

House of Pryce

Wil Clayton

Long Shadows on a Wide Plain series

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Thank you,
Wil Clayton

Chapter 1

The head of Lord Pryce sat on the ornate carving tray, his skin shrivelled and tight after an afternoon in the oven. His illustrious beard that he had oiled and dyed everyday, was now sheared and thrown to the pale. His radiant, commanding eyes replaced by handfuls of herbs and bread that had browned and hardened, forming a crisp and fragile crust inside the eye sockets. A single, fine slice separate his scalp from the rest, held in place by a delicate crown of dough that circled the top of his head.

Valtteri took his favourite hunting knife from his belt, a heavy blade, slightly curved, and perfectly balanced by its decorative stone handle. He turned its spine to scalp and tapped it, the crown of dough crumbled. The edge of the knife wiggled its way into the incision and separated the scalp from the head revealing the delicately, steamed brain within.

The dining room became filled with the scent of cinnamon, garlic and sweet flower seeds as the steam escaped from the once Lord Pryce. A few moments later, the choking fire of burning root oil took the air from the room.

Sayjin cough and spluttered from one end of the dining table and grabbed for his bronze goblet.

“Move that thing away from me, will you?” he choked, gulping at his wine.

Sayjin reached for the cane he had found in an upstairs bedroom and went to push the tray away. Valtteri grabbed the cane before it could make contact and held it tight in his grip.

“Please, friend,” laughed Valtteri, “I want us all to celebrate in this, our first meal as the new Lords of the House.”

“A fitting tribute to our ascension to the ruling class,” smiled Nerys from the other end of the dining table, sipping from her wooden goblet.

The impostors sat around their newly claimed dining table, loudly celebrating their conquest, while the last of true named Pryce hung, silent, in the meat locker beneath the manor house. Stripped, cleaned and placed on hooks, waiting to be consumed over the months to come.

The air cleared from the dining hall and Sayjin could breathe freely, again. He looked around the walls, the room was not the largest he had seen, a table that could sit eight took up half of the space, the other half was filled by a large hearth and two well crafted leather chairs. The hearth crackled and popped as it kept the slight chill of autumn from the room.

Dark shadows danced across the stone walls, given strange shapes by animal heads and ornate wooden decorations that had been hung by the previous owners. Sayjin then looked at the head of the noble on the table and smile cut across his lips.

“A toast,” cheered Valtteri raising his golden chalice, “to the Lord Pryce who may never learnt to swing a sword, but tried to the noble end.”

“To Lord Pryce,” cheered Sayjin and Nerys.

“To the Diamond Heart for leaving us this bounty in their wake,” laughed Sayjin.

“To the Diamond Heart,” cheered the others.

“And of course, to the Council,” smiled Nerys, “and their wondrously, capricious gods for bringing this madness.”

“To the Council,” the two others cheered and all drank deep from their goblets.

“Now, my blood,” said Nerys lifting her plate to Valtteri, “the feast.”

Valtteri took a serving knife and carefully split the brain into two, shared equally between Valtteri and Nerys. A leg roast from a different, far less important, Pryce was cut into thin slices, the juices flowing rich and free as the still bloody meat was placed on the plates.

Sayjin looked down at his plate of roots and leaves, which he had picked that day from the garden just beyond the windows of the dining room. He wanted to go hunting again, but woods had become a circus since the world ended. A man hunched in the bushes, slowly tracking a deer, was now likely to take a blow to the back of head from some child with a stick.

A bleat came from between Sayjin’s legs, he looked down, their sat his new ward looking up with its light brown eyes. Sayjin took a root from his plate dangled it in front of the goat and as the creature went to bite on the bulb he pulled it away. The goat stared at him and bleated again, pitifully.

“Take it,” ordered Sayjin.

“Must that thing stay inside,” sighed Nerys as Valtteri found his seat at the middle of the table.

“Sam is our guest,” said Sayjin as he placed the root in front of the of Sam again.

Sam lunged for it. This time Sayjin saw the goat move faster, at least that was what he thought.

“That’s right,” Sayjin cheered to the goat, “you must take what’s yours.”

The goat bleated again.

“You do know Sam is a female?” said Nerys.

“It’s short for Samantha,” growled Sayjin.

That morning Sayjin and Valtteri had stood in front of the animal pen, hunting knives in hand. The yard had been emptied by the previous owners, except for a lone goat. Sayjin was determined to have a fresh kill for the grand feast and the beast that sat in front of him would do nicely.

Sayjin unlatched the gate and moved towards the goat, waiting for the beast to try and escape its confines, a last desperate attempt to live another day. But, instead, the goat just stood in front of him, its eyes unfocused, munching on a mouthful of grass. It did not run for the gate, still wide open, or try to retreat to the back of the pen as the predator approached. It just sat there, dumb and unaware.

Sayjin yelled at the beast, waving his hand in the air. The goat bleated. Sayjin made himself large and intimidating, brandishing the knife at it. The goat found another mouthful of grass.

“Run,” he shouted, “bite at me. Kick me. Do something.”

“Just slit its throat,” snapped Valtteri.

Sayjin lowered himself in front of the goat, it did not move. Sayjin stood up, disgusted.

“You do it,” snapped Sayjin.

Valtteri stepped over the small fence into the pen and grabbed the goat into a lock, it started to bleat. He placed his heavy blade to its throat and stopped for a moment.

“Why doesn’t it kick?” yelled Valtteri, “goats are wild creatures that kick and bite. This one just sits there.”

“The poor thing.”

“What?”

"This one has its fight taken from it by these damn lords," hissed Sayjin angrily and then added firmly, "what are we if we do not help?"

Valtteri put his knife to the throat the beast, not wanting any part of such nonsense.

"Stop," yelled Sayjin angrily and leapt at Valtteri.

Valtteri stunned by the sudden advancement, pulled back from the goat.

"When it is fair," said Sayjin, "I will kill it and feast upon the flesh, but not til then."

And so, Sayjin had taken in the poor creature and named it Sam. Sayjin became determined to remind the goat of what it was. It had only been a day, but he knew he was making progress when the goat had struggle to escape his arms as it was carried into the dining room.

Sayjin dangled the root in front of Sam for a third time.

"Again," he commanded.

The goat bleated and looked away, tired of the game. Sayjin sighed and chucked the root to floor and Sam snatched it up and started to munch.

"Give me the knife," said Nerys, "I'll finish it off."

"No, when the times come I will be the one to do it."

"It's the walls, I tell you, turns wild creatures into tamed men," said Valtteri placing a moist piece of grey jelly into mouth, "not that I am complaining. This one is perfectly tender."

"The masters of the house had quite the collection of spices and herbs in the cellar," said Nerys, "we will be eating well for months."

The mention of time brought a heavy silence across the table as the three sipped from their fine cups.

"That long, then?" asked Sayjin to the silence.

"Quiet," snapped Nerys.

"Well, we have had one day as Lord's of the House," shrugged Valtteri, "I suppose, tomorrow will be two."

The three were wanderers by nature, living amongst the trees, sleeping under the stars, never staying in the same place for more than a few days, that was the life they knew and loved.

While the three had cheered their taking of the manor house as great victory, all knew the truth, silently. It was a retreat from a world that had been turned on its head. The Order of the Diamond Heart, the keepers of the god's peace, had left their posts, retreating to the kingdom of the God's Isle far to the west. And with them gone, the law of gods were gone as well, men were now free, after so many generations being chained to the gods.

At first, the three had ignored the affairs of the men, they had never been held by of the laws of gods as they walked the tight jungles and jagged hills of the Stormlands and the vast, open plains of the eastern kingdoms. Unfortunately, they started to find their world invaded by the newly freed men. Now that they had been released of their bonds, the men had decided to try their hand at thievery, murder and all the other sins they had been denied for so long.

It was not that the three were fearful of the newcomers, it was more that they had become exhausted. Slaying thirty men a day was amusing when the chaos had first erupted, but after several weeks of cooking pots being knocked into fires and quiet evenings interrupted by loud idiots waving knives and screaming nonsense, the three had been forced to admit defeat. The three were skilled, but the men had the endless numbers.

"For over a hundred years we've wandered the roads of the eastern kingdoms," began Nerys, her red eyes focused on the candle that sat on the table in front of her, "corrupting the Lesser Men, turning them against each other for sport."

"Nerys, the corruptor of souls, they would cry," said Valtteri pushing his empty plate away.

"Valtteri, devourer of the innocent, they screamed as they fled," laughed Nerys, then the laughter left her face and it became dark, "but in a few days the men of the worthless gods have caused more havoc than we have with a hundred years of hard work and effort."

"Makes you feel small," laughed Valtteri.

"I don't like feeling small," she said, softly, and then added more loudly, "I'll eat till I feel large again."

Nerys stood, grabbed the tray with the remaining roast and dropped it in front of her.

Nerys had the appearance of a tall, fair skinned woman with large broad shoulder that tapered down to her a narrow waist. Her hair alternated from brown to black as it tumbled down her to shoulders and onto her large breasts. She was still dressed in her travelling clothes, a simple shirt and trousers.

Her twin, Valtteri, had a form that was in complete contrast. A large, muscular man with dark brown skin, his body square, as was his face. His black hair was cut to the scalp leaving just a hint of its existence as it glistened in the light. He wore a blue cloak made of finest thread, which he had found earlier that day. The cloth pulled tight across his shoulders, barely able to fit.

Under the cloak Valtteri wore his normal travelling clothes. He had tried to find something more elegant to wear with his new cloak, but Pryce and his sons had been slender men and after tearing apart a few shirts he, reluctantly, took back his travelling clothes.

The one thing the physical appearance of Valtteri and Nerys had in common were their large, round, red eyes. The mark of the Demon blood that flowed in their veins.

Sayjin, on the other hand, had simple, dull grey eyes, a slender, athletic form with the golden skin of the Reisu, the people who called the Stormlands home. His head natural bald and had been since he was a born.

Sayjin had stumbled across the twins, several years earlier while hunting a wild cat in the southern jungles of the Stormlands. The twins had mistaken him for an easy kill and after a few, unpleasant words and unfortunate wounds to both parties the three had become good friends.

All were efficient killers, which was on full display the previous day when they had taken the fortified manor house, protected by twelve trained guards and many more untrained nobles. Sayjin had scaled the stone walls without difficulty, easily gripping the small holes in the surface, using them to propel himself up and over without aid. As he did, Nerys and Valtteri hid amongst the trees and setting loose arrows, landing shoots, cleanly, between the small gaps in the guards armour, catching them in the eyes and throat.

Once inside the wall, Sayjin cut down those that had not retreated into the house before kicking open the large wooden gate and letting his companions enter. It was not long until the halls became stained with the blood of men, women and children. Their bargains and pleas for mercy ignored as the three butchered each one.

Those that hid were rooted by Sayjin's keen hearing. In cupboards, under beds, in crevices behind paintings. None were safe and none were spared. A few hours later, the sun

had set and the manor house lay silent except for the calm, quiet footsteps of the three. The house was now theirs.

Sam butted its head against Sayjin's hand the tip of its horn dug into his palm.

"Good," Sayjin cheered, "you're learning. Did you see that, Valtteri? I've been gored."

Sayjin placed his plate on the floor with remains of his meal.

"A Month," announced Valtteri.

"A Month?" asked Nerys.

"A month til I turn on both of you all out of restlessness," Valtteri laughed, "but for now, I will go to bed."

"Pleasant dreams, my blood," said Nerys as she always did.

"Sleep well," said Sayjin quietly his thoughts lost in the flames of the fire.

Valtteri left the room by the two large ornate doors, the sound of his heavy boots echoed down the hall, slowly growing fainter.

Nerys cut at the shrinking lump of meat on the plate in front of her. Sayjin sipped. The delicate, sweet taste of the fine wine danced in his mouth as his finger traced the curves of the goblet. The comfortable chair he sat on was stuffed with duck feathers and excepted his body, fully, within a gentle embrace. The fire was welcoming and his body soften as it warmth worked it ways through his muscles.

"The life of a lord is ours," said Sayjin to the fire, a distance in his voice.

"So it is," sighed Nerys.

Chapter 2

Valtteri stuck his head out of the attic window as Sayjin let another flaming arrow lose. The arrow sailed high and landed in the woods just beyond the walls, the tops of which were decorated with fresh, rotting corpses. Valtteri swatted at Sam who bit at his legs, trying to drive the large intruder from its room.

"What are you doing?" asked Valtteri as he struggled with Sam.

“Getting rid of the trees,” said Sayjin as he pulled another arrow from the metal bucket that was his quiver.

Sayjin had awoken that morning, Sam nestled beneath his arms, he strode over to the window and saw the forest again. Everyday, it mocked him as it continued to run free beyond the walls.

Today, Sayjin decided, he had enough of it and had proceeded to jam two planks of wood between the roof and the protrusion that covered the attic window. Convinced the planks were sturdy enough, him he had set up a bucket of arrows wrapped in cloth, another pale of lamp oil and a small brazier of coals he had found in one of the bedrooms.

All morning Sayjin had stood atop his perch and set his arrows onto the trees.

“You’re acting the fool,” said Valtteri, “get down before you fall.”

“I will when I am done.”

Sayjin released another burning arrowing into the woods, Sam bit hard into Valtteri’s leg tearing the pants and drawing blood.

“Get your beast off me,” shouted Valtteri in pain.

“Sam is one of us, now,” said Sayjin, “she does as she pleases.”

Valtteri tried to kick the goat away, but missed. Fortunately for him, Sam decided the point had been made and went back to its bed of hay in the corner of the room.

“A forest isn’t going to just catch fire,” sighed Valtteri.

“There’s a dead tree just beyond the walls,” said Sayjin pointing a brown lump amongst the green, “if I can hit that, then this whole thing’ll start burning.”

Sayjin let another arrow fly towards his target. It went wide as had all the others, but Sayjin simply reached for another.

“Don’t break your neck, we still need you in the fight.”

“These planks are tight, don’t worry.”

Valtteri lent against the window frame and looked out over the forest. It was the first time he had come up to the attic, which Sayjin and his goat had taken as their own. The size of the room did not accommodate his size, nor the stairs and hallway which led here. So, Valtteri had decided to stay on the lower levels and leave the place to the goat. But that morning, the

arrows that whistled over head had forced him up the tight stairs to see what madness had taken his friend.

Valtteri stared out into the domain of Pryce that was now his. The woods did not reach far to the north. It gave way, quickly, to hills and farmlands, the manor house sat on the forest border of the Stormlands, to the south, and the Kingdom of Douruh, to the north. The former Lord Pryce likely swore fealty to whichever of the two kings were at his gate that day, but there were no kings now, and even if there were the new Lord Pryce did not know how to kneel.

The forest stretch off to the east and had become home to a large number of Lowmen, who had started to come several weeks ago. The first of them had thought they could secure the manor house with groups of two or three. Believing the place abandoned, they leapt over the walls haphazardly using ropes and ladders, only to discover the serious error they had made. As time past, the groups became to better with their tactics and the numbers grew, three became ten and curiosity became ruthless determination.

Nerys, a week earlier, had decided she would take no more. When the Lowmen came next, she took them alive and then bound them to posts on top of the walls for all to see, their tongues cut from their mouths. The bodies would hung and screamed for days as starvation and birds set upon them. The message was quickly received by those in the forest and the attacks had stopped.

“It was the first days of summer when the Diamond Heart left,” said Valtteri, “now the chill of high winter is here.”

Sayjin did not respond, Valtteri would often talk to himself when he was listless and he talked to himself a lot these days. Sayjin focused, instead, on his target and let another arrow fly.

“So, much time has passed now. I wonder, how many of cities are still standing? I wonder, what the Lowmen doing without their gods?”

“Moving forward,” said Sayjin, “hopefully.”

“You still cling to your hopes.”

“It is all I have,” replied Sayjin and found another arrow.

“When I was young the Diamond Heart had just started to take the lands. City by city they approached from the west and each city flung opens it gates and welcomed them in. The

Diamond would bring the peace, the Lowmen cried, and free them from the wars that had taken so many,” said Valtteri, “and they did but not in the way any of us thought.

“The Heart swore fealty to the ones that sat on the thrones, saying they had come not to conquer, only to uphold the law of gods and keep the peace the Lowmen so desperately wanted. And they did, and as the years passed, the city guards became fat and lazy, the armies became small and unorganised, until the whole of the army of Galla could be hosted at a single table.

“War was done and life was good. When those of us who did not accept the chains came the Lowmen would cry for the Heart to save them and the Heart would come without question. The world was safe for one and all.”

“I know of the corruption that has swallowed my people,” spat Sayjin, “I do not need to hear it again.”

“You’re child of the Heart, like any other Lowman,” said Valtteri, “you do not know yourself or your people. There is no corruption, before the Heart it was the Emperors, before them the Saquaari, before them the Dragons, before them the Demons. Your people have not been corrupted, weakness and servitude are in your being.

“There are exceptions, such as yourself, I will concede, but such Lowman are few in the herd.”

“You may think me naive or a fool,” said Sayjin taking aim, “but I don’t care what others think of me. I won’t give up on my people. Someone must hold the last hope for our future.

“You always claim we are weak and without worth, Valtteri, but there is one thing that separates us from those that called themselves our masters. The Dragons, the Saquaari, the Heart, are all gone, while we are still here, even your kind is coming to an end, you can not deny that.”

Sayjin let an arrow flying and it hit the mark, lodging firm into the dead bark of the dead tree. The pair held waited as they watched the bark started to smoke. After a short while, though, the black cloud dissipated and the forest was left standing.

Sayjin seized another arrow from the pale and dunked the cloth into the oil.

“The Lowmen are resilient, that is true,” said Valtteri.

“If only that was enough,” sighed Sayjin.

Valtteri went back to looking at the forest in silence.

“I can tell you what is happening out there,” continued Sayjin, “my brothers make the same mistake that have been repeated throughout time. It is not that is what we must do, it is because my people do not remember their better selves. Right now, fools will be fighting over whatever scraps have survived the end.”

Valtteri just nodded and Sayjin fired another arrow.

“Those fools will become kings,” Sayjin continued, “the kings will put their faith and love into laws, gold and gods, then the laws, gold and the gods will become monsters in their own right and they will bring an end to it all, again.”

“It is your nature.”

“It isn’t,” challenged Sayjin, “it is just all that is left after so many lifetimes being told that there is nothing more. I love my people, Valtteri, even if they have lost their way.”

“I think your love blinds you.”

Sayjin was quite as he lit another arrow, steadied himself and let it fly. The arrow was caught by the wind and thrown into the green leaves of the trees.

“That was last of them,” sighed Sayjin.

“Well, at least the morning is gone, now we only have the afternoon.”

“Help me, won’t you,” said Sayjin as he handed the empty bucket to Valtteri.

“The Saquaari had a saying about the end of the world,” said Valtteri and recited the words, “When the protectors are dead and gone, then the fields will burn and the sun will turn’.”

“Of course,” laughed Sayjin, “the world would be nothing without them to rule it and yet here we are, fields unburnt, the sun, still blinding.”

Sayjin fell silent as he tried to hand Valtteri the brazier of coals, the metal slipped from his grasp and tumbled down the roof into the yard below. Sayjin shrugged at the mess below.

“Protectors?” spat Sayjin dismissively continuing his thought, “who were the Saquaari to claim themselves the protectors of anything?”

“They took what they wished when the Dragons and Demons were done slaughtering each other. The names, the lands, it was all theirs.”

“Then I proclaim myself the protector of the house,” laughed Sayjin, “and when I am gone the roof will collapse and the walls will come crumble. A statement just as true.”

Valtteri laughed as Sayjin pulled himself through the window into the attic.

“The last of the self proclaimed protectors, Valtteri,” said Sayjin, “that is what I wish for my people.”

“Well, we have done a good job with Lord Pryce, haven’t we?”

“And we are the protectors of the house.”

“The last of its protectors.”

Nerys sat in the library reading a book on engineering and machining from The First Kingdom. She always enjoyed numbers. The cold, hard truth they contained always comforted her in the madness of her existence. In fact, she had spent many nights devising a way to precisely and formally measure the fiendishness of her actions. A series of complex calculations taking into account the suffering and pain caused, increased then by a factor of how far the deeds had spread amongst the Lower Men. Her numbers were so well calculated, so joyously accurate in their measure, she knew Ka, the great engineer, would have approved.

The numbers were lost on Sayjin and Valtteri, but this did not stop her delighting in recounting her deeds concluding her tales with the exact total of her evil. Though, the joy for the numbers had left her since the retreat of the Diamond Heart.

A month earlier, she had sat, alone, in the library with the fine, wooden writing set, once owned Lord Pryce, now hers. She had taken the delicate parchment and large feather quill and attempted to calculate the depravity the Heart had wrought on the world. How much suffering and pain, over how much the time inflicted, over how the number of effected people.

The unnecessary death and mindless destruction, the grief of those left behind, the countless generations that would be left to fester.

The numbers grew larger and larger until, finally, they would no longer fit on her parchment, numbers so large she thought them unthinkable. Nerys had picked up the wooden tray of the writing set and flung it into the fire. The cold, hard numbers contained the cold, hard truth. She, her life, her deeds were all, clearly and irrefutably, irrelevant.

“When the protectors are dead and gone, my blood,” announced Valtteri as he marched into the room, Sayjin followed behind, “then fields will burst with fruit and the sun warm us with a its loving gift.”

Nerys looked up from the page in her book.

“I have decided to build this catapult,” she said, ignoring her blood, “we have the wood, I just need the iron.”

“You won’t have time for that,” said Sayjin.

“What has taken you two, now?” asked Nerys, frustrated at the interruption.

“A vision,” said Valtteri, “I have decided to join Sayjin in his noble life cause and save the Lowmen.”

“The house has driven you mad, my blood.”

“This is the moment, Nerys,” said Valtteri, “a moment to become the protectors of the Lesser Races, just as the Saquaari took the world from the Dragons, we will take the land from the gods.”

Nerys laughed and shook her head.

“The last of the damned protectors,” stated Sayjin, hardness in his voice, “we will rule like none other before, we will bring the strength back to my people.”

“Two Children, a Lesser and a goat,” puzzled Nerys.

“There are weaker men in the cities, right now, building thrones to sit upon,” said Valtteri, “why not us?”

“To what end?” sighed Nerys.

“The greatest end there could be,” smiled Sayjin.

Nerys waited.

“To prove that you, Nerys, have always been right.”

Since Sayjin had joined the twins in their travels, one disagreement had always divide them. What was the worth of the Lesser Men that clung to the land without purpose. Valtteri would always listen to Sayjin’s defence of his people before meeting it with a polite shrug or some soft words of disagreement, but Nerys was not so kind. She knew the worth of the Lesser Men. None. And she would dismiss anything else as pure nonsense.

“We will build a kingdom were the Lesser Men can be great people I have always claimed they could be,” continued Sayjin, “if such a thing is possible.”

“A chance to show you the worth of your people, Sayjin?” smiled Nerys.

“Exactly,” said Sayjin.

Nerys thought for a moment.

“But your people have no worth, I already know this,” concluded Nerys dismissively, “it would be a waste of our efforts to build such a kingdom.”

“If my people are as you say, then at least they would be in position to follow your kind as there new masters.”

“A land ruled by the Children,” said Nerys, quietly to herself.

There was a moment as Nerys face came alive.

“Oh, Sayjin,” smiled Nerys, “you know me too well. How could I refuse such a proposition?”

Nerys moved her focus from her two companions to the map on the wall. It was not an accurate map, like the ones she preferred when navigating the rivers and paths of the kingdoms, it was a symbolic map showing the manor house and the holdings that fell within the sway of Lady Pryce.

A trading post on the banks of the Sulla River with a small dock, it would have attracted some peasants and traders making it a hamlet of about thirty or so people. A hunter's lodge and tannery in a small wooded area to the south east, not fortified, it may have brought some new inhabitants in recent months or burnt to the ground by thugs, both equally as likely. The town of Finestone, the only major settlement in thirty miles, a source of men and coin, but are either of any worth now? An iron and coal mine just north in hills that would be prize to hold, but how to hold it without a sizeable force of swords and men? A vineyard that export the famous Red of Sulla vintage, if the barrels had not been plundered the wine might be suitable payment for a host of mercenaries.

Nerys was the unacknowledged leader of the three. Valtteri would often turn to her with his vague ideas and strange visions and she would find the value in them, if there was any, and devise a plan. And there was value in this vision, a value she did not want to disclose to Sayjin or her blood.

Nerys had changed in the months since she was forced behind the walls of the manor house by the gods she had ridiculed. The shame had tarnished her and her work and she was no longer satisfied with the trifling schemes that upset a handful of Lesser Men, in a unknown village in the between nothing and some place. If she was to leave her new found exile and return to the world, it would have to be for something that would make her numbers so large they would eclipse any that had come before.

"A kingdom," declared Nerys to the map.

"A kingdom," nodded Valtteri.

"The last to rule," added Sayjin.

"Then, where do we start?" asked Valtteri.

"We start by rallying the Lesser Men to our cause," declared Nerys, "I propose the following. Each of us choose a place in my broken dominion and take it in the name of the new kingdom. The ones who occupy it now must swear fealty to our house, our rule, none other."

"But there is something very important you have forgotten, my blood," said Valtteri.

"And what is that?" snapped Nerys.

"Who will be the king of this new land?"

“I did not forget, I thought it would be evident there would be no king,” said Nerys, dismissively.

“Oh no, my blood, such a title should not be given unearned. So, I suggest the first to claim a holding in the name of our new kingdom should be the one to be regent, game to lighten our heavy task.”

“But a title will be in name only,” said Sayjin, “our kingdom will not need a king or queen.”

“Of course,” smiled Valtteri.

“If you insist, as long as it is only ceremonial,” said Nerys turning from the map, “then, to demonstrate their obedience one of the Lesser Men must carry a wreath of flowers to the manor house and lay it at the front gates. No one may escort their vassal and they must place the wreath of their own freewill. Choose your colour and find one to lay to it, the game will be simple.”

“Wonderful,” laughed Valtteri enjoying the purpose he had found, “I will take the colour blue, blue flowers are much easier to find during the winter months and, I think, I will take the winery.”

“Then, red will be my colour,” said Sayjin, “I seek allies in the forest that are not on this map. It is within our domain, though, do not worry.”

“Then I will take orange,” declared Nerys, “and I will head to the town of Finestone and see what remains.”

The three agreed and the next day they prepare for their journey.

Sayjin left Sam a large plate of roots in the attic and laid down some new hay, he would not be gone for long. Sam bleated and butted Sayjin, forcefully. Sayjin nodded, approvingly, and rubbed her head before closing the door behind him.

Valtteri put his ill fitting cloak away in his closet, he would not need again it until his coronation. He then found his rapier and donned his leather. He was ready to tame the Lowmen.

Nerys sat in the library looking into the fire, thinking on the plan. She pulled the long grey hair from her head. Two hundred years had passed her. Now, she sat forgotten by a world she

thought had feared her. The Children of Linyu, the one blessed with the red eyes of the Demon, but cursed with the form of the Lesser Men, were becoming so few many believed them all dead. She felt like time and fate was moving against her and her kind, but she may have found a way to fight back.

The three met in front of the wooden gate, bidding each other pleasant travels. Sayjin left south into the forest, Nerys took the road north, while Valtteri vanished into the trees, heading east.

Chapter 3

Nerys took the road north as it weaved its way lazily through the low, bare hills of southern Douruh. She kept her eyes on the road ahead, if danger came then it would and she would deal with it. Nerys never concern herself with such trivial matters.

Nerys pulled her long, brown cloak around her to keep back a cold winds that whipped across the land.

Occasionally, Nerys came across a ravaged cart, its good stripped, its mules lay slain next to it. The remains of the owners sat bloodied and rotting amongst the splinters, maggots feasting, happily, on the corpses. A waste of good meat, Nerys thought to herself, keeping her pace as she passed by.

The day went and the hills became decorated with fields, here and there. The crops had become overgrown with weeds as the men who had cared to harvest them had been lost in the chaos. The orchards, though, appeared to be cared for, still, by some unseen hand and the trees had been stripped of their fruit. A few shoddy traps had been laid to keep away unwary trespassers. Nerys inspected the trigger of a spring loaded trap and look another trap just few feet away, the triggers could easily be switched without much effort, of an amusing game to play on the ghosts that cared for the trees, but then shook herself from her old, small ways. She must stay focused on Finestone.

Dusk grew close, in the distant on top of the largest hill was the town of Finestone ringed by a wall of hard lumber. Without breaking her stride Nerys followed the road to the front gate, her hood pulled over her face.

“Who approaches?” came the voice a man on top of the town wall.

“My name is Nerys, I seek refuge.”

Nerys lowered her hood.

“We are full, you had best keep moving.”

“It is getting dark and the roads are not safe. You must let me stay the night, I will be gone by morning.”

“We do not let strangers into our town, best keep movin’.”

“Who is in charge here? Get your captain. He will see there is no threat here.”

“Captain will be coming by at dusk, you can wait if you want, but it’s a waste of time.”

“I have time.”

Nerys stood at the gate, lifelessly still, the sun continued its dying march across the sky. The guard watched, fidgeting slightly in his place, he seemed to be uncomfortable with his new guest.

“Where have you come from?” asked the guard to break the silent.

“I was using a farmhouse down the road a day as a haven, but I lost it to some bandits. I only barely escaped with my life.”

“You’ve done well to survive this long.”

“I can protect myself.”

The guard cleared his throat and continued to shift in his place, Nerys remained still and silent.

There was a sound from behind the wall.

“Captain, there’s a girl here who wants to be let in,” shouted the guard and Nerys flinched under her robes and gritted her teeth, she hated when Lower Men dared to call her a girl.

There were some creaking of wood and then a solid man dressed in polished, plate mail appeared on the wall draped in a purple silk cape, a shining helm with a large plume of red rested, proudly, under his arm.

“Greetings, lass,” said the captain with a broad smile.

“My name is Nerys,” replied Nerys bluntly, “I seek refuge in your town for the night.”

“The gates are closed and are staying closed til the Heart return. You can camp by the gate, if you wish we will watch over you from here, but by morning you must move on.”

“That is not enough, I seek bread and safety.”

“These times are dangerous, I cannot help every girl who comes begging at my gate.”

A whistling sound cut through the air and a throwing knife was suddenly firmly planted deep in the captain’s right eye. He screamed as his body spasmed and fell back off the wall.

“Stop, where you are or you will be as dead as your captain,” shouted Nerys to guard her right arm holding a throwing blade at the ready, “now get the gate open.”

“Open the gate,” spluttered the guard as he look desperately at the captain’s body behind the wall and then back to the woman that had her blade trained on him.

The wooden gate swung open slightly and Nerys entered swiftly. Two guards set upon her. She met one with a kick setting him off balance and then quickly grabbed the arm of the other, twisting it from it socket, the man screamed and released the sword in his hand.

Nerys looked around and counted, four other men, just as she had thought, the town was not well guarded.

“If you stay where you are you will not be harmed,” shouted Nerys and the men froze, “good, now where is your leader?”

There was silence as the men stood shocked.

“In the hall,” stuttered a young man finally.

“Good, black haired boy, you will take me, the rest of you clean up this mess,” snapped Nerys walking over the captain and held the body down with her foot and wrenched the dagger from his eye, he screamed.

“It is best you don’t tell anyone else know about this until I clear this with your leader”, said Nerys hard and firm cleaning her blade on captains cloak, “you don’t need people to find out you could no protect them from a girl.”

The men looked at her, mouths gapped, the captain was still writhing on the ground. Nerys shook her head at pathetic Lesser Men that stood uselessly around her.

“If you can save him, do it,” said Nerys finally, “come, black hair. There is no time to waste.”

The black-haired boy stepped forward the others remained where they were still confused and bewildered.

“Lead the way to the hall,” commanded Nerys and the young guard headed down the road and Nerys followed.

The road that led away from the gate was neatly paved, it led into the town proper. Strong houses that were built of timber and stone flanked the road on both sides, clean and well maintained. They passed a few of towns men going about their normal activities looked up at the stranger in robes and the guardsman, a puzzled look crossed their faces, but then went back to their work.

“What’s your name, lad?” asked Nerys.

“Tyman,” the guard replied.

“Have you been a guard for long?”

“Not that long... but long enough.”

The guard struggled with her words for some reason.

“What did you do before you were a guard?”

“I shouldn’t... I shouldn’t be talking to you.”

“It’s ok, Tyman, you have a friend with you,” she said warmly, “now, I don’t want anyone else to die today, do you?”

“No, of course I don’t.”

“Then I need you to listen to me. When we meet with your leader you must stand back and let me speak and if I ask you any questions you must answer them truthfully. If everyone keeps their heads, I won’t need to kill anyone else. Do you understand?”

“The people in this town are good people...” started Tyman.

"I know, Tyman, that's why I have come. Do you think a handful of guards will keep the outsiders at bay for much longer?"

"We do what we can," said Tyman angrily, "we just need to keep them out til the Heart to come back."

"The Heart aren't coming back, Tyman. That is truth, we have to look after ourselves now," said Nerys with harshness to her voice, "have you even killed anyone, yet?"

"I have," said Tyman a defiance in his voice.

Nerys looked at the guard, the face behind the mask was that of a young boy.

"Just one," he added quietly as the red eyes met his.

"And who was he?" asked Nerys stopping in the street.

"Garrath... He was a town watchmen... He was a good man..."

"Why did you kill him?"

"When the Heart vanished the watch took charge and they..."

Tyman stopped.

"You had to get rid of them, didn't you?" said Nerys stopped in the street and made the boy look at her.

The boy nodded gritting his teeth.

"You're a brave lad," she said and took his hands.

Nerys let her fingers trace over his palm, studying them.

"Educated, aren't you?" said Nerys with a smile, "you can read and write."

Tyman smiled back.

"How did you know?"

"You have the soft hands of an educated man," she said softly, "what were you before?"

"I was an apprentice at Riley and Franc's Trading, I kept the books in order."

“Well, Tyman, the watch weren’t your only enemies,” said Nerys, “and you can’t defend yourself without a leader with experience.”

Tyman slowly nodded.

“Please, let us continue.”

Nerys released the boys hand and they continued through the neatly kept streets of Finestone.

“I don’t think the Elder will listen to an outsider though... excuse me, madame, I have not gotten your name?”

“My name is Nerys,” she said and then added, “why won’t he listen?”

“He just won’t. Everyone’s gotten stubborn in these days. I... ah... no ones allowed to talk about... goods... food anymore, but what else are we meant to do, we aren’t fighters, we’re just... us.”

“That is all you need to be. You have shown your bravery and killed a man when needed to keep your Ma and Pa safe. And can do it, again?”

“I don’t have a family,” snapped Tyman with a sudden aggression in his voice.

“Even before?”

“I don’t have a family.”

“Do you want one?” Nerys asked simply.

Tyman was quiet for a moment.

“Yes.”

“Then do not give up, Tyman, for there is still a chance,” she said, “though there will be no place of homesteads and children if we do not set the world back on its correct course.”

“Do you think it really possible?”

“It is, if you help me. I will need you in the coming days, Tyman, and if you do I promise you will have children and grandchildren and great grandchildren.”

“You can do that?”

“You know I can Tyman, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know you can.”

“Then let us do this, together,” smiled Nerys.

“I like you, Nerys,” said Tyman hesitantly.

“I like you too, Tyman.”

The two arrived at the town hall, a manicured garden sat out the front. Stone foundations and stairs held up the expertly carpentered walls, decorated with eloquent carvings of vines and flowers. The detail of each was lovingly crafted by hand, bringing the frieze to life. The roof formed a triangle which was painted a brilliant white which glowed a soft gold in twilight of dusk.

“Real flowers would have been cheaper,” scowled Nerys to the building.

“Lord Pryce, were very generous to us, he made sure every public building was built by the finest carpenters in Douruh,” said Tyman merrily, “the decorations were done by the craftsmen of Quillo and then brought here.”

“The Pryce’s must have been very wealthy.”

“Indeed, we haven’t heard from them since the trouble. Some say they will come with a mercenary army to save us.”

“Do you think that is true?”

Tyman was silent for moment.

“Elder Hornefred should be inside still,” said Tyman his voice becoming empty again.

The entrance of the hall were a large set of ornate doors depicting an elaborate carving showing the wonders of the land. The winery that Valtteri had left to investigate, the iron mine to west, the trading port receiving large numbers of barges, rows of orchids each tree

bearing a different fruit. In the centre a large temple with the symbol of Tarenli, the god of madness and chaos.

“What is that temple in middle?” asked Nerys.

“That’s the temple to Tarenli in the hills to the west. Sulla built it in the Age of Men, a lot of pilgrims come to see it.”

“Is there an altar?”

“I don’t know, I have little interest in gods.”

Before the end, saying such a thing so openly would have had the boy hung by his neck, but the way this young lad now threw around such blasphemy with disregard brought a smile to Nerys’ lips.

Tyman pushed the door open revealing a large hall within. Thin, decorative, wooden pillars held the roof above. An dull, golden corridor of carpet lead from the door to the podium at the end of room, marks of a hundreds of boots had worn into the cloth. The walls held tall windows that went from the floor to the ceiling that let in the golden light. Leafless trees, just outside the window, threw hard shadows of their skeletal forms across the room.

Where there were no windows, murals had been painted on the bare boards. Mythical figures from the Age of Men. Sulla the Fire Babe and Roland the Wild reliving the famous epic The Taming of the Heartland. Rei the Defiant leading the first men into The Stormlands and slaying the Demons who once called it home. Gil the Beautiful leading the first men east and where he seduced the merfolk and stole the Isle of Quillo, the painter had even depicted the underwater kingdom his offspring had founded beneath the waves.

The murals danced with life and colour around the room. Nerys rolled her eyes at the pointless extravagance. At the head of the room, three bare, simple tables sat on a podium in stark contrast to the rest of room. Behind the table was a painting of Thalius the Just, charging out of the painting atop The Horse his sword drawn and raised above his head, ready to bring his righteous justice to those who stood before him.

Nerys had always admired Thalius out of all the other inept and deceptive heroes of Lesser Men, Thalius was a creature much like herself, determined and one minded. Whenever she had found herself staring at one of his many depictions in courtrooms and gaol houses across the land, she had always wondered what it would have been like to meet the man who had tamed The Horse of the gods and slain The Bear with his bare hands. Behind him stood

the five gods of the Lesser Men. Zeria, the god of protection, holding the golden crown above his head.

There was a sound at the side of the room. A door opened and a man entered with a sour look on his round face, he had short blonde hair that was cut to his pale skin. In his hands he held several pieces of parchment marked with large, rough scribbles. His body was broad and muscular with a tight, ill fitting suit stretched across it. The man walked uncomfortably, not daring to bend with limbs too far in any direction out of fear of the fine cloth tearing.

“The hall is closed, Tyman, you know that,” said the man in a deep, large voice.

“We have a visitor, Master Flynn, she wants to see Elder Hornefred,” replied Tyman.

“Why did the captain let in...”

“The Captain is dead, Flynn, and I need to speak with the Elder concerning the matter,” said Nerys stepping forward, “I can speak now, Tyman, step back.”

“The captain is dead?” said Flynn his voice bearing no emotion.

“Yes, the captain is dead. Now, we are all looking forward to our dinner, so if you could fetch the Elder we can resolve the matter and get on with our evenings.”

Flynn looked at Nerys, his eyes sharp and aware, but void of emotion.

“What happened to the captain?”

“I don’t like to repeat myself, it is best you get the Elder and anyone else you need to hear what I have to say.”

“Tyman, who is this?”

“Her name is Nerys, she can help us.”

“That’s enough, Tyman,” interrupted Nerys, “Flynn, if this is bit much, you can find me a place to stay and we can meet in morning and discuss, but it would be best to have this done tonight.”

“Do you have any weapons?”

“Several,” said Nerys and removed her cloak revealing her knives and sword.

“Why did you bring her here, Tyman?” scolded Flynn.

“Tyman is no fool. What was he to do? Resist and die like his captain. I hope, Flynn, you are as smart as Tyman and get your Elder.”

Flynn looked at her for moment and stepped back towards the door.

“What do you want then?”

“To see your Elder.”

“Do you want to harm him?”

“Absolutely not, I will leave my weapons in the hall, if you wish,” said Nerys.

Nerys started to remove the knife belt from her chest, keeping her eyes trained on Flynn.

“Do you want them?” asked Nerys.

“No, I don’t want them. Tyman, take them.”

Tyman moved forward and took the knives.

“Now, may I see the Elder?”

“If you do, will you move on?”

“If that is your wish, after you have heard me, then I will move on without an incident.”

“Remain here,” nodded Flynn, “I will return.”

Flynn vanished through the door. Nerys wondered what would happen next, Flynn was a hard man to read, if he was afraid he hid it well, if he was laying a trap for her he hid that just as well.

“You did well Tyman, we may all make it through this.”

Tyman nodded in the dying light.

After a short while the door reopened and Flynn appeared with a lantern.

“This way, woman, the Elder will see you,” said Flynn, “Tyman, stay here.”

Nerys looked at Tyman, in the soft lantern light, he was smiling, unconcerned for her safety. Nerys turned to Flynn and nodded.

Flynn led her through a tight set of corridors that twisted on themselves slowly, slanting downwards, after a short while Nerys knew she was underground. The corridor came to a

sudden end with four doors, on each the crest of the House of Pryce was carved into the wood. Flynn led her through one.

Inside, two men waited. One was young, about twenty, uncomfortably slender with light, brown hair and painfully white skin and he had sunken eyes ringed by light, grey circles. He wore a suit which matched Flynn's, but this man knew how to move in it. He paced the left of the room with a nervous energy, flipping through a book, absentmindedly, not looking at the pages. He lift his head as Nerys entered, met her eyes and smiled.

The other man was only, slightly older, had the deep, golden skin of the Reisu with crazed, black hair that he had grown long and wild. He had deep, brown eyes that peered out of large almond eyes. He was dressed in same suit. He reclined in a large armchair facing the door, relaxed and unconcerned, his arms draped on both the arms of the chair. He smiled welcomingly.

The room was awkward for a moment as Nerys stood looking at the Reisu in the chair.

"Flynn, aren't going to introduce us?" asked the man.

"That's Master Bahruun," said Flynn gruffly gesturing, dismissively, towards to the man with the book, "and this is Elder Hornefred."

"And this is?" asked Hornefred.

"I... damn it, I don't know," shouted Flynn, "I'm no butler."

"My name is Nerys."

"Please excuse Master Flynn, he is still getting acquainted with his role," said Hornefred, "we haven't had much of an opportunity to greet visitors."

Hornefred stood up and extended his hand for Nerys to kiss as the lords of the Lesser Man did. Nerys took his hand and kissed it, burying her disgust.

"An Elder?" asked Nerys puzzled.

"It is a just title, as you may have noticed, none of us quiet fit our role," said Master Bahruun he walked graceful forward and scooped her hand from her side and kissed it.

"That explains your captain," said Nerys waiting for the mood of the men to change, but it did not.

"How did you kill him?" asked Hornefred curiously.

“The fool stuck his head above the wall with his helmet under his arm,” replied Nerys, “the shoot was easy.”

“I told you the man was not useless, you should have put me in charge,” snapped Flynn, he began unbutton his jacket to let his body breathe.

“Not in front of guests,” growled Hornefred quietly.

“You need a new captain of guard, then,” said Nerys.

“And I suppose you would be perfect for the role,” laughed Bahruun.

“No, but I’ll make it fit for now.”

“No outsiders,” said Flynn from the corner, “it gets complicated, otherwise.”

“Flynn is right,” said Hornefred, “if we let you stay, then everyone starts wanting to let their friends and family in and we don’t have the food or water for that.”

“How much food and water do you have left?”

“Outsiders, don’t ask questions,” growled Flynn, in the half light of the lantern Flynn suddenly looked very menacing.

“Outsiders know you don’t have farms inside these walls and you’re all going to start starving soon.”

“I’m sorry, Nerys,” said Bahruun, “I don’t know what you wanted from us, but we can not accept new visitors without starting a riot. You may stay as our guest for the night, but tomorrow you must be on your way.”

“And what about the future of this town?”

“As a Demon, I’m sure you have seen a lot,” smiled Hornefred, “you know exactly what the future of this town is. We are just trying to make the end as orderly as we can.”

Flynn sighed heavily from the corner.

“It doesn’t have to be that way, Flynn.”

“Yes, it does,” replied Flynn shaking his head, “we know it. We have seen it.”

“This is not what you want,” insisted Nerys, “tell me what you want for your town.”

“There is nothing left to want,” replied Hornefred.

“As the leaders of this town you must desire something for tomorrow,” snapped Nerys.

“This isn’t a town,” said Hornefred, “it’s a burial mound, if you think any different, you will find the coming months quite trying. The Lesser Men are done, Nerys, surely as a Demon you will celebrate this.”

“I have come to help you, Hornefred,” said Nerys, “you must let me help.”

“We do not need your help. We are making the final days as orderly as we can and then when the food is done or the plaques come, we will be ready and the people of this town will move on with peace in their souls.”

Nerys looked at Hornefred, he was not listening, Nerys looked at Bahruun.

“And do you think it is abyss for us all?”

“We all must take that leap into the abyss at some point, my lady,” he smiled, “even those with Demon blood.”

“Are you ready to jump, Bahruun?”

“Please, we are not without compassion, you may stay at my home for the night,” said Bahruun ignoring the question, “it is by the back gate. In the morning you can leave without notice and we can put this strange episode behind us. Hopefully, you will find a safe haven further along the road.”

Nerys studied Bahruun for a moment. The man had an energy about him, unlike the others.

“Then it is done,” said Nerys, “it is a shame you would not listen to sense.”

“Fare well, Nerys,” said Hornefred from his chair, “I do hope you find a place for yourself in these last days.”

“Take the her, Bahruun,” said Flynn, “I need to talk to Hornefred.”

Bahruun led Nerys back to hall where Tyman waited in the dark, he was handling one of the knives.

“I’ll have my knives back,” snapped Nerys.

Tyman slipped the blade back into its leather pocket.

“Are you staying?” asked Tyman, eagerly, handing Nerys the belt.

“No.”

“I knew they won’t listen.”

Nerys ignored him.

“To your home then,” s he said to Bahruun.

“Where are you going to go?” asked Tyman.

“Somewhere else,” sighed Nerys annoyed.

“Can I come with you?”

“I do not need a boy at my heels,” snarled Nerys and turned away.

Tyman fell back, quiet and chastened.

“Bahruun, lead the way.”

Nerys retrieved up her robe from the ground and pulled it on as she went. A cold winter air swept into the room as Bahruun pushed the ornate doors open and Nerys left the hall, leaving Tyman in the dark hall.

The paths of the town twisted together until they opened up on a large street with four large estate houses. The roads were lined with several unlit street lanterns.

The second house was Bahruun’s home, painted, pristinely, in blue and white, flowers of the same colours decorated the gates, fences and window boxes. Over the font door painted in fine calligraphy was “The Manor of Franc”.

“This is a very fine house for such a young man,” said Nerys, “did you acquire it after Heart withdrew?”

“No, it’s my family’s home,” said Bahruun as he pushed open the door.

Inside was a tight hallway with several doors leading to the rooms, at the far end a stairway led to the second floor. Paintings, tapestries, shields, swords of all varieties clung to the walls. The house was quiet.

“Where is your family?”

“Quillo, this is just the home I stay in when I come to Finestone for business.”

He led Nerys with a lantern down the hallway and into a room with a large lounge and a bearskin rug. A small fire smouldered in the hearth. Bottles of wine and other alcohols lined the walls reflecting the orange light of the lamp causing it to dance along the floor and ceiling.

“This is the leisure room,” laughed Bahruun, “I use this more and more these days. Do you know how to start a fire?”

“Of course.”

“I knew it,” he declared with a smile, “could you get this going, again? Feel free to drink anything you see, no point saving it for another day. I’ll see what the baker has delivered today.”

Bahruun took up the lantern and vanished into the hallway.

Nerys took to the fire and soon had it burning large and bright, the darkness in the room pushed back into the far corners. The bottles on the walls now glistened like jewels.

Taking her time, Nerys inspected the shelves. A light layer of dust had started to build, it seemed the servants had not been called to clean recently.

After a while, Nerys found what she was looking for, a sweet port from the Ashen Valley in Frys. Port was a perfect drink for the Children, it helped to fight the constant cravings for sweetness and sugar that nagged at their minds, Nerys preferred her own brew of Sweet Water, but this would do.

Nerys grabbed a large mug from the small table next to the lounge and emptied the remaining contents of bottle into it and sat. The lounge accepted her and Nerys felt for the first time the soreness in her feet and the ache in her legs, she had travelled a lot of ground in a short time. Her knife belt dug into her shoulder, still wrapped around her, she unbuckled it and placed it to the side.

Sipping the red, sweet liquid she let her mind drift and relax, the fire was warm and the room was silent. For a moment she thought of Valtteri and wondered how he was doing at

winery, he had the advantage of distance on her, but who knows what he found when he got there.

A clattering of dishes on a tray brought her back to the room. Bahruun had reappeared with a plate of bread and dried meat strips.

"This is what I have left," sighed Bahruun placing the plates on the floor between the rug and lounge, "Dried beef, I think, and day old bread. The baker didn't come today for some reason."

Nerys looked at the plate, unimpressed. She had a larder full of good meats back at her manor, real meat not the mellow, cow offcuts that the Lowmen called food.

"Bread, will do," she said and Bahruun passed her a plate of bread.

"No meat?" asked Bahruun.

"No," she replied simply and reclined back into the lounge, tear into the stale bread with her teeth.

Bahruun sat on the rug and stuffed a few strips of the meat into his mouth.

"So, what's it like out there?" asked Bahruun after swallowing his food.

"Quiet but growing louder," replied Nerys, "everyone is starting to recover."

Bahruun tore at a small piece of bread and began grinding away at it slowly.

"This bread is terrible," said Nerys putting what remained of her bread aside.

"The baker is terrible," choked Bahruun as he forced himself to swallow what was left in his mouth.

"How does a small town in middle of the plains have a bad baker? It's the life blood of any town."

"The baker became the carpenter."

"Pardon?"

"Well, we needed a new carpenter and the only one who knew anything about carpentry was the baker. So the baker became the carpenter and the stable master became the baker,"

said Bahruun matter-of-factly, "the stable boy was happy though, he got promoted to stable master long before he was suppose to."

"Is the baker a good carpenter?"

"Better then no carpenter," shrugged Bahruun, "well, except the shingle he repaired fell off and struck the poor Jerold in the head. Now the washer woman's the tailor and we have to clean our own clothes at the well."

"It is quiet a town you have for yourself."

Bahruun simply smiled and started to cleaned up the plates.

"We make do with what we have left," he said, "I'll be back, you enjoy your wine."

He gathered the plates on the silver tray and vanished down the hall.

Nerys sat enjoying the sweetness of port. She still wanted this town, but if she waited the Lesser Man would soon all kill themselves and then who would she rule? She only had tonight though, she had to get through to Bahruun.

Bahruun walked back into the room and sat on the rug. Nerys pulled her eyes away from the fire and realised he was laying on the rug naked.

"What are you doing?" asked Nerys puzzled.

"Presenting an opportunity for you," smiled Bahruun presenting proudly his rake, thin body. Bones protruding at strange angles from his tight, bleach, white skin.

"And what opportunity is that?"

"One night of passionate love in a doomed world spinning towards the abyss," he said pulling himself up to the lounge and looked deep into her eyes.

"I am a Child," she said annoyed.

"I know and a most beautiful one at that."

"Put your clothes on, Bahruun," she sighed and took another mouthful of port.

"Why not, Nerys? What else have we to do tonight? The food is wanting, the conversation is sorrowful. The flesh is all we have left and we may not have it for much longer."

“Lying with you, Bahruun, would be like you taking a dog or sheep and I doubt you would partake in such an act.”

Bahruun face lit up.

“Don’t presume to know me, Nerys. In my life I have always believed in seeking pleasure where others may not think to look and then, if I don’t find my pleasure, I try it again, just to be sure there was something I did not miss.”

Nerys looked at the strange Lesser Man that sat across her.

“I’m afraid, I am not as adventurous.”

Bahruun spun himself around on the lounge and lay his head on her lap.

“Please Nerys, won’t you help a desperate man.”

Nerys looked down at the head in her lap, admitting to herself, she was amused by this one.

“This town is insufferable. The woman closed there legs when the trouble started and the men became limp and timid. When I saw you, I thought, for a moment, there was some hope for me yet, one last night of joy before I follow the impotent Hornefred into the abyss. Will you take that away from me?”

“Does begging ever work?”

Bahruun laughed and sat up.

“Sometimes. On a normal day, my name was enough, but now the damned gods found another way to spite me, one last time. Petty of them, don’t you think?”

“Indeed, “ laughed Nerys.

“Can you pass me the wooden box on the table?”

Bahruun fell back on the rug, lying on his front showing his back was as shapeless as his front. Nerys looked for the box and threw it to Bahruun.

“I betrayed the captain for this,” sighed Bahruun opening the box, “maybe I should have just lost my head with the others.”

“What happened with the watch?”

“Indulgence,” replied Bahruun with a shrug, “the type you get in the back streets any city.”

“It was too much for you?”

“When you are a son of a wealthy trader, Nerys, you see the true faces of kings. The men of Finestone were much more timid, but far less discrete.”

“Why did you betray them?”

“I saw the way the wind was blowing, Nerys, and I like to keep my boat sailing. If it were not me to betray them, it would have been another, less deserving man.”

Bahruun removed a small cylindrical container from the box.

“Do you know any other Demons, Nerys?” asked Bahruun changing the subject.

“My blood and I still travel together, why?”

“I have never enjoyed the embrace of the Demon, it is something I would do before the abyss took me. If I had only known things were going to get so complicated I would have done it earlier.”

Bahruun took the lid off the small container and took from a pinch of pale yellow powder between his fingers.

“You should be careful,” said Nerys, “the form of the Children is not ordered like the Lesser Men. You never truly know what lies beneath the clothes.”

Bahruun snorted the powder and fell back onto the rug.

“That’s what makes it so exciting,” laughed Bahruun, “I’m an explorer, Nerys, like you, but my ship has run aground and I’m not quite sure how to proceed. Stay here and mend it or push on into the wild jungle of the new world.”

Bahruun began to rub himself against the rug.

“Jungles are dangerous places,” smiled Nerys.

“Oh, and I am not handy with a sword,” giggled Bahruun.

“You have only a lame carpenter, here.”

“My glorious ship is doomed,” he wept.

“Then what?”

“Stale bread and frigid women til the end?”

“Of course, not.”

“Tell me how, Nerys, I will hear your words.”

“The baker will bake and washer woman will wash.”

“Your words are not as exciting as I had hoped, what do then accepted bread and clothes?”

“Order.”

“And in that order, what will become of poor Bahruun?”

“The same as before, wealth and power.”

“I am a jester, Nerys, not a king.”

“There will be no king, just a queen.”

“And I will cheer her name as I am...”

“A stupid, spoilt lord with the means to set his ship right.”

“I like you, Nerys.”

“I like you too, Bahruun.”

Chapter 4

Valtteri stood amongst the bloody remains of the winemaker and his guards. The negotiations had not gone as well as he had hoped. Valtteri wiped at the gore from his leather pants with a sigh. The remaining Lowmen were still gathered in the main room downstairs, returning alone, splattered with blood, would not help his cause.

The mission had started well. Valtteri had found the the guards on the road leading up the hill to winery and had convinced them that he was looking for refuge from the gangs that roamed the lands.

The guards had brought him back to meet the winemaker, a man of many more years and experiences than his guards. The moment Valtteri had stepped into the room the wine maker immediately noticed the deep red eyes that betrayed Valtteri's nature and before Valtteri could say a single word the winemaker had called his men to arms.

Now the room was silent, the fight done. Valtteri went to the window and looked out, it led to a roof that looked sturdy enough to hold his weight. He turned back to the bloody mess, there was no reason to stay, so he opened the window and crawled out on to the roof.

It had taken a full day to reach the vineyard and now he was at a lost at what to do next.

The game was not going to be as easy as Valtteri had thought, the Lowmen had always frightened easily and that made them unpredictable. But he would not be so easily deterred, he just needed to change his approach, when he arrived at his next destination, the trading post he decided, he would be more cautious.

Pushing eastward through the night, Valtteri, found the banks of the impassable Sulla River bathed in the light of dawn. He remember the trading post being above the vineyard on the map and had to hope the drawing was accurate.

The waterway lay bare, clean and unbroken except for the occasional branch that had gotten caught in its flow. A year earlier, when Valtteri had last seen it, the river was a constant flow of barges coming downstream full of goods for trade.

Valtteri moved quickly through the long grass that whipped at his shin. This was a dangerous place, an archer with any skill could easily catch him from the plain or the other bank, there was little he could do about it but move as quickly as he could from cover to cover hoping he would not catch anyone's attention.

Luckily, the river was free souls looking for a fight and Valtteri reached the trading post as the sky turned a deep red. He held himself low to the ground to hide from the eyes of that watched from the makeshift barricades surrounding the settlement.

A few torches lit up the barriers that protected the main road that approached from the west. Beyond them, Valtteri could see the faint outline of Lowmen with something attached to their backs, maybe a bow or shield, it was hard to say in the low light.

A small thicket which sat by the road was the only cover in sight. Valtteri, moved to the brush, took out his hand axe and hacked at the tangle of growth to make himself a small nest inside. A few stray branches and vines of the brush sealed the entrance way behind him.

Valtteri sat cross legged in the nest and let his mind become blank. He locked the muscles of his body and slept, exhausted after the days of travel.

The dawn sun woke Valtteri as it rose behind the buildings of the trading post and he saw it fully for the first time. A few dozen small, buildings clustered around a square plaza, a common water fountain in the centre. The main road led straight to the square across it, at the entrance, a simple wooden arch straddled the road. Beyond the square, in the distance, sat the large warehouse, the heart of the settlement. Two large, wooden cranes used to move goods onto barges poked just above the rooftop on the far side of the building. Beyond the warehouse sat the fast flowing water of the river.

The guards looked haggard in the morning light, leaning, lazily, against the barricade or a random stick they had picked up during the night. There were nine watching the front gate and the barricades. Three of the guards had clustered together and were talking quietly, the others stood and just stared at the emptiness of the land.

The guards, suddenly, jumped to life as a man with a strong beard and heavy armour burst out from behind the buildings, shouting orders. The guards shook themselves from their positions and walked inside the gate, as eight fresh guards appeared from the warehouse.

Valtteri focused on the bearded man, who was now shouting something at the new men who were wandering towards the entrance. Some of them started to jog towards their posts as the harsh words caught them, while others started to walk slower.

The bearded man's armour was well crafted and held the remains of an large insignia that had been scratched at until it was hard to read. He had been someone before the collapse, but that did not matter now, what did matter was certainly the captain of this militia.

Valtteri turned his attention to the subordinates of the group, some were equipped with bows, others with finely crafted swords and wooden shields with barely any scratches or cuts into the painted surfaces. Their armour was less well crafted, seeming to be tattered pieces of leather and cloth sown together in haste.

The men settled into their positions and the captain vanished behind the buildings. As the day passed, the sounds of wooden weapons cracking against each echoed from within the ring of buildings, accompanied by the sounds of a single man shouting.

Midday came and the sounds of training ended. The guards changed again and the captain reappeared still clad in his armour, Valtteri tried to make out the insignia again, but was unable.

The captain had seemed to have worked out his aggression and now simply stared at the empty hills and plains that stretched out beyond trading post. Valtteri sat cross-legged and motionless in the small clearing he had made for himself, studying the man. Valtteri felt like

he could use this one, he may not run from his eyes as easily as the others, but Valtteri wanted to be sure.

The dusk came and the guards changed, the captain yelled some more at the men before heading back into the ring of buildings and vanished inside the warehouse. The building had several large doors once used to accept the caravans that had brought goods from across the kingdom, all of them were now barred shut with planks. Two normal sized doors at each end of the building were being used by the guards as they came and went.

The light died and the night came, the Lowmen started to light the torches in front of their barricades.

Valtteri emerged from the thicket, he hurried through the short grass to the left of settlement, keeping himself low. As he came around the side of town he spotted a lone guard watching the north, after a short while the guard vanished between the buildings. Another guard appeared a short time later.

Valtteri watched the guards cycle a few more times before deciding he could cross the distance before a guard was replaced by another.

Valtteri crouched in the grass and waited until the time was right then he leapt from his position and sprinted towards the town as fast as he could. He needed to be inside the town perimeter before the next guard appeared.

Valtteri pushed himself up against the cool brick of a small house, panting, he looked around. After a few moments he saw the orange torchlight wash over the wall of the next house. Valtteri pushed himself up against the brick and as a boy of fifteen years, emerged at the end of alley, torch in hand, he stopped for a moment and looked into the field. He took a small bell from his pocket and rang it once.

Valtteri froze and held his breath readying himself for another bloody mess, the light illuminating his red eyes and hard face, but the boy simply continued to stare out at the plain unaware of the large Child that stood just a few feet behind him.

When the light was gone Valtteri started to breathe again and turned his sights on the alley that led to the main square. Valtteri moved down the two walls and looked into the main square. The small fountain in the middle of square bubbled to itself. He could see the warehouse, there were only a few high windows that were not covered, through which he could see the dim light of lanterns.

There was a stable where the main road met the square. It was a large stable with room to house three or four caravans as well as room for several more horses. Valtteri could easily find a vantage point within.

Valtteri moved across the dark square to a small wooden door that led into the stable. He tried the handle and it turned freely. He moved inside and was hit by the strong smell of unclean hay and horse manure left to rot over the months.

A single window above the large doors let the moonlight into the space. Valtteri found a barrel and wooden crate, placed under the window and climbed up. As Valtteri pulled himself up to the sill, pieces of empty bird nests fell to the ground below.

Valtteri counted eight orange lights moving through the settlement. Eighteen small houses and seven other buildings that may have been stores or small offices of traders, none had lights in their windows. All of Lowmen seemed to have moved into the large warehouse that sat directly across from the stables. That was all there was to Valtteri's new trading post, but it would still be a fine start to his kingdom.

The guards patrolled as Valtteri watched from his vantage point and he slowly deciphering the patterns of their movement. Three guards for the left of the town, three guards for the right, nine watching the main approaching, two more moved randomly between the houses. Every so often the guards on the outer edge of the town would ring their bells before moving on.

The Lowmen were not soldiers, they were the rough looking men raised on farmers with poorly groomed hair and scattered beards. They had strong, round bodies from farm work not the slender, muscular forms sculpted by days of swinging swords and manoeuvring shields. He wondered how far their training had come, they had the numbers on him, for sure, but perhaps not the skill. And then Valtteri chastised himself, he was not here for a fight.

The moon had hit its zenith when the door of the warehouse opened, spilling light into the town square, the captain strode out from inside. As the captain crossed the town square Valtteri pulled himself back into the shadows and lowered himself from his perch.

The captain walked past the stables and his deep voice cut the night air just outside the stables.

"Anything?" asked the captain.

"Nothing. Another quiet night, looks like," a voice replied.

"Good," said the captain.

There was a pause.

"You," the captain suddenly screamed into the night, "why are you here? Where are you meant to be?"

The voice trailed off as the captain stormed off away from the stables. There was the sound of a man yelping and a short scuffle.

Valtteri pulled himself up slightly over the sill to see what was happening. The torches in the town had come to a stop, then there was a torchlight running frantically to the right side of town.

“Back to it,” screamed the captain the voice echoing against the wall of warehouse.

The torches started moving again, some in the wrong direction.

After a while the two voices next to the stables started again.

“I have told you to watch those two,” growled the captain.

“They’re just boys,” snapped the other with an anger growing in his voice.

“There are no more boys,” yelled the captain, “start doing your job.”

“I’m not here to listen to your lectures, I’m here to watch the gate” challenged the voice, “I have a whole night ahead of me, so unless you want to do it, get inside!”

There was the sound of boots on gravel and Valtteri saw the captain stomping across the square, though he did not return to the warehouse, he turned to the left and entered one of the dark houses.

Valtteri lowered himself and moved back to the small door at the side of the stables. He waited for the gap in the patrol’s pattern and left the stables, heading quickly to the house immediately next to the stables. He tried the door and, as he expected, the handle turned and the door open.

The guards had just finished one of their rotation when Valtteri left his the stables, the one who randomly walked the allies had found a corner to sleep in. Valtteri made his way through the night and reached the door of the captain’s house. He turned the handle and open the door slightly before retreating back to a nearby house. The guards cycled again and Valtteri moved back to the captain’s door, it was closed again, just as he had hoped. He open the door and listened. The heavy breathing of captain came from inside.

Valtteri entered, inside the room had become chilled by the night air that had entered earlier, the captain lay under a thick, woollen blanket, unmoved now by the cold that followed Valtteri. The large figure moved across the room lit only by the silver moonlight.

Valtteri found the armour against the wall and inspected the insignia, closely. Cut into the armour were the outlines of two snakes twisted together, the left snake held the head of the right in its mouth, the symbol of the city guard of Hawkescliff.

Valtteri smiled to himself and shook his head. The Black Snakes, as they were called in the city, were as renowned for their laziness as they were for their corruption. The single shield stamped into the shoulder of armour was likely a marking of low ranking officer.

Valtteri looked at the snoring lump across the room from him. This captain was nothing then a lowly guard that had fled his post at the first sign of trouble. No wonder he spent his days blustering at the others, the man was merely imitating the Heart who once spent their days doing the same within the guardhouses of Hawkescliff. This creature had no real knowledge of leadership and likely did not even know how to use his sword, a good thing he had tricked the farmers into taking up the blades for him.

But, then he thought went to the friends.

Nerys would already have the people of Finestone singing her praises by now. And Sayjin was surely already beating his followers into submission in the way he always did. Valtteri knew he did not have the time for a new target.

He took what he was looking for in the belt on the floor, an exquisite dagger with a well crafted handle, mostly a bribe from a now-dead noble, and left the house, leaving the door open.

The coward was a risk, but he would have to do.

Chapter 5

Sayjin ran his hands over the coarse, bark of an old oak. The air was fresh, cold and slightly damp. The silver moonlight scattered across the forest floor. The branches wove themselves together to create eloquent paths above the forest floor. He was home again and he was happy.

While Nerys had hidden herself in the library and Valtteri in his kitchen, Sayjin sadly had watched the forest from the attic windows. It was then he had seen them dancing through the canopy. Purple lights that flashed and popped with a mystical energy. They would play amongst the leaves until finally shooting up into the heavens and disappearing into the sky.

Sayjin had watched the lights for months, looking for a pattern in their dance, but there was none he could find. They came when they pleased and followed different paths when they did, but Sayjin was certain there was an intelligence behind them.

The wild shaman of Stormlands could do such things, the men who claimed their fathers had learnt the magical art from the Demons that once ruled the eastern lands. Men that had been driven by from the city, like himself by the gods.

Sayjin had met them a few times amongst the trees and they would show him powers that would have made normal men flee in terror, beasts made of nothing but smoke, lights that could fly through the air and cut a tree in two, they could conjure warriors made of blinding light, who could fight with skill better than any man he had met. If there were shamans hiding within these woods, Sayjin would find them and bring them to the new kingdom. They were just the type of men Sayjin needed to show Nerys the strength of his people, when they were not shackled by laws of the gods.

A day had passed since Sayjin had returned to the trees and he had made an attempt to search the forest at first, but his direction was soon lost when he found a beehive wedged under some exposed roots. Sayjin had spent the rest of the day smoking out the bees and stealing the rich honey inside. Now, his stomach full and his mouth clammy with sweetness, he had enjoyed his day back amongst the trees.

Sayjin was not concerned, though the others had many miles to travel to reach their mark, and then would surely be met by hostile peasants. Sayjin had time and tomorrow he would start his search in earnest, unless the forest offered up another surprise. He smiled and lay back in a cradle of branches and looked up at the dark sky.

The forest was alive with sound of insects, the beasts of night could be heard scratching their way through the underbrush as they stalked their prey. Sayjin listened as the moon arced, lazily, above and soon the screams of dying rodents had sung him to sleep.

Sayjin woke, the morning had come and it was time for him to move on. If the shamans were around then there would be tracks. As he searched he found the tracks of a doe with fawn, those of a squat, fat, flightless bird called a grannel, a set of tracks left by wild dogs and the strange tracks of some kind of a small, monkey-like creature, none interested him.

The day was reaching midday when he came across the tracks of some men. The footsteps crossed each other, back and forth, branches cut and snapped out of their path. A patrol, most likely a bandit camp was nearby. Sayjin followed the trail through the woods until the wet, gamy smell of a cooking bird started to fill the air. Sayjin began to salivate.

At the end of the trail sat a small group of Reisu around a campfire over which hung a large, fat grannel still grey and uncooked. Sayjin licked his lips, the forest had delivered him a banquet. His desire for meat overtook him, after weeks of eating nothing but roots and leaves pulled from the garden and pickles from the cellar. He counted the men he could see, there was not enough to keep him from his gift.

Sayjin hid himself just beyond the tree line, three men and a woman sat, some looked at the fire, others at their boots, their weapons resting just out of reach, a sadness dug into their faces. A single tent had been thrown up with some rope, the trees used as supports.

Sayjin moved his hand onto the small wooden baton tucked into his belt. He moved, quietly, around the camp, sure not to disturb the bushes as he went, until he was positioned behind the largest male of the group.

The baton swung through the air as Sayjin leapt from the bushes, a hard blow to the back of the neck made a satisfying crunch and the body went limp. Two men across the fire shouted and grabbed for their swords.

Sayjin moved quickly to one, dispatching him quickly with a hard blow to the jaw and then a second directly to the temple. The other had a sword but the swing was wide and slow, Sayjin dropped below the blade and took out the man's legs with a kick, he then jumped and landed his foot directly on the man's sword hand. Sayjin twisted his boot and felt a crack as the bone gave way and the man screamed. Sayjin's baton swiped across the man's face and the screams stopped.

A woman fumbled with a bow at the door of a tent. Sayjin left the man on the ground below him and walked towards her, slowly, the baton held high and strong.

"Put down the weapon," said Sayjin calmly to the woman, "I won't hurt you."

The woman looked at him with wide eyes. She lowered the bow, slightly, and with the quick strike she was on the ground as well, unconscious, blood pouring from her mouth.

Sayjin felt his rapid breath and the blood rushing in his muscles. He really had missed the wilds. Sayjin listened, the sounds around him were more intense now, the leaves sounded as though they were made of metal, grinding past each other in the branches above. The once gentle sound of the wind blowing through the tree trunks now sounded like a hurricane roaring around him. He waited to see if any would come from the tent.

None came and, slowly, the adrenaline drained. Sayjin's vision went from the sharp, singular focus of the killer to the sweeping gaze of the hunter. His body loosened and realised he was still holding his arm outstretched holding the baton where it had finished the last of its work. Sayjin smiled as a feeling of contentment took over him. He then set about inspecting the bodies on the ground.

The woman still had a pulse, so did the man with the broken hand. Sayjin would question them then he would kill them, if he needed. He checked the grannel, it was still a long way from being cooked. So, he turned his attention to the bodies.

First, he cut down the rope holding up the tent letting the structure collapse into a heap. Next he dragged the unconscious Reisu across the clearing to a tree away from the camp and secured both them with collars around each neck. One coughed blood which splattered onto Sayjin hands, he smeared it on the offenders clothes in disgust.

After the work was done, Sayjin moved back to the bird that was starting to brown. He took a seat next to the fire and looked upwards. The clearing gave him a small, unimpeded view of the sky.

The fire popped and spat as the fats of the bird dropped into it. Sayjin had become distracted again, but tomorrow he would give his all to the search. The day continued.

Sayjin got up momentarily and checked his meal, half of the bird was brown and crisp the other half still grey. He turned the bird on the spit and then returned to watching the sky.

As the sun disappeared back below the tree line the man bound to the tree started to groan. Sayjin stayed where he was, focused on the canopy, he did not want to miss the lights if they came. Though he was sure to listen to the wild scratchings of the man as he discovered his new collar and his battered companion. There was a moment of strange whimpers, then the man then fell quiet and Sayjin went back to listening to the fire, watching the light blue sky above and enjoying the smell of the roasting bird.

The sky started to turn to red, Sayjin went to the fire and looked at the golden bird, now begging to be eaten. With a single swipe Sayjin snatched a leg and the fire erupted as the juices flowed into the small flames below. The oils and hot skin burnt his hand, but he did not care.

The grey meat filled his mouth with the earthy, juicy and slightly sweet flavour of the grannel, fat ran through his finger and down his arm. Before Sayjin was knew it the bone was stripped of its skin and meat, he started to lick the grease from his hand.

Wine was the next thought that came to his mind as he dropped the bone to the ground, wiped his hand on his trouser and drew his knife. He heard a scuffling coming from the other side of the clearing and ignored it. He moved towards the tent and sliced at the leather where a bulge betrayed the presence of the supplies.

The tent held four large boxes marked with by the names of different trading companies. They had a sundry of dry goods and tools, but sadly not a single wine bottle or skin. It had been a good day though, even without the wine.

Sayjin returned back to the fire. He saw out the corner of his eye the man tugging at his collar, the woman still lay face down. Sayjin removed the second leg and sat back on the log that had been placed next to the fire.

“Have you seen the lights in the sky?” asked Sayjin to the man, not looking at him.

“What...” replied the man, his voice broke and he started to cough.

“Lights dancing through the leaves and then they shoot into the sky. Have you seen them?”

“Gods take you...” spat the man, but the cough took his voice.

“You tell me about the lights and I will leave you and your friend in peace. Don’t tell me and I kill you both and continue my search.”

“Mari is already dead.”

“Then I will kill you and continue my search,” shrugged Sayjin.

“Cut the rope and I’ll tell you what I know,” shouted the man

Sayjin dropped the leg bone to the ground, he reached over to the bird and tore at the breast meat getting a handful of fresh and skin, deciding to focus on the meal before him, the man could wait.

“Are you going to free me?”

Sayjin continued to eat and the man fell silent as the darkness of night came over the camp.

The moon rose and filled the night sky. The grannel’s carcass lay on the ground next to Sayjin, cleaned of any meat. The bird’s flesh now sat low like a rock in his stomach. He had never eaten a whole bird by himself before. Valtteri would have stolen half or Nerys would have berated him and took it away. He sighed and missed his friends.

Sayjin burped, loudly. The collared man shuffled in the dying light of campfire. Sayjin took out his knife and walked over to the man.

“Do you know where the lights come from?” asked Sayjin.

“Yes,” answered the man pushed himself up against the tree, “let me go and I’ll tell you.”

“Tell me where the lights are and I won’t kill you.”

Sayjin brought his knife in front of the man.

“Please, I’ll tell you.”

“Good.”

“A stream, a while in that direction,” he said pointing into the forest, “the lights fly up and down it.”

“What colour are the lights?”

“Purple.”

“Who controls them?”

“I don’t know.”

“Thank you,” said Sayjin with a nod put his knife back into its sheath and walked back to the fire.

The men waited for a few a moments.

“Are you going to let me go?” asked the man.

“You are free to go,” replied Sayjin kicking dirt onto the fire.

“The rope, you need to cut it.”

“Its just a rope, brother.”

“I can’t get it loose,” started the man.

“You have made it this far because you are better than the others,” said Sayjin forcefully, “I know you don’t need my help with such a simple matter.”

The man looked at Sayjin puzzled at brutal invader who had taken his meal and murdered his friends.

“I will see you another day, brother,” said Sayjin and walked to the edge of the camp.

“Please, the wild dogs in this forest are vicious.”

“I know.”

The man searched the rope, then his fingers found the knot and he started to pull at it frantically.

Sayjin seized a low branch and pulled himself up into the tree. As he swung up the stone weight of the bird lurched in his stomach. He held himself for a moment and recovered, he had eaten too much, he would need to sleep off the meal.

Sayjin found a comfortable place against a tree trunk and let the soft growl of the wild dogs relax his mind. Tomorrow, without fail, he would find the masters of the lights.

Chapter 6

Valtteri sat in the corner of the stable's loft listening to the conversation below with a tired disdain.

"Damn Lugus and his peasant work," sneered Tim, shovelling some rotten hay into the barrow.

"It's better than being out there," said Ral who held the barrow that was now full.

"Is it? Things might've calmed down. We just need to get back to Finestone."

"You'd have a better chance knocking off Lugus than making it on the roads."

"Maybe I will, I can't take another day of that smug arse."

"Well, if you are, do it soon," sighed Ral with barrow as he wheeled it from the stables.

Tim stabbed the shovel into the pile of hay. The straws crackled and snapped as the blade cut into the mound.

"Take that, you bastard." he cheered

Valtteri sighed from his hiding spot.

For four days now, the men had come to the stables to clear the hay. As they worked they would endlessly complain about their captain, Lugus. Everyday a new threat, a new way to set the captain straight. And everyday Lugus would enter the stables, bark his orders, and the men would crumble huffing their frustrations to themselves, their voices lost until Lugus left room. Then, taken with a new strength, they would become loud and full of defiance again.

After a week of observing these rats from his loft, Valtteri had decided he's first decree as king would be to have to take each of them tie them to a post far off in the fields where they to cry their empty words into the hills. A threat he realised sounded very similar to the one's he had just heard below, with one important difference, Valtteri meant it.

In the days Valtteri had spent hidden in the stables, the men of the trading post had been tested a few times by bandits that prowled the lands, some alone, others in packs. The test always concluded with a few of the local men failing. The old and slow were the first to fall,

the young men, though, kept the invaders back with the life they still clung to desperately. Valtteri had also noticed, not only did the young fight back but they were getting better, maybe there was hope for Sayjin's kingdom after all.

While the days were frustrating, Valtteri was cheered by the fact his mission was going well. The captain had turned out to more a resilient man than Valtteri had thought. When Lugus had discovered his dagger was missing, possibly stolen, he did not start a frantic search for it or accuse his man of treachery. He simply went about his day, the empty dagger sheathe displayed, prominently, on his belt. Valtteri had never seen a Black Snake act with such a level head, being stripped of his rank and laws had done this one a world of good.

The test continued, the next night Valtteri had left the dagger below the back window to his homestead and knocked on the window. The captain opened the shutters to find his blade glinting in the moonlight, he looked out into the alley, before leaving his home and retrieving the dagger from the ground.

Valtteri had left clear tracks that led to a nearby building. The captain followed the footsteps, seemingly out of curiosity, found the house empty, shrugged and returned to his bed.

The next night Valtteri snuck back into captain's room and took a sword from its sheath then left tracks to another house where he placed the sword. The captain awoke in the morning found the the tracks and retrieved his sword.

The next night he took the helmet leading him to an empty general store.

The next a glove placed in an accountant's office.

Lugus was always even tempered, in fact, he seemed amused by the wandering items, smiling to himself as he retrieved his missing items. Not once did he give into paranoia, or become fearful at the thought of a stranger easily gaining access to him in the dead of night. The coward may have found a backbone in the plains outside of Hawkescliff.

Valtteri then stopped his tests, he wanted to put some distance between Lugus and himself, tonight he would see how well he had done at convincing Lugus he was not a threat.

From the corner Valtteri listened as the complaints of the Lowmen started again, waiting for night to come.

The night was unusually warm, the first moments of spring had come to the plains. Valtteri expertly dodge between the guards, whose patterns Valtteri had now memorised. The unruly brothers Tor and Failan had snuck off again to gamble, leaving a large gap in the procession. The brothers had almost met their end when they had decided to play the card games in a house Valtteri used as a hiding spot. Fortunately, he was able to close the door

without the brothers noticing, who were more interested in their game and the mead they had stolen from the storehouse.

Skirting around the front of the buildings, Valtteri approached Lugus' door feeling the surge of adrenaline that came over him before every fight. Tonight would reveal if he had wasted the last week and lost his crown or had he been able to gain some kind of acceptance from Lugus.

Valtteri pushed the door open and moved into the space, Lugus lay beneath his blanket snoring heavily. Valtteri took the dagger and helmet and left, leaving the door fully open. Bending over he walked across the ground, letting his hand drag behind him, leaving a visible mark in the dirt of the square. Yosh would be emerging soon from behind the old store to Valtteri's right. Valtteri placed the helmet next to the fountain, then he moved into the stables leaving the small door ajar and placed the the dagger on the ground, he climbed the ladder up into the loft and waited.

The twilight of dawn came across the horizon and the tired groans of the men could be heard through the small window in the loft. The large doors creaked open, Lugus appeared dressed for his morning duties. He found the dagger laying in the dirt.

"I hope you appreciate the job the boys are doing," said Lugus, "they're not the quickest about things, but its better then it was."

Valtteri stunned for a moment, he thought he was going to be the one to speak first.

"But then, why hurry?" sighed Lugus who sheathed the the blade in his belt, Lugus had brought his sword with him tonight, "we have time, don't we? A mountain of time."

"Men waiting," said Valtteri from the loft still hidden from Lugus.

There was a silence.

"Do you want to join us?" asked Lugus finally, "you seem skilled enough to evade our guards, you may be helpful to our cause."

"And what is your cause?"

"Survival," said Lugus with an annoyance in his voice.

"Survival is not a cause."

“I chose my words poorly,” shrugged Valtteri, “what I meant to say is we need hands to defend to the post. If you’re looking for a place there’s one for you here.”

“Will two hands make difference in the end?”

Lugus grunted.

“I have men to train,” snapped Lugus.

“You have a mountain of time of that,” laughed Valtteri.

“I came to offer you some refuge,” said Lugus angrily, “if you do not want it then move on and leave my possessions be.”

Valtteri walked to edge of loft and looked down at Lugus. The large, imposing figure of Valtteri set Lugus back, instinctively reaching for the hilt of his sword.

“Two hands are not enough, Lugus,” said Valtteri, “and thats why I bring you two hundred.”

“You don’t seem to be very good at counting.”

“That is very true,” laughed Valtteri and jumped from the loft landing a few yards from Lugus.

Valtteri stood himself up and looked in Lugus’ eyes.

“Look at my eyes, Lugus,” smiled Valtteri.

Lugus fixed on Valtteri’s eyes and then unsheathed his sword.

“What do you see?” asked Valtteri unmoved.

“A Demon,” replied Lugus simply.

“Beyond the colour, Lugus, look deeper. Do you see the determination? The will to do what is needed, the power to not just exist but thrive?”

“What do you want?”

“Everything,” smiled Valtteri, “but for now this trading post.”

“Are you here to kill us?”

“What would that accomplish?”

Lugus stood for a moment his eyes moving fast with thought.

“Explain yourself,” said Lugus, finally.

“You cannot defend this place, can you?”

“Of course not, the trading post was built when the Diamond Heart kept the peace. There was no need for walls then.”

“You need more men, to keep watch and others to build the walls you need.”

“Agreed,” grumbled Lugus.

“An army.”

“There are no armies of any worth left.”

“But there will be.”

Lugus scoffed.

“A new kingdom, Lugus, built from what has survived,” declared Valtteri, “and with a kingdom we will have soldiers to fight, engineers to build, executioners for those that would prey on us.”

“You are quiet outlandish, even for a Demon.”

“Is it that outlandish?” asked Valtteri, “as far as I can see it, it is our only option. How long can you keep those boys inline? How long until a band of marauders larger than ten turn their sights on you? How long until the food store are empty?”

“If we don’t take back the land and restore peace none of us will last.”

Lugus looked at the Demon, quietly, his eyes flickered slower.

“How?” asked Lugus.

“I am not alone,” explained Valtteri, “my friends are at this moment gathering allies across the plains with the same message.”

“Two hundred hands, you say you have?”

“Two thousand hands, maybe more.”

“And, if we fail.”

“Then to the abyss with all of us as that mountain of time comes crashing down on us all.”

There was silence between the two as Lugus thought and Valtteri waited.

“I did not get your name, Demon.”

“Valtteri.”

“I have thought of such things myself...” his voice trailed off, “you will need to speak to Lawrence, he runs this town. The people listen when he speaks, convince him and you may have the post.”

“Will you stand with me?”

“I’ll get you a hearing,” said Lugus, “that is all. I am only just a hired arm here, an outsider, like yourself. There is a bath, in the house next to mine, water in the well. Get yourself cleaned up, you stink of horse dung.”

Valtteri smiled, his plan was going well. Valtteri doubted Lugus had nerve for his vision, but he had served his purpose. Lawrence was the true power here and the one he needed.

Valtteri gathered water from the well as the Lowmen glared at him, puzzled by his sudden appearance. Lugus had ordered them to stay back and they had done so.

The water was bitterly cold against his skin as Valtteri’s scrapped away the filth. His clothes still stank of sweat and manure, but he had no time to wash and dry them. He opened the windows and lay the pieces of leather and fabric on the sills, hoping the air would help in some small way.

Valtteri lay on the bed waiting for Lugus to return as the midday sun came and went. The rhythmic sound of the men practicing with wooden weapons came through the open window.

As the man started to disband from their training and the guards changed without Lugus returning. The night came and as the night air set in Valtteri retrieved his clothes and dressed. After a while longer, Lugus appeared at the door with a lantern.

“Come,” said Lugus, “Lawrence will see you now.”

“What did you tell him?” asked Valtteri getting up from the bed.

“That you want to discuss an alliance with him,” replied Lugas.

“Does he know I am a Child?”

“I told him you were a Demon, yes.”

“How did he respond to that?”

“Not well,” said Lugas, “but I told him you could help us defend the town. That is why he has agreed to meet you.”

“I am put a lot of faith in you, Lugas,” said Valtteri finding his boots.

“And I in you. If the people are to find out that I knew you were hiding in the stables for a week and did nothing, I’ll be following you out of town.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“I do not know, really. I suppose, I wanted to see where it would all lead.”

“And now we are here.”

“And I am intrigued, I must admit,” nodded Lugas but then added firmly, “the people in the warehouse, they don’t need to hear that their guards failed to protect them. That is all they have left, if they lose it who knows what they would do to you or me.”

“Luck has been on your side.”

“I know.”

“And when it runs out?”

“Keeping headings east, I suppose, the mermaids off Quillo are said to be very inviting,” laughed Lugas.

“I am sure it won’t come to that,” Valtteri joined in the laughter and motioned to the door.

The two crossed the dark square. Valtteri had spent many nights staring at the outline of the warehouse in the moonlight, wondering how many people were crowded within. Some

nights he had thought to approach the building and try to peer inside the high windows, but had thought against it, the risk had been too great.

Lugus led Valtteri around the side of the warehouse to a small door. He opened it and revealed a simple room with a long table that could seat twelve men. At the far end sat a wrinkled, pale skinned man with a long grey beard, liver spots covered his bald head, his face worn and tough. He held himself upright, stiff and tall in his chair, his arms resting on the table in front of him, hands clasped. A slender woman with auburn hair and a simple dirty dress sat to his left and a broad man with a round stomach sat to his right, his face hidden by a bright red beard. The Lowmen had turn their chairs slightly angled towards a chair the far end of table.

"Sit here," instructed Lugus motioning to the chair.

Lugus bowed towards the three.

"Lawrence, Virginia, Yarl, this is the Demon, Lugus."

"Lugus, tells us you seek an alliance?" asked Virginia as Valtteri found his chair.

"Not an alliance," said Valtteri smiling, "an invitation to join our new kingdom."

"A new kingdom?" laughed Yarl, "and where do you get the authority to proclaim such."

"The authority given to me by those who wish to swear fealty," said Valtteri, "just as the once King of Douruh ask the same of Lord Pryce."

"We still swear fealty to Lord and King," snapped Yarl.

"If your lords still live they do not seem to be riding from Hawkescliff to reward your loyalty."

Yarl grunted in response.

"I will reward such dying loyalty," continued Valtteri, "together we can restore the roads and waterways, making them safe again and our people can go back to their lives as they was were."

"How many swear fealty to you?" asked Virginia.

"A numbers are growing and we would like you join us."

“This is foolishness,” said Yarl, “you can not walk into this place and proclaim yourself a king.”

“Someone will, and perhaps you will even live to see that day and when they come, they will not come with the words of friendship and aid as I do, they may come with swords for what remains.

“Who do you wait for, Yarl? The Orsil who will throw you in chains and have you work their dead lands, or the Reisu who will simply butcher you over old grudges and take your land and woman as their own. You may be lucky though, and the Sowan will get here first, they won’t kill you or put you cages but they will grind you with taxes and confiscate your goods on a whim as they are known to do.”

“You talk above your station, above all our stations,” snapped Yarl.

“There are no stations, the nobles are dead, Yarl,” yelled Valtteri, “and you must decide now if you want to still be here after the waves of destruction are done battering the land.”

The room fell silent.

“You know that it is coming,” continue Valtteri quietly, “at the moment everyone is still shocked, scared, clinging to what they can of the old world, but after that, oh, then the Midnight Worgs will come to feast.”

“You expect us to believe a Demon will keep the worgs at bay?” laughed Virginia, “your kind have always delighted in our torment.”

“It is true, I myself have found much happiness in the torment of the Lowmen before the Heart left,” said Valtteri, “but the truth is, Virginia, the worgs come for me as they do for all others and I am not ready to be taken, not yet.”

The room went quiet, again.

“Why must you be king?” asked Yarl, “why not me or Virginia?”

“This is not the time to be quibbling over a crown. Once the union is formed and the walls are built we can fight over it then.”

“An ally here and an ally there won’t help us,” said Virginia shaking her head, “the task is monstrous.”

“The task is monstrous, I grant you that, but its nature won’t be changed by ignoring it. Supplies dwindle, more give into despair and become animals. We must start now, before there is nothing left to save.”

“What do you think, Lugas?” asked Yarl.

“I don’t involve myself in politics,” said Lugas bluntly.

Valtteri sat, enjoying the silence, he looked at the three across the table. Virginia was leaning back in her chair, but her eyes betrayed an excitement. Yarl sat forward in his chair, his hard eyes trying to unnerve Valtteri, but his body had become more relaxed than it had first been. The silent Lawrence sat, unmoved. Valtteri caught his eyes, the old man did not look away, but simply kept staring with a soft, studious gaze.

“If you need time, I can give you the night to think upon it,” said Valtteri finally, “but after that I must keep moving. There are others I must spread the word too.”

“Get Solmarn,” said Lawrence with a wave of his hand.

The old man’s voice was painfully rough and soft.

“Yes, Elder,” replied Virginia quietly.

“Who is Solmarn?” asked Valtteri as Virginia exited a door at the back the room.

“A Keeper of the Light,” said Yarl with a wicked grin.

Valtteri was on his feet knocking his chair back.

“Sit down, Valtteri,” said Lugas, “you need to trust me, as I trusted you.”

“You did not think we would meet with a Demon without protection,” said Yarl quietly.

Valtteri pulled a dagger from his belt and placed it on the table.

“A small piece of protection for myself, then?”

Yarl nodded in response and Valtteri picked up his chair and sat back down resting his hand on the hilt of the blade. His mind became alert and quick, his fingers danced nervously along the hilt of the blade.

Never leave Nerys, Valtteri thought quickly, why did you leave Nerys?

The door opened and light spilled in from the next room accompanied by the sound of dozen people mumbling, just beyond.

And then the Keeper appeared, he was old, sixty, maybe seventy years. He walked tall and strong but with a slight limp, his hair were dark swirls of grey and black that tumbled to his shoulders. He wore a white tunic, emblazoned on it was the insignia of the Keepers. Three black towers above a bed of black flames.

Valtteri's attention was drawn immediately to the grizzly necklace he wore, a chain of deformed, petrified ears, fists of sharp claws, gnarled teeth, warped skulls. Each a trophy obtained from a Child of Linyu that Solmarn had slain.

The pendant though was what took the breath from Valtteri's body. A simple horn that shimmered gold and green in the torchlight of the room. The horn was not of a Child but taken from a true Demon, the monstrous race that had been driven from this land but still stalked the distant savage continent to south beyond the Stormlands and the Sparkling Isle. Only a man of exceptional talent could survive the journey to that land then return with such a prize.

"Are you afraid, Valtteri?" asked Solmarn as he moved slowly down the long room.

Valtteri sat silently in his chair watching Solmarn approach his fingers rapidly tapping on the handle of the blade in front of him. Valtteri panicked, what use was this blade would be against such a man?

"Good," said Solmarn with a smile.

Solmarn placed his hand firmly on the back of the chair next to Valtteri and sat. Valtteri stiffen in his seat.

"If it makes you feel more comfortable you may have two," continued Solmarn with a gentle wave of his hand.

Faster than any could comprehend, a second dagger was on the table, Valtteri hands now resting on both hilts. It required every ounce of his self control to still his hands and centre his thoughts.

"You sister, Nerys?" Solmarn asked softly, "where is she?"

“Finestone. Looking for more,” Valtteri said quickly he did not have the presence of mind to lie.

“Lugus, do you know what you found here?” asked Solmarn his eyes flicking up at Lugus.

“No, my lord,” said Lugus not meeting his gaze.

“Valtteri, brood of Loranos, one of the most vicious assassins ever to stalk the eastern kingdoms. He once killed a party of eight Keepers single handedly,” explained Solmarn his eyes slowly moving back to Valtteri, “he was untouchable by his kind and ours.

Oh, Lugus, how I wished I had the chance to cross swords with him, he sounded like a challenge worthy of me. But unfortunately me he came to bear fruit. Twins, Nerys and Valtteri. His body was undoubtedly stronger than many, but even he was unable to take strain of bearing two children at once and he was consumed during their birth. Do you remember your father, Valtteri?”

Valtteri sat silently watching the man across from quietly.

“No.”

“You did the Lesser Race’s quite the favour in getting rid of Loranos for us,” he smiled, “Valtteri and Nerys have gone on to make a small name for themselves in the two hundred years since then with minor disturbances here and there but nothing that compared to work of their father. You see, Lugus, a Demon’s fruit tend to fall much further from the tree than ours.”

“Did you come just to insult me, Keeper?” spat Valtteri.

“No, Valtteri, I came to let you know I am here,” said Solmarn slowly leaning with a low, hard voice, “I am here and I know you. I know everything about you.”

Valtteri sat still, his muscle tense ready to pounce at the first sudden motion, but Solmarn sat back in his chair he pulled at his necklace showing a small skull no bigger than thumb.

“Do you know who this belonged to?”

Valtteri looked at the strange trophy.

“No.”

“Did you ever meet Gulagar the Horrible?”

“Yes,” said Valtteri and quick smile flashed on his face and then it vanished, “he was an amusing fellow.”

“A sideshow act with a travelling circus. A Child who had the odd gift which allowed him to vomit up handfuls of tiny skulls. Gulagar would use them as puppets to amuse and disgust the townsfolk across the east. And they loved him, he would always end a performance to wild cheers, children took the skulls as token of their magical night at the circus,” Solmarn looked at the skull with a distant gaze, “still, he had the Demon blood and as a Keeper it was my duty to take his life. An creature who had wronged no one and simply wanted to amuse others.”

Solmarn’s powerful gave flicked back onto Valtteri and he jumped.

“The gods have said many things to many people, Lugus. Many of us listened and are now wondering why we did so,” continued Solmarn his eyes still focused on Valtteri.

The room sat quiet for moment.

“I’m not going to kill you, Valtteri, or your sister in the name of my order like I once would have, but if you so much as harm a single person in this place or I suspect your motives are any other that which you claim, I will not hesitate in hunting you down and claiming another trophy for my necklace,” Solmarn placed his finger on Valtteri’s, “this.”

There was a silence between the two as Solmarn stared down Valtteri. There was a few moments and Valtteri looked away. Solmarn lifted his finger and stood.

“What say you, Solmarn?” asked Yarl.

“I would be cautious of this one, but not frightened,” explained Solmarn in a cold, calculated voice of a doctor giving a diagnosis, “they’re childish brats, little else. The other is worse, her gift allows her to exploit a Lesser Man’s desires, allowing her to overcome a man’s reason, sometimes to the point of madness. She has driven some weaker souls to suicide and murder, but her power is only as strong as the mind is weak.

“Once you have leave her company or become aware you are being manipulated the effect dissipates and reason restores itself. This one has no gift. Twins are rare in occurrence in the world of the Children, all Loranus’ power went Nerys leaving her brother impotent and weak in comparison to other Children.”

The others did not notice when Valtteri body stiffened at the insult.

“And their plan?” ask Virginia.

“Its time to rebuild, I agree with that and the strength of two Children will be an advantage in the months to come. What is important is that you get the farms working again, food takes time to grow and your stocks will be stretched.”

“Will you stay?” asked Lawrence with his rough voice, “let your strength secure our voice in this pact.”

“I will stay as long as I can, but I am old man like you,” said Solmarn quietly, “there are things I must do before my own end.”

Solmarn bowed to three and then turned to Valtteri.

“I will be watching.”

Solmarn exited leaving the room in silence.

Valtteri’s body relax and his breath returned. He felt sick, deeply and disgustingly sick.

Where was Nerys?

“Virginia? Yarl?” asked Lawrence.

“We have been waiting for help and this is what has arrived. It is not ideal, but I think we know it is time to make a stand,” said Virginia.

“I agree,” nodded Yarl.

“I, too,” said Lawrence, “Valtteri, we accept your agreement.”

Valtteri’s head was still slightly spinning.

“Yes, the agreement,” he stuttered as he steadying himself and then added, “we must spread the word, of course, we must rally more men to the kingdom.”

“Isn’t that your task?” asked Yarl.

“It is our task now, we either gather together now or we fail and the word is more easily spread amongst the Lowmen, themselves, my eyes are not trusted as well as yours.”

“This is true,” nodded Virginia.

“You must choose these envoys from your own ranks and send them, the more we have the greater our chances of making this union work,” said Valtteri.

“Understood,” said Virginia.

“Now, a more delicate matter. I must have a lord, one who will swear fealty and rule this place in my absence. The lord must be able to travel the plains unafraid to meet with me wherever I will be,” said Valtteri, “Yarl, you seem a man eager for promotions and titles.”

“Indeed, I am,” said Yarl, suddenly excited.

“Then let me make you a lord in my new kingdom. You will rule here in my stead above all.”

Lawrence raised his hand and as Yarl went to speak.

“I think we must talk on the matter,” interrupted Lawrence, “we will present you with a lord we consider suitable.”

Valtteri waited for a moment and thought it was not time to push the matter.

“I must have one your choice by dawn,” replied Valtteri, “too much time has already passed us.”

“Agreed,” said Lawrence, “now, if you would excuse us, we would like to discuss this amongst ourselves. You are free to stay in the warehouse tonight, though I would ask you, do not speak of this to anyone. The people will be told when the time is right.”

“Very well,” said Valtteri standing and looking at his subjects, “I believe it is customary to stand when the king does.”

Yarl stood while other to stayed seated, slightly embarrassed Yarl sat again.

“You will have our choice by dawn,” said Lawrence softly.

Valtteri nodded and walked the length of long room to the door past the table. He looked back at Lugus for a moment, who gave him quick nod. Valtteri opened the door.

The cavernous room of the warehouse proper gave off a smell a hundred times worse than the rot in the stables. A horde of people crawled over makeshift beds and squirmed out from under fabrics. Cloth, once used as sails, had been strung up as tents or walls to give the occupants a reprieve from dead stares and tired cries of babes, stained with something yellow and brown. Valtteri looked past the people for the horrid vision of Solmarn, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Valtteri relaxed and pushed through the corridors of fabric. He found an unused corner, sat himself down and viewed his conquest. The faces were vacant, but the hands were still strong.

A drunk woman drop herself down beside him, bottle in hand.

“And who might ya’ be?” she slurred with a grin as her hands found his chest.

“I’m your new king,” he replied with a smile.

She cursed and laughed.

“Who talk’ ya inna that?”

“I volunteered.”

“ere,” she pushed the bottle on to him, “you’re gunnata need dis.”

Her wretched hair fell beneath his nose causing him to choke, the woman did not seem to notice as her hand slowly moved down his body.

“When zay run out of ta bot’l,” she laughed wickedly, “I goin’ out ta top.”

She threw her head back at the high window.

Valtteri took a mouthful from the bottle and the putrid alcohol burnt his mouth and throat as the hand found his crotch.

“Are ya looking for queen, ma’ lord?”

“No,” he replied politely.

“If ya change yar mind, I’m ova ‘ere,” she laughed and squeezed.

The woman giggled to herself and then sighed, releasing her hand. The woman struggled to her feet and started to wander off when she turned her head quickly.

“I ‘ave a sista ta.”

She winked and bared her browning teeth with a grin, before turning away.

Valtteri sat and waited for the dawn to come, watching the Lowmen take a short interested in the large man sitting in the corner before retreating to their beds. The warehouse became dark and the mummers and grunts gave way to snoring and the sound of people wrestling with their nightmares.

The dawn was not coming quick enough and Valtteri had seen what he needed. So, he picked himself up and found the door that led back to town square.

Valtteri looked around the square, the patrol was well into their cycle. He felt a sense of pride as he stepped out into the square in full view of anyone who wished to see and went directly to his stables. Once inside, he hoisted himself back up into the familiar loft and waited out the night.

Outside the small window of the loft, the plains sparkled in the moonlight. It was his now and a surge of triumph flooded his body. He place the bottle of rancid wine to his side and fell asleep.

The dawn woke him and Valtteri left his stables. In the centre of the Valtteri’s Square stood Lugus, a leather bag over one shoulder.

“I thought you weren’t interested in politics,” said Valtteri

“I’m not,” said Lugus, “that is why they chose me. Lawrence stays the voice of authority here. Give me any title you wish, but I am nothing more than a messenger.”

“If that is what you have decided,” shrugged Valtteri, “do you know the manor house of Pryce?”

“I know of it, on the edge of southern woods?”

“Yes, now for the pact to be complete you must lay a wreath of blue flowers at the gate of that house to signify your loyalty. You must find you way alone and with no aid. I will be waiting within for you.”

“As you command, my lord.”

The fresh guard emerged from the warehouse and out of habit Lugus turned to the m.

“Tim, Fal, stables,” he barked.

“I am on watch today,” shoot back Tim.

“They don’t need you on watch, finish the stables.”

“Please, Lugus,” interrupted Valtteri quietly, “I will have you leave at once. You do not need to concern yourself with these trivialities, anymore.”

Lugus shoot Valtteri a hard look then shook his head and shrugged, without another word he walked towards his home.

“Lad,” Valtteri called as he approached Tim, “walk with me, won’t you?”

Tim looked at the large imposing figure in front of him and then nodded, his words lost again.

“Tell me,” started Valtteri as the two crossed the square to the front arch of trading post, “of all the hills on the horizon, which is your favourite?”

Tim rubbed his arm nervously.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Time puzzled.

“Which of the hills is your favourite, lad?” asked Valtteri motioning to the hills that sat beyond the plain that stretch out before them, golden in the dawning light.

“I don’t know,” stuttered Tim, “I don’t have one.”

“Of course you don’t, lad,” smiled Valtteri and took a deep breath of fresh morning air, “I’ll have to choose one for you.”

Chapter 7

Flynn wiped the sweat from his forehead as he shuffled in front the crowd, which had gathered before the funeral pyre. The midday sun hidden by the grey clouds above as the cold winds whipped through the trees of the public garden.

“Elder Hornefred was a great man and a great minstrel...” Flynn stuttered, “one of finest... He, ah, told the songs better than any man I ever knew.”

Flynn cleared his throat before continuing.

“He was also... a good, ah, great Elder. Even though he... we never completed the second well, not that it matters, we will finish it and when we do... we will remember Hornefred and what he did for us.”

Bahruun stood behind looking out upon the crowd, comfortable and relax. Flynn had refused to let him speak.

Two days earlier, Hornefred had died in his bed, taken by the illness he had been battling for a week. When the body had been removed from the Elder’s chambers Flynn had handed the mantle of Elder to Bahruun without question, Flynn never liked his position as Master of council and he, absolutely, did not want to be Elder.

But then the morning of the of funeral came and as the council met to prepare for the solemn event Bahruun came with the news that Nerys had returned to Finestone and claimed he had been the one to bring her into the town, thinking Flynn would prefer to focus on funeral of his friend.

Flynn, suspicious, went to the guards and found none had seen the gates opened that morning. The coincidence of Nerys returning with no guards seeing her and Bahruun being the one to discover her a few days after Hornefred’s death was too much for Flynn to believe. Flynn then realised his error in giving Bahruun Hornefred’s title, something he was resolved to fix that day.

Flynn returned to the town hall, taken by his fury, cursed Bahruun in front of the whole council, demanding he not say a word at the funeral and that he would deal with him after he had said goodbye to his friend.

The councillors were stunned, unsure what to make of the fight between the two leaders and wondered what had caused Flynn to go into a rage. They shook their heads and whispered to themselves, none of them had ever liked Flynn, finding him a strange, gruff and distant man, but they tolerated him because Hornefred had demanded he be at his side. Flynn did not care what the councillors thought of him, he was not a man who cared to understand the soft art of politics, all he knew was his last friend was gone and Bahruun and the Demon may have been the ones to take him.

As the funeral had begun and the councillors said their words of farewell Nerys, unescorted, appeared at the gate of garden, her cloak flapping wildly behind her like a war banner flying in the wind.

Flynn growled to himself as he watched the Demon approach, doing all he could not to jump from his place and strangle her with his bare hands. The Demon was responsible and she had come to see the fruits of her labour. He met her treacherous, red eyes.

“Shepard Johanna, the final blessing,” said Flynn, low and quiet keeping his eyes on Nerys.

Flynn stepped back into the line of councillors, next to Bahruun.

From the crowd emerged a short, spry woman with curled, black hair. A smile could not help but creep across Nerys’ face as she saw the woman had decided to wear a bright, red dress in place of the elegant, red robes usually worn by the Shepards of the Last Woods. Amused, Nerys wondered what the woman had been before she had been thrown the once scared title of Shepard.

“Thank you, Flynn,” she said quietly and turned to the crowd.

“Hornefred was the greatest that man that we could have hoped for in the darkness of these trying days,” declared Johanna her voice strong, hard and commanding cutting through wind that roared overhead, “when those charged with our protection betrayed us and used their strength to enslave us, Hornefred and only Hornefred, reminded us of the truth we had all long forgotten.”

The smile vanished from Nerys’ lips.

“This man reminded us of what we had forgotten, who we are and where we came from. Our father, Sulla the Fire Babe gives our bodies the strength to fight our enemies. Our father, Quillo the Beautiful give our minds the sharp, cunning we need to survive in these cursed days. And our father Rei the Defiant who gave us the resilience we need to stand hard against any foe.

She paused a few men shouted Hornefred’s name.

“Without this man to lead us we would still be a terrified, we would still be struggling and we would still be lost, cowering from the hands of those that struck us,” she yelled angrily,

“and we own it to Hornefred to make sure we do not cower again, that we continue through the trials that are certain to come.”

A feeling of dislike swept over Nerys. This Lower Man, whoever she was, could be an annoyance.

“Johanna,” muttered Flynn seemingly as annoyed as Nerys, “the blessing.”

There was a moment as Johanna looked at Flynn and then turn back to the crowd.

“Shepard,” called Johanna raising her hands, “I call upon you. Bring the Mother Wolf to the Last Woods were Elder Hornefred awaits her.”

The wind in the trees became still and the garden became silent.

“Bring the blessed Mother and let her find a good man, true to his word and loved by those he leaves behind. Let him ride upon the her back, nestled against her regal mane.

“Keep from him the Midnight Worgs who would feast upon those unworthy and untrue. Keep him from him the spirits who wait to trick him from his path. Take him to the edge of the Abyss where he may step into the final end knowing he leaves behind those that will continue his memory.”

There was a pause as the blessing concluded.

“Not the Abyss,” shouted a man from the back, “let him ascend.”

“Yes, let him ascend,” yelled another man aggressively.

“Let him ascend,” shouted the woman standing next Nerys.

Soon the crowd was shouting the same in chorus, a sadness took over Flynn’s face and tears welled in his eyes.

“Silence,” shouted Johanna and the crowd quieted, “do you find Hornefred to be the greatest amongst us?”

“Yes,” shouted voices from the crowd.

“Will you sing to the gods as one? Will your voices be loud enough to reach Thalius and the Saquaari?”

“A curse on Gods,” shouted a man from back, “a curse on Thalius and the damned Saquaari.”

A dark silence hit the crowd.

“He belongs with Sulla,” cried a woman in tears, “let Sulla come and take him. He belongs with the heroes he loved.”

Nerys looked around the people nodded their heads silently, their faces angry and fierce. Johanna look at those behind her, the council were expressionless.

“Then let it be,” said Johanna with a wavering voice, “let Sulla take Hornefred from the Last Woods and take him where the heroes rest.”

The crowd began to chant Hornefred’s name, the voices growing louder and louder. When the air started to shake from the voice Johanna motioned to a boy standing by the pyre, torch in hand. He bent over and the fire quickly took hold. The crowd fell silent and the flames grew.

After a short time the body of Hornefred was lost in the flames.

One by one each villager left, muttering simple thoughts of love and admiration under their breath. Flynn had not turned from the flames, watching it take his friend and letting the tears run down his face. Bahruun waited quietly beside him, shuffling nervously.

“The town hall,” said Flynn quietly to Bahruun, “bring your Demon.”

Flynn wiped his forehead, the fever from his illness still burned under the skin. He turned and started to walk down the hill when Johanna’s small shape cut in front of his path.

“Not now,” snapped Flynn and kept walking.

“I will not be ignored,” demanded Johanna.

“Not now,” yelled Flynn loud causing a few in the remaining crowd to jump and some of council to shake their heads.

Johanna froze in place and watched as Flynn walked from the garden.

Nerys approached Bahruun who was still staring into the flames.

“He was a good man, whose time had come,” said Nerys.

“Without question,” nodded Bahruun and turned away from the pyre, “we should deal with Flynn.”

Nerys agreed and two made their way from the garden to the hall. Flags of exquisite fabrics that hung from the window sills rustled in the cold wind that had come across the plain that day. The clouds over head made the hall’s white shell, dull and grey.

Bahruun pushed open the doors. Flynn stood inside the dark room studying the large mural of Thalius behind the podium. Flynn turned and took a large breath and the let it out, slowly.

“You are a wicked one, Demon,” stated Flynn his voice calm.

“My name is Nerys,” she replied.

“A week after you appear, Hornefred is dead of a strange illness. My own skin turns pale and burns. Bahruun claims you have only just returned, but no one seems to have seen you come or go from our town. I will suffer no more lies. Tell me, why did you bring death to my home?”

“Death was already here, Hornefred said so himself.”

“The herbs woman gave Hornefred a stew of flowers and roots to fight the illness. Would it have saved him?”

“Yes,” said Nerys she step forward so that Flynn could easily attack her, if he dared, “it would have expunged the poison Bahruun fed him. He would still be with you.”

Flynn did not move, but studied her for a moment.

“Will it save me?” asked Flynn.

“Of course, if it is what you want?”

“Why are you bent on tormenting us?”

“Because you hold a place for the living. Go and die in the plains, if you must, but leave this place to those that would use it.”

“Do you think you can save these people?” laughed Flynn, “do you think this was how I wanted it? There are too many people here. Come the summer, there is no more food, the wells are already stressed and are becoming dirty, the men outside trap us here. There is no hope left.”

“Then be done with it. Go to the Abyss with your friend.”

“I would, but I am still needed here,” growled Flynn his body grew in space as he opened his shoulders and stood tall, “someone needs to keep the peace, someone has to stop the suffering and that isn’t going to be done by a damned Demon. I should have killed you the moment I saw you.”

Bahruun cleared his throat about to speak.

“Quiet,” ordered Nerys and then paused before continuing to address Flynn, “we will bring food from the farms, we will fetch water from the springs. The world has not ended yet, Flynn.”

“Beyond the wall?” laughed Flynn.

“Yes, leave these damn walls and take back your lands.”

“With a group of twenty men who can’t swing a sword.”

“Yes, those men, the men I saw on that hill today did not seem to know you had already built a pyre for them. They deserve a chance to fight.”

Flynn wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“You think you know better, Demon, then let the council decide it, but if they decide against you, this time you and your servant will leave and never return. You will keep your word this time.”

“I always keep my word,” growled Nerys, “Bahruun invited me to stay after he saw what you and Hornefred had become. And when your council sees it, they too will also beg me to stay.”

“Bahruun, call them.”

Bahruun left through the door to the side of the podium. Nerys and Flynn stood silently across from each.

“I do...” Nerys began.

“I do not want to hear your lies, Demon,” said Flynn coldly, “save them for your pet.”

The bell that sat above the hall began to ring out across the town, summoning to council to meet.

“I will take one of the chairs,” snapped Nerys.

“You will stand where you are, the chairs are for the council only.”

Nerys wanted to leap across the room and plunge the dagger deep into the insolent Lesser’s face. But she didn’t, she simply waited to see who would arrive.

Bahruun returned to the room and lent by a wall, lazily, watching the two tense combatants continue to stare each other down. The three were joined one by one by the eight councillors that had stood behind Flynn at the funeral. Each was welcomed and asked to wait while the others arrived, forming a circle in the centre of the hall.

The final one to arrive was a short woman with mud caked onto her legs and dress. She smiled at the others, warmly, and took a place in the circle.

“I have called you all here to discuss a serious matter,” started Flynn matter-of-factly, “as you can see a Demon has found her way into our town. She has bewitched Bahruun and murdered Hornefred, also she has also poisoned me.”

A man step back out of circle, a look of panic across his face.

“And you brought us here to offer us up to her,” yelled the man, “you’re a fool, Flynn.”

“Stay calm,” ordered Flynn, “she has promised to leave us in peace once she has spoken to you.”

“How do you know it will keep its word?” snarled another grim looking man covered in ash.

“You have nothing to fear from me,” said Nerys calmly.

“You murdered our Hornefred, Demon, and now you say we shouldn’t fear you,” said an old woman more puzzled than angry.

“No one was murdered,” replied Nerys, “Hornefred asked for death, as unbelievable as that may sound to you. Bring me herbswoman, she will tell you, as such. When Hornefred became ill...”

“Poisoned,” spat Flynn.

“When death came for him,” continued Nerys, “he said he welcomed it and that he would except the judgement of the gods.”

“He did,” said the woman caked in mud, “I gave him the broth and he refused to drink... He said it was his time.”

“But it was not his time, he was deceived,” snapped a young woman with fierce eyes and body movements.

“There was no deception, there was an ailment and a cure that I made sure was available,” said Nerys, “Bahruun knew to get herbswoman and to help her to find the correct cure for Hornefred, which he did. I needed to show you the true face of the man your followed, a man wanted death and not just for himself.”

“Bahruun, you have disgraced yourself again, let us hope your father never hears of this” said the old woman shaking her head.

“Bahruun...” started Nerys.

“I am speaking Demon,” scowled the old woman cutting Nerys off, “we have heard your wicked words Demon and I hope you enjoyed your distasteful game, you have cut us a wound that will never heal. We will hear no more, leave us to morn our leader and take Bahruun with you.”

“He was no leader,” snapped Nerys, “he was a fool who was obsessed with death.”

“Disgusting,” snarled the man covered in ash, “even for a Demon.”

“You have no supplies to last past summer, what was Hornefred going to do for you when the stores were empty?” shouted Nerys.

Some of the councillors looked away, while others sighed, but none dared to speak.

“Nothing,” continued Nerys sensing weakness, “because he already saw you all as dead, walking corpses. The wells dry and instead of seeking new supplies, he set you about digging a hole that will take a year to finish. Pointless work to distract you from what you know.”

“I said that to him,” said a small old man on the far side of the circle, “I said it was folly, but he insisted it was the right thing to do.”

“Then what should we do?” asked Nerys to the man who had spoke, “where do we find water?”

“The farms just to the west have ample water supplies and windmills to bring more to the surface, we just need to find a way to get it back here. A caravan to bring fresh water, I told Hornefred.”

“Then do it,” said Nerys, “take a dozen horses and those that will help and go.”

“Quiet,” said Flynn, “you do not give orders here.”

“I am not giving orders,” said Nerys to the old man locking her eyes onto his, “I am agreeing with you. You need to stop acting like Hornefred wanted you to act and start looking outwards, beyond the walls.”

“Why do you care what happens to us, Demon? Your kind have never been any more than nuisance,” challenged the man in ash.

“I don’t care,” said Nerys simply turning to face the man, “but when the Heart left I found myself the same as you, locked behind walls, scared to leave, wondering what was to become of me. As much as it disgusts me to admit it, I need the Lesser Men in this moment. And as much as I know it disgusts you, you need me. This is the way of the new world and I hate it.”

The man covered in ash simply nodded in reply, his face no longer angry be stern.

“There are those among of you that hate it as well,” declared Nerys, “being locked up this place wanting nothing more then be back on the roads to your true homes and finding your families or working a farm as you once did or just being able to see the plains again and wander them freely.”

Another man who had stayed silent until now nodded.

“It is true,” he declared, “I want to get back to my home and my children.”

“I can give you that, if you listen to me,” said Nerys to man and then turned to rest of the room, “tell me what you want and you will find the answers.”

One by one each councillor gave voice to what they had hoped for, but never dared speak of under Hornefred because under Hornefred there was no reason to speak of the m. And one by one each councillor started to realise Nerys held a reason for them, to the future they needed to seize, the life Hornefred had made the m forget.

Flynn watched on, unsure of what to make of it, he tried to interrupt but was hushed by the circle and when it was done and the councillors had listened. The doubt that had once held them was gone and they knew now they could leave their cage and take back their lands.

“Tomorrow when the dawn has broken, we will go for water. I will guard the caravan myself,” declared Nerys, “we take those who wish to help and walk our lands.”

“I will take the road tonight and see what I can learn of camp to the east, I will report back by day break,” said the man covered in ash.

“I will arrange the children to be taken in by the workers and taught trades,” said the old woman.

“I will take those willing and start planting just outside the wall,” said the woman covered in mud.

“You are all fools,” yelled Flynn from the corner, “you have lost your senses.”

The room fell quiet. Nerys smiled and enjoyed watching the man struggle.

“Curse the gods, if you will, they have earned your scorn, but look at yourself now, suckling at the Demon’s breast in desperation. Try to escape that which is unescapable,”

snarled Flynn, "the worgs come for us and they are never kind to those that deny them what is theirs. You have forgotten Shepard Ardil, you have fallen from your way."

"Shepard Ardil was a servant of the gods as was I," said the old woman, "but I won't be anymore. Not after all I have seen."

The circle nodded silently in agree. Flynn growled at the m.

"Then let the godless demons have you all," yelled Flynn and then he stormed from the room.

The room was silent for a short moment.

"My friends," said Nerys into the silence, "we have a new world to build, but before that there are somethings I must demand of you. Bahruun will be continue to be Elder here with no others as head."

"Bahruun, alone..." said the old woman shaking her head.

"Please," said Nerys, "we do not have time for this. What we must do is set our eyes on the horizon and march onwards."

The councillor's looked at each other quietly.

"I don't care, if that is what you wish," said the ash covered man, "but the council must still be consulted on all matters."

The others started to nod.

"I would be nothing without your council," smiled Nerys.

One by the one the councillor's dispersed chattering excitedly about their plans until Nerys and Bahruun were left standing alone in the room.

"You are quite the devious one," laughed Bahruun, "I will make sure to keep an eye on you."

"I have a task for you and it must be completed quickly," said Nerys.

"Already?" sighed Bahruun.

“Do you know the manor house of the Pryce family?”

“Of course, I have met with them a few times. They have quite an alluring daughter,”
smiled Bahruun, “am I to pay them a visit, give them the same treatment as Hornefred?”

“The Pryce family are already dead.”

“A pity, the daughter was quite the animal in bed.”

“I need you to ride there and lay a wreath of orange flowers at the gate.”

“Why?”

“To show your devotion to me and it must be done by tomorrow evening.”

“Or else?”

“Or else our pact is ended and I will find another to be my lord.”

“You would be nothing without me, Nerys,” laughed Bahruun.

“I know.”

“I will be expecting a host of woman when this done, I have been celibate for so long I am
thinking of calling myself Shepard. Will you be coming back to the house?”

“Of course, but first, I wish to see the Elder’s chambers.”

“I’ll show you the way, then” said Bahruun and retrieved a lantern from the podium.

Bahruun led Nerys through the side door and passages until they arrived at the same
hallway of doors she had been brought to on the first night.

“We will have to do something about these doors,” said Bahruun, “the crest is no longer
relevant with the Pryce’s gone.”

“The crest is still relevant,” said Nerys, “the House of Pryce and all its claim are mine.”

“And how is that?”

“I took them,” replied Nerys simply, “the crest is mine.”

Bahruun smiled and pushed open a door. In one corner of the room sat a bed that had once been Hornefred's, the stained sheets reeking of human waste and death. Against a wall sat a bookcase and a desk. On the desk sat an empty bowl with the residue of the herbs woman's cure.

"What are you looking for?" asked Bahruun as Nerys slowly looked through the books that lined the shelves.

"History," said Nerys.

"I have history books in the library at home," yawned Bahruun picking up the empty bowl on the desk and started to toss it back and forth between his hands.

"That is not history," muttered Nerys, "just stories to send children to sleep. The books in here are the real history of my domain with detailed records, thoroughly checked and verified."

She found the title she was looking, 'Civic works and judgements of Elder Olta' and she pulled it from the shelf.

"Who was Elder Olta?"

"The Elder before Francis," Bahruun had found the wall and was now leaning against it the bowl still in hand, "Francis lost his head a few days after the Diamond vanished."

"Where is his book?"

"I think the clerk had more to worry about than finishing a stupid book."

"Where is it?" growled Nerys.

"Why would I know, Nerys?" huffed Bahruun, "probably in the clerk's room, abandoned."

"Then we will complete his book and one for Hornefred, as well, the records must be kept complete," declared Nerys taking the leather tome under her arm and then added with a smile, "you will have a volume yourself one day."

“You speak like my father,” sighed Bahruun, “he should be dead now, if the gods are kind.”

Nerys laughed.

“Come, you need your powder, your mood has become sour. I think I will have the last of my port. We have earned a night of celebration.”

“I was promised more than a night.”

“One night for now, Bahruun,” replied Nerys, “but rest assured, the new world will be laden with gifts for both of us.”

Chapter 8

Sayjin felt his stomach turn. He lent from the branch and vomited onto the ground, pieces of half digested meat flooded across the forest floor.

When he ate, he always ate too much, when he drank he could not stop himself, when there were was a enchanting woman he never held back his love. This was the curse of the only potent man left in an impotent world. When he felt desire, the others would fall to the side and he would continue to indulge, unchallenged, and then Sayjin was left to suffer the consequences of excess.

At one point, he had thought to hold himself back, to ignore the impulses that took his soul, but then what would he be? Nothing but a useless shadow of himself, like the rest of his people, who he looked upon with great pity.

It had been a wondrous day when he met Valtteri and Nerys. Finally, others to challenge him. Valtteri was there to snatch the food from his furious hands, Nerys to slap the wine from his lips. If the fight was in him he would take back his meal or pick up his cup, but if he had truly had his fill, his friends had saved him from his fate.

Sayjin purged again.

The bile soured his lips. Sayjin wiped the spit from his mouth and turned his attention to the forest. The morning air was quite. Sayjin looked at the camp, the bodies of the dead were ravaged and torn apart by the dogs. On the far side of camp, the bloodied remains of the man were still tied to the tree, unable to overcome the rope. It was a sad end, the man had done so

well to survive this long after the fall, he had come so far, and yet he was taken down by a few, lowly mutts and a simple rope.

Sayjin sighed and then remembered the directions he had been given. He turned from the camp, steadied himself on the branch and moved forward through the treetops. He would not be distracted today, he would find shamans before nightfall.

It was still morning when he heard the sound of water coming from beyond the trees. The treetops became thin, Sayjin dropped to the ground and pushed through the last line of trees. Beyond he saw the strangest sight he had ever seen.

The water ran clear and quick across the dark, brown earth of the river bed. Where the sunlight hit the surface of the stream it reflected an odd red, perhaps blue.

The brush that had grown close to the river had taken on strange traits. A bush had grown its flowers four times larger than that of their normal size, each petal a different colour. The branches that had grown above the stream carried large, brown warts that slowly moved across their bark. A long, legged bird stood in the river cleaning its wings, but as Sayjin looked closer he noticed the bird was not moving, somehow frozen in place. He touched the bird, the feathers shed themselves from its body and fell to water, quickly washed downstream. All that remained of the bird was a rotting corpse standing still and lifeless in the water.

Sayjin smelt the air, the normal comforting smell of damp rot was gone replaced by a strange, sweet smell like sugar or perfume. He had expected the magic of Shaman to be odd, but nothing like this.

Sayjin pushed onwards surveying the riverbanks. He came across a tree with fruit the size of his head, the fruit bulged and warped as though their flesh inside was made of liquid. A worm the size of snake lay dead beneath the tree starting to rot, giving off the same sweet smell.

A bush shook violently on its own accord, throwing its leaves from its branches, when its leaves hit the ground they decomposed instantly and vanished into the soil. The bush then began to sprout new leaves, growing large and green again.

The strange warts on the trees started to become smaller as Sayjin moved upstream. Instead, the trees themselves began to melt as though they were wax put to close to a flame, though when it appeared as though a branch would make contact with the water or earth, the tree would suddenly whip back into its normal form, before slowly beginning to melt again. Sayjin stopped and watched the trees for a while, he had never seen anything so mesmerising. He went to touch one of the branches that drooped close to him but before he could, the tree

swung away taking its solid shape again. Sayjin wondered how the tree knew his touch was close.

As the sun peaked in the sky he reached the source of the steam. A cave that cut into a small rise in the ground. The mound was so small it was barely larger than Sayjin and with just a handful of steps he was able to circle it completely. Though when he peered into the cave it seemed to travel back a great distance.

Sayjin listened at the cave entrance and heard movement inside. He laid his hand on the side of the tunnel and found it to be smooth as glass. He ducked slightly to enter and placed both hands on the walls to keep his balance.

The entrance was cool with a breeze blowing from within, the sound of movement became louder as Sayjin moved further down the tunnel. It went perfectly straight for a few hundred feet and Sayjin could see clearly even though he left the light of day far behind him. He knew he had found the Shaman he sought.

Eventually, the cave opened into a large cavern, stonework made the walls resemble a room of a fine castle. Fires burnt in the two hearths on each side of the space casting a warm light across the space, a kettle was strung up over one of the fires, whistling as steam escaped from its spout.

In the centre of the room sat something Sayjin was not expecting. An altar made of a single slab of dark golden stone. Carved horns stuck straight up from its slab, twisting on themselves like seashells, the mark of Tarenli, the god of chaos. The slab was held up by four carved Saquaari their long wings stretched from shoulder to heel, their hard muscular bodies proudly displayed. Two were females with six round breasts and wide hips. Two were male with large endowments and broad shoulders, their large feline paws held the slab, their legs and arms resembled those of the large cats Sayjin had hunted in the jungles.

The four carvings each were finished with the head which resembled that of a normal man except for the two large horns that began on their temples and swept up and over the heads and reaching down beyond neck and shoulders. Each face held a different expression, one stern, one fierce, another content, the final one was asleep.

Water flowed from the top slab and down the side of the altar then escaped under Sayjin's feet out into the forest. This was not a home of a Shaman, it was some kind of temple to the corrupting gods, but why was it hidden in middle of the forest under a dirt mound. Sayjin was intrigued and entered the room.

A figure at the back of room fussed over a wooden table. Sayjin moved from the entrance and approached the altar, cautious of the figure wrapped in a simple, brown cloak. It seemed to be busy with something on the table.

The altar bubbled away as water seemed to erupt from the stone slab.

"Greetings," called Sayjin.

The figure turned in the light and looked at Sayjin. The face was swollen and grey, his cheeks bloated hiding the eyes of the man in dark pits.

"Greetings," replied the figure with a cracked voice and returned back to the table.

"Are you the one who sends the lights into the sky?" asked Sayjin.

"The lights are not meant for you," said the man dismissively.

Sayjin approached the table and saw a large number of root vegetables and mushrooms laid across the surface, the bloated creature was slicing them and placing them into a wooden bowl. Sayjin picked up a mushroom and sniffed it, it gave off a normal earthy smell.

"Do you have a name?" asked Sayjin placing the mushroom back on the table.

"I am Horun," he replied taking the bowl and walking towards the fireplace with the kettle.

"Are you a cleric of Tarenli?"

The head of cleric would be a good enough prize for today.

"The clerics are in the God's Isle," replied the man, "didn't you know?"

"Then, who are you?"

"Horun."

The steaming water poured into the bowl.

"Is this yours?" asked Sayjin pointing at the altar.

"Can one own the power of gods?"

"Can you use it?"

"Of course not," laughed the figure.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for the tide to recede."

Pushed the hot bowl into Sayjin's hands.

“Drink this,” said Horun, “and I will explain.”

Sayjin smelt the broth it had alluring smell of strange herbs and spices. He drank from it and his mouth came alive with a thousand flavours. He drank the rest of the broth, happily, and looked at man. Horun was now standing in front of the altar and three purple lights rose from its surface and then in a moment the three lights flew from the cave. He seemed fixated on the water flowing from the slab. Horun did seem to know something about this altar.

Sayjin opened his mouth to speak, but as he did the world began to spin around him. He dropped the bowl and a white mist took the world from him or the he was taken from the world. Either way, Sayjin stood alone in the white as a wind found him. Slowly, it started to push his body forward.

There were forms just beyond clouds that he caught out of the corner of his eye, but then they were gone. Then his body jolted as he felt himself move upwards as though a hand had pinched his head between its thumb and index finger. His body lost its strength and became limp and motionless. There was no longer a floor under his feet.

Sayjin let his body travel, he wondered to himself if he should struggle, but then he could not remember why he was here. There had been bird in his stomach, for a moment, it had made him sick and now he was here.

The mists started to part and he found himself in circle of white stone. Life returned to his body and he was standing again. The edges of circle were lined with rough, grey columns, beyond them the mist swirled.

At the far end of the circle sat a large, golden throne was draped with red silk. Atop the throne sat Sam, the crown of the Golden Empire sitting proudly atop its head.

“Come forward, old friend,” said the goat.

Sayjin moved towards Sam with a cautious pace, he was dreaming he conclude.

“You have done well to find me in mists,” said Sam.

“Why am I here?” asked Sayjin.

“To see to my ascension.”

“What are you?”

“I am Emperor Sam the First, the Wise and Just chosen of Thalius and ordained by the true gods.”

“But your an Empress?”

“You must not get distracted, Sayjin,” scolded Sam, “I must sit upon then Golden Throne or none will sit upon it again and the world will be lost to the mists of chaos.”

“I have heard it said.”

“That is what I can ask of you, my love,” replied Sam, “come, let me lick your neck.”

Sayjin approached the throne.

“You forget me, brother,” came Valtteri’s voice Sayjin turned and there stood the large frame of Valtteri exuding a familiarity that comforted Sayjin in this strange place.

“Love me,” commanded Sam and Sayjin turned back to look into the speckled eyes of the goat.

“You’ve no time for love, now,” came Nerys and Sayjin turned to see her bringing a strength that gave metal back to his muscles as his head swam.

“She is jealous of our passion,” cried Sam and Sayjin turned back to the goat and then it whispered softly, “let me lick your neck.”

The long tongue of the goat came forward and ran the length of Sayjin’s neck and he was in the room of wooden walls. He stood naked looking at the young woman with golden skin laying on the bed. Her small breast pointed to the ceiling her nipples hard, she had kicked back the sheets displaying the tight curves of her body and her bright silver hair.

“We must wait my love,” she whispered.

“I will wait,” he replied.

“Can you?”

“I must.”

“Maybe, there is something else for us?”

“Where?”

“I know a place they won’t look.”

She rolled onto her side, presenting her back to Sayjin, but he did not want her to turn away, he wanted to look upon her and have her whisper to him again. He raced to the bed.

"I will wait," he shouted as he pulled at the woman's shoulder and the body tore itself into halves.

Her face was rotten, her eyes dead. The body had ripped in two from head to hole, maggots and organs spewed onto the bed. Sayjin jumped back from the bed, someone was banging at the door.

The mound of maggots grew and squirmed on the bed. The banging at the door continued.

"We don't have time," shouted Nerys from behind the door.

"I'll have what's left of the wretch, Sayjin," yelled Valtteri.

The bed in the middle of room began to sink into the wooden floor, the walls bowing towards the centre. Sayjin pushed himself up against the wall, peering into the pit of rot and puss now below him.

The floor was starting to slip away, he grabbed at the walls behind. There were slight ridges and small grooves that he tried to jam his fingers into. Normally, he could grip them with easy, but now his fingers slipped with sweat and refused to hold.

His fingertips ached and stung as splinters caught under the nails. The floor continued to sink, as he scratched and clawed, he wanted to hold on, but he wanted was irrelevant here. Sayjin fell, screaming, into the pit and he hit the ocean with a crash. The storm raged above, lightning crackled across the clouds. A hand reached in and pulled him onto the boat.

"Take the oars, damn you," shouted his grandfather against the wind, "we're almost through The Hold."

Sayjin grabbed the oars and started tried catch them in the water under the boat, but the fierce waves made it difficult. Lightning arced to the sea, he was blinded by the flash and deafened by the roar. When his sight returned his grandfather was the gone. The man he had left by the tree, left to the dogs, sat across the boat from him, his collar in hand.

The man lunged at him.

Sayjin was pushed to the back of the boat, the man was upon him. Sayjin tried to push him off but his arms had no strength, his legs tried to kick but they were numb and refused to move. Sayjin tried to move his useless body away, but the man had him.

Sayjin cried the panic, the cry of lost child and shook his head violently as the man hooked the collar around his neck and pulled on the rope tight.

Sayjin felt it tighten, crushing his throat and denying him breath. The rope cut deeper and deeper into flesh.

“Just a simple rope,” the man laughed as the storm threw the boat.

Tears streamed from Sayjin’s eye as he hung from the tree. He looked below at the dead leaves the wind had spread them across the grey and brown ground.

“A fitting end for one who would turn on his own,” sneered the man from below, “hang til the world is done with you.”

Sayjin felt the rope cutting into his throat, he tried to pull breath and when did the rope cut deeper and the crushing pain caused him to scream, but he couldn’t and the rope cut deeper. The panic came and the tears flowed. Where was he? Why was he here? He didn’t have the answers.

The time past, possibly a week, possibly more, possibly less.

Sayjin thought of his distant friends. Where was Valtteri? Where was Nerys? Had they abandoned him to this fate or did they search the forest for him, he was in the forest, he was a room.

Immeasurable time passed as the rope held him high above the ground. The dull sun did not move in the sky, the shadows sat frozen, long and dark below him.

As the time moved on the rope continued to cut through his skin. He felt his skin peel as his body came apart at the neck. One by one each muscle snapped until he was held by nothing but the thinnest of tendons.

Then in a moment, after a million others, a sickening crunch came as his body separated from his head and he fell to the hard ground. Sayjin looked at his body spewing a black ooze from the neck cavity. His tongue fell from his mouth and tasted dirt. He tried to pull the tongue back in, but it refused to obey and then Sayjin realised it, he was dead and his friends had forgotten him.

Sam trotted out the white mist and started to lick the black ooze that flowed from his body. It then turned its brown eyes onto Sayjin and trotted forward.

“Let us be, brothers,” said Sam, “I am only one left who’ll have you.”

Sam beard its teeth and torn out Sayjin’s tongue from his mouth.

Sayjin lurched as his body became complete again and he was back in the room.

Above the altar stood a man looking deep into waters. He wore long, leather pants, his muscular shirtless torso a rough black, covered in scars of battle. He turned and look at Sayjin.

“Who are you?” the man asked.

“Horun?” asked Sayjin.

“Well, Horun,” said the man finding his rapier by the altar, “you had better answer my questions.”

“I’m Sayjin,” Sayjin replied finding his senses and then snatched the handle of his dagger and leapt to his feet, his body was strong again.

A puzzled look crossed the man’s face and then he shook his head.

“Where did you come from?” asked the man.

“I was with a cleric... with this altar... in Douruh,” said Sayjin trying to orient himself more then give information to this man.

“You have travelled a long way, lad.”

“Where am I?”

“The Sparkling Isle,” said the man turning back to the altar, “this is a mightily, curious treasure, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” said Sayjin, “and your name?”

“Captain Delaros of the Moonlit Stalkers,” said the man, “I s uppose you have no sails, Reisu.”

“No,” said Sayjin pulling out a parrying blade.

“I hope you know how to use those,” said Delaros, looking at the weapons in Sayjin’s hands

“Better then he you know how to use that.”

The captain laughed.

“Well, I do not wish to die today, so let us put away our weapons and talk like the high men do.”

“Talk,” laughed Sayjin, “with a Stalker.”

“The you have heard of us.”

“I’m no fool.”

Delaros laughed and lent his rapier against the altar.

“Do you know how to use this thing?” asked Delaros turning back to the altar.

“No,” replied Sayjin, “I had just found one myself.”

Sayjin studied the carving of altar the Saquaari on each corner bore the same face as the one in the cave, it seemed identical at a quick glance.

“Well, then, I suppose you best get swimmin’, lad. There’re no men of the gods to send you back, here.”

“Where is your ship?”

“Sunk,” smiled Delaros, “I ain’t no fool, either. You think I’m going to let a boat of Stalkers follow me here. With this I’ll be Lord of the Black, ain’t no man gonna take it from me.”

Sayjin laughed at the mention of the mythical title and shook his head, this altar had a strange effect on the men that coveted it and Sayjin had seen enough of its madness.

“How far are we from a dock?” asked Sayjin

“Not far, a healthy lad like yourself should be able to make. About three mile hike east through the jungle, I’d say.”

Sayjin nodded, his head still swam from the dream, what had Horun done to him? Whatever had happened he needed to get back Douruh, he wondered how much time had passed since he had left.

The entrance to the room was a tunnel as smooth as glass, just like the one he found in the forest. He quickly looked back, the captain was once again staring into the water that flowed from the altar.

Sayjin heard the sound of sea bird cawing from outside the cave as he splashed through water that flowed under foot. Eventually, he came to the mouth of the tunnel and looked out. A sheer cliff face dropped away, the sunlight washed the sea white as waves tumbled against the rock a mile below.

“Watch your step, lad,” whispered Delaros from behind as he shoved Sayjin from the entrance.

The wind scream past Sayjin’s ears and he fell until his head met the rocks below and his body crumpled into itself.

Sayjin body lurched and he was in the room again. Horun was crouched over the wooden table muttering to himself.

Sayjin rose to his feet and stormed towards the table, dagger now in hand.

Horun turned.

“You have your senses, again?”

Sayjin slashed at Horun and the dagger vanished.

“I’ll use my hands then,” growled Sayjin and took the swollen neck in hand, he felt the liquid under the skin roll and slip under his grasp.

“Hold yourself,” shouted Horun slapping at Sayjin’s hand.

Sayjin punched at the face.

“Drop me at once,” yelled Horun unfazed by the blow

Sayjin kept striking Horun with blows

“I don’t harm you?” panted Sayjin after several.

“No,” replied Horun, annoyed.

Sayjin punched him again and the liquid sloshed across his face.

“What happened to me?” yelled Sayjin.

“A battle.”

Sayjin pushed Horun back and the man tripped over his cloak and fell to the ground.

“The altar is poisonous to mind of men,” said Horun from the ground, “only a few are able to survive what its effect. I sedated you so you would not harm yourself.”

Sayjin kicked the cleric and turned away. Horun, pulled himself from the ground and rearranged his cloak.

“It seems your mind has survived, which is more than most can say.”

Sayjin looked at creature through its puffed grey cheeks, he could now see colourless, cloudy eyes darting back and forth behind.

The vision came back to him, clear and fast.

“Are you here to help me?” asked Sayjin suddenly taken by the clouds that danced within the eye sockets.

“With what?”

“I don’t know... something.”

“Yes.”

“Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“How did you survive your battle?”

“Oh, I didn’t,” laughed Horun.

There was a movement at the entrance. A lone man stood in tattered clothes his face lined and old.

“Now, they come,” said Horun quietly to Sayjin.

“Who?” asked Sayjin.

“I saw and I have come,” yelled the man.

“The people,” whispered Horun.

There was the sound of footsteps as a handful of man and woman struggled up the entrance way and emerged into the cavern. They varied in ages, all in ragged clothes covered in filth.

“What is our way?” called a woman as she saw Horun.

Horun stood quiet as more people made their way up the cave and into the room.

“What is the way?” more people cried out as the cavern started to fill.

Sayjin noticed the stone wall at the back of cave was stretching away from him to allow more to take their place in front of him. Mummers and grunts arose from the crowd as they pushed and jostled each other.

“The last of the beasts that stalked the land are gone,” shouted Horun and a mummers came from the still growing crowd, “as we have been told.”

“The ones who denied us,” shouted a woman from the crowd.

“I have seen it,” shouted another man.

“I have seen it, too,” shouted another.

“Through the eye of the dragon,” screamed another in the back.

“Fly and be free,” chanted the crowd.

There was silence.

“What have you seen?” shouted Horun to the crowd.

“A man of gold,” shouted one.

“He will not sit upon the throne,” shouted another.

“But he knows who must,” shouted another.

“Show us the way,” cried another.

“And we will bring the light,” chanted the crowd.

“And when it is done?” shouted Horun.

The crowd fell to their knees, their arms raised to the front of the room where Sayjin stood bewildered. they waited, silent and still. The sound of water swirled through the masses who filled the room.

Horun turned to Sayjin.

“Who will sit upon the Golden Throne, Sayjin?”

“I never told you my name.”

“Of course you did, don’t you remember?”

“What madness is this?” stammered Sayjin overwhelmed.

“The strongest.”

Chapter 9

The wooden gate of manor house sat open, in front was a wreath of orange, one of blue and one of purple.

Across the dark yard of the manor house came the faint sounds of voices, drifting from the open windows of the dining room. Spring had returned and with it the warm nights. Valtteri had thrown open the shutters to let the smell of the forest flowers clean out the stale halls of the house.

Lugus and Nerys were huddled at one end of dining table with quills and parchment, scratching out the movement of men and taking stock of supplies. Bahruun had spread himself across one of the leather chair that sat in front of the hearth talking, loudly, to Valtteri of which city he thought they should conquer first. Discussing the differences in woman, drugs and other pleasures. Valtteri laughed adding his own experiences of the cities as Bahruun rambled.

“The nobles of Hawkescliff were always the most tiresome,” sighed Bahruun, “vaults overflowing with gold, thanks to their lacking imagination. That gold is probably still just sitting there, waiting to be taken.”

Valtteri laughed, he had grown to enjoy Bahruun’s company more then he thought he would when he had first met the white, twitching Lowman at the gate. In fact he had come to enjoy the company of both the Lowmen, Bahruun and Lugus, which he found odd. Usually, he found such company insufferable.

“I don’t think you have enough muscle to stage such a robbery.”

“I’m sure you’re enough muscle for both of us,” said bahruun and raised his half full wine glass to his lips and sipped, after a short pause Bahruun looked at Lugus, “what state was Hawkescliff in when you left?”

Lugus raised his head and met Bahruun's eyes. Valtteri smiled to himself, he had not questioned Lugus about his role as a Black Snake, feeling the questions would lead nothing but vague answers, but Bahruun was never concerned about with such things.

"I was gone before the Diamond Heart left," said Lugus flatly and turned back to Nerys.

"A guard that, without reason, decides to leave his watch moments before the world comes crashing down," said Bahruun, "you certainly are a lucky man."

"I don't think we need to keep the trading post," said Lugus ignoring Bahruun, "we'll take it back later."

"If we lose anything now, we lose it all," said Nerys shaking her head, "the people only turn to us for protection, nothing else."

"You know what I would do, Valtteri," started Bahruun loudly, "if I was a guard who knew it was all going to end. I would find a bunch of fools to loan me a few hundred gold each, knowing they won't be there to collect in the morning. Grab the fastest horse and get out of town before sun rose. Leave the city behind me to burn and find a nice, quiet, place in the plains and enjoy my new wealth. Maybe a trading post, where I could find some simple minds who would easily believe I was a great commander."

Lugus turned to Bahruun, his face cold and hard.

"How close am I?" asked Bahruun with a smile.

Nerys pushed herself back in her seat and put down the quill.

"How did you find out?" asked Bahruun not looking away with a sudden hardness in his voice, "did you run the message from the king, sneaking a quick look as you ran through the halls?"

"No, no... you weren't important enough for that, were you? I bet you were crouched at your captain's door wondering to yourself 'What had brought the rider in the night?'"

"Did you pissed in yourself when you heard what was coming? Did you run crying from the watch house, your pants stuck to your leg?"

Lugus picked up a bowl and hurled it at Bahruun with all his strength, it hit the wall behind Bahruun and pieces porcelain scattered across the room. Bahruun burst into laughter.

"Gentleman, please," yelled Nerys standing up.

"Don't worry, Lugus," laughed Bahruun, "Valtteri and I will put things right in Hawkescliff and when we do we will erect a statue to honour the great Lugus, who now rules because he ran."

"Shut it, Bahruun," Nerys shouted.

Bahruun continued to laugh to himself, but turned back to the fire.

"Lugus, back to the papers," said Nerys lowering herself back into her seat.

Bahruun picked up a shard of porcelain that had fallen into his lap and rolled it between his fingers, enjoying how the shard stabbed at his skin.

The door open and Sayjin entered, a solemn look on his face. The swollen, grey man shuffled behind, as he always did, holding Sam beneath his arm.

"How are your men?" ask Nerys.

"Well enough," said Sayjin taking the bottle of wine from the table.

Sayjin lifted the bottle to his mouth and gulped three or four mouthfuls before coming up for air.

"They're quite industrious," said Nerys.

"Men with purpose always are," said Horun.

Horun sat at the far end of table and placed Sam on to the ground next to him. Sayjin hated when he carried Sam with him, he had never spoken of his vision to Horun, but Sayjin knew he knew because, somehow, Horun always knew.

Sayjin had fled the cave as the masses knelt, silent, in their corrupted water, escaped into the forest and took into the manor house. He ran upstairs to attic and shut the door behind him. He found Sam munching on stray scraps that remained from the plate he had left just a few days earlier.

At least Sayjin thought it had been a few days, he did not really know how long he had been gone, but the plate was still half full. The plate of root brought sense to his world again and he steadied himself against the door.

The night came and Sayjin started to feel stupid as he paced the attic, hiding like a child in the attic was not like him. He laughed and shook his head, he need to find a new mark. No wreath had been laid, the crown could still be his. He went to the door and opened it.

There stood Horun, in his hands a plate of fresh leaves and roots. Without a word the man pushed passed Sayjin and placed the plate in front of Sam. Sayjin watched frozen, no words were spoken. Since then, Horun had been with Sayjin from dawn to dusk, Horun did not always bring Sam, but every now and then he would.

The people of the cave came next, massing at the wooden gate. There, they waited, numb to the world and time. A girl of seven or eight held a wreath of purple flowers in her hands. Sayjin lost his temper many times at them, cursing and threatening them with all his rage, even killing a few in his fury, but nothing moved them.

As the days passed he realised, Horun and his people were going to stay with him until they choose otherwise. Sayjin came to accepted the situation and just hoped these things, not truly men, would move on soon. Until then, he would find a use for them.

“Are you here to follow?” he called to them one morning.

“We have seen through the eye of a dragon,” called one from the crowd.

The girl walked forward and placed her wreath at the gate.

“We will build our city now, to honour your coming,” whispered the girl her eyes vacant, clouds dancing across their surface.

The people moved for the first time, turning their gaze from the manor house gates to the forest.

The next day Valtteri had arrived from his exploits to site a hundred or so people using makeshift axes to clear the forest, others collected stones for the foundations of their shelters. The men worked without words, there eyes dead, Valtteri moved through the sea of ghosts and found his friend watching from the attic, a swollen grey man with him, nursing the goat.

“What have you found?” asked Valtteri.

“Strange allies for the kingdom,” said Sayjin simply, “but allies they are.”

Now, Sayjin lent against the window of the window sill in the dining room not wanting to look at the Horun who sat at the table.

“We need some of your men to fortifying the trading post,” said Nerys.

“You mean Valthaven,” corrected Valtteri.

Nerys sighed.

“Horun, will they leave their work?” asked Sayjin, still not looking at the man.

“They will do as you command,” said Horun, “we are one with your vision.”

Sayjin flinched at words, he had learnt to hate Horun’s words. When the man spoke he spoke with words that left him feeling exposed and mocked, but Horun never showed a hint of malice in his manner. Sayjin often wondered why the words cut him so deep. What caused him to despise Horun so much? When he searched for the answer, he found none. Horun simply disgusted him, in his subservient manner and hideous form, and there was nothing more to the matter.

“Then take what you need,” said Sayjin, “take all of them if we want, that is my only vision.”

“We won’t need that many,” said Nerys still lost in her numbers.

“Must you feed that thing at dinner table,” growled Bahruun, “it is enough I must look at your hideous flesh when I eat, must I also entertain the smell of farm animals.”

“I agree,” said Nerys, “its time you butcher that beast and be done with it. We have been welcoming long enough.”

Sayjin eyes snapped to Horun, how would the man react to such a thing being said. But Horun did not respond, he just sat quietly and continued to feed the goat, the words meant nothing to him.

To hell with this, thought Sayjin, slice the neck of beast and be done with it here. If Horun knew what he seemed to, it was a sure way to send him and his followers on their way.

The room was waiting for Sayjin to speak.

“Not now, Nerys,” growled Sayjin and went back to his bottle.

Nerys shrugged and shook her head.

“What causes the bloating, is it water under there or blood or something worse?” asked Bahruun with a giggle.

“The power of the god’s are taxing on the mortal form,” replied Horun.

“The power of the gods,” scoffed Valtteri with a laugh, “show us your powers, Master Horun.”

Sayjin winced, but no one noticed. Horun ignored the room and continued to feeding Sam.

“Can your powers dig a well or bring an army?” spat Nerys a look of hatred crossing her face.

“I can see through the eye of a dragon,” said Horun turning to meet her gaze.

“And what do you see?” sneered Nerys.

There was a silence as the two stared at each other.

“I see... A farmhouse.”

“Is there a bumper crop at your farmhouse?”

“No,” said Horun his eyes flicked to Sayjin, “the fields are bare.”

“Well until your dragons find us the farms to feed our kingdom, I won’t hear of gods or your apparent powers. Keep your men loyal and inline and we will have no problems between us.”

Nerys broke her gaze away from his and went back to her numbers.

Horun patted Sam on the head. He did not correct Nerys, like he did whenever Sayjin accused him of being a servant of the god. He seemed unconcerned by the Child that sat across from him.

“One day, Horun,” Bahruun smiled wickedly and stabbed his shard of porcelain into the air, “pop.”

Bahruun laughed to himself and drank what remained of his wine.

“Sayjin, if you would,” Bahruun whined and waved his empty glass in the air.

Sayjin walked from the window and poured him another.

Valtteri rang a small bell he had placed on the mantle. A man appeared at door dressed in a fine black suit, his eyes were surrounded by black rings, his eyes cloudy.

“We will have dinner now,” said Valtteri to the man, who bowed stiffly and left, “to the table, friends.”

“Not with that beast,” snapped Bahruun, “I’ll take dinner in my room.”

“You will sit with everyone and be dismissed when I say,” said Nerys.

Sayjin quickly took the seat next to Nerys, as far from Horun as he could. Bahruun was forced to drop himself next to swollen man, throwing a disgusted glance at Sam. Valtteri took the final seat between Lugus and Horun.

“It’s quite the table we have tonight,” cheered Valtteri, “and the first time we dine since the return my only and dearest blood and to honour this fine evening I present a gift from Valthaven for us all to enjoy.”

Valtteri and produced the grubby, half drunk bottle of rancid wine, placing it in the centre of table.

“Sayjin, if you will pour,” said Valtteri gracefully, “Bahruun, if you could empty your glass.”

Sayjin took the bottle and poured and a mouthful of liquid into each glass.

Bahruun smelt the new wine and turned his nose away in disgust.

“What is this, Valtteri?”

Valtteri ignored him. Nerys smelt the wine as well and shoot Valtteri a hard look, her blood simply smiled back and waited for Sayjin to take his seat.

Valtteri lifted his glass.

“A fine woman from Valthaven presented me this gift and she did say, ‘My lord, this is the ancient drink of our people and, as such, will give you the great strength and vigour needed to rule,’” Valtteri looked around at the unimpressed table, “and, so I simply say to you all.

Welcome to your home and to our land.”

He drank and the others followed. Sayjin sipped a small amount and put the glass down. Lugus spat the wine onto the table. Bahruun winced, gagged, spilling what remained in glass on to the table.

“I think, I can see through the eyes of a dragon, now,” laughed Lugus grabbing for his mug of ale.

“So, you do have a sense of humour,” coughed Bahruun, “Sayjin, your bottle please.”

Nerys and Horun drank fully and placed their glasses aside and then looked at each for a moment.

“I was careless, my blood” said Nerys, “I did not think to bring the wonders of Finestone to our table, but know the people send their best wishes.”

At that moment the dark-eyed servant entered with a tray of meat.

“I have been slaving all day on this,” announced Valtteri, “please bring it to the centre of the table.”

The servant obliged and placed the roast in front them all. Valtteri noticed Sayjin was looking at him across the table with a tired expression.

“Venison, of course,” smiled Valtteri at his friend, “fetched by your people. Nothing but the finest for our new lords, but please bring the second roast for my blood and I.”

The man nodded, silently, and moved back through the doors.

“Please,” said Horun his hand gently finding the arm of the servant and the man stop, “I will partake of the second roast.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“That meat will likely not agree with you,” said Nerys.

“The flesh of man has a very unique flavour, does it not?” said Horun, “nothing is quiet like it. It takes me back to better times.”

“What times were that?” asked Bahruun cutting into roast on table.

“I was on a smuggling ship from the Sparkling Isle bound for Suther’s Arch when the Imperial Navy caught us just off The Rough,” said Horun quietly, “the forces blew out our masts and left us to drift. As the days passed our food supplies dwindled until there was only one thing left to eat.”

“You were a pirate?” asked Lugus.

“Sometimes.”

“Enough,” yelled Sayjin banging his fists on the table an anger suddenly took him, “Horun is a daft, old man who has spent his forest, nothing more. Now, give me some damn meat.”

Bahruun, stunned by the outburst, put the piece he was cutting for himself in front of Sayjin.

“You smell sweet, Horun,” said Nerys with questioning look.

“Not another word, Horun,” growled Sayjin, “everyone eat.”

“As you wish,” said Horun and lowered his head to look at his plate.

Nerys look at Sayjin, but he refused to acknowledge her, cutting his knife into the meat and taking a chunk into his mouth.

The servant arrived with the second lump of meat.

“Please, carve it for us three,” said Valtteri and the man nodded, took the large carving knife from the tray and set about his task.

“I only saw the wreaths at the gate,” said Nerys with a smile.

“I was wondering when you would mention that,” sighed Valtteri.

“Tell me, my blood,” grinned Nerys sensing victory, “which arrived first?”

Bahruun sat back in his chair, quietly. Lugus found his mug.

“We have been bested, my blood,” said Valtteri and stuffed a chunk of meat into his mouth, “cause the fool I choose could not find his way a few miles down a straight road.”

Lugus smirked from behind his cup.

Valtteri lent forward and took his golden goblet from the table.

“To our new King, Sayjin,” he proclaimed with a smile raising his mug, “may his reign be long and fruitful.”

“May he one day claim all and take the Golden Throne,” added Horun.

“You are an ambitious man, Horun,” cut in Nerys.

“Enough, Nerys,” snapped Sayjin, “I will enjoy my victory.”

“But I must protest, my dear Sayjin,” said Nerys, “I see no wreath of red at the gates.”

“Do the colours matter?” snapped Sayjin.

“Of course they do, my friend,” replied Nerys with no malice, “we have come to rule and a part that is to be specific in our commands and ruthlessly observant in their execution. The wrong colour means your followers are not truly loyal.”

“I forgot the colour, I chose,” rebuked Sayjin.

“The rules were stated clearly,” said Nerys, “and if we do not honour them what start is this to our kingdom.”

“A poor one,” agreed Sayjin with a nod, “you are right, Nerys. I withdraw from the contest.”

Valtteri whacked Lugus in the back of the head, causing him to spill his ale, Bahruun laughed wildly.

“Then which was next?” asked Nerys.

“I could have been King,” he snarled.

“I was next, my lady,” cheered Bahruun.

“Then, it seems the contest is settled,” said Nerys, “maybe I will claim the Golden Throne also.”

She looked at Horun, but he had lost interest in the table and was now looking down at Sam again, patting her head softly.

Lugus raised his mug with a broad smile.

“To our queen,” he declared, “long may she reign.”

“Don’t forget who your true master is,” growled Valtteri to Lugus raising his goblet of sugar water to his lips.

“That would be my one and only liege, Queen Nerys,” stated Lugus, “I will serve no other as long as she lives.”

“And what am I then?” sneered Valtteri.

“My blood,” said Nerys with a loving smile.

“Which would make me...”

“Some would say horse shit,” interrupted Bahruun.

“Others would simply ask ‘who?’,” laughed Lugus.

“Others may say, usurper,” muttered Horun to Sam.

Valtteri heard him, but the others did not.

“My Lord Counts, please,” said Nerys standing, “I am but half of myself without my blood and you will show him the same love as you show me.”

“I’ll be sure of it, my Queen,” grinned Bahruun.

“Now, I thank you all for your efforts, but now is the only the first of many hard days ahead,” she began, “if we are to rebuild we will need to be true, fair and loyal to one another. We will need to give our full devotion to our mission.

“This, I declare, on the first day of our new kingdom, a kingdom not to be named for the dragon’s that enslaved us, but for the name of the noble blood that flows in my veins. This realm will be known from this day forth as the Kingdom of Pryce.”

The End

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