate them as they were often hidden amongst the populace of the Heldannic Territories who protected them for a variety of reasons such as providing help as midwives and performing divination spells to forecast a possible future. Another big reason was that anyone the Knights was trying to kill was worth protecting.

Matheus's next assignment was not with the Experten however. He had been asked by the Grauenberg military to come with them to Hayavik. Knowing his background, they had a need for his experience with a matter that had arisen with the people of Ethengar.

After the war against the Partisans had been won, many of Halvard's supporters had fled across the border into Ethengar. Their presence there had obviously been unwelcome and they had been massacred by the tribesmen and their bodies had been dragged back to Hayavik. Grauenberg were sending a force to ensure they went no further. When they arrived however the horsemen had withdrawn back to their land leaving behind a clear message in the form of the mutilated bodies of the dead settlers that had been strewn across the ruins of Hayavik which itself had not recovered from a previous invasion almost seventy years ago.

With little to do but bury the deceased they were soon on the way back to the safety of Grauenberg.

About six months later they heard news of 'The Priest', the name they had given to the nosferatu that had escaped them. The Experten were deep in a mine that was crawling with an assortment of undead, trying to end him once and for all. While they were gone, their base camp had been attacked and when Druss returned, he had found everyone dead, including Kesi. He saw the puncture wounds on her neck and cradled her head in his lap. Flashbacks of how he had held Ransen, his grandmother's faithful bodyguard as it died, intruded in his sorrow. He knew what was likely to happen when his father and the Experten returned.

Against all his training, everything he knew he should do, he wrapped her in her blanket and carried her into the woods. He found a place to put her body, setting it down gently, a part of him still hoping he was wrong and that she would again open her eyes. He sat with her awhile, her face gray, her eyes still closed, no sign of life. He thought back on their time in Freiburg and Landfall and wished he had never met her, wished that she was still alive, already missing her crooked sarcastic smile. He was heartbroken.

Hiding her body as best he could he walked back to the clearing where the attack had taken place. His father and the Experten were there, and they were disposing of the other bodies. He could see that wooden stakes had been driven into their chests and their bodies were even now being doused in oil.

"Ah Druss, I thought we had lost you" said Masarai in relief. "Kesi?"

He shook his head.

"Did you do the right thing?" his father asked.

"I did".

Matheus looked at him closely and then began loading his gear back onto his horse. They would not stay here tonight.

Mika and Masarai took him under their care, seeing how devastated he was by the loss of Kesi.

Matheus was silent, his eyes cold.

He dreamt of her most nights, and it was almost a year to the day when he saw her again in the flesh.

They had been further north near Altendorf when they had found another nest of undead, and Kesi was amongst them. Druss felt all eyes on him. Mika, Masarai, Ventura and his father, boring into him, disappointed in him, feeling betrayed and lied to. There was no more time for accusations, and they went about the business before them.

Druss helped where he could, shooting arrows with deadly accuracy and wielding his longsword with all the skill his father had instilled in him. His eyes were darting around searching. He was looking for Kesi, he had lost sight of her when they had engaged the undead. He saw her racing along a corridor as she passed the room, he was in. The figure of a huge man in close pursuit, his father. He felt the blood drain from his face and ran after them.

He jogged down the corridor listening and then he heard the sound of a struggle. Coming to a doorway he saw his father standing over Kesi. She screamed as Matheus pinned her arms by grasping both her wrists in one massive hand and pressing them into her belly. She snarled like a feral animal but was helpless to escape while he almost nonchalantly looked to his belt to choose a silver tipped wooden stake. Druss ran into the room as his father raised it above his head ready to strike.

“No!” he shouted and continued quickly forward.

Matheus shook his head, his face held determination but also understanding. “There’s no other way”.

He turned back to Kesi who was squirming in desperation and raised the stake again but before he could bring it down, Druss grabbed him, seizing his father’s wrist, the other arm wrapped around his neck trying to pull him away. Druss was strong and he had seen how strong his father was when had dealt with ‘The Priest’, but to actually feel that strength himself, he was still shocked. When he had been wrestling with his father he knew now that his father had been holding back.

Matheus held a struggling Kesi in place, while at the same time preventing his son from upsetting his balance. “What are you at?” he shouted annoyed.

“Don’t kill her” Druss gasped trying to force his father’s hand further away but not succeeding in budging it even an inch.

“She’s already dead. I’m doing her a kindness”.

“Aaaaargh” Druss roared with all his might, taking the arm away from his father’s neck and using both hands in the attempt to overpower his father’s one arm. His father’s arm began to move but then Matheus released Kesi and stood flinging his son away with an angry shout.

Kesi scrambled away, backing herself into a corner, hissing in terror.

Druss was on his feet again and charging towards his father. Matheus let him come and braced for impact as Druss grabbed him around the waist, grunting with the effort to twist and throw him. Matheus dropped the stake and adjusted his weight twisting in his son’s body lock and breaking free. “Druss, stop this. What are you doing?”

“First my mother, then my sister, you’re not taking her from me” said Druss setting himself and swinging a right cross that caught his father, who was shocked by the accusation, full on the jaw.

Matheus barely budged. “I’ll give you that one” he said in a low voice.

“Just let her go, she won’t hurt anyone” said Druss his fists raised, his chin tucked ready for a fight.

“She means that much to you?” asked Matheus.

“Everything” Druss replied.

His father’s stance softened and sighing he turned to Kesi. “Go, little one, far from here. If I see you again not even my son will stop me”.

Kesi’s fevered eyes darted from Matheus to Druss. She got quickly to her feet and bolted for the open door.

“Thank you” said Druss when she was gone.

His father turned back to him and grunted in reply as he stooped to pick up the silver tipped stake that lay on the floor.

They returned to the main chamber where the others were soon gathered. It had been a successful hunt. All the undead had been slain, their lair cleared out.

Druss and Matheus shared a look that said, “Almost all”.