

Lost in the Fog

Simon Belt



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This book is set in the year 648 b. OW of the Many Isles Setting. It plays in the Ferdrskjisle region.

Many Isles Setting
www.kartecaedras.ch

To Emelyn, Yeren, Astrid, and Sigord.


Ferdr's Isles
MJNFARPENINSULA
Venfer
FARNUSEL
MOON STRAIT
EUNSEL
Eyfloss
FERDRSKJAND
SKUSEL
Neustad
Nordolen
Skristad
Ferdrheim
GROUSUSTEL
OSMUND
Caer Fürn
Jokurcairn
BLONJAND
Contje
Fjorrfarn


Mjnfar
Ingeport
Varburg
Nordvik
Moonsea
Bomborg
TREESNATCH
Karogeborg
Everflow
The Hills
Osmund's Clearing
Velenstek
BONECRUNCH
Old Redoubt
Trebkernstad
Loneport
Ferdr's Isles

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A Friendly Visit

Osmund's Clearing, Mjnfar

The needle-strewn dirt crunched imperceptibly under Yeren's boot. He frowned, disappointed at himself. It's small mistakes like these that could cost a man dearly. And he had sworn to himself that he'd never make a mistake again.

Today, though, it didn't matter. He wasn't trying to hide, standing to the side of a footpath, in plain view of the low wooden cabins clustered in a clearing up ahead. Three men stood there, talking amongst each other. There was a tree stump with a nasty-looking woodman's axe stuck in it nearby. One man, with forearms as thick as a fir tree trunk, had a broad dagger on his belt. The other two looked unarmed.

Everything was as it should be, then. They weren't dressed for a fight, but that didn't mean Yeren should let his guard down. You couldn't be too careful.

A hand appeared on his mailed shoulder.

'It's fine, Master', the grizzled merchant Hellfar said. 'I'll take it from here.'

He never listened, that one. Tell him to stay back, he comes right up to the front.

But then, Yeren was only a guard. His employers made their own decisions. He shrugged and crossed his arms, letting the two merchants and the donkey walk past before falling in behind them.

One of the forest men, a scraggly one with greying patches on the sides of his dark black hair, finally noticed them. All three trappers adopted matching frowns and clamped jaws, watching the newcomers approach in silence.

Yeren gingerly brushed his hand against the smooth leather of his scabbard as he looked around once more. There was some activity in two of the huts: a woman stoking a fireplace, and someone looking at them through a half-opened door. Two men were stripping a felled tree of its branches on the other side of the settlement. Mastiffs that looked like they could hunt bears pawed around in an enclosure, growling as fiercely as one might expect from such dogs.

The three trappers next to the tree stump looked pretty much like all other backwoods men. They wore practical linen clothing in subdued colors and broad

leather belts. They had the solid builds of hard-working men. The one on the left was bald and wore knotted hempen bracelets. The man in the middle, with the thick forearms and the dagger, had the thin grey hair and beard of a grandfather, and piercing eyes that seemed to judge Yeren almost as hard as he was judging him. The wrinkles on the last man's face, the one who had noticed their approach first, belied his age; he was likely no younger than grey-beard.

Hellfar put on a wide grin and held out his arms. He looked precisely like one might imagine a wandering trader: a middle-aged man with loose whitish-blonde hair, a noticeable bulge of fat around his waist, two gilded rings pierced into his nose.

'Oystein, well seen!' To the grey-bearded man in the centre. 'And Svenn, of course, best scout in these parts.' The black-haired man on the right nodded. 'And you are…' He looked expectantly at the bald one.

'Romund', the trapper grunted. He was not all happy to be here. Probably had work to do.

'It is my pleasure to see you! How are things in Osmund's Clearing these days?'

Oystein, who'd shifted from crossed arms to resting his hands on his hips, gave a smile of his own. 'We're doing well enough. There's still plenty of deer left from the good spring. And we'd expected ye to come by. Didn't know you'd bring such charming company, though.'

Hellfar gave a small laugh.

'A good mind and a good eye, Oystein, I see the years haven't yet taken that away from you! These', and he turned to the merchant next to him, 'are my partners. Emelyn here, she came from Venfer just this summer, but she's already proved herself invaluable. Has a knack for the books, you see, and she manages business relations.'

Oystein briefly glanced at the blonde woman, half a head shorter than him and wrapped in a thick travel cloak, then back at Hellfar. A quick judge of character, it seemed, but then you have to be, when you live out in the wilderness. Ignore the harmless, focus on the essential. On the danger.

'And who's that fellow on your right? Don't often see his kind in our woods. What's he do for Hellfar's Furs, trade in blood and severed heads?'

Hellfar gave a little chuckle which barely sounded forced. 'No, no, this is Master Yeren. A real friendly soul, you can see it in his yellow eyes, if you catch a glimpse of them beneath those bushy brows. He's come along to keep us merchants safe on our little trip, with his… skills of survival.'

Now Oystein gave him a proper look. Any fool could see Yeren was a serious

man: he wore a full mail coat and a curved scabbard hung from his hip. Many backwoods folk were also put off by his hobgoblin's face, which to a human might look like it was frozen in an expression of fury. But Oystein was clearly no ordinary fool, he knew how to spot the difference between threatening looks and real danger. The old trapper's eyes fixed on the brass ring that hung from Yeren's left ear, and he swallowed.

'Indeed, nowadays, it's wise to take care travelin' this far north. Things aren't the same as they used to be.'

'So they are', Hellfar agreed, in a tone that seemed to imply something more. 'In fact, that's why I've come, as you've already guessed. To talk about how things stand. 'Bout deals made, and deals to be made.'

Now it was Romund's turn to swallow. He looked down, not meeting anyone's gaze, and toyed with his bracelets. Svenn the scout had crossed his arms and stared daggers at Romund. Oystein only nodded.

'We both know what deals were made. My da was trading pelts with a Hellfar, as long as our huts 'been standing in this very clearing.' Hellfar junior, who'd taken over the family business no less than two decades ago, gave a small but sincere smile. It was the first Yeren had seen on him since the trip began. 'I can speak for everyone here when I say Osmund's Clearing respects ye, Hellfar, and knows ye to be a good man.'

One of the mastiffs over in their pen gave a loud bark, and Svenn shifted his weight. There was an expectant silence.

'Thing is, times change', the scout said. He had a surprisingly soft voice, and Yeren had no trouble imagining him padding through the woods, silent as a wolf. 'Ye know it yerself, things aren't as they used to be up here. Might be we need to think again in whose hands our pelts have the most value.'

Hellfar's face had gone pale, but his voice hardly wavered. 'Listen, I know you folk do hard work out here, and it ain't easy. But we've years behind us, and we've always found a good deal. We can talk about the prices…'

'You can talk about the prices', Svenn interrupted, 'but not with us.'

Oystein nodded. His shoulders looked slumped. 'Times are a-changing, us three are getting old. We need young folk, now, to set the bear traps, and hunt the dashing deer. As it comes, they're the ones with the pelts to trade. I figure the best I can offer are some wood shavings, and dirty tubers from the gardens.'

Hellfar had difficulty finding his voice. Yeren knew it was bad news, if the merchant failed to keep this trade. But then, Yeren was only here to guard, so he didn't have to care about the merchant's problems. He could keep his face re-

laxed and casually look around. He didn't have to worriedly chew his lip like Emelyn did.

'Very well', Hellfar said in a level voice. Whatever his doubts, he was a veteran merchant, and he stoically pushed on. 'Think I can speak to these young folk, then? I'm sure we'll make a good deal.'

'Aksel's still out', Oystein replied.

'Who?'

'Svenn's son. He's out laying bear traps. He'll be back in the evening, though, and ye can talk in the morrow. Meantime, I've got space enough for three in my hut, and the wife will cook up a nice stew for the night.'

Hellfar hesitated. His partner spoke up for the first time, and got the last word. 'Thank you kindly for your generous offer, Oystein, and we'll gladly take you up on it. We'll talk deals tomorrow.'

Emelyn wriggled into her padded clothing, shrugging off the clammy cold. The mornings could get quite fresh up here in the wild forests.

She'd thought about yesterday's events for most of the sleepless night. Somehow, she'd slept even worse in Oystein's hut than in the constantly damp tent.

Aksel Svennson had returned in the late afternoon alongside two other young men and another one of those huge, blood-curdling dogs. In the course of the evening, a small crowd of young men, and two women, had formed around a roaring fire in the center of the village. They drank, and ate, and drank together. Emelyn had wondered if she should say hello, but Oystein had told her it wasn't necessary.

These trappers had some odd customs, but she wasn't scared of them, because they were people like her. She understood them. She understood Oystein, and she knew what Svenn wanted, and she was sure she'd understand this Aksel as well. She had certainly understood what he was after during that boisterous evening around the fire. That's why she was confident they'd be able to work things out, renew the trade agreement.

Hellfar, however, had her far more worried. The veteran merchant wasn't really old yet, but he'd been worn thin by the last few moons. There had been a cheerful side to him when she first got to know him, half a year back, but business had not gone well, and he struggled to bear all that weight on his shoulders. She'd tried helping where she could, using her contacts in the Auxiliary, and doing the books for him, but it hadn't helped. It wasn't so much the workload as the constant worry about the future that troubled him.

She found him sitting on a log outside, smoking a chag-leaf pipe. White smoke streamed out of his ring-studded nostrils. He usually fell asleep like a stone, but then he also woke well before the sun. The more important the day's business, the earlier he rose.

He looked at peace, right now, contentedly puffing his pipe. His nose piercings glinted golden in the morning sun. One almost didn't notice the tiredness in the dark rings under his eyes, in his slumped shoulders.

Yeren was also up, leaning against a hut. He seemed to just be lounging there, looking around. She smiled politely when his slitted eyes met hers. That man was one of the few she did not understand. What he was thinking, what he wanted, why he'd come along on this trip in the first place. He even scared her a little. But then, scaring people was his job.

'Morning, Master Hellfar!'

'I see you, Emelyn. Had a restful night?'

She plopped down next to him and looked around the settlement, at the few other early risers beginning to stir. There was a bit of fog in the air, resting thickly among the trees.

'Good enough. I've been thinking about today.'

He grunted. 'So have I, my friend. I reckon this Svennson is a boisterous fellow, eh? Seen him yesterday? Almost looked like a feast thrown in his honor.'

'Aye, I saw him.' She enjoyed that word, *aye*. It was a word clan-warriors and frontiersmen used. It had character. 'But if that's all he is, making a deal shouldn't be too hard. Might just take some haggling about the prices.'

He nodded, fixating on a patch of briar grass. 'Gonna be an important deal today', he murmured.

Emelyn nodded. 'It will. Three other trapper groups look to Osmund's Clearing for guidance, right?' He nodded. 'So whatever Aksel and his friends will say, it'll make a big difference in the books.' He was silent. 'And we know the company needs their trade…'

'I bloody well know we need them!' Hellfar knew the books as well as she did, of course. The numbers got him up so early each day. He also worried that half as many trappers as usual came to bring him their pelts this year. He worried that money had dried up. And he worried about politics, a world from which he'd carefully shielded her. That world seemed even worse than the books.

In fact, if they failed to make a deal today, Hellfar's Furs was over. They'd have no chance of paying back their debts.

But Hellfar didn't need her to tell him that, so she changed tack.

‘We can make them a good offer. Even if they want to go up two bushels on the hide, we can afford it.’

‘Aye, I know. We offer them a strong price. One they can’t refuse. We just need their goods, it doesn’t matter how expensive they are.’

‘And if the price isn’t enough… They live dangerously out here. I hear the orcs up north, they want more. A hunter’s cabin was burned down, in the wilds. People have gone missing.’

‘The wilds are dangerous, that’s nothing new.’

‘Yes, but it’s worse now. You know very well, don’t be stubborn. If the price isn’t enough, try promising them protection. That we look out for our partners. You know, I can probably get the Auxiliary to patrol a bit more in this area… And even if I can’t, we just need to make the deal. It’s the promise that counts.’

Hellfar nodded, sourly. He was not used to making deals of this kind. In his eyes, trappers should be happy to find a reliable buyer, and trade was all about prices. Not vague promises that had nothing to do with business.

A man came out of a hut, stretched, and began walking towards them. He wore baggy trousers, plain leather boots with footwraps, and a sleeveless cured leather vest that showed off his thick arms and his hairy, not-too-lean stomach.

‘Aksel Svennson!’ Hellfar was standing and smiling, showing his best salesman’s face. Emelyn took a bit longer to catch herself and struggle to her feet.

‘And I see Hellfar, the master trader from Trebkernstad.’ Aksel had a grin of his own as the two men shook hands.

‘Why, everyone’s already up!’ Oystein appeared in his doorway, all smiles as well. ‘We’re just ‘bout to have breakfast. Why not have a bite, ‘fore plunging into the morning’s business?’

Then two young men appeared behind Aksel, with slightly less friendly expressions. Svennson kept his grin. ‘No, no, old man. We are up early, ye see, to seize the day while it is fresh as Sylva’s breasts!’ His two friends chuckled, and Emelyn had a queasy feeling. Not so much because of the young men’s attitude, but because of Oystein’s worried expression, and because the hobgoblin Yeren had moved up silently. He still stood off to the side, but much closer, and his eyes were narrowed.

Hellfar shrugged. ‘Why put it off? After all, a deal’s easy to make. Pleases everyone once made, too.’

Aksel nodded. He had not stepped back after the handshake, so he was standing uncomfortably close, looking down at the somewhat shorter Hellfar.

'Ye're a merchant talking of deals, ain't ye? So do what merchants do, give me a price.'

If Hellfar was put off by his tone, he didn't show it. 'I understand that times are rough for the folk of Osmund's Clearing. I'm happy to pay you one more bushel-'

'Ha!' Aksel clapped the merchant on the shoulder. It was a friendly gesture, but it looked like a threat to Emelyn. 'Anything less than thirteen bushels the length of hide, ye can go right back south.'

Hellfar swallowed, but Oystein spoke before he did. 'You want two and a half bushels more? Aksel, have you spun the wrong way, the Master cannot accept such high a price…'

Aksel didn't seem bothered. 'Might be you was spun wrong, not to realize ye could squeeze much more out of this here man.'

Hellfar swallowed again. 'Perhaps… I would greatly value your partnership, of course, so I am ready to consider…'

But Aksel wasn't done. 'For each fox-fur, I want six bushels.'

Oystein gasped. 'Aksel! Be reasonable…'

'For bear, thirty bushels, no fewer.'

Oystein started to protest again. But Aksel turned on him with surprising ferocity before he got a word out. 'Shut up!'

The grey-bearded man took a step back, holding onto his doorframe. The dogs, out of sight in their kennel, seemed to be growling more fiercely than before. Oystein mumbled under his breath and disappeared into the house.

'I'm not sure… that was a measured response', Hellfar muttered.

'How I speak to my folk is my own business', Aksel retorted. 'Now, ye accept my prices?'

Hellfar shook his head. 'At this price, I'd be selling the goods cheaper than I buy them. Listen, in trade, each side has to yield a bit. Talk it out, you know, find a middle ground…'

Offer him protection, Emelyn thought. She almost wanted to scream it. Offer him protection! Their old prices were already high enough, no one else - not the competition in the south, not the orcs to the north - would match them. Aksel wasn't really arguing about price, he wanted something else. It was obvious. But Hellfar looked like he wasn't thinking wholly in business terms just then.

When the silence lengthened, Aksel crossed his arms. 'My offer is final. If ye argue more, I'll raise the price.' He looked wholly unbothered by the situation, and looked down at Hellfar over his nose. 'Oh, and also, you'll need to send your own folk up here to fetch the wares. I ain't walking all the way to Trebkernstad for ye.'

This was the moment to change tack. Offer him something else, sweeten the deal. Offer him protection.

'That's enough!', Hellfar burst out. He was shouting, angrily pressing a finger against Aksel's chest. 'Have some respect! This is not how proper business is conducted! You cannot dictate terms to me!'

Aksel took a step back, but he looked amused more than anything.

'Do you understand your position? You're nothing! A small little village in the wilderness! You need me, you need my trade! You cannot afford to have me as an enemy!' He tried to push the man with both hands, but Aksel didn't budge. That didn't slow Hellfar down. 'I have friends! Powerful friends, young man, who you do not want as enemies! There will be consequences if you refuse me!'

The merchant was staring wide-eyed at Aksel, breathing heavily. Yeren had stepped forward, a hand on his sword-hilt, though Emelyn wasn't sure if he meant to draw it on Aksel or on Hellfar. She wanted to cover her eyes. It was falling apart so fast…

Aksel, unmoved, enjoyed the tense silence. Then he stepped forward again, and looked down at the aging merchant. 'Friends?', he sneered, with a threatening edge to his voice. 'What, like him?' And he pointed at Yeren. 'Clowns with brass studs in their ears? I've heard stories, but I ain't as foolishly scared of them as the old folk are. They're just warriors. Like me.'

He turned to the hobgoblin, holding out his arms as if inviting him to fight. 'Eh? Ye great fighter, you're the one who'll hurt me, if I don't give Bastard Hellfar his furs?'

Yeren didn't move. His eyes were fixed on Aksel, his right hand gripping the still-sheathed sword. Aksel did not take a step forward.

Instead, he snorted and turned back to Hellfar. 'I ain't afraid of your threats, ye bastard. Send your thugs, we'll smash em. Though I've a feeling none'll come.'

Then he turned away. 'In your shoes, I'd be the one who's scared!', he tossed over his shoulder. And with that he strolled off.

It was a disaster. Utter, total, complete. She'd imagined, at worst, that they'd have to make do with high prices. But from this defeat, of these bridges all burned down at once by a few angry words, there would be no recovering.

The hunting dogs in their pen barked savagely, as if they had caught the scent of blood.

They left swiftly. There was no time to enjoy Oystein's breakfast. Hellfar was silent as the grave while he rolled up his blanket and put his things away. Emelyn

felt tears welling at the corners of her eyes, and her hands trembled so hard she couldn't get anything done. Hellfar packed for her, without a word.

The only sound as they left the village was the soft clopping of the donkey's hooves on the hard ground. There were a few folk in sight, but they watched in silence. Oystein did not wish them farewell, and of Aksel there was no sign.

Without looking back, they plunged into the foggy woods. A brooding Hellfar walked in front, followed by a worriedly fidgeting Emelyn with the donkey. Yeren followed at the back. He also did not speak.

She had a queasy feeling in her stomach. Couldn't stop nervously glancing into the trees. She tried to convince herself it was because of the overcast sky, of the dripping wet boughs. But deep down, she knew that Aksel's threats hadn't been empty words. The man had had a fierce glint to his eyes.

The donkey was even more scared than her, apparently. It snorted loudly, pulling its head one way, then another. Its nervous stomping at the ground made Emelyn want to run. Flee, fly down the path as fast as she could. Then the animal gave a guttural cry, wrenched its lead so hard she had to let go, and almost threw her over as it barrelled straight ahead, galloping down the path.

She slowly turned around. She felt stiff, didn't dare move an arm. Her throat was burning, and she felt she might throw up.

There was nothing. The footpath they'd followed wound back between the trees and disappeared in the foggy gloom. But the silence was worse than a blood-mouthed werewolf. She didn't know what to expect. She was terrified of the unknown.

The hobgoblin Yeren didn't look put off, though he was peering into the woods. Emelyn had almost gotten so far as taking in a shuddering breath when he moved. His sword slid out of its scabbard, humming softly.

It was a beautiful blade. Elegantly curved and perfectly smooth, with a mirror sheen broken only by silver-etched runes. Its edge was razor-sharp and gleamed white in the murk. 'Stay close', came his harsh words.

She couldn't have moved, even if she wanted to. It took all her strength to keep from falling over backwards as she looked past Yeren into the trees. She could hear faint barking. It drew ever nearer. She could hear the heavy panting, the rapid footfalls on the ground, before they finally came into sight. Two huge dogs, their mouths slavering, pouncing over the shrubbery towards them.

She saw Yeren crouch, then take a step forwards as the first mastiff leaped towards him. The second, though, ran a wider circle through the woods, then approached from the side. Hellfar stood near her, holding a dagger, but his hand

was shaking. She thought to draw a weapon of her own, but she had nothing. Trembling, she took a step back, fixating the slowly approaching beast's wet black eyes. It smelled her fear.

Then it pounced. All she saw was a disgusting maw filled with yellowed, jagged teeth. Spit flew from its muzzle and sharp claws reached for her.

In a blur, someone appeared in front of her, raising an arm. Instead of her soft throat, the dog's teeth buried themselves into the aketon on Yeren's arm, its claws scratching savagely at the mail on his chest. The mastiff was on top of him, almost forcing him over backwards with its weight. His right arm was pressed to the side, the steel blade too long to use.

She could see the fearsome jaw muscles straining as the beast clamped down on his arm, tearing at the cloth. There was a ripping sound. Followed soon after by a dog's whimper.

The mastiff let go of the arm, went into a threatening crouch, baring its fangs. Blood streaked from its stomach. Yeren's short blade, held in his left hand, was covered in blood. Unbothered its growling, he took a step to the left, and in a swing so swift she could hear it slicing the air, cut off its head. Its lifeless body flopped to the ground.

Yeren walked over to the other dog's corpse, checking to make sure it was dead. Then he cleaned and sheathed his blades, and began working up his left sleeve as if nothing had happened.

Emelyn felt tears streaming down her cheeks. She hadn't realized she was crying.

'Well', came Hellfar's weak voice. He was still holding his dagger. 'Seems that closes it. A deal with Svennson is off the table.'

There was no arguing with that. She ignored her salty tears and turned to Yeren, who had sat down against a tree. There were dark red trickles of blood seeping through the brown fur on his arm, which he was already wrapping with a strip of cloth.

'Master Yeren, you're wounded.' That was all she said, though thoughts were tumbling through her head. Was it over? Would there be more dogs, followed by bloodthirsty trappers? What would happen next? But it did not matter at the moment, and she squatted down next to the hobgoblin. 'Please, let me help.'

He stopped his wrapping, and spoke in his strange, rhythmic accent where each word seemed hacked off. It was similar to that of some Auxiliaries, but much stronger, clearer. 'It's not a bad wound.' She wasn't sure about that, the punctures looked quite deep, but he was doing a nice job of treating them. 'Wipe

those tears from your eyes, they do not suit you. If you wish to make yourself useful, find that donkey.'

'Aye.' Hellfar had regained his composure, sticking the dagger back in his belt. 'Reckon this was just a warning, but it'd be best not to linger. We must get back to the town by nightfall.'

Emelyn struggled to her feet. Push on, no matter what, get it done. That's what her sister Hanna would do. If others could be so brave, so unaffected by whatever happened, then so would she.

And she set off into the woods, before that braying idiot of a donkey caught its leg on some root and went lame.

The lazy autumn sun had slunk behind the fells and made way for the stars by the time they finally reached Trebkernstad. They had marched on through their fatigue, dragging the tired mule onward. After what had happened, they had no desire to spend the night in the wilderness. Aside from a short break at the Old Redoubt, they had not stopped.

They dumped all their gear on the warehouse floor and put the exhausted donkey in its stable. Even getting this much done felt like a lot. After all, what was the point? Hellfar's Furs was finished, the warehouse and the stable and the donkey would soon have to be sold.

That hadn't stopped Hellfar from insisting on doing it, and locking the heavy oaken doors when they stepped out. He held his head high and spoke in his usual determined manner, but even in the dark she saw how spent he was. Exhausted by the march, and everything else.

'Well, this is it.'

Emelyn had nothing to say. Couldn't think straight, anyway. So she just nodded. Yeren stood to the side with his arms crossed, his face unreadable as always.

'I'll go to my brother's farmstead for the night. He's sure to still be up. And I need a bit of warmth, after all this.' He turned to the hobgoblin. 'Master Yeren, I thank you for your service. Wouldn't have made it without you. And my regards to the guild.'

'It was my pleasure, Master Hellfar', Yeren replied in his sharp voice. 'Well seen.'

When the aging merchant turned to Emelyn, she saw a wet glint in his eyes. They shook hands. 'Well seen, Emelyn. Till later.'

And with that, he was gone, crunching up a gravel path between dark orchards.

Emelyn, soon-to-be unemployed merchant, walked to the town alongside

Yeren, master mercenary with a brass ring in his ear. They passed by the tannery and through the open gate in the palisade wall.

There were candles and fires burning, people were still out and about. Even in the dark, Trebkernstad was an ugly place. The road was badly cobbled, rutted by wagons, and full of foul puddles. People spoke in raucous voices, there was loud laughter further off. Alcohol and smoking leaves were popular, because they distracted from the dreary houses, and the stench, and how dirty and poor everyone was.

Yeren walked in stoic silence, his eyes two yellow pinpricks of light. She often forgot about darkvision. He could see the town in all its grimy splendor. No doubt, that's why he was even less talkative than she.

She wondered what he was thinking. More than that, who he was. She didn't care he was some mercenary, fulfilling mysterious missions for his feared guild. That was a tale to fascinate a doe-eyed town girl, not her. She cared who he *really* was. Why he did what he did. What he was thinking behind that expressionless mask of a face. Was he really fearless? Did he feel anything when he killed folk with that curved blade of his?

She caught herself before she started blabbing out questions. Spirits, she was almost as bad as a naive town girl.

He was just a person, after all. Like her. And he'd taken a wound saving her life.

'Thank you', she said, turning to face him. She said it sincerely, because she meant it.

Yeren seemed almost surprised. But now she'd started, so she better get it done. She gently took his good hand in both of hers. 'For… helping me. I know it's just your job, but that doesn't mean you didn't save my life.' It felt good to say it. 'I won't forget it.'

He answered in his sharp voice. 'Neither will I forget you, Emelyn Annikadottr. See you well.'

And then he pulled his hand from her grasp, and slid away into the night.

Emelyn did not feel well. She realized she could barely stand upright, and that she hadn't eaten anything since last night. A wave of pain coursed through her body and she bent over, retching, but nothing came out. Instead, she spat a ball of bile into a fetid ditch, and pulled herself together again.

She'd been telling herself for years that she was strong. Strong as her warrior sister, strong as her hero mother. In business, she used to look down at those who failed, and laughed at them for their weakness. Today, she'd been weak herself, and she wasn't proud of it. That would be the last time.

She would not show fear again. This was the last time she cried. Of course things were looking bad, and of course she was worried what the future held. But damn her if she'd let anyone else glimpse her doubt.

A Little Shame

Morencairn, Farnijsel

The beer frothed under the nose of Astrid Vendriddottr, the Daughter Superior of Venlags Domen, the Eye-to-See. She was the honored daughter of the Mother Superior, the future guide of the holy sisterhood. In the domen's mythos, her young blood - in which all the sisterhood's holy toil was concentrated - was one with the spirits. From her pure soul sprang the wisdom of the beyond, and a man might discover his future in her prophecies. She saw what lay ahead, she was the leader of the new generation, and an inspiration to the old.

Or that's what they believed, at least. Though they didn't say it too often anymore. Astrid had probably brought that onto herself. After all, she'd busily drowned all their hopes alongside her own, inside the beer keg.

The froth tickled her nose. She lifted the keg in both hands and drank in swallows so large it felt as if her throat was getting torn apart. She liked that. Half the drink went down in one go.

Then she set it down, and burped noisily. If there was one thing she was good at, it was drinking.

Not that anyone was proud of her for that. These days, no one was proud of her for anything, really. Probably her mother was glad she'd taken to staying in a Morencairn tavern; that way, she couldn't be an embarrassment to everyone in Venlags.

'So tell me again' Ienns mumbled. He was slurring his words, and sniffing noisily because of the brown-powder he just snorted. Astrid had insisted to let him drink at their table because of his good looks, but now she wasn't sure what she'd seen in him. 'You're a shishter… Not my shishter, I mean. A nun. From Venlagsh.'

'I am.' People told her that often enough, usually with raised brows. She didn't need her drinking partners to remind her as well.

'Sho… how come you're… here… and not in the monashtery?'

It was a fair question. 'I've done my seminars, so I earned my sisterhood.' As boring as school was, she'd made a spectacular effort - for her standards - and

just about passed the evaluations. 'Now I've nothing to do till my ma passes from the world and they put me in her place.'

Responsibilities in the monastery were all voluntary. Being the opposite of dutiful, she'd taken on none of them. Well, except for one job, which was the high office she'd been born into. She liked not to think about that.

Sometimes, Astrid dreamt about just going away. Shrug off all the expectations and disappointments and go somewhere, on an adventure. It was a grand, but pointless, thought.

She put up her left leg and scratched at her ankle. The little hemp bracelet she wore there was darn itchy sometimes. Why did she wear that ugly thing again?

'I've got a joke.' That was Gerlyn. A funny woman, one of Astrid's oldest drinking partners. 'There's a nun of Goibniu, one night she doesn't return to her cell.' She took a swig of her earthenware ale cup, burped, then went on. 'Thing is, she's supposed to chaste. So the mother superior is all angry, and berates the adventurous nun: you have a duty to the spirits, our God Goibniu won't be pleased! You know what the nun answered?'

'Tell me.' Astrid grinned and took another swig of beer.

'Goibniu won't complain, cause he was the one railing me from behind!'

Astrid guffawed, frothy beer spraying out her nose, drenching the tabletop and her shirt as well.

'Damn it, Gerlyn', she said, wiping off what she could with a dirty rag. Her nose hurt. 'Guess now my nose is cleared. Give me the brown-powder, will you.'

She glanced to the side, at the patrons on the next table over. Some white-haired folk in colorful greatgarb were muttering to each other, a disapproving look on their faces. She had little doubt their distaste was directed at her motley group.

Well, what did she care. She sprinkled two little heaps of powder onto the back of her hand, sucked in from one nostril, then the other. She made big brown stains on the wet rag when she wiped her nose with it. Guess she was bad at snorting, too.

'Want some?' She turned around and proferred the wooden box with the brown-powder to the grumpy patrons on the neighbouring table.

A wrinkly, grey-haired woman stared at her in shock, her mouth hanging open. The old geezer nearest to Astrid looked at her outstretched hand, his lower jaw wobbling, then looked up at her.

'Outrageous!' His jaw was working furiously. He had an air of righteous anger as he looked around the table, at her lounging companions. 'The day has just

begun, and already you are wasting yourselves in a manner that would shame even backwoods trappers!'

Astrid was about to make a sharp reply, but she had to wince as a shot of pain in her backside forced her to sit upright. The haze of drink had just about dulled the aching in her stomach, but the occasional stabs of discomforting pain would get through no matter how much she drank. The moon-blood had struck her, again. How the fuck was she supposed to become some sort of spirit-mistress if she couldn't even master her own body?

The old fart was gaining momentum. 'I find this quite distasteful, nay, scandalous! You people are young, full of vigor. You should be out in the world, shouldering responsibilities!'

Astrid had spent most of her life getting out of the way of responsibilities. From what she knew of the others, they had done the same.

The rune amulet hanging from a cord on Astrid's neck caught the man's eye. 'Vendriddottr, you most of all! You should be seeking truths, finding purpose for the new generation. You should pray at the temple, read the signs of the spirits! You should be an inspiration to us all!'

Gerlyn sneered and chuckled at the same time. 'Astrid, be a leader? She couldn't even get a mule to follow her.'

Ouch. Though it wasn't wrong, either.

'There are many lessons you must still learn. Lessons that can't be found in a tavern.'

Another man perked up. He looked almost as old as his companions, and had warriors' knots embroidered on his tunic. A chief, apparently. 'That's right. It worries me greatly, seeing what the young do nowadays. Thwarting traditions.'

They were thwarting traditions because they couldn't care less about them. Astrid also couldn't care less about what the chief had to say, though she didn't have the strength to tell him to shut up.

'Young men in my clan, they want to be heroes. They believe bravery means taking up arms and looking for trouble, roaming the countryside. They think being rowdy and drinking a lot is manly. Bands of mayhem, is what they truly are.'

The other speaker nodded. 'Don't do anyone any good. Honestly, though, we don't even have it so bad. It's folk on the frontier who have to deal with the worst of it. Boisterous bands of warriors striding around, making a mess.'

'No sense of responsibility. They just do it for the fun.'

'I heard they waste a good part of their time in taverns, the good-for-nothings.' And the old man frowned at Astrid's group, making sure his meaning was clear.

The chief tried to draw the discussion into a more productive direction. 'Sister Astrid, I hear you are a wise woman. Elder Atbjorn here speaks from frustration, of course, but surely you understand his view. You are no man, you see how ridiculous of a notion it is that fighting and drinking are a warrior's best attributes.'

'Suppose they aren't', she replied. 'Doesn't mean drinking ain't a lot of fun, though, and I guess fighting tickles young men the right way, too.'

The elder drew himself up for an angry retort. 'Which is why the shameful example set by you, Vendriddottr, no less than the to-be Mother Superior, is truly- '

He was interrupted by a loud clamor, outside. Someone banged against the tavern's doorframe with a stick. 'They're coming! The walk of shame!'

The elder's bluster disappeared in an instant, curiosity getting the better of his righteous anger. He turned to the chief with a quizzical raising of his brows.

'Our man on Mjnfar's been called back', he explained. 'Clan Trejdell made the decision, four days ago. He had lost control of the trappers.'

The elder's eyes opened wider as he remembered. 'Right. Bad business all around out there, if you ask me.' The chief nodded in agreement. 'Though, a walk of shame…'

'Doesn't sit quite right with me, either. Honest failures shouldn't warrant shame before the Gods. But folk nowadays are hungry for spectacle. They say it pleases the spirits. Guess they don't have aught better to do.'

Astrid didn't like public shamings either, but watching a walk of shame would be better than stewing in silence and listening to old men talk. 'Get up, let's go see', Astrid called as she stood up. Gerlyn struggled to her feet, but the others looked at her blankly, or had even dozed off. 'Or wait here, then.'

She took a lurching step and almost had to hold onto the table to catch her balance. Her stomach convulsed and she had a sour taste in her mouth. Oh, the charms of alcohol.

She heroically overcame her struggle and managed to stagger out into the stabbing sunlight. Her eyes hurt, but the fresh air with a twang of brine did her some good. Let her focus on taking deep breaths instead of her pounding headache, at least.

Through squinting eyes, she saw that a few people had gathered on either side of the street, talking excitedly to one another. Nowadays, with its neat cobbled street and the shale-roofed buildings, Morencairn actually looked the part of a respectable town. You could barely smell the stench from the garbage ditch on the other side of the tavern. This was the capital of the Farn-Clans, after all.

Some woman wearing a warrior's bell-dress walked past and up the road,

chanting a saga of Ferdr. That got the people to come and watch in expectant silence. But the real attraction followed: a cluster of armed men in dwarf-copper armor, leading the subject of interest between them.

He didn't look impressive, certainly not how one might imagine a remorseless criminal. He was a middle-aged man, with a face that might once have been proud. Now, he just looked tired. Wispy, formerly blonde hair stuck to his pate. He had two gilded piercings in his nose. Astrid had never seen that kind of jewelry on anyone but an orc, but it somehow fit him well.

His hands were bound in heavy iron fetters. Not because he might escape, or because he was violent, but because it made him look more guilty. He was also topless, displaying an unassuming and slightly fat body. She supposed the point was to expose him fully to the people's ire, so he might be properly ashamed.

And the people were playing their part. Flinging insults and jeering at the man, booing him for failings they were only vaguely aware of. A teenage girl shrieked loud enough for Astrid to feel as if her head was splitting.

Did he look familiar? She wasn't sure. Might be she'd met him, years ago. But then, everyone looks familiar when you have had enough to drink.

She wondered if she should stop this. The poor man hadn't really done anything wrong, and he certainly didn't look like he deserved all the curses. A good, selfless sister would have wrapped a modest blanket over his shoulders, and walked in front of him, calling for understanding and compassion. A noble deed that would no doubt earn her the admiration of the local burghers, and a nod of respect from the chief and the elder in the tavern. Astrid was Daughter Smuperior, she could have just told them all to stop the walk of shame, and let him atone in peace at the temple instead.

But she was feeling dizzy, and she couldn't get herself to step forward. Because of her moon-blood, certainly. She wasn't just making excuses for herself.

She tried to shrug off her foolish notions of selfless heroism, and grunted in thanks when Gerlyn handed her the brown-powder box.

There was shouting up ahead, some commotion as people pushed against one another. Something flew and hit the shamed man's head. A stone.

He stumbled, fell to his knees, was caught under the armpit by a guard. Other guards were jostling with the burghers, trying to find who'd thrown the projectile.

Then the man was carried away and the crowd dissipated, people going back to their business. They chatted happily about the day's exciting sights.

Astrid really hated public shamings. Perhaps as much as she hated herself.

Master Merchant

Trebkernstad, Mjnfar

Somehow, Emelyn was still not out of a job.

Ten days after the catastrophe at Osmund's Clearing, a longship from Morencairn had brought a man of Clan Trejdell who told Hellfar he'd be judged by the Gods. Hellfar had gone with him, but Hellfar's Furs remained. No one told Emelyn to close down shop, and no one came to call in their debts.

Being a good adjunct, she ran the business as if nothing changed. She had no idea where she was going, where she'd even find the funds to continue operating, but she showed none of her doubts to the others. To them, she was as determined as Hellfar at his prime, and she knew what she was doing.

She kept the four employees busy with whatever work she could think of. They carefully treated the small batches of furs that still trickled in, aiming to extract the highest value possible. They took a full inventory of assets, as one might do when taking over a business. And they busily searched for high-paying buyers, going to the market and approaching visiting merchants.

Emelyn styled herself a successful adventurer-merchant. Each day she dressed carefully, choosing one of her two nice tunics and colorful wool belts, and binding her hair in a neat plait. Appearance makes half the merchant.

She'd also bought a short sword, which she'd taken to wearing throughout the day. It was a military blade from the Empire, a plain length of metal with a round pommel. She told herself it was just for the looks, but there was also something comforting about the weapon's weight on her hip, against her leg. It gave her power, made her feel like she was in control.

She felt good while she strode through town. Perhaps Trebkernstad was a dreary hole, but she knew this place well. She'd come to like it and its crude inhabitants.

At the town's center was the market, to which all the trappers and the handful of farmers of this part of Mjnfar flocked. The settlement was a merchant's dream: it was a colonial frontier and a crossroads of trade in one. It had been

founded by the Farn-Clans, the clans of Farnijsel, and still notionally belonged to them. In practice, the place was ruled by City-Chief Kaspjer.

The settlement proper consisted of around two hundred thatch-roofed huts, clustered against the coast on the east side of the Trebflow river. There was a bustling market square, a sprinkling of taverns, a stave church of Ferda, and several cabbage patches and pigsties inside the ditch-and-palisade. The Borg, the wealthier part of town, was separated by an additional palisade.

There were several more buildings on the other side of the single bridge, including a tannery which rigorously fouled the water, and the small compound of Hellfar's Furs.

To the north, on a hill overlooking the town, laid the city-chief's castle and an old stone building called the Chapel.

That was where she was headed. Where her hope of saving Hellfar's Furs laid.

The Chapel was a tall cobblestone building covered in black and yellow patches of lichen. It had a meekly sloped skillion roof of stone slabs. Once, the building had been a chapel of Gaya, as shown by the rune-shaped window slits set high above the door.

Now, it was the garrison of an Auxiliary chapter. That was made clear by the Goblin writing in black paint all around the door frame. The Auxiliary was the human military-religious force of the goblinoid Empire, which had been deployed in Ferdr's Isles to protect the people and safeguard trade interests.

After completing her mercantile apprenticeship in Venfer, Emelyn had come to Trebkernstad because she'd heard her little sister Hanna was deployed here. Before that, she hadn't seen Hanna for ten years, ever since she enlisted and sailed away to the south.

The heavy door creaked open before Emelyn's knuckles could rap against it.

'Lady Emelyn! What a pleasure!' Tryss stood beaming in the doorway. She had a strong accent, but Emelyn thought it quite endearing. The red-haired woman might not be a Child of Ferdr, but she'd successfully adopted the open manner and warmth of its people.

'Sister Tryss! So very well seen.' They embraced one another, but only lightly. It was a formal visit, after all.

Flames roared in the fireplace in the corner, giving off a nice warmth. Only few rays of sunlight got in from outside, and the resinous odor of incense permeated the gloom. Once one got used to the strange atmosphere, though, it could be quite cozy.

Sister Diulia, the chapter's leader, stepped away from the massive oak table,

where she'd been arranging dishes. Like Tryss, she wore a plain grey dress and a leather belt with patterns of colored beads.

They embraced as well, their arms barely touching one another's backs. 'Sister Diulia. Thank you very much for hosting me.'

Diulia smiled and waved her to the bench. With only three people, the long table was almost eerily empty.

'Unfortunately, Sister Mylinna is on patrol', Diulia said. Emelyn still hadn't gotten used to Hanna's adopted name. 'As are all the others. We are stretched quite thin, nowadays.'

They began their meal: half a stewed chicken with some boiled potatoes. Tryss was busily separating meat from bone with a knife. 'The hours of light are getting fewer, but our hours of service are not. There are disturbances all over the backwoods. Orcish hunters and human trappers, causing one another worry. There has been some fighting.'

Emelyn had heard of this before, of course. 'I hadn't realized how involved the Auxiliary is. You have fought too?'

Diulia shook her head. 'No, though it might yet come to it. Tribe Treesnatch refuses to parlay. We patrol the marches, but we fear they may choose to force their way through.'

'And when that happens, we will defend the Children of Ferdr!', Tryss threw in. She had a fiery character.

Diulia smiled. 'Sister Mylinna is also indomitable. The darling, she says she won't let anyone down. She patrols hard as anyone.'

The Auxiliaries loved Hanna. She was the youngest member of their special family. Emelyn, meanwhile, had struggled to reconnect with her little sister. They'd spoken, a few times, but it had felt like empty words. And Hanna was often away with her adoptive sisters, praying or patrolling.

But Emelyn had put that behind her. That's how the world is, after all; people change. They'd find one another again, later.

'I've visited a few trapper communities, in the last tendays', Emelyn began. 'Times are tough for them. A few are scared of the orcs. They're worried they'll lose some of their hunting grounds. Some even fear for their homes.'

Diulia nodded. 'Yes. Treesnatch is hungry. I've read that they bought some fenrir, wolven war-mounts. And mercenaries are gathering in the port of Bomborg.'

That was worrying. But Emelyn bulled on. 'I think it's important for the trappers to feel safe. So they stay in their place, help you keep the poachers out.' And

trade with her, rather than the orcs. 'It could help if you show your determination to them.'

Diluia looked grim. 'I don't think a visit by two exhausted scouts would inspire much confidence. We're quite busy as it is.'

Tryss put a hand on Emelyn's and leaned towards her. 'We are spread too thin', she whispered, with her sharp t's. 'Command tells us to protect all this woodland, but we are just fourteen women.'

'They give us what they can', Diulia threw in. 'There is trouble in the south, resources are not infinite.'

'I hear it rumoured they want to withdraw the Auxiliary from Ferdr's Isles', she whispered on. 'There could be war, in the south. And there's trouble in the human provinces.'

The Auxiliary, withdrawn? Emelyn's future was looking ever worse.

Diulia shrugged. Whereas Tryss spoke conspiratorially, with her sharp accent, Diulia talked clearly and matter-of-fact. 'Goblinoids and humans are different, I think it's just natural that there are tensions. But the order of things is given, in the Empire, humans obey hobgoblins. Anyways, Tryss is right, we don't have the strength to do anything more right now. I'm sorry.'

Emelyn's plate was empty, but her mind was full of worries.

She'd hoped that, with the Auxiliary's support, she might be able to turn some trappers around and get their trade back. There would be little chance of success, of course, but there was hardly another way to save the business.

Yet now things had turned out even worse than she'd expected. Not only would she not get her lost deals back, if the Auxiliary left, she'd probably lose her remaining suppliers as well. Who knew, the way things were going, Trebkernstad itself might fall to some orcish invasion in a few years.

'Thank you for your visit', Diulia said, stacking the plates in a decisive manner. 'Sister Tryss and I must prepare now. We will be giving a service in Ferda's church.'

'Thank you for your hospitality, Sisters.' Emelyn stood, embraced them both, then went to the door. 'My best to Sister Mylinna.'

There was a fresh breeze outside, blowing out to sea. High grass rustled. The dark patch of Trebkernstad laid sprawled below her, clouded in the haze of the cooking-fires, and the dull silver sea stretched out beyond.

What could she do? If her world ended, it mattered little whether she got some trappers to trade with her. She wanted to cry.

But that would not do. She grasped her sword's pommel firmly, feeling the cold

metal in her palm. And she pulled herself together, like the determined merchant-woman she was.

If the Auxiliary couldn't help her, then the city-chief might.

The gravel crunched under her slippers as she walked along the short footpath from the Chapel to the City-Chief's Castle.

It wasn't much of a fortress. The centerpiece, a blocky three-storey keep, was surrounded by a wooden wall. A stone watchtower rose next to the open gate. This castle was home to Trebkernstad's ruling tyrant, his modest entourage, and the half-dozen brutes he called a town guard.

Emelyn was familiar with the place. She had visited it on occasion.

There were more guards than usual by the open gate: namely, two. They wore rough linens. The only thing distinguishing them from a common burgher were the dwarf-copper-tipped spears they wielded, and the padded skullcaps on their greasy hair.

They lounged against a wall and looked like they couldn't care less about her presence. Neither did she care about theirs.

The courtyard consisted of raw dirt, with a few patches of grass showing in unused corners. Various buildings were huddled against the palisade, towered over by the keep on top of its mound. There were no other guards in sight, but there were a few civilians going about their business, and two angry-looking blonde-haired men who were busily loading crates onto a wagon.

She was in luck: the castellan with his broad plumed hat was outside, talking to two burghers. They had a sulky look when he dismissed them.

Emelyn applied for audience next. 'Castellan Ulff!'

He turned to her with an air of mild recognition, twisting the silver ring on his middle finger. 'Ah yes, we've seen before. Umm…'

'Emelyn Annikadottr, of Hellfar's Furs. It is a pleasure to be one of Trebkernstad's most productive guildswomen.' She held out her hand.

'Right, Hellfar's new partner. Quite unfortunate, that whole affair. I still hope the business fares well?'

'It goes well.' An easy lie. 'But the situation in the backwoods is pretty dire. The trappers are worried.'

'Tribe Treesnatch is making trouble. The city-chief has sent word to the authorities about it.'

It didn't sound like any meaningful action was beaking taken. 'This danger hurts trade, and the clans care a lot about my trade. The city-chief should send men to secure the marches.'

‘We don’t have the manpower, sadly. And in any case, you shouldn’t speak to Kaspjer now.’

She wasn’t sure what she’d even expected. ‘He’s busy?’

‘Yes. He’s composing a letter for his beloved future bride, the Lady Sylvan. That’ll take him the rest of today.’

Emelyn had heard of this: the city-chief had won the hand of Sylvan Sylvandottr, an important clan chief’s second daughter. Rumour was that he hadn’t even seen a drawing of the girl before he accepted the marriage.

‘I wish him success. Are there no men, then, who he can spare to defend the land and trade interests of the Farn-Clans?’

The castellan shook his head. ‘I am profoundly sorry, but the levy cannot be called, and the town guard is needed to maintain order in the city.’ Then he leaned forward to add in a whisper: ‘And the young warriors of Victyr Ulfson’s retinue, who chased off that gang of bandits two tendays ago, will be leaving us. I hear Ulfson had a falling out with the city-chief.’

Excellent. City-Chief Kaspjer had thrown away half of Trebkernstad’s standing manpower, at a time when they were sorely needed.

She spoke through gritted teeth. ‘I am certain the city-chief had good reason to do so. Well, if the clans deign to send a military expedition, Hellfar’s Furs would be honored to provide guides and material support.’

‘Thank you, Emelyn. We will keep this in mind.’ They both knew that a response of any kind was quite unlikely. Trebkernstad was right at the edge of the map, and the Farn-Clans had not raised a proper military force in decades.

She bowed her head and stomped out of the castle, then down the hill, as fast as she could. Short of breaking into a run. Today was the first time she’d involved herself in politics and she already wanted to go far away, leave this nightmare behind. It was falling apart. Somehow, since that fateful meeting with Aksel Svennson, everything had been going downhill at an increasingly rapid rate. Emelyn was giving her best to salvage things, but the more she dug, the more she realized there was no hard ground to build on.

Her feet carried her into town, past the Borg palisade, onto the square that faced Ferda’s church. Holy chants were echoing from inside.

Down here, things were the same as they always were. People went about their usual business. She wondered how long it would take until change affected these people, too. Until all business died down, or the orcs reached their doorsteps.

Looking at the peaceful church now, it didn’t feel like there was any change coming at all. Emelyn hadn’t spoken to the spirits much, lately. Maybe that’s

what she was missing. Ferda might give her answers. Maybe through some supernatural intervention, she could turn things around.

'Master Emelyn.' A resonating tone. Surprised, she turned to face the speaker.

He was a head shorter than she. A bald dwarf with a wide black beard and a burgundy coat.

'My name is Master Broug', he continued in his deep, rolling voice. 'I represent the honorable guild of Thain and Gerth.'

A banker. So this was when her short spurt as guildsmaster ended.

'Well seen.' She resigned herself to her fate. 'Though I have not yet earned my mastery of the trade. I am a mere partner of Hellfar's Furs. I assume you wish to discuss the matter of debt?'

He nodded slowly, presenting the broad smile of a man confident that he had all the power and you had none. She'd have equal glee, in his position. 'My lady, you are as perspicacious as you are capable. Know that I consider anyone who manages the operation of a guild, as you do, to be a master of the trade.'

'You are too kind, master. However, it seems that I have held the position of manager for less than two tendays.' He was dragging it out, wallowing in her defeat.

'I am certain that you will manage your business quite successfully in the future as well. Thain and Gerth wishes to offer you a new loan. Are you interested?'

Emelyn had to catch herself not to gasp out loud. 'Master Broug… You surprise me. My account has considerable arrears with your guild, does it not?'

'So it does, but we nonetheless wish to offer our support. My guild believes Hellfar's Furs will yet find success, and make back our investment. What do you say, 2'000 golden crenelles, at a 5% interest rate?'

With this money, she'd be able to cover her deficit for moons to come. Not only did she have nothing to lose, this was an excellent offer. 'This… suits me.'

'Excellent. You may visit the Dwarven Guildhouse at your leisure, to sign the loan.'

And with that, he turned on his heel and sauntered off towards the Borg.

Emelyn just stood there, stunned. In an instant, everything had changed. It was too good to be true.

The soft melody of the cantics echoed around her.

On the Summit of Ottenholm

Ottenholm Hill, Farnijsel

Astrid's hair fluttered in the wind. Her steed's powerful body moved and shook between her legs, the hoofs thudded sharply on the hard ground. Hedges and trees whipped past her. She edged her horse closer to a hedge, feeling the twigs and leaves whip past as she sped along.

If felt great, to be moving. Perhaps riding was one thing she wasn't terrible at.

One branch was a bit larger and poked out a bit further than the others. It whipped hard at her upper arm. She winced at the pain, almost losing her balance. The horse swerved, confused by her sudden movement.

She slowed down to a trot, getting away from the side of the field and back onto the path. A group of women was waiting ahead, at the edge of the copse on Ottenholm's ridge. They wore the yellow garb of Goibniu, the God of Metals.

Astrid hastily pulled the loose strands of hair out of her face and straightened her flaxen blouse. She also lwore the rune-studded cloth of a Goibniu cultist, though she'd opted for a composition with trousers rather than the elaborate dress most of the women ahead wore.

They'd all turned at her approach, and had their heads respectfully lowered. Well, all except one.

'Eye-to-See! How good of you to come.' The words of the Mother Superior of Venlags Domen dripped with sarcasm.

Astrid got her horse to stop in the right place, though it kept on treading the ground, and she feared it might drift off or even turn her the wrong way. She just about managed to swing down from the mighty steed.

'Mother! I am glad to see you. We meet so rarely, nowadays.' Astrid spoke in a cheerful tone, because she didn't see the point in being sour.

The sisters of Venlags had silently gathered their things and were now shuffling off along the path into the woods. They were wise to give Astrid and her mother some space, because their reunions were rarely a gentle affair.

Mother Vendrid looked her over carefully, then straightened her amulet and

brushed off some twigs that had caught on her sleeve. ‘You look presentable today. Like you made a modicum of effort.’

Was that a hint of a smile, at the corner of her mouth? Astrid certainly deserved it. She’d hardly drunk that morning, just enough to get over last night’s hangover. She’d just taken a bit of brown-powder during the ride, and had somehow managed to wipe her nose well enough there were no stains left for Vendrid to spot.

She pried off a hand that had cupped her cheek.

‘Stop fussing over me!’

Astrid tried to adopt an upright and self-confident pose that might instill respect in her mother, but Vendrid just smirked.

‘You know’, she said softly, ‘sometimes you remind me of your father.’

Now why did she have to bring that up? Her father had left them, nearly a decade ago. He’d gormlessly abandoned her.

A songbird chirped as they headed into the woods.

‘You should try harder to follow the example of your elders. Adopt their good traits.’

Her mother looked breathtaking, casually strolling along the path. Her bright dress flowed akin to a tree’s windswept boughs. She wore a beautifully crafted bead-studded belt, and her fair hair was tightly bound in a chignon. She almost looked of an age with Astrid, damn it.

‘I don’t want to do that. First, it’s no fun, and second, I’d end up like you.’ A weak retort, Astrid knew. But then everything was weak about her.

Vendrid clucked disapprovingly. ‘There is plainly too much of your father in you, and altogether too little of me.’

Astrid had liked her father. He had been there for her, in the evenings, while her superior mother officiated until late into the night. But he’d been a severe and headstrong man, which is why Vendrid eventually tired of him.

Clerics didn’t marry, but they could live together with a man, and bear his children. And then discard him and his sons whenever they pleased. That was the way of things, but Astrid didn’t like it. And she was angry at the mother who’d taken her father away from her.

She should be angry at both, really. But she couldn’t really hate someone who wasn’t even there.

‘Now wipe that frown from your face and try to look dignified. You stand for the clergy.’ Ever practical, her Mother Superior.

The trees opened up to a bright sky beyond. The path continued to follow the

ridge, then wound up the side of a grassy knoll. That patch of ground was the political center of all Farnijsel.

The view from Ottenholm's summit was gorgeous as always. To the east were low rolling hills, the steeper slopes grazed by sheep, the flatter ones covered in orchards and fields. Somewhere behind them laid the town of Morencairn. Beyond was a grey haze, where the sky blurred with the ocean at the horizon.

To the west were expanses of woods and vines. The rounded stone towers of Venlags Domen rose out of the greenery. Just behind it hid the sprawling town of Venlags, with its docks, markets, and workshops. Here, too, the ocean stretched to the horizon.

The flat top of the butte had been dug out to create a large circus. Broad flat stones, carved earth, and wooden planks served as benches. Menhir stones, carved with patterns and runes, were sprinkled among the stands and around the rim.

There was an expectant hush as the Mother and Daughter Superior appeared. Most folk had already arrived, filling out two-thirds of the space. There were elders in the greatgarb of their clans. Chiefs who'd donned the heavy cured leathers tradition demanded. Tradesmen flaunting their wealth. And a few special guests: a handsome young man in the ring-studded dress of a western clan warrior, a dwarf in a dark orange coat, and the hobgoblin commissioner wrapped in heavy black cloth.

Last time Astrid had been here, she'd been drunk. She was starting to regret being sober this time.

'Let the augury begin!', Vendrid declared in her hallowed voice.

A sheet of copper was placed on a round slab of stone. Yellow-garbed priestesses hammered at it with specially pointed sledgehammers and smith's tools, bending and splitting it in various ways. Here Astrid's role as Eye-to-See was to observe carefully. The ceremony might cause her a sudden insight, in which case she should loudly announce what the spirits had told her.

She hated auguries. If she really focused, she might be able to catch a glimpse of a spirit in the Ether, mocking her. She had no idea what kind of wise words or prophecies she was supposed to derive from whatever blurred sights she caught, and she wasn't much of a speaker anyway. So she didn't even try, looking carelessly at the metal bending and splitting under the weight of the hammers.

Now the sheet was judged sufficiently deformed and the sisters placed the stone slab on top of a bed of glowing charcoal. The ritual would take up to an

hour, waiting for the metal to soften and melt in some meaningful way. This was a time for the delegates to talk casually with one another.

Astrid, of course, couldn't go hide somewhere and take a much-needed sip. She had to stand there, hands clasped, and look concentrated. Luckily, the church seminars had taught her one thing: how to do nothing and wait.

Finally, her mother judged the metal sufficiently molten. Or rather, the people had talked enough and were ready to proceed. She briefly looked at Astrid, to see if there was any last-moment insight, then addressed the assembly.

'The omens are favourable!' There was a shuffling as the last people found a spot to sit. 'Let the all-tache of the clans of Farnijsel begin!'

While the augury ceremony was dull, the all-tache could be outright exhausting. Astrid swiftly chose a spot among the clerics, in the shade of a menhir, and wriggled into a decently comfortable position.

She wondered if they made the tache intentionally boring, so that no young people attended and the old relics could keep making all the decisions.

The meeting began with a tedious introduction of each clan's elders and chiefs. Oh, a drink, for pity's sake.

Elder Atbjorn and the chief she'd met in Morencairn were there. She gave a little wave and the chief returned a nod of acknowledgement. Many of the others, she only knew by sight and superficial words. Some, she didn't know at all.

The handsome western man was introduced as Victyr Ulfson of Ferdrheim. A very important son. What his business here was, Astrid didn't really understand. He was just roaming around as he pleased with a band of other important sons, apparently.

The first point on the agenda was a conflict about commons grazing rights in one part of Farnijsel. It began as a dispute between two clans, then devolved into a loud feud between three families. The tache eventually moved on, having failed to resolve the issue. The next topic was financing the maintenance of the fens road.

By the fifth precise tallying of sheep and donkeys, Astrid was considering to just stand up and leave. Did nothing interesting ever happen?

'Colleagues!' A man of Morencairn's Clan Trejdell had stood up, fiercely interrupting the endlessly droning voice of an elder so old he had no right to be out bed. 'The sun has already travelled far, yet we have not at all broached the subject of essential importance!'

There were some nods and bouts of 'hear, hear'. It seemed that the majority of the elders, however, had no idea what this important topic even was.

‘Our frontiersmen, dependents of all the Farn-Clans, are under threat! Trade is stifled, foul Drubarks are baying at the border!’ The mention of the orcish empire, the historic arch-enemy of Ferdr’s Children, provoked a lot of muttering.

Despite its spectacular beginning, this subject turned out hardly more interesting than the others. The discussion involved which clan had the most interest in the region of Trebkernstad, and who shared the most responsibility for it. The elder of Clan Trejdell heavily belabored the subject of fur trade. Then, elders and clerics discussed the proper spiritual atonement for some failed businessman, concluding that a year’s cloistering at Venlags was suitable.

‘Victyr, your party was in the service of Trebkernstad for the better part of a year’, someone commented.

‘So it was!’, the young man pronounced, drawing everyone’s attention. He addressed the crowd as if he was a chief riling them up for war. ‘My men have defended Trebkernstad valiantly! Just two tendays ago, we scattered a host of bandits. However, City-Chief Kaspjer told me he no longer required my services. So I left.’

There was some confusion on a few faces. Apparently, people had heard conflicting stories about Victyr.

‘And how capable are the city-chief’s own forces, then?’

Victyr gleefully pumped up his chest, as if they had played right into his hands. ‘They are pathetic!’ Shouts of dismay. ‘We were single-handedly protecting all the people of Trebkernstad. Kaspjer has a handful of thugs, who likely couldn’t even hold the castle against a force of equal size. Trebkernstad is undefended, vulnerable, exposed. Drubark and its minions, meanwhile, are strengthening their forces. They have hundreds of men. They have war-wolves. Dozens of mercenaries have arrived at Bomborg.’

This was exciting! It sounded like war, and a challenging one at that. The brave but primitive frontiersmen, hopelessly outnumbered by the armed and armored hosts of Drubark.

His presentation completed, Victyr sat back down. Someone remarked that the goblinoids had a garrison chapter in Trebkernstad. The commissioner was asked about its dispositions.

‘The Human Auxiliary has a chapter of fourteen under the command of *Ygumenkka-ik* Diulia’, he confirmed. He spoke Skijspik well, but his clipped speech betrayed his Goblin accent, and he had the nasally tone all hobgoblins had. ‘I have read her reports. The situation is complex and fluid. The garrison chapter patrols the wilderness, but it is stretched to its limits.’

Angry grumbling all around. The commissioner was widely unpopular among the clansmen due to his insufferable personality, and his tendency to deliver bad news.

'Could the garrison be reinforced?', a Trejdell woman asked. Solving the problem with someone else's strength was very attractive; the Farn-Clans hadn't raised an army in Astrid's lifetime, and they were also notorious misers.

'Out of the question.' The commissioner was puffing himself up. He looked like he intended to underline the point with all the self-righteousness of his Emperor Trensandor.

Trejdell didn't leave it at that. 'But perhaps we can come to an agreement with the authorities…'

Astrid knew the commissioner for an overly proud man. '*I* am the authority! I am the commissioned official of Trensandor for Farnijsel and the whole eastern bay!' To Astrid, this loud assertion of his credentials only lessened his credibility. 'And I say to you, with full authority as High Commissioner and in the name of the military governorate, that the Human Auxiliary will not be increasing its deployment in the region. If anything, it will reduce its garrison forces. Trensandor wishes to concentrate on the home front!' He sat back down like a smug toad.

The Trejdellians were sullen. Conversation briefly swerved away from the difficult topic of the Farn-Clans' responsibility towards Trebkernstad, but it was too serious of a matter to ignore.

They considered sending Victyr's men back, but they realized his dozen would not make a real difference, whereas antagonizing the city-chief would be decidedly unproductive.

The man from the tavern, Elder Atbjorn, addressed the assembly. 'What we need is to send an ambassador of the Farn-Clans to Trebkernstad. To talk to the city-chief, properly find out what the situation is. To explain our position, and encourage him to strengthen his own forces.'

Had he briefly glanced at her? Astrid doubted it, she was usually ignored by everyone.

All the fervent talkers noted their agreement, but none of them volunteered to be the envoy. Typical. These elders were happy to talk for days, but when it came to affirmative action, they deflated.

But then Astrid had no right to complain. She didn't talk and she didn't take action either. The only thing she did was be a disappointment.

'I'll go.' She was standing among a sea of surprised faces. Why wasn't she lounging on her seat, in silence?

She stepped out of the yellow mass of clerics and into the center of the circus, next to the augury fire with its artful tangle of copper. Her mother at first looked like she wanted to pull her back down, but now she sat with an unreadable expression.

'Eye-to-See, you wish to represent us at Trebkernstad?', Atbjorn asked.

Yes, she did. It sounded bold, adventurous. A mission where she would be completely on own, far away from the clergy and her mother. For the first time in a while, she actually felt motivated to do something.

When she addressed the assembly, she tried to speak like someone who knew what they were doing. 'The task of ambassador requires someone impartial, who speaks in the name of all the Farn-Clans. Now, I understand people here might not know me for a very respectable person.' She didn't earn any laughs for this, but then she couldn't really expect any. 'But how should a young woman prove herself, and gather experience, if not through practice? I am motivated and I am dedicated. Who is more qualified than the Eye-to-See, she who sees and speaks the future of the Farn-Clans?' A few were nodding. 'I promise you, I *see* myself succeeding!'

There were some chuckles, a few bursts of 'hear, hear'.

Her mother, for once, properly smiled at her. 'Venlags proposes the Daughter Superior as ambassador of the Farn-Clans.'

No one protested.

With that, Astrid had made it. 'That's my daughter!', her mother grinned, patting her shoulder.

Visions of a boat gliding over the crashing waves, and an untamed wilderness filled with brave muscular men, flashed before Astrid's eyes. She didn't pay attention to the insignificant rest of the tache.

This was one job she'd take seriously. Real responsibility, which she'd shouldered in the name of the church and the all the clans. A job she couldn't mess up.

The sky had turned a pale orange by the time the all-tache broke up. People talked in small groups of two to four people. Mother Vendrid and some clan elders were speaking to the commissioner about the Imperial presence in Venlags. Elder Atbjorn was speaking to a young merchant. Perhaps Astrid, as a productive member of society, should have joined their discussion, and talked with Atbjorn about her ambassadorship.

But one couldn't expect too much of her. She was still herself, after all.

So she slunk off in the opposite direction, away from all the elders and import-

ant people on Ottenholm's summit and down towards the wagons, horses, and attendants below. A few clerics saw her go, and her mother gave her a sidelong glance, but no one tried to stop her. They were used to her slinking off to the tavern as soon as possible, after all.

The attendants and servants were a motley group. There were blonde-haired Children of Ferdr, orc porters, and a cluster of hobgoblins in black cloth and mail. There were cushioned pull-carts, bulky wagons, and fine horses. Astrid's own horse was tied to a picket on the other side of the field, beckoning of the beer-keg and freedom from expectations. Of Gerlyn's comforting presence.

Then she spotted them: a group of young men, some wearing leather jerkins or even metal armor, next to a battered-looking wagon. She turned towards them. The tavern could wait.

One man, who'd been standing to a side chewing on a stick, saw her approach. He wore his brown hair in a loose tie, and an open blue vest that showed off his flat stomach. He was quite tall.

'Sister of Goibniu! I am Jesper Sylvanson, at your service!' He bowed low, as if he was in a hobgoblin's court.

Astrid grinned. Given the contempt people usually had for her, she could appreciate a little flattery. 'You are too charming. I am Astrid the Eye-to-See. You are one of the Ferdrheim party?'

'I am from Eyfloss, myself, but I do belong to the party of Victyr.' Astrid raised her brows at that. Eyfloss Domen was a church town in many ways similar to Venlags. Though it was also much larger, much older, and much more prestigious. 'Perhaps I could one day show you my city?'

'A very generous offer, Jesper.' And one she'd have found quite appealing, in a different circumstance. 'I wish to talk about your party's… plans. I take it Victyr is not here?'

'Unfortunately, our leader rode ahead to Venlags in the company of a charming maid. However, perhaps I can please your needs?'

There were certainly some needs she could have him address. 'Please do.' And she placed a gentle hand on his upper arm. His muscles were delightfully firm. 'You are a band of brave warriors, right?'

He seemed to like where things were going. 'That we are. We've sworn to follow the spirits, spending our best years to protect the Children of Ferdr, so we can return home with great glory.'

'How heroic.' Astrid gently slid her hand down his arm, then pulled it away. 'Trebkernstad is in dire need of men. Going there would be very brave.'

He lowered his straight black brows a bit. ‘We’re not well seen by the chief there. He wants us gone.’

Astrid almost whispered, leaning very close and looking up to his square face and those nice straight lips of his. ‘I’m not saying we should sail right into port, blowing the horn. You could keep out of sight. And… follow my lead.’

The brave Warrior Jesper wasn’t sure where she was going with this, so he kept silent. She could almost feel his tension.

‘Stay out of sight, wait for my call. Then, fight for glory, return to Eyfloss with a great victory and the praise of Venlags Domen to your name.’

He seemed hesitant, though she could see she’d hooked his interest. Proper glorious fights were rare, as these men had undoubtedly noticed in the past year, and she was offering them one on a silver tablet.

He clasped her outstretched hand. ‘I’ll talk to Victyr, but I’m sure we can come to an agreement.’

Before he got any ideas to say something more, she curtly told him ‘I’ll be in touch’, then swerved off to her horse.

It was that easy. It was exciting, to think about what she’d say to City-Chief Kaspjer, to look for solutions with the tools she’d been given. The pieces were falling into place neatly.

She was looking forward to the trip.

A Pilgrim's Experience

Ferdrheim, Ferdrskjand

There was a noticeable change passing from the city proper into the outskirts. The bustling docks and workshops in Ferdrheim's stone houses gave way to more scattered passers-by and log cabins. The carefully cobbled street had turned into a corduroy road made of straight logs, and the ground was getting steeper.

Wood was cheap in Ferdrheim. Back when the city had been founded, the lush pines had grown so near the coast that the settlers had had to carve space out of the forest for their huts, or so the legends said. Now, Yeren was sure that every one of the thousands of trees he saw covering the surrounding hills had been planted by human hands. The Children of Ferdr were such good foresters, in fact, that even the Empire made use of their engineers and sheriffs' expertise.

He noted a chain-house in a solid-looking one-storey building, as advertised by the wooden sign with a red warrior-knot painted on. He walked on. The log road continued up a slope, past muddy gardens and patches of trees in regular rows. When it evened out, the long rough-plank walls of Ferdr-Yk Monastery rose into view.

This complex served as the Garrison Diocese Number 2, the Human Auxiliary's headquarters and largest facility in Ferdr's Isles. Most sisters who arrived at the Isles, or were about to rotate back south, stayed here.

The public entrance was a facade of stone and marble in the style of an Imperial temple. Five white columns supported a massive pediment, upon which the arrival of the Auxiliary in Ferdrheim was colorfully depicted. The statue on the ridge depicted an Auxiliary priest. The composition radiated power, culture, and friendship.

Inside the colonnade, next to the entrance, hung a lacquered wooden plaque explaining the building's purpose, in both Goblin and Human.

The space beyond the doorway was much less pretentious. Square pilasters held up the wood-shingle roof, and the building was open on two sides, letting in light and air. Yeren knew that the monastery was quite well built in that regard, working with cheap building materials and practical architecture yet none-

theless creating a very nice ambiance using natural light, vegetation, and even water.

He was surprised by the absence of people. In previous visits, the entrance plaza had bustled with Auxiliaries and visitors, but today there were only a few visitors and fewer attendants.

He was most surprised by the presence of an Imperial hobgoblin, armed and dressed in black. He seemed to be guarding the entrance. Just a few years back, this would have been almost unthinkable. The Auxiliary stood under religious oversight and handled its own security; the state did not meddle in its day-to-day operation.

A sister walked towards him before he got to sit down on one of the benches.

He liked to make the first move. 'May Trensandor bless you, Sister. I am Yeren, a pilgrim in search of respite.'

She beamed at him. 'He has blessed you, Yeren. I am Sister Cantia, of the Hospice Sisterhood. Please, follow me to the Camerarium, and we'll get you registered.'

Cantia had black hair, blue eyes, and a few dark freckles sprinkled on her cheeks. Given her slight build, Yeren assumed she was one of those Auxiliaries who focused on duties inside the monastery rather than military roles. Judging by her soapy scent, she also did the washing.

She enrolled him into the hospice. He'd presented himself in simple journeyman's linens, without any of the weapons and equipment he usually carried, to make things easier. His brass earring caught some eyes, but no one approached him about it.

Some other woman, who wasn't part of the Hospice Sisterhood, showed him to his cot in the hospice barracks.

While planning his visit, Yeren had wondered at what time he should present himself. He had chosen the evening, right after supper, so he'd be able to have a quick look around and refresh his memory of the grounds before resting.

A large parchment hung by the hospice barracks entrance, illuminated by the flickering flames of some candles. It informed the pilgrims of the day's programme. Every day had the same schedule. The Auxiliary did not have a primary focus on public service, after all; pilgrims were not expected to stay for any lengthy period of time.

At second gong, while the sky was still barely graying, the odd dozen pilgrims

were served a breakfast of hardbread and honey in a small refectory, separate from the main building where the sisters ate.

Food was carried in by a porty woman called Sister Didia and served by the beaming Cantia. Yeren smiled when she plopped a spoonful of honey on his bread, trying to catch her eye, but she was already looking cheerfully at the next pilgrim in line.

Next followed a session of morning prayers, which the pilgrims received in a temple hall together with three sisterhoods. A priestess spoke beautifully of Brekka's grace, using a story about the mother-god's adoption of an orphaned hobgoblin boy.

The Head Sister of the Hospice then led the pilgrims to a chapel-library with a colonnade in stead of walls, set in the midst of the monastery gardens. She spoke of the importance of edification just as the sunlight pierced through the gloom.

Her name was Lutya. She had wavy blonde hair and very light blue eyes, though her rounded features and her perfect mastery of the Goblin language belied her southern origin. She also spoke very monotonously, looking right over the heads of her audience; despite Yeren's best efforts, he did not catch her eye once.

For the entire monastery, part of the morning was dedicated to the divine lecture, a time to privately read scriptures and histories, as well as pray. Most sisters did this out of Yeren's sight, likely in their own cells or in one of the numerous chapels from which he was barred access. He rested on a stone bench in the gardens, holding a treatise on the traditional role of an Auxiliary. Head Sister Lutya sat stiffly on a wooden bench inside the chapel-library, reading scripture, and did not glance up once from her pages.

The divine lecture for the sisters ended after two hours, whereupon they minded personal duties. Quite a few appeared in the gardens, meditating or chatting with one another. For pilgrims, lecture continued into the early afternoon.

Yeren actually recognized a few sisters by sight. There was Sister Terlena, an officer he'd once worked with near Contje, who leaned against a pine tree and read some treatise. There was also Sister Trensenda, sipping wine and sitting with other hobgoblins at a marble table under a pergola. Trensenda was a prominent noble who had recently arrived from the south. And there was Sister Cantia, carrying a basket of washing together with a silver-haired woman. They crossed the gardens and disappeared.

Midafternoon lunch was brought in by Lutya, but this time the pilgrims had to serve themselves. None of the pilgrims spoke, and Yeren didn't break the silence.

The gentle drone of the sisters' chants, followed by the voice of a sister reciting a story, carried in from the other refectory.

For the rest of the afternoon, Lutya explained that the pilgrims would engage in communal prayer, with the guidance of a sister. There would be two groups: Sister Cantia, fidgeting with her hands, explained she'd be hosting a regular communion, while Sister Flavina announced she would help pilgrims who'd been touched by spirits feel out what it meant. Flavina, the silver-haired woman Yeren had spotted with Cantia before, was very young for an Auxiliary - probably no older than twenty - and seemed quite shy, holding her hands tightly clasped.

Only two pilgrims said they'd been touched by spirits: a stuttering old human and a goblin woman. Yeren and the others went to a circular wooden bench under some sweet-smelling trees whose leaves had turned scarlet red.

Cantia began the communion with a story about three spirits having to find one another's friendship. Then the pilgrims tried to find meaning behind various stories and events, by speaking their thoughts and their questions to one another. Occasionally, Cantia would recount a fitting story from the canon mythos. Whenever she spoke, Yeren leaned forward eagerly, and tried to look fascinated as he picked every word from her lips.

She glanced at him a few times, but whenever she acknowledged his attention, it was with a sheepish smile.

He'd always rather preferred private reading and meditation, so he found it difficult to empathize and draw much use from the discussion. Reflecting about the past also reminded him of his life, back in the south, before he'd chosen his lonely path and come to Ferdr's Isles.

A weeping woman spoke of spurned love, and Yeren remembered his own experiences. He'd had a few encounters with the teenagers of other family tribes, back home. Even then, though, he'd always enjoyed playing games with fellow boys much more than talking to girls. He once had a close friendship with an infertile girl, but she left the village before anything could develop.

Since then, he had never felt anything for hobgoblin women. He'd tried to love someone, when his family insisted on a marriage to the neighbours' girl, but he couldn't get himself to care. That was one of the reasons why he'd chosen the mercenary exile. He'd left his people behind, the sharp accusation of being an "unfeeling bastard" sharp in his mind.

He almost told his pitiful tale to the communion, but luckily he caught himself and said something else instead. A story from his early years as a mercenary, when he'd saved a dwarven village from an orcish raid. Instead of gratitude and

love, the villagers had shown resentment and anger. The others nodded, one pilgrim remarked on how gratitude can be difficult to find, and the discussion moved on.

For supper, Lutya and Didia brought in a bowl of soup. Yeren sipped the watery vegetable stew while Didia recited the rules of proper pious behavior.

When she was finally done, he cornered her before she could leave and conspiratorially leaned forwards. It wasn't promising, but one can always try. Maybe the stocky woman had some need for emotional closeness, somewhere deep inside her.

'I have been wondering, about a spiritual… personal matter.' He tried to make a mischievous grin. 'I was hoping you might give me succor.' He'd assumed he couldn't be blunt enough.

She stared him dead in the eye. 'If you wish personal spiritual advice, you can seek it at the next communal prayer.' Then she pushed past him and out of the hospice refectory.

The eventful day was rounded off with a vigil in the gloomy Chapel of Erekhul. Head Sister Lutya told a profoundly instructive story concerning a smart sheep and a simpleton shepherd, which ended with the sheep eaten by said shepherd.

It was fully dark by the time Yeren climbed onto his hard straw mattress. He applied a bit of ointment to the old wound on his forearm. It had scarred over nicely, and it barely hurt anymore, even when he flexed his wrist.

Then he laid on his back, crossing his arms over his chest. A bit of fresh air blew in through the doorless passageway.

He reflected about the day. What he'd learned about himself, and what he'd learned about the others.

He admired the hospice sisters. They were very dedicated to their jobs, each in their own way. Some, like Didia and Lutya, did precisely what was required of them. They didn't pretend that they cared about the pilgrims, they just fulfilled their obligations in the same way they would for a tuber garden.

Others, like Cantia, additionally showed friendliness and empathy for the pilgrims. She probably believed this could help them in their spiritual self-discovery, or she was just someone who smiled a lot. That didn't mean she actually cared on a personal level, either.

Yeren's favorite part of his guild job was the certainty it gave him. When he had a mission, he knew precisely what he had to do, and what he had to ignore. Like back on Mjnfar, when his mission had been to protect Hellfar and his assistant

from physical harm. He could stay out of the negotiations and the personal worries then. He didn't have to care.

Conversely, the part he liked least was when he had to make important decisions. He had always been indecisive. Whenever he had to consider options, he overwhelmed himself with positive and negative factors. Even after he chose a path, he was often wracked by doubts about whether it had been the right decision.

The topic of morality had come up again and again throughout the day. The sisters loved to talk of the spirits' moral code, and tell stories with morally superior and spirit-favored protagonists. In Yeren's experience, though, the real world was far too complex to fit into some moral framework. Everything depended on how you looked at it. The notion of "doing the right thing" was absurd.

So Yeren's code, his entire truth and purpose, were his missions. Their text was scripture. Fulfilling his orders was right, failing them was wrong. It was the only way he could prevent doing something he'd regret.

He knew now what he'd do tomorrow. His mind was made up, and for once, he was confident it was a good decision.

At first gong, he was fully dressed by the barracks doorway. The sky was still dark, and no stars pierced the clouds.

He kept near the walls and the shadows of statues, bushes, and colonnades. He was too used to humans' total blindness in the dark, so he had to be doubly careful.

Auxiliaries were walking through the gardens, alone or in small groups. Yeren spotted two persons of interest, Cantia and Flavina, strolling along a wood-chip path to the Chapel of Erekhul.

Soon after, the soft prayers of lauds carried across the still gardens. Yeren used the opportunity to move over to the pergola with the marble table, and sit down in one of the wooden chairs. From here, he had a nice view of the low wooden building of the hospice refectory, and the large temple-like hall that served as the regular refectory.

A few sisters showed up there about halfway through lauds. Through the broad doorway, Yeren saw one woman giving directions: Sister Terlena, the officer from Contje. Apparently, she was part of the refectory sisterhood.

By the time second gong finally sounded, Yeren was ready to eat. He was the first to arrive in the hospice refectory.

This time, the bread and honey was served by Sister Flavina. She had hastily

bound her silver hair in a pony-tail, and one strand was loose and hanging over her face.

Yeren was last to be served, and instead of returning to his own bench, he leaned on the serving table. Flavina glanced at him sideways while preparing her own breakfast.

'You look quite tired this morning, Sister Flavina', he commented.

He heard her swallow. She answered in a soft voice. 'I was up late, Yeren.' He was slightly surprised she knew his name, since he hadn't talked with her yet. 'We were training swordwork mantras.'

'Amazing!' Yeren gave a friendly laugh. 'I find working the blade to be one of my favorite activities. The rhythm of the dance has a mesmerizing quality.'

She gave a small but sincere-looking smile. 'I hope to forward deploy with a garrison chapter soon. With the Ferdr people of Skijsel, or Contje.'

'The humans out in the wilderness are quite endearing.' He smiled emphatically. 'Will you be guiding our divine lecture this morning?'

She gave a small shake of the head. She might almost have winced. 'I will be listening to the spirits in the rhythm of sword-mantras. Sister Terlena is teaching us an excellent dance. And I'll be doing the washing after that.' Almost apologetically, she added, 'Head Sister Lutya will host the lecture again.'

Sister Lutya, as Yeren had almost expected, gave the exact same sermon on edification she had spoken yesterday. When she finished, she told the pilgrims they were allowed to read in the gardens and the barracks, then she sharply pulled her chair forward and sat down to read her scripture.

Yeren tried to strike up a conversation with her, but he got little more than a brief recounting of her monastic schedule and curt reading recommendations out of it. He shrugged, grabbed the sequel treatise to the one he'd read yesterday, and went to sit down next to the flagstone path that served as the monastery's main artery.

At the fifth gong, the sisters' divine lecture ended, as was obvious by the sudden traffic in the gardens and on the flagstone path. It seemed that the hobgoblin notables' meeting under the pergola around a flask of Crirkyr wine was a regular occasion. Their constant giggles and meaningless talk might have bothered him, if he had been reading.

Sister Terlena appeared on the flagstone path. Her hair was loose and heavy with sweat. She wore a shortened grey dress, held a sheathed arming sword in her left hand, and had a fluffy towel around her shoulders.

'Master Yeren!' Of course she recognized him. He had bunched his straight

black hair into the tight bun he'd used to wear, and even put on the grim expression he'd often had back in Contje.

'Sister Terlena! What a nice surprise, to meet you here!'

They embraced. She'd always been a jaunty one, and he gladly wrapped one arm tightly against her sticky shoulders.

'I'm resting here. I hope they'll deploy me again soon, I'm starting to feel penned in. And you, you've actually put down your blade for a moment?'

'My guildsmaster insisted I take some rest. But I find that I am most receptive to the spirits in me when doing work.'

'That's how I know you!' She clapped his shoulder. 'I say, perhaps our paths will cross again, out there. Can't say I wouldn't like that.'

'Perhaps. But please, don't let me keep you, Terlena.'

She wandered off down the path and he looked after her. He stood upright, broadening his shoulders, but lowering his head as if in thought. Gravel-stones crunched under his boots as he headed back into the garden.

'Master!' A hobgoblin voice called out to him. The difference was easy to tell: it was sharp and clear, not mumbled like even native humans spoke.

The voice belonged to Sister Trensenda, wrapped in a grey toga, leaning on the side of her chair. Yeren turned to face her, but a low balustrade separated them, and the pergola was slightly raised, so she looked down at him even from her seat.

'Ygumenkka Trensenda. Your reputation precedes you.'

He bowed deep, a sign of profound respect for someone high in the social hierarchy.

Trensenda was an ygumenkka, a senior Auxiliary officer. She was of noble birth and very proud of herself. Self-importance was a common failing of the Imperial elite, especially with regard to humans, whom they considered far below them. Trensenda, whose hubris had gone so far as to adopt the Emperor's own name, had come to Ferdr's Isles to prove her authority to herself, take a military command for a few years, then return home for bigger and better things.

'You know who I am, but I don't know who you are.' She looked supremely confident, sprawled in her chair.

Yeren, looking up at her grinning face, gave his best play humble. 'I am Yeren, a swordsman by trade. But of course, today my function is merely that of a pilgrim. At your service, ygumenkka.'

'I have heard of your guild. You have quite a reputation of your own!' She pretended being impressed so badly, it sounded rather mocking. But then, she had

already established her dominance in this altercation, and was merely enjoying it now.

'I always follow my orders, to the best of my ability.' Simple, bland words, with an air of mystery.

Flavina and Cantia had appeared on the path, dragging the heavy basket of laundry. 'Now tell me', Trensenda was saying. Yeren followed Flavina with his eyes, her supple shoulders casually hauling the heavy load. 'What would you do, if you received orders from someone outside your guild?'

There was a hint of annoyance in her voice, now. She followed Yeren's gaze to the human's silver hair. He waited a moment longer, until Flavina had disappeared behind a wooden wall.

'If the authority is respectable, I would obey them. So long as they do not conflict with my guild's instructions.'

Trensenda had a sullen look, sipping from her wine.

'If you would excuse me, my lady. Ladies. I have reading to get through, lest I disappoint the hospice sisters.'

Yeren strolled off and sat down beneath a pair of statues, casually leafing through his treatise. The statues depicted two hobgoblins: a priestess and a bare-chested male warrior. Trensenda, sitting within view under the pergola, glanced at him more than once. She didn't seem to be listening to her colleagues' babbling.

After lunch, Lutya once again explained that there would be a communal prayer. The fact that there were no new faces did not stop her explaining it the same word for word.

When they asked who had been contacted by spirits, Yeren stood up. 'I have felt a tingling in my sword-hand, and a red ghost danced in my chest and told me to follow my heart. Sister Flavina, I hope you can coax the ghost to come into the light, and help me discover what it's about.'

She gave him a friendly smile. 'I am sure we can find its meaning together.'

The four of them - Yeren, Flavina, the old human, and the goblin woman - sat on a circular bench in a small, isolated room. The old man began by leaning forward and placing his wrinkled hand on Flavina's right leg. 'Flurina, my feelings', he stuttered. She gently shifted to the left, towards Yeren, to get out of reach.

She gave a faint sigh of relief when he spoke, distracting the man.

'The red ghost burns inside my chest. It entered me yesterday at midday, and has been growing since then. I think it is reaching out to someone, because my

right hand tingles.' The whole story was made up, of course, but it drew from Yeren's past experiences. And it felt sincere enough.

'Let me feel it', Flavina said, and she clasped his coarse hand in both of hers. 'Speak what you felt and what you saw, when this ghost first entered you.'

They leaned close to one another, talking softly. Their knees touched. The two of them spoke as if they were alone.

The goblin woman didn't mind. She had her eyes closed and was muttering indistinctly to herself. The old man had tried to catch Flavina's attention again, at first, but then he just stared at her. She didn't care, keeping her eyes fixed on Yeren's.

It seemed as if they were together on some other plane of existence. Yeren spoke of a ghost, but he was actually telling her about his feelings. She gave vague clerical answers, but she was actually reaching out to him. They were wrapped together, in the Ether.

The ninth gong ended the communion and called everyone for supper. The human and the goblin stood first, and Yeren slowly pulled away. The dream was over.

Flavina looked almost sullen, staring straight at the patterns on the wooden wall while he moved away.

Yeren stopped at the doorway, politely letting her pass first.

Her cheeks were bright red, now, and she didn't meet his gaze. He barely heard her mumble 'thank you'.

'Sister Flavina.'

She turned around, her eyes wide open. Her lips were shut tight.

Now what should he say? 'Thank you very much for the communion session. I feel my soul has been opened.' She turned even redder at that. 'Perhaps… you might host our vigil, this evening? I would greatly appreciate your guiding words.'

She nodded, eagerly. Then she said, 'I will see if that is possible.'

She turned around sharply, her pony-tail whipping the air. She walked briskly down the corridor, floorboards creaking beneath her feet.

Yeren was grinning while he sipped his soup. He barely even heard Didia's voice, recounting the same rules of behavior Cantia had spoken yesterday. He was thinking ahead, and he liked what he thought.

Sister Didia, demonstrating excellent timing, finished her speech just before the tenth gong. Lutya and Flavina had entered and stood next to her. Flavina

kept close to the wall, holding her hands clasped in front of her. But she had woven her hair into two braids and had her head confidently raised.

Lutya addressed the pilgrims. 'Sister Flavina has graciously offered to forgo a preaching by our monastery's ygumenkka and instead share with you the *Second Eulogy of Spiritual Mother Eva* for the vigil.'

Yeren did not want to stand out, so he kept his face carefully expressionless, and he followed at the back of the group. He sat on the chapel's rearmost bench, though he had a clear view of Flavina over the goblin woman's head.

She stood still, hands clasped and eyes closed, while recounting the story. But her crystalline voice was loaded with emotion, painting colorful pictures.

Eva was considered the Human Auxiliary's founding figure. Her Second Eulogy talked about bravery: Eva was a human warrior, but her greatest achievement was daring to overcome her primitive society's prejudices, and find love in her heart for the goblinoid people. A tale of emotional discovery and bridging the racial gap.

Flavina bowed to the audience after she finished her beautiful tale. Then she glided out the chapel through the back door.

Yeren pretended to be deep in thought. He waited for the other pilgrims to file out of the chapel. He looked at the spot where Flavina had stood, and at the black-painted runes of Erekhul painted on the wall. Erekhul's domains were discretion and stealth. The eleventh and final gong ringed faintly, far away.

He stood and walked past the closed eye of Erekhul, out the back door. There was a small garden there, little more than a courtyard ringed by broad-leaved bushes. Sister Flavina stood there, next to a bright marble statue of a nude nymph. Yeren wasn't sure which of the two was the more beautiful.

'Flavina, you are an apparition. More beautiful than a nymph.'

The woman blushed, turning her head away. He could see the warmth flowing into her cheeks.

He stepped forward, close to her, and pushed up her chin so their eyes met. She had grey eyes, matching her silver hair. 'The red ghost in my chest tells me this is what it has been waiting for.'

The ice was broken, and she giggled. She pulled her face out of his hand and moved away, pulling him after her by the arm. She sat down cross-legged in a patch of flowery moss behind the statue, and he knelt to face her.

How long they stayed there, touching one another with their gaze and their words, neither knew. They talked of many things, things which might seem unimportant to someone else, but things which were very important to them. She

spoke of her impressions when she first arrived at this monastery, and her excitement for active service out on the frontier. He spoke of his experiences as a mercenary, and the self-doubt that often plagued him. She admired that he could rely on loyalty to guide him, and regretted that the spirits' wishes were often unintelligible.

She felt he was afraid of something. He admitted he was terrified of failure, terrified of what might happen if he ignored his guild's orders. She asked why, and he told her of the disastrous consequences the one time he didn't follow the letter of his instructions. When he acted on his own initiative, and botched it so terribly. She did nothing but listen, and that was all he needed.

He saw that there was resentment in her, stewing deep beneath the surface. Her life had been a string of constant disappointments, of callous treatment. The officers hardly cared about the human sisters; women like Ygumenkka Trensenda treated her with nothing but contempt. Her instructors had been very harsh on her, while she was a scared teenage seminarian back home. Her mother had enrolled her into the Auxiliary without even telling her, when she was ten years old. She hadn't even chosen the name Flavina herself.

Voices carrying over from a nearby hallway brought them back to the real world. Most sisters had finished their divine lecture by now, she would be expected to retire to her cell soon.

Her eyes had a wet sheen as she whispered, 'Thank you, Yeren. It was very good talking to you.' She held out a hand, brushing against Yeren's. 'I have suffered so many disappointments, I'd almost given up. I wanted to lock myself in my cell, sometimes. But now I look forward to the next day. Thinking of the future fills me with warmth.'

Yeren nodded. There was nothing to stay.

Then she stood and slid away between the bushes.

Strangers in the Woods

The Hills, Mjnfar

This evening, while the night was still young, the owls told Sigord that strangers were wandering the woods. The owls didn't actually talk to her; that's only how foolish men think the spirits work. They just hooted different, and that was enough. She could feel something unusual had come and bothered them.

She used the full moon's light to show her the way. The Moon was a good spirit, she loved it and it loved her. It was always there for her. It comforted her when she was sad.

Giant ferns brushed against her outstretched fingers. It was their way of saying hello. They couldn't say much more than that, because they were just plants.

A gentle rustling told her she had found what she'd been seeking. Nature had a will of her own, so it sometimes took many days until she told her what she wanted, and sometimes she never revealed her secrets. Tonight, though, Nature had chosen to reveal her secrets after just a few hours.

Sigord didn't move. She breathed carefully, such that her breath was one with the wind. The spirits took fright easily.

A frail little doe poked its wet muzzle out from behind a tree trunk. Then its head appeared, looking around carefully. There was no buck in sight.

Sigord was happy to wait and let Nature take its course. The doe carefully walked between the trees, sniffing at some ferns. Then it disappeared behind an incline.

Deer did not enter the dry-pine woods. There was little food here, and too much open ground. Yet here was a lonesome doe, walking west.

This confirmed the small signs Nature had shown Sigord. There were strangers in the Hills. They were to the east, no more than one or two hours' walk away.

She could guess what kind of dangerous creature it was. She needed to return to the village.

Sigord often went lost when she roamed the woods. But the spirits were gracious, so she never had trouble finding her way again.

Tonight, it was the Sky spirit who guided her. She saw many of his stars, twin-

kling above the sparse boughs. They told where where she must walk. They, and the shape of Earth, unerringly led her home.

The little village bubbled with activity. Women sat in front of round houses of earth and wood, grinding seeds and carving meat. Cooking fires bathed the settlement and the surrounding trees in a bright orange light. Many people were missing, because they were out in the woods. Tending to them.

Her little brother Ragnor was in the village. He sat at the edge of the woods, together with four others.

She appeared through the tall ferns. 'The Moon shines on you, brother.'

Ragnor was not really her brother. He was adopted. Sigord's father the chief had found him in the woods, as a young boy. Ragnor was very good at everything.

'Sister! You were speakin' wi' the trees?'

Sigord nodded. 'I heard the owls speak different. Then a little doe told me there are strangers in the Hills.'

Ragnor frowned. 'Humans poaching our game?'

'Must be. I know where they are.'

The men, fierce warriors with broad shoulders, growled angrily. 'We got to make them go', Ragnor grunted. 'We must talk to Red Beregor.'

'No.' Sigord hated talking to her chief father and the other elders. They were hard folk. Always scared her with tough questions.

She would handle this problem herself. Scare the poachers away on her own. 'It ain't that important. Don't need to bother dad.'

'Anything you say is 'portant enough!', Ragnor protested. 'You're the daughter of the chief!' The others nodded.

'I know! Don't need you to remind me!' Ragnor often made sense. Told Sigord what she was supposed to do. But she didn't like it. Didn't want to be daughter of the chief. And Ragnor was annoying, reminding her all the time.

He shrugged. 'All right, all right. We'll do it your way. I fancy a hunt!'

They were a merry band of young warriors. Ragnor in front, and the others with him. Talking merrily with empty words.

Sigord walked behind. They sometimes turned to ask where to go. But else, they did not talk to her.

Ragnor had it easy. Whatever he said, the others listened eagerly. They laughed together and cheered when he farted. Sometimes, Sigord dreamed she was in Ragnor's body. That people would love her and pay attention to her.

She was the chief's daughter. The real daughter. Why didn't people like her more than they liked him?

‘I hear the daughter of Agrig-o-Goswog ‘ll visit soon’, one of Sigord’s cousins was saying. ‘Anyone know ‘er?’

Agrig-o-Goswog was the First Axe of the Wild Boys. The fiercest warrior in a tribe of fierce warriors.

‘Nay’, Ragnor answered, ‘but ‘em Wild Boys are crazy.’

‘When they fight, they yell to make your blood curl. Like a host of drunk wolves, they do’, someone piped in.

‘You know why their tribe’s called Wild Boys?’, Sigord’s cousin asked. He looked like he was telling a grand secret.

‘Why’s that?’, Ragnor asked.

‘Cause they can’t tell the difference ‘tween a boy and a girl, they’re all too crazy. They all fight the same, too.’

‘And they fuck each other the same!’, her second cousin added. ‘Don’t care about cock or cunt, they take it all! And Agrig-o-Goswog’s daughter is the worst o ‘em.’

A Wild Boys girl wanted to visit the Hills. A girl who fucked men and women the same. Sigord was a bit scared, but also a little curious.

‘Stop!’, Ragnor suddenly whispered. ‘Smell that?’

The orcs went silent. Sigord smelled it clearly: the acrid smell of old smoke, carried on the gentle breeze.

She had completely forgotten what they were even doing.

‘Sigord’, Ragnor asked her. ‘This is ‘em?’

She sniffed the air, gazed into the trees. Looked for a sign from the spirits. But now, with five pair eyes on her, she couldn’t see or hear a thing.

One lesson shamans learn early, is when you see nothing, you still pretend you do.

‘The Forest says it’s the strangers’, she whispered back. ‘They gotta be sleepin’. We should give ‘em a scare.’

Her brother Ragnor nodded and waved the others close to him. They agreed on a plan.

That’s one thing these five did well. They often hunted together, even boar. So sneaking through the woods and surrounding a blind humans’ camp was easy.

She soon couldn’t see them anymore. The trees here were dense, so the orcs’ shadows mingled with the trunks and the brushes.

It was very silent. The silence pounded at Sigord’s ears. To her, it meant great danger. But then their prey did not know the voice of Nature.

There was a sharp cry in a high, frail voice. A human. It was followed by a grunt, and the rustling sound of a body collapsing onto the ground.

Twigs snapped and feet crunched in the underbrush as the hunters moved out of hiding and into the clearing. She heard some sleep-drunk moans, and harsh voices in Orcish.

The clearing where the strangers had made their camp was brightly lit by the kind Moon. They were five men, sitting up, looking very scared. A sixth with a split skull was sprawled on the ground in front of them. Leering orcs stood over them with short-spears and battleaxes.

The dead man had had greying black hair. He'd wielded a bow, though that hadn't done much good when Ragnor pounced him with a hatchet.

'Who speaks proper?', her brother asked the humans. A few looked too shaken to even hear him.

A very bulky man, with hempen bracelets on his thick wrists, stuttered an answer. 'I- I do.' It was very ugly Orcish.

'You poached our land. This is the Hills.'

He shook his head in disbelief. 'You killed… You killed Svenn.'

'I did. He pointed 'is bow at me. And now I'll cut off every one of your-'

'You'll leave', Sigord interrupted. They did not have to get carried away.

Ragnor shut up, but some of the others looked unhappy. Muttered and shook their heads.

'You entered the Hills. This is our territory,' she explained to the humans.

A year ago, her people would never have dared kill a human, for fear of retaliation by the Auxiliary. But now they knew it would not come. The demons were busy with the large tribes to the north, and they did not have enough soldiers.

She tried to sound fierce and serious, but her voice didn't carry as much weight as Ragnor's had. 'Leave now. If you return, we kill you all.'

The humans wordlessly struggled to their feet. Their wide eyes were bright pinpricks of light. One of them had wet his trousers.

They shuffled off, looking worriedly at the orcs standing all around them. Sigord almost asked her brother to whack them in the back, because they looked so pathetic.

Even when their sounds faded away, the men stared angrily after them. The sacred territory of the Hills had not been fouled by poachers for more than ten moons.

Sigord shrugged. She had nothing to say, so she walked back towards the vil-

lage. They might speak ill of her behind her back, but she didn't care. She was daughter of the chief.

She hadn't gone far before she saw someone in the woods, right on her path. A woman, sitting astride a giant boar.

Sigord was surprised and a little scared. She hadn't heard the stranger, or the boar.

'Ye of the Hill Tribes?', the stranger called in a nasal voice. She had a long white bone stuck through her nose.

'I am Sigord, daughter of Red Beregor. What do you seek in my Hills?'

The stranger gave a gleeful whoop and swung down from the great boar. 'I be Huord-o-Goswog, a boy from d next hill over. Daughter o' the great Agrig!'

Bones clattered faintly as she strode forward. She was a strange woman, covered in bits of bone and metal dangling from leather strings. She was thin and had pale skin, with strange white patterns painted on. Her bare nipples bore silver bead piercings.

Sigord thought carefully what to say next. She wanted to properly greet this guest of her tribe. Find some good words, make a good impression.

'The Wild Woman!' Ragnor's voice echoed as he strode up through the trees.

Huord turned to face him, planting her hands on her hips. Her breasts jiggled.

'I be a Boy! Ye be a Blind One?'

Ragnor laughed, not put off in the least by her strange appearance. But then, he'd hunted with Wild Boys sometimes.

He wrapped her in a great hug.

The Wild Boy walked with them back to the village. She had lost her way until she luckily crossed Sigord's hunting party.

Huord daughter of Agrig was even larger-mouthed than Ragnor. She chattered of ridiculous and crazy things. The men walked close to her, laughing at her foolish words. Ragnor tried hardest of all to prove he was a brave and interesting warrior.

Sigord tried to enter the conversation. 'Your boar is strange, Huord-o-Goswog. It is very silent.'

Huord shrugged. 'It's much beloved o' the Earth.'

A few men chuckled. Ragnor bumped her with his elbow and announced, 'A strange boar for a strange girl, eh?'

'I be a Boy!'

Sigord went forgotten among the laughs. Sullen, she dropped behind, letting the happy group walk on ahead.

She had hoped to talk with Huord and discover the spirit inside that fascinating body. But Ragnor had overshadowed her and pushed her aside, without even noticing.

Hobgoblin Love

Ferdrheim, Ferdrskjand

Yeren woke with a start at the first gong. His clothes were clammy. Strange, he usually didn't sweat when sleeping.

There was a warmth in his chest. It felt good. He didn't move, tried to hold on to it longer, tried to recall his dream. Blurry images appeared and shifted, emotions tumbled through his mind.

The chaotic memories were held together by a gentle face, a delicate body. A nymph, swimming in the sea of his emotions. A human with silver braids shed tears, listened eagerly, smiled at unheard words.

Strange. He usually didn't remember his dreams.

And he usually wasn't that excited by the thought of someone. But he was almost jumping out of bed out of eagerness to see her. To sit with her again, behind a nymph's statue. To talk with Flavina.

Well, rashness had never got him anywhere, and he wasn't about to throw caution out of the window. He had a purpose here, after all.

He donned a fresh set of pilgrim's linens and pulled his dark hair into a half ponytail. The fur on his forearm was brushed the wrong way, but that wasn't important right now.

He entered the gardens just when the refectory sisterhood was gathering. Sister Terlena, busy carrying stacks of bowls to the serving table, noticed him when he showed up in the hall's doorway.

'Master Yeren! You're up early!'

Yeren gave his best to look sheepish. 'I don't sleep much, Sister Terlena. You remember, how I told you I hear the spirits best when working?'

Terlena was an efficient woman, and she had work of her own to get done. 'Yes, you did.'

'I was wondering', and he leaned forward eagerly, 'if I might help you for the breakfast? I feel that there is something, waiting just outside my consciousness, but I can't quite reach it.'

She probably would have accepted his help even without the excuse. 'Sure. Pre-

cisely do what the refectory sisters tell you. We need one-hundred-thirty bowls set on the tables.'

Time was surprisingly short: the six sisters and Yeren had barely set the tables and carried the food in by the time the second gong had sounded and sisters began streaming into the refectory.

'You can go sit now', Terlena told him.

'No, no, I'd like to help serve as well.'

The frontmost banquet table was filled with the monastery's top brass, all hobgoblins. A handful Imperials in black sat at one end.

Cantia and Didia handled the food for the pilgrim's refectory, which suited Yeren. He took hold of a pot of honey and guided the sister with the bread basket to skip the front table and start at the rear instead. This maneuver did not escape the notice of Sister Trensenda, who frowned right at him.

Flavina had no doubt intended to keep their connection a secret. But that did not suit Yeren's needs.

Most of the sisters at the back were quite young, and Flavina was among them. He followed behind the bread-sister with his pot of honey, beaming at the women as if this was his happiest day alive.

Flavina carefully avoided his eyes, and uncomfortably glanced away when he leaned close to spoon honey onto her bread. That didn't stop him from complementing her complexion this morning, then laughing loudly when a sister joked she had probably fallen into a pot of silver paint when she was young.

Once everyone was served, he no longer had a good reason to stay in the refectory, so he joined the other pilgrims and wolfed down some bread with honey.

At the morning's sermon, Ygumenkka Trensenda spoke about battlefield tactics. It was profoundly uninspiring, putting a much too heavy focus on smart maneuvers and aggressive action, and also treated an irrelevant topic: Yeren strongly doubted any of the women in this temple would ever fight in a pitched battle involving thousands-strong formations.

Sister Flavina refused to meet his gaze, and even looked scared. She undoubtedly feared her colleagues might notice something. That hadn't stopped him from standing as near to her as possible, and from keeping his eyes fixed on her supple shoulders for the entire sermon.

The fourth gong announced the beginning of divine lecture time, and Yeren felt the tension tingling in his nape. Sister Lutya's talk about the value of learning seemed to pass in a flash. He took hold of a collection of Ferdr sagas and strolled

around the gardens. He was surprised by how early fifth gong sounded. As the time neared, he had to keep himself from anxiously striding in a circle.

He had taken off his shirt and was doing pushups when Sister Trensenda and her colleagues showed up. He got onto his knees, the smooth brown fur on his stomach rising and falling sharply, and greeted them sheepishly. Trensenda raised her brows quizzically but her face remained unreadable.

He pulled his shirt back on and tried to look inconspicuous. He stuck close to the flagstone path, though he stayed as far away as possible from the pergola. He tried to look deep in thought, admiring a statue of two hobgoblins. But he wasn't doing too good of a job, because he could feel Sister Trensenda's cold stare on him.

Cantia's little laugh carried across the garden. Yeren glanced briefly to the flagstone path, where he saw her and Flavina carrying the laundry. He pretended at first to be innocently wandering around, then look amazed when he ran across the two sisters.

'Sister Flavina! Please, let me help!' She looked at the ground rather than meeting his eyes.

The air left Yeren's lungs when the laundry-basket's weight hit his arms. He was a strong man, but he'd forgotten how well Auxiliaries used sprinklings of magic to assist in mundane tasks.

He tried to grin broadly at Flavina, but she only briefly met his eyes, then blushed and looked away.

They reached the end of the flagstone path. 'Unfortunately, I cannot escort you further, for I must continue my pilgrim's divine lecture.' Cantia looked like she couldn't care less for his help, though she still had a false little smile.

Before they could move on, though, Yeren placed a gentle hand on Flavina's shoulder, then leaned close to whisper to her. She finally met his gaze, and he was suddenly afraid. It was easy to forget, when making plans, that in the end real people are affected.

Those eyes were wide, searching. There were strong feelings here, in her - and in him.

'Tonight, by the nymph?', he whispered.

She nodded, a mix of embarrassment and eagerness. Then she turned away and hauled off the laundry, so as not to be too conspicuous.

Yeren had an uncomfortable queasy feeling inside him, the same he had when making major decisions. He was actually excited for tonight. He couldn't keep from smiling when he imagined Flavina's gentle face gazing into his soul.

She actually understood him. He had never been as sincere with anyone else. He felt like he needed her. And she needed him, someone to show proper compassion and support her. He was looking forward to this evening.

When he turned around, he saw Trensenda staring at him through slitted eyes. She had an expression somewhere between a sneer and a grin.

That afternoon, Flavina hadn't moderated a communal praying group, but Yeren didn't care. It was easy to imagine a dark, sweet-smelling garden, Flavina sitting on the moss and beaming at him.

He almost walked right into a woman standing on his path in a rigid military pose. She wore a grey Auxiliary's dress, but with a broad black belt around her waist rather than the beaded Ferdr-style ones most sisters wore.

She was a head shorter than him, but that didn't stop her looking at him with utter contempt. 'Pilgrim Yeren. You have been invited for a meal with the honored Ygumenkka Trensenda.'

So the woman had made a move after all. Yeren knew he had little choice. He gave a noncommittal nod.

'Follow me.' And she turned on her heel, stomping away like a legionary on parade.

They walked right through large parts of the compound that were off-limits to visitors. Yeren saw many surprised faces; some sisters whispered to one another as they saw him pass. This was intentionally very public.

They finally reached a curtained doorway. His guide pulled the purple drapes to the side and waved him in.

There was a small garden with carefully clipped rose bushes, a marble pool, and a red chaise. Trensenda's chambers were on the other side, through another doorway.

It was quite overwhelming at first. Heavy drapes, most of them embroidered with mythological scenes, covered the walls. A good twenty candles painted in bright colors burned all around. There was a strong smell of sweet, flowery incense.

A canopy bed loomed in one corner. Closer to the entrance were two cushioned lounge seats and a round table laden with food.

Trensenda laid nonchalantly on one of the seats, in a pose worthy of a masterwork statue. Her straight black hair was gathered in loose netting. She was wrapped in heavy cloth, pinned on the left shoulder with a golden brooch. The dress was short enough to reveal the light fur on her thighs.

She pricked a raisin with her sharp teeth and only then pretended to notice Yeren's presence. She smoothly turned onto her back and welcomed him in.

'Master Yeren! It is *so* gracious of you to accept my invitation.'

He looked her right in the eye, and smiled. 'I could never have declined an invitation of yours, Lady Trensenda.'

Yeren sat down on the other couch. At first, they ate bites of olives and grapes in an upright position, but by the time of the main course, they were lying sideways on the soft pillows. He made sure he looked at her more than he did at the food. She happily returned his gaze while sipping her sweet wine. They talked mostly about their respective tradecrafts: he told exciting and manly stories, while she received great praise for important official work.

A chicken bone Yeren would have carefully chewed around crunched under Trensenda's teeth. 'So tell me, Master Warrior. What do you think of my girls?'

It was an intentionally ambiguous question, which Yeren answered carefully. 'I believe the Auxiliaries here are quite a capable force. With the right commander, there is little they couldn't do.'

She nodded, again fixing him with those pale yellow eyes of hers. 'Just so. And, do you believe… you might… catch a liking for one of them?'

He pretended to be unbothered by the question. 'I find I appreciate their dedication and their efficacy. The Auxiliary are excellent servants of the Empire.'

'That's right.' Another bone crunched. 'They are quite an amazing product, considering the primary materials. It takes our clerics a decade to mold a human child into an useful Auxiliary.'

Yeren just nodded, and glanced at Trensenda's exposed thighs.

She went on. 'I am disgusted, every day, to have to deal with so many lowly elf-borns.'

She stood up, pushing the table over in a great crash of crockery. She circled around Yeren's lounger, scratching his shoulder with her clawed hand. 'It makes me appreciate a healthy body when I see one.' Then she leaned against the door frame to the gardens, arching her back to best display her feminine figure.

Yeren stood over her, resting his arm on the wall behind her. 'How do you know I'm not sterile?', he asked huskily.

'Because you wouldn't be so damn hot!'

She threw herself at him, almost pushing him against the other wall. Their mouths met, kissed. It was a savage, noisy kiss. Their lips moved quickly, searching for one another. Spit flew. Her sharp teeth bit his lips, his tongue, more than

once. She pressed him against her, holding the flexing muscles on his back, scratching at him.

They moved across the garden in a wobbly dance. Thorns pricked at Yeren's calves, claws pricked his back, teeth bit his mouth. He held her strong hips, working one hand up, trying to find her breast. He found it, cupped it, felt her hard nipple through the cloth-

She pushed him away with sudden force. He felt a bit of his lip tear off as he flew back, crashing into the chaise behind him. Then she straddled him, pressing his chest down into the soft mattress with one strong arm.

'You know', she said, licking her bloodied lips, 'for a moment I'd feared you had something going on with one of those human girls.'

He swallowed, trying to ignore her knee pressing against his half-hard groin. 'Flavina, yes. I admire her bravery…'

She grunted, pressing down harder on his chest. Probably trying to push all the air out of his lungs so he couldn't keep talking. 'How could a pathetic young human like her possibly impress bravery? To impress a veteran like you?'

Yeren gasped for air. 'She… she spoke of eastern Mjnfar. The orcs, there, pushing south…'

She suddenly released him, moving to stare into the still waters of the pool. 'I plan to go to Contje. Build a new fort there, show the barbarian tribes what we're made of', she said through gritted teeth.

'The Mjnfar orcs are armed by Drubark, they have mail and war-wolves. Flavina said she wanted to go there to do some real fighting, face a proper enemy.' Yeren had to bite his tongue. Pushing too hard was very dangerous.

'Spirits damn it!', she was shouting angrily. 'I'll go there myself! Take a company with me, push north, force those fucking orcs to go right back into their muddy holes! Drubark doesn't scare me.' Then she looked at Yeren, still sprawled on the chaise. 'And fuck that Flavina. She wants to be brave? I'll make her waste her life attending fucking pilgrims.'

She paused in her apartment's doorway, looking over her shoulder. 'Get yourself away from here, I'm not in the mood. I have an expedition to plan.'

So Yeren found himself alone, feeling shagged, outside Trensenda's garden.

He sighed, sucking at his salty lip. He felt empty. As if he had lost part of himself.

Not at all like he'd just successfully completed his mission.

The eleventh gong echoed through the night air. He still had time to go to the

garden with the nymph and meet her. Enjoy her caring gaze, one last time. Or at least explain to her why he had to leave, and say goodbye.

His emotions were shouting at him to stay, that he was making a terrible mistake. But he'd learned the hard way that acting on his own initiative was never good. It was an unnecessary risk, and it would certainly bear unintended consequences.

The mission was accomplished. He could not endanger that. He had to leave now, no matter the hurt feelings.

To be safe, wouldn't return to his quarters, but spend the night in a portside tavern instead. Then, on the morrow, he'd look for an eastbound ship.

Perhaps Flavina would understand.

Audience with the City-Chief

Trebkernstad, Mjnfar

No one had welcomed Astrid when she arrived at Trebkernstad. But she supposed frontier towns were just rough around the edges. There hadn't been a dock, either; they'd simply sailed the longship right up to the shingle beach, and she had to wade through the water to disembark.

She hadn't felt very much like an important dignitary, but she'd done her best to look the part. Her first point of office was to visit the establishment called *The Swordsman's Parlour*, in the inner city. But the beer hadn't tasted quite right; she'd felt the stares of the wine-sipping locals on her, judging her. It was far from enjoyable.

Chewing some chag leaf, she'd taken a room in a nearby inn. Though wax-treated trousers and soggy boots might be closer to her true self, they would not do. So she had stripped off her stiff wet clothes, laid a while on the floor contemplating her many failures, and eventually forced herself to get up. She had a headache.

So now Astrid found herself on top of the hillock outside of town, breathing heavily from the ascent. She wasn't in shape anymore, but then she couldn't recall ever being fit.

She'd donned a full ritual dress, covered in intricate white and silver patterns made of filigree and beads. She had carefully braided her wavy hair, the way maidens were supposed to. Standing on the dirt track, in front of a gloomy ditch and palisade under an overcast sky, she felt extremely out of place.

A woman in dirty linens, squatting on the raised ground beneath the palisade, hawked and spat. She had a sneer on her grim face and a short sword at her hip.

'I am Astrid Vendriddottr, Daughter Superior of Venlags. I represent the alltache of the Farn-Clans.' It sounded presumptuous and wholly out of place.

The woman, clearly drunk, slurred back, 'And I'm Ole, bitch.'

Astrid seriously considered ripping off her dress and sitting down next to Ole to take a sip of vodka. Her head hurt. Meant she hadn't drunk enough. What was she even doing here?

‘Honored Astrid!’ A goateed man with a hefty plumed hat approached her with aggressively open arms.

She hesitated slapping him, but then she caught herself and instead gently accepted his formal embrace.

The man held her at arm’s length. ‘Well seen! Seen stunning, in fact. I am Castellan Ulff. Let me guide you to the city-chief.’

Astrid just nodded. Her composure was collapsing. Visions of alcohol were washing out her carefully-made plans. Doubts were piling onto one another. Someone was pounding at her head with a smith’s hammer.

The three-storey keep towered above them. Castellan Ulff walked right up a short flight of wooden stairs and through a tight doorway.

They crossed a wood-panelled room with several doors leading out of it. The double doors straight ahead were quite impressive: carved out of dark oak, they showed mighty Ferdr on the left panel and a stricken giant on the right.

The castellan pushed Ferdr aside and held the door open, inviting her in. She had to squeeze past.

The keep’s main hall was an overwhelming sight. A man in greatgarb stood at the other end, next to a high chair, speaking softly with a scribe. The city-chief, no doubt.

Four massive columns supported the rafters. They were of the Imperial order, paneled with white stone. A marble bust of the city-chief’s likeness in the Dwarven style stared haughtily down at Astrid from the right. To the left, a good part of the wall was covered by a painted Imperial-style fresco showing Trebkernstad from above. Bright red and green drapes covered the rest of the whitewashed walls.

It was a garish sight. This was supposed to resemble a great chief’s hall, but Astrid had seen rooms twice as majestic and half as decorated on Farnijsel. The city-chief’s hall was filled with pompous artifacts supposed to evoke an air of culture and power, but instead they screamed of bad taste.

Astrid was famous for being a pathetic human being, and she considered herself an expert on the matter. So she immediately saw that the city-chief was one of her ilk, except that he also falsely pretended to be a better man.

City-Chief Kaspjer finally deigned to turn away from his scribe. He was a fat, balding man, wearing an assortment of jewelry on his stubby fingers and heavy gold filigree on the front of his green greatgarb. The peak of his conceit was on his head: a dwarf-copper circlet, reminiscent of the goblinoid Emperor’s crown.

‘Ah, the clans’ envoy! Forgive me, I was working on a treatise about strong leadership.’ He had a powerful but grating voice.

Then he stomped across the room, arms outstretched, and clasped Astrid in an embrace. She had leant forward and intended a light touch, but he pressed her against him, almost wrapping her over his fat stomach.

No doubt he enjoyed this demonstration of strength. But if Astrid could still think clearly after five shots of tuber spirit, then she wouldn’t be thrown off kilter by a weak man’s antics.

‘I am Astrid Vendriddottr, representing the Farn-Clans.’ Her mother Vendrid had told her precisely what she should say, and she’d spent much of the trip carefully thinking through her words. She had practiced a sequence of precise arguments, leading to the solid conclusion that Kaspjer must heed her advice and defend the border.

But now, the arguments seemed frail as the wind.

Kaspjer was stomping back across the hall to his raised chair, and Astrid was forced to follow behind him. He sat himself into it, raised one leg over the armrest, and gazed down at her. There were only two others in the room, the scribe and the castellan, but she still felt as if a thousand judging eyes were fixed on her.

She cleared her throat. ‘I come from the clans, because… The all-tache, I mean… sees trouble brewing. You need to fix it.’

Kaspjer laughed as if she had told a grand joke. Then he enjoyed a bit of silence before he spoke, his horrible voice filling the room. ‘And what do you think I’m doing, young maid? Protecting Trebkernstad’s people is my job!’

He was enjoying the sound of his speech, gobbling up olives at the same time. ‘My brave town guard must police the city every day. Petty thieves and criminals are everywhere! Trebkernstad is a poor frontier town, you know, not wealthy like Venlags. Whatever little income I make, the clans demand as tithes. Without money, young maid, there is nothing I can do.’

Ge grinned at her, then farted wetly.

Astrid realized she was fidgeting with her belt and biting her lip at the same time. She tried to draw herself up and push the headache away. She had to prove herself to her mother, and to the elders of the all-tache. Prove that she wasn’t a good-for-nothing.

But she wasn’t doing so well.

‘Certainly, City-Chief, there exist ways to raise more forces. Trouble in the backwoods hurts trade…’

‘Trouble, trouble, trouble’, he muttered. ‘Trade is hurt, danger everywhere, peo-

ple afraid. I tell you, in these dark times, good men need good rewards.' He gazed to his left, at a small shelf on the wall, bearing a sleek green bottle. 'You heard, I am to be married? A good wife makes half the man. Sylvan is such a kind soul, she sent me this finest spirit as a gift. We will drink it at our wedding!'

He was trying to throw her off track. She considered giving up and crying, or starting to scream and throwing punches at him, but neither option was any good. She had to try harder.

'That is a fine-looking bottle of Ferdrskjand spirit.' Now back to the matter at hand. 'You had some free warriors helping you. Victyr Ulfson's party. Why did you throw away their help, though you need it so badly?'

Kaspjer puffed his cheeks. 'They are annoying sons of bitches.' That much, Astrid had learned too. 'And this Victyr did not heed my authority. Disobeyed me. He was more of a danger than a help.'

He dealt with her question as if it were nothing. Dimly, Astrid remembered that her plan had seen him at a loss for words.

She tried to regain her footing. 'But we agree you need more troops. To protect the borders.'

It was a weak point, and he knew it. 'Nope, I don't. Auxiliary does that.'

Right. But the Auxiliary didn't have the manpower to keep Tribe Treesnatch out. Or was it Drubark? She couldn't even remember who the enemy was.

Boots squelched as someone entered the city-chief's hall. A boy, with mud on his shoes and on his bare legs.

'There's a fleet coming!', he shouted in a merry voice.

'What, boy?', Kaspjer growled.

'Five ships, they counted! Pulling up sails near the shore. Red ones, and black hulls.'

The colors of Imperial ships of war.

'So the Auxiliaries are getting reinforced', Kaspjer muttered. 'Castellan, call everyone you find to the terrace.'

The chair squealed painfully on the flagstones as he stood up and hustled towards a side door. So Astrid was unceremoniously dismissed.

She mumbled an excuse, bowed her head to an empty chair, and went out the door.

Fuck. She'd completely messed up her audience with the city-chief. Now she was standing outside on that windswept hillock, feeling spent. Having achieved nothing.

She could probably try to spot which of the two dozen ships on Trebkernstad's

shore were the Auxiliary vessels from the summit. Then again, she didn't care. She didn't really fucking care about much right then.

Back in her small room at the inn, she ripped off her yellow dress and threw it to the ground. She bit a pillow and wanted to just stay on that bed until everyone forgot her. Why had she ever believed she could do this?

Her throat was too dry to ignore.

She struggled into practical linens, stuffed a few copper bits into her pockets, and opened the door.

Jesper, the blonde lieutenant of Victyr's party, was leaning against the wall facing her. He grinned at her. 'We pulled our longship up into the woods, an hour to the west.'

That's the trouble with taking up commitments, they tend to follow you whether you feel like it or not.

She wanted to just push past him without a word. 'That's fine', she grunted. 'They can stay there till I can find a way to not be fucking useless.'

'That sounds good', he replied. 'In the meantime, I'll get a drink at the Swordsman's Parlour. Care to join?'

Now that's an interesting proposal, she thought, taking a look at his handsome face. Go for a few drinks, then maybe a nice night. His chest, graciously exposed by his shirt, was just asking to be stroked.

She shook her head. 'Sorry, I'll have to catch you later.' She needed to clear her head, alone. Nice distractions like Jesper's cock wouldn't help her fix her problems.

'Right shame. Well, some other time.' He winked and sauntered off down the corridor.

Astrid really needed to have a think, and clear her head. Somewhere where she could feel comfortable.

So she went to sit at a rough-hewn table outside a seedy tavern on the shore. Here she could blend right in with the regulars, without people judging her or reminding her of her responsibilities. The beer keg was her one true friend.

While brooding, she could observe the Auxiliaries' landing. They wanted to spend the night on land, it seemed.

She was surprised by their arrival. After all, the Imperial commissioner himself had declared that there would be no reinforcements. Well, he had clearly been overruled.

There weren't as many ships as the boy had said, though. There were just three:

one white-sailed cog and two Auxiliary longships. These longships weren't very large, either, but small craft built for littoral waters and shore landings.

All in all, Astrid saw maybe a score Auxiliary sisters. They looked quite fearsome, in creaking leather blouses, with red and black war-paint on their faces and arms.

And that was that. Astrid the Eye-to-See, the envoy vested with all the power of the Farn-Clans, hadn't known about the arrival of a fresh military force which all of a sudden made her visit meaningless. And she had failed to impress even an inkling of respect into that slimy toad of a city-chief.

That was when she noticed a dark-haired kid sitting on a grassy mound nearby, eating a sausage. He was that runner boy from the castle.

'Boy!', she called. Perhaps she did need more friends than an unfeeling keg. 'Want a drink?'

He looked up and nodded eagerly, joining her at the table. She gave him her half-empty beer and ordered another.

'You're the woman from Kaspjer's hall', he said, sipping at his drink. The keg was as large as his head. 'What happened to your dress?'

She gave a wry smile. 'I got rid of it.'

'This looks better on you.' He burped. 'Folk call me Mikk.'

'They call me Astrid.' She liked him. More than she had liked any of the grown-up men with whom she'd shared a table in the past. He reminded her a bit of Gerlyn.

'What do you think of the city-chief, Mikk?'

He grinned. He had somehow gotten froth on his little chin. 'He's a fat fucker who only cares about his stomach and his flaccid prick.'

Astrid couldn't agree more. It made her really angry. 'The man must've lost his balls to a feral dog! He's useless, and this town stinks, too. It's all just rotten.'

'Welcome to Trebkernstad.' He burped again. 'Why did you come here anyway, my lady?'

'It's a dumb reason. To prove something. To my mother, to my people.' She took a large swallow. 'But now I can't get the city-chief to do anything, and I'm at a dead end. Can't get him to move, take control of his own backwoods.'

She could see the boy thinking. She thought it was cute. Which was funny, because she usually didn't like children. Or men. Both kinds were typically noisy and annoying. Not like Mikk.

'I know!' His face lit up. 'There's a guildswoman, she works with the trappers. And she talks with the Auxiliaries, too. Maybe she can help you?'

That was… a good idea. By working with this woman, she could actually get some leverage. Get a hold of the trappers, talk to the Auxiliary. Combined with the manpower of Victyr's party, she might actually be able to make a difference here.

She didn't really know yet what she was doing, but that was a familiar state of things. She felt that this was the right way to go, to actually get more done than draining beer kegs.

'Who is this guildswoman, Mikk?'

'It's Master Emelyn', he answered. 'She runs Hellfar's Furs now.'

'Great.' Hellfar's Furs belonged to the Farn-Clans, so this Emelyn should be her natural ally. 'Do you want to earn yourself a few coppers, Mikk?'

He nodded eagerly.

Astrid smiled herself. Finally, she was making headway. She'd make her mother proud, even if she wasn't able to see the future like she was supposed to.

'Then go to Master Emelyn and arrange a meeting for me. Whenever suits her, I don't have anything else to do. And then go find a big man called Jesper in the Swordsman's Parlour. Tell him that the boys should get ready for action.'

A Fiery Prophecy

The Hills, Mjnfar

Spirits raged and churned. Images did not stay still. Grey mountains turned into streams of seeds, and bushes turned into trees and caught into flame.

Then the sadness and the anger and the love and the confusion were swept away by a cool breeze. The breeze died down, but the air stayed cold. There was a field of rich green grass, wet with dew. Dense grey fog all around.

A bull bellowed fiercely. It charged straight ahead, digging chunks of wet earth out of the ground. It ran on and on, but there was nothing there. Only fog. Exhausted, it stumbled and fell. And snorted happily.

A hawk flew in circles, high up in the air. It could not see the ground, only a sea of fog. But it kept on circling. It knew nothing else. Perhaps, by just letting the wind carry it away, it would be able to rise above the clouds and into the sunlight.

A doe stood by the side of a lake. It pranced, gazing carefully at its reflection. It tried hard to look beautiful. But it did not realize there was no one watching, except its own reflection.

A mouse huddled in the grass. It was scared and did not dare poke its head out.

Then the grass caught fire, and the mouse was wreathed in flame. It squeaked shrilly. There was the smell of burning flesh. The stench of smoke, of burning, of acrid smoke…

Bright white light stabbed at Sigord's eyes. There was a dull throbbing in her temples. Her throat was dry. Her muscles ached.

She dimly remembered putting herbs of sight in her oil lamp, and drinking a mushroom infusion. So it had not been a regular dream, but a vision.

Why had she woken?

Still the stench of burning wood prickled her nostrils. People were shouting. This was not a dream.

Sigord sat up, slowly, wincing. Sitting hurt her stomach. She lifted a waterskin to her lips with a trembling hand, trying to wash away the ache in her head and in her muscles.

She stood, shakily, holding on to the doorway of her hut. The bright light outside hurt her eyes. It was difficult to see anything.

The village was bleached of its color. People were running, but they were barely perceptible grey shapes. Smoke was in the air, but Sigord did not know where it was coming from.

Ragnor. Her brother had good instincts. He would know what to do. Tell her what had happened.

She stumbled out, trying to shield her eyes with her hand. She walked by feel: Ragnor's hut was just next to her own.

The Sun was bright. The Sun was also searing hot. She felt its heat hit her hand, her face. The knuckles on her right hand.

She saw Ragnor's hut before her. The doorway was there. Sigord could hardly breathe, her lungs were filled with smoke. The Sun was so hot, she felt as if she was burning. Just one more step, into the hut. Ragnor was there…

Someone grabbed her shoulder. She tried to shake them off, fall forward into the shadow of the hut. It was so, so hot. Get away from the Sun.

Other hands caught her left arm, pulled her. She felt herself moving backwards, falling over. She crashed onto the ground.

It was cool, all of a sudden. Sigord could not see much. She had to close her eyes.

People were speaking, far away. She was probably still dreaming.

'She almost threw 'erself into the fire!'

'Probably din't see it. I'm 'alf blind too.'

'Check if she's burnt!'

Sigord pressed the wet cloth to her face. It felt great. She still felt like she was boiling up inside.

They had been attacked, sometime around High-Sun. Raiders set fire to Ragnor's hut. And captured Ragnor and Huord-o-Goswog.

So Huord had told them. She sat in the circle, in the chief's hut, with a heavy fur draped around her shaking shoulders.

Sigord should have been angry. At Ragnor, for stealing the Wild Boy from her. At Huord, for spurning her feelings and choosing another. But right now Sigord was happy about the cool cloth on her head. She clenched her left hand; the burn blisters hurt.

Huord finished telling her story. The raiders had taken her and Ragnor away

from the village, and beat them. Then they'd told Huord to go back to the village and tell everyone what had happened.

Two owls hooted outside. They were wondering what had happened. They were glad the fire had stopped burning.

Red Beregor put a strong arm around Huord's shoulders.

Sigord's cousin asked if the humans and their Auxiliary demons were behind the attack.

His father, Sigord's uncle, shut up his blubbering voice. 'You should not speak. You are scared and it makes you stupid.'

'I told ye, they been orc warriors. With mail, an' brown cloaks', Huord said in a trembling voice.

'Can't be humans', Chief Beregor agreed. 'This is a different thing.'

The best orcs of the Hills, all gathered in the chief's hut, listened to what he had to say. 'Brown cloaks, sounds to me like Auguonor's band. Mercenaries of Drubark. Last I heared, they came to Bomborg. To fight for Treesnatch.'

Collective muttering.

'Now they come here. To our village! They burn a hut, and take my half-son. They want us to be scared!'

Some protested, and presented different theories. That it had been wild raiders. But they knew what Red Beregor said made sense. Only those who served the great clans had mail. These raiders were no bandits, but a war-band.

Huord suddenly remembered something, and tried to speak. One great-aunt cursed her for interrupting, but Red Beregor stared at her the way he did before punching someone, and the rest kept silent.

Huord had to wipe away some more tears, and pull the fur tighter around herself. 'They said this been just a warning. That your tribe should stop hunting north o' Seventh Hill.' She jerked in fear, shaking her head. Until she remembered she was safe, and Beregor was holding her. 'Poaching. I meant poaching. When I said you was huntin', they punched me bad.'

Sigord saw her cousins growling like fierce dogs. They would have killed the raiders with their bare hands, if they could.

'Was there something else?', Beregor asked. He was very gentle.

She swallowed and nodded weakly. 'They said, if ye co… conoborate, or sumthin', you get Treesnatch's protection. From the 'umans, I guess.'

'And what about my son? What about Ragnor?'

She shook her head. 'They wanna keep him. And kill 'im if ye don't cono… coob… fuck. If ye don't listen to 'em.'

'*Raaaaaa!*' Sigord's uncle roared, and a few others were equally furious. 'Fuck them! This is war!'

All the People of the Hills muttered assent. Sigord was proud of them: they never lowered their heads. You can't attack the Hill Tribes and you can't take their land from them.

For some reason, she wasn't that sad that Ragnor was missing.

'Fuckin' Treesnatch, trying to snatch our trees', someone muttered. Some chuckled.

'War it is', Red Beregor agreed. 'Don't matter they have my son.' In war, you always take casualties.

'War it is!' He shouted this time. He stood in the middle of the circle, raising his fist. He'd let go of Huord's shoulders, but then she had stopped shivering, and had her head raised to watch him. There was water and fire in her eyes.

'I will go, with the Hills' eldest and wisest, to visit the Wild Boys. So Huord-o-Goswog may safely return home. And so they may join us in war!'

Folk cheered.

But Sigord had doubts. The Hils might raise three score warriors, and the Wild Boys again as many. But Treesnatch had many more, and they had mail and steel axes. She did not want to see the Hills burned, like they had burned Ragnor's hut.

Now she felt proper relief her brother was gone. If he was here, he would be shouting about fighting, and she would be looking at him in awe. And staying silent.

Instead, she was able to speak. Though she was terrified of even saying one word.

'I have an idea', she announced.

The others were probably surprised to hear her say something, because they all went silent and looked at her. Even though she had not spoken loudly and had almost hoped they would not notice. But now she was forced to go on.

'Treesnatch is much stronger than the Hills.' None argued. She was a Wise Woman, a leader, though she often forgot. 'We need strong allies. I can go to the humans and their demons. Ask them to fight with us.'

People murmured unhappily. The chief himself did not look convinced. 'We can't ally with humans. They'll betray us. And the Wild Boys won't agree.'

'I just say we make them fight with us', Sigord retorted. 'Don't say we have to give them our land. And maybe after, when the fightin' is done, we get some of our old hunting grounds in return… Or we take 'em back. The Moon approves of trickery, after all.'

Red Beregor grinned. So did Huord, though she had more of a wild leering.

'Then so it will be!', he boomed.

And so it was. Beregor and Huord went west, to the Wild Boys. Sigord, alone, went south, to the humans. And the others prepared the Hills for war.

Of course, she did not walk straight to the south. She would be lost, in the unfamiliar woods and fields.

The Moon showed her the way, at first. Though it was no longer full, it still lit her path east. Then at the fifth stream, she turned to follow it downhill. This took her outside of Hills territory, into the land the human trappers called their own.

Sigord did not only talk to spirits. Sometimes, when it was necessary, she also spoke with demons.

The little creek flowed into a still pond. Silver moonlight sparkled on its flat surface. An old moss-covered building stood nearby, among the trees.

She was a night early; the demons only expected her next morning.

She found her spot against the boulder, near the pond, where there was a nice hollow in the ground and a gentle moss pillow at head height. She nestled into it, resting her aching legs. She was still suffering some of the after-effects of her vision herbs, her burnt hand hurt a bit, and daylight was not far off. It had been a long night.

Would she ever see her brother again? She liked him, after all. Looked up to him. Even though she was the elder, and she was the chief's only real child. They both knew he was the better warrior and the better leader, but that had never bothered her. Well, she'd never noticed that it bothered her.

Now it was different. He was gone, and she was the chief's only child. She could be herself. A proper leader.

She was smiling when the Sun pierced the lightening sky. She was so exhausted, sleep came easily.

In Sigord's dream, a little marmot was fettered in chains. It tried to break free, but it was bound fast. But then its teeth turned to metal, and it chewed through the bindings, and it ran away, leaping from stone to stone. She watched it flee into the distance.

Her mind drifted, her vision blurring into white fog.

'Good morning, Wise Sigord.'

She woke with a start. The sky was still bright, above the boughs, though it had

a yellow tinge. So she had slept almost an entire day. The demon was a night early, though.

It was standing next to the pool. It had threatening patterns painted onto its skin, wore a strange leather shirt, and had fiery red hair. Its arms were bare, because it could not feel the cold. Still, demons rarely looked like this. They usually preferred to wear good cloaks and fewer war-paints. Something was different.

'Well seen, Sister Tryss.' The merry one. Sigord could tell because of the red hair.

The demon held a fighting spear in its right hand, and a longsword hung from its hip. But Sigord knew these weren't its only weapons.

'Your message reached us at a difficult time', the demon said. 'We have received reinforcements and a new commander, and are moving north. To hold the marches against Treesnatch. Sister Diulia is busy, that is why I have come.'

Sigord was proud she had learnt the language of the Children of Ferdr. Many orcs had laughed at her while she was learning it. *Skijspik*, it was called. It was beautiful, and now even the spirits sometimes spoke to her in its sounds.

The demon Tryss spoke a bit fast, though. And it used words she did not know well.

'There is trouble, wi' our Treesnatch neighbours', Sigord explained. 'They burned a hut and captured a tribesman. The Hills are preparin' for war.'

The demon looked worried. 'The Auxiliary is also preparing. But we hope to keep peace.'

'I need to talk wi' a human. To help my tribe.'

The demon cocked its head. 'I might know someone good.'

'Where can I find him?'

'Go to the northernmost building at the mouth of the Trebflow, and ask for Emelyn. Give her this.'

The demon wrote on a scrap of parchment with a charcoal stick. The letters were so tight next to one another that Sigord could hardly read them.

'Stay off the road as much as you can. The trappers are angry', the demon added.

Sigord nodded. 'Thank you, Sister Tryss.'

'Thank you, Wise Woman.'

The demon smiled and threw itself at her. Sigord gasped, trying to get hold of her dagger, but the demon was wrapped tight around her arms. Pressing… gently.

It was a queasy feeling. The demon was warm and it smelled good, of sweet pine-nuts.

Then the demon took a step back, and looked at her with its strange black eyes. ‘I needed to do that. Goodbye, Sigord. And, in case we don’t meet again: I always thought you are very brave.’

And with that, Tryss turned and walked away.

‘Goodbye’, Sigord whispered after her.

Swordpoint Meeting

Trebkernstad, Mjnfar

Emelyn had not wanted to leave her bed, that morning. Did not want to push aside the warm blankets, because with the cold would come all the worries. She worried about the meeting at midday. About the floundering market. She wondered what the implications of the Auxiliary's offensive were.

Somehow, the Auxiliary always managed to surprise her. First, out of nowhere, it had tripled its manpower instead of retreating. Though that hadn't been just good news, because she did not wield as much influence with Sister Trensenda, the new commander, as she had with Diulia. Then, also out of nowhere, an orc shaman showed up at the warehouse, bearing a letter of recommendation from Sister Tryss.

Emelyn had always thought of the Auxiliaries as a kind of supernatural force, roaming the wilds and using divination magic to find out what was going on. Turns out, they actually maintained local contacts. And one of these contacts was the shaman of a supposedly uncontacted tribe.

The orc woman, Sigord, had walked right up to the workers yesterday morning, saying she was looking for some 'Ermelinn'. She spoke in barely intelligible Skijspik, which she had apparently taught herself. She was also strangely shy.

She was looking for help against Treesnatch, a goal which aligned well enough with Emelyn's own. So Sigord had slept through the last day in a tool-shed, and come into town bright and early this morning. She was now in a private room at the classy Swordsman's Parlour, where Emelyn was headed. She needed some breakfast.

The orc woman was sitting at a large round table, beneath a sword suspended from the rafters as an odd kind of decoration. She had a round face which looked like it was frowning, due to how close together the eyes were. She wore a dull but practical dress, with a few small ornaments of animal teeth and bones. Her right hand was wrapped in a leaf bandage.

She also insisted on taking nothing other than water. While sipping her bowl of tea, Emelyn wondered who this Sigord really was. She asked about her family,

and received a confusing story about tribe chiefs and missing brothers. Other questions, the orc barely answered at all.

Maybe Emelyn's dreams about getting control of an orcish army were too ambitious.

She sighed. Well, it would be better to try, rather than miss out on a golden opportunity. In any case, her first goal was to secure peace between the trappers and the hill orcs. That much shouldn't be too difficult to achieve.

The shaman had finished her mug of water and was now rolling a thick bunch of leaves. When she lit one end and puffed, it created a heavy white smoke.

'When we talk real?', she asked in her thick accent.

Emelyn smiled. It seemed Sigord also couldn't wait. 'The others should join us in an hour. For lunch.'

It had been quite a coincidence, actually. Just three days ago, Emelyn was approached by Astrid Vendriddottr, the envoy from the Farn-Clans, with a request to talk about 'regional politics'. At first, she'd been wary, but then she saw the opportunity here. Vendriddottr was powerful, she needed to get things done, but she had been turned down by the city-chief. She needed local resources and guidance, and Emelyn needed power. Her profession was control of the backwoods, after all, and she needed strength to get it back.

The morning after Vendriddottr's offer, Emelyn had an utterly unproductive interview with the insufferably arrogant hobgoblin Trensenda, where she learned that the Auxiliary had a purely military mission and would not meddle in regional trade or politics. That was when she realized just how essential Vendriddottr was.

And then, the day after, Sigord had showed up, talking of war and alliance. Emelyn understood her position was weak - in truth, she had barely any influence left anymore, and no military strength at all - so she decided to invite the shaman to her meeting with Vendriddottr. All three of them had complementary goals and assets, and with some luck, Emelyn could draw a good profit from it.

By midday, the room had turned from nice and airy to quite seedy. Sigord's smoking had plunged everything in a dim haze, despite the open window. Emelyn's throat was scratchy and she had to keep herself from sneezing.

Creaking floorboards and a light knock outside announced Vendriddottr's arrival.

'Come in!', she called. She had carefully planned the first impression she wanted to give: that of a smartly dressed guildswoman, with an imposing orc at her side. The smoke-haze probably worsened that impression, though.

Astrid Vendriddottr walked in. She had a relaxed gait and an easy smile, which Emelyn envied. She wore straight button-trousers and a beautifully embroidered blue and silver blouse, which nicely complemented the woman's faintly blue eyes.

She gave a surprised glance at Sigord's looming presence, but didn't seem overly bothered. Emelyn herself was surprised, however, by the additional guests who showed up behind.

First was a well-built, blonde-haired man wearing sleeveless blue greatgarb in the western style. And second was someone Emelyn would never have expected: a hobgoblin in a full coat of mail. Master Yeren, the mercenary.

She was off-balance, but that didn't stop her from taking the lead.

'Well seen! I am Master Emelyn, of Hellfar's Furs.' None of the three seemed impressed: Vendriddottr gave the slightest nod, the western man grinned weirdly, and Yeren had the unreadable expression she knew well. She placed a hand on Sigord's shoulder, hoping to exude confidence. 'And this is Sigord, a shaman from the hills.'

Astrid put her elbows onto the back of a chair, leaning forward casually. 'This is Yeren.' She didn't even look at him. Her eyes were fixed on Emelyn's. 'That, Jesper. And I, Astrid.'

'Please, take a seat. We can enjoy some sardines, until the main dish is brought in.'

The woman Astrid plopped herself down in a mild show of disrespect. Emelyn gritted her teeth: Astrid was the more experienced and confident demagogue, but that wouldn't stop her pushing her own interests through.

Not only had Vendriddottr outdone her in the initial verbal sparring, she had also brought more guests. Emelyn wondered what they were after, and if their presence changed things at all. She still wasn't sure what Yeren's guild really was, but she knew it was powerful. She probably just had to hope his interests aligned with hers. As for Jesper, he could be a merchant, or even a financier. That was very dangerous, because his resources might hurt Emelyn's bargaining power.

Still, she could work with this. There were many unknowns at this table, but there was also a lot of opportunity. She would have to discover all the parts, think fast, and combine them into a good whole. She was certain all the parts she needed were here, only combining them might be difficult.

Fuck. Astrid was really hungover. Worse than usual.

She had just barely managed to catch a chair before falling over. She couldn't turn her head, because that would make her headache even worse. It was a wonder she had managed to remember her companions' names.

Why had she drunk so much last night? She'd promised herself she wouldn't fuck this up, right?

Oh. Because of that devil Jesper. Now she remembered.

They had gone to the tavern next to the Borg palisade. Jesper had convinced her with that sweet smile of his. And his sleek stomach.

It was a wonder he hadn't railed her, actually. In her room, or in the wood shed at the back of the tavern. Though he had been so direct. Getting her all those drinks. And putting his hand on her hip all the time.

Ah. Now she remembered why he didn't. Yeren had been there, yesterday night. Sitting stoically, with his arms crossed, much like he was now. He was probably just as interested in her cunt as Jesper, just too shy to say so. Apparently hobgoblins have quite massive cocks. Spirits, her headache…

The hobgoblin had just shown up while she was eating breakfast, yesterday. Saying his guild was interested in her, or whatever. It had sounded like a good idea to have him along. He was an extra card for Astrid to play, and also the only clear head in her party.

But there was something more about him. He reminded her of her father, somehow. The way he didn't say much, holding back, a silent threat. A hidden strength to support her. Someone stoic. Fuck, she forgot she barely knew this guy a day.

She took a deep breath. The air was filled with smoke, but she wasn't bothered by it. It was almost nice to breathe in, a little as if she were smoking herself.

The others were blabbing about unimportant stuff. Astrid wouldn't have been surprised if it was the weather.

Their host, Emelyn, could have been an attractive woman. Young, with straight blonde hair, and gorgeous green eyes. It was unfortunate that she had dark circles marring her cute face.

Finally, proper food was served. Mutton with tubers and oats. Tendons crunched as the orc woman tore off whole chunks of meat at once. Astrid sipped the cool water, feeling her hangover slowly recede.

Emelyn chose this moment to start talking serious. 'So', she announced, 'it seems were are a community of interests. Perhaps we can start by each explaining what they stand to gain?'

Astrid's head was clear enough. She slammed her earthenware cup onto the tabletop and began. 'I represent the Farn-Clans.' She hoped she wasn't slurring

her words too much. ‘I just want safety, for the people of Trebkernstad and the backwoods trappers.’ Then she added, for good measure, ‘Just what’s best for everyone.’

She hoped the others wouldn’t notice she didn’t really have a clue what she was after.

The hobgoblin Yeren nodded as if she had said something profoundly smart. ‘My guild has similar interests. It desires stability in the region.’

Emelyn prodded the orc to talk. The shaman spoke in a very gritty voice, swallowing half of her words. ‘Treesnatch is mean. I want help for fight.’

The guildswoman followed her up. ‘Hellfar’s Furs mostly does business with the trappers. We need stability in the backwoods, and peace with the hill orcs.’ She smiled at the shaman.

Then she raised a brow at Jesper. The man was almost surprised, as if he had forgotten he was also sitting at this table.

‘I guess… we’re just doing whatever Astrid wants. Victyr said so.’

Great. A superb display of loyalty. Astrid suspected she was the only one who’d been even halfway sincere, for that matter.

‘So we all want peace and order’, Emelyn was saying, ‘yet the city-chief will not budge from his castle. He has abandoned the backwoods. Sister Astrid, you know this as well.’ Astrid snorted in agreement. ‘Sigord, why don’t you tell us what it’s like out there? You saw some fighting, yourself.’

The orc reluctantly began telling some strange story about spirits of nature and the moon, and some trappers who’d encroached on her land.

Sigord wasn’t happy with herself. The strange people at the table scared her. The right words were too difficult to find in this language, and she wasn’t sure what she wanted to say, anyway. She only said something when Emelyn told her to. It was just like the tribal meetings, when she was too scared to speak up.

She had her moon-bleeds, too, but that was good. It was a similar feeling to the vision herbs’ after-effects. It helped her focus, and the chag-smoke opened her eyes to the souls of people.

She had done her best to explain what had happened in the hills. That the trappers had poached in tribal lands, and that she was afraid there would be more fighting soon.

The woman Astrid, who seemed like she had been dozing off, spoke up. ‘I guess we can’t rely on the city-chief to stop this kind of thing.’

Emelyn shook her head in false sadness. 'The city-chief does not care about the backwoods. We will have to act on our own.'

'What of the Auxiliary?', Yeren asked.

Emelyn had all the answers. 'I spoke with Ygumenkka Trensenda. She is now leaving for the trapper village of Velenstek. She intends to block Treesnatch with aggressive patrols. She will not intervene in backwoods matters, and does not want to deal with the hill orcs.'

That was good. Sigord did not want any demons near the Hills.

'We need to have peace between the trappers and the orcs in the hills. So the tribes can live in peace, and protect their northern marches from Treesnatch,' Emelyn continued. Why was the little human speaking for her? It made Sigord angry.

'Peace with humans is good', she grunted. 'But we also need help to fight. Keep Treesnatch away.'

'Treesnatch will be busy with the Auxiliary', the hobgoblin commented. He spoke weird, but slower than the others, so Sigord understood him better. 'Sister Trensenda wants to be aggressive, push into the contested forests in the east. Towards Karogeborg. So far, my guild does not know of any tribal warriors of Treesnatch being sent to the Hills. Except for the mercenaries of Auguonor Pinecones.'

'Still, you will have the support of my dozen warriors', Astrid promised. 'They can fight with you.'

'Auguonor must be killed', Sigord growled angrily. She hated the mercenary, because he had taken her brother. And hurt Huord.

She was also angry because these were bad people. They spoke so smooth and fast she could barely understand. But they thought different from what they said. They had secrets, behind their false smiles. She did not trust them.

The man Jesper was grinning hungrily at Emelyn. He did not care about the talk. She saw he was a fierce man, who usually got what he wanted. He was a killer. And he also wanted to fuck Emelyn.

Emelyn did not notice his look. She was too busy thinking about words. Sigord knew she was making many plans, and was not speaking sincerely.

And the hobgoblin Yeren was the worst. He had the same scheming eyes as Emelyn. And he was a fighter. Not like Jesper, who was driven by passion. Yeren could kill without feeling anything at all.

She was making a dangerous deal. But she needed these people. She sighed

and leant back, looking up at the ceiling. At the plain steel word that hung there, whispering of blood and deceit.

Yeren chewed a piece of mutton, enjoying the bloody taste. He hardly had to say a word. That was good.

He'd come to this meeting filled with worry. The guild's new investment, the Daughter Superior, had not looked promising. Yeren had already had doubts when he first heard she was a drunk, and he'd found them confirmed several times over. Astrid was not only clueless, but she had also associated herself with the worst troublemakers around. Everything had indicated a catastrophic mess.

This meeting, however, had gone in an excellent direction. It seemed this motley group might actually end up doing the right thing.

Yeren most admired Emelyn's strategic thinking. She'd grown a lot, since he knew her as a scared little girl. She knew where she was headed, and what was necessary to get there.

His only fear was that she might have the wrong end goal.

'So we deploy Victyr's party to the Old Redoubt', Astrid was saying.

Emelyn completed her thought. 'That way, they can intervene when Sigord calls for them, or to help the Auxiliary if Treesnatch attacks elsewhere.'

Yeren flattened his tongue and strained his mouth to speak in the human tongue. 'What will you tell City-Chief Kaspjer and Sister Trensenda?', he asked. The political context has to be kept in perspective, after all.

Emelyn didn't seem bothered. 'We'll say that Victyr's men are simply employed by Hellfar's Furs, to protect the trade. The Auxiliary won't care anyway, and I'd rather not involve the city-chief in the matter.'

'The fucker would only get in the way', Astrid muttered. 'I speak with the authority of the Farn-Clans, so we don't need him.'

Yeren nodded. He had to be useful, too, else they might leave him out. 'I can coordinate information with the Auxiliary. Make sure you know what you need to, and no mishaps happen.'

Emelyn turned to Sigord. 'I will supply the fort, the materials, and the food. Astrid's men will supply the manpower. Now that's worth an alliance, isn't it?'

Yeren had to remind himself that he had orders to stick to. That was the only purpose he had here. It was just fortunate that the group's interests aligned with his own at the moment.

It didn't matter that he liked Astrid's messy but sincere manner, her genuine attempt to fulfill her mission. She was a sweet and doubtless better version of

himself. It also didn't matter that he was warming to Emelyn's sense of determination.

He should not build attachment. That would only make it hurt more, later.

Midwinter Morning

Old Redoubt, Mjnfar

It was a cool midwinter morning. White clouds of mist formed when Emelyn breathed out of her mouth. Her cheeks were red from the cold. She felt free, trudging through the calf-deep snow.

She was only a few dozen steps ahead of the fiercely snorting and heavily laden mules, and the two employees of Hellfar's Furs, but it was enough to feel liberated. Just for a moment.

They'd made too slow progress, with a mule getting stubborn and the bad weather yesterday. But she was glad that they had had to sleep on the trail, because now she got to enjoy this beautiful morning walk.

Almost an entire moon had passed since that meeting in the Swordsman's Parlour. Victyr's party had moved to the Old Redoubt, Astrid had gone with Sigord into the hills, and Emelyn had managed affairs at Trebkernstad. The weather had turned recently, covering the town's ugliness in pristine white snow.

It's amazing, what kind of a difference a little bit of money could make. Just when Emelyn had feared she must close down shop, the dwarven bank's loans had allowed her to push on. To deal with Astrid from a position of strength. To get her where she was now, enjoying a brisk walk through the snow, towards a castle filled with men who answered to her. Or, well, almost.

At least Hellfar's old employees were loyal to her. She had saved their jobs, and now they looked up to her. At least as much as they had looked up to old man Hellfar before.

She'd seen the fires' smoke against the crystal-clear sky from far away, but now she also spotted the Old Redoubt hillock rising up between the trees. The shored-up walls were a dark smudge on top of the smooth white hill.

A man was waiting next to the empty hunting cabin at the foot of the hillock. It was Yeren, wrapped in a whitish grey cloak.

'Well seen, Master Yeren!', she greeted him cheerily. It was good, to meet him here. It gave her a sense of security.

‘Master Emelyn.’ He had a neatly packed bag at his feet. It looked as if he had spent the night in the cabin.

She considered hugging him, ‘We just came up from Trebkernstad! We had some trouble with the mules, but at least I got to enjoy this beautiful morning.’

‘I arrived here yesterday, late. Victyr’s men are waiting for you. They emptied all the spirits bottles some days past, and they’re getting impatient from all the waiting.’

‘Well, they can wait some days longer. However much time it takes for those orc mercenaries to show themselves.’ Emelyn’s patience was already wearing thin with these headstrong warriors. If any other war-parties were available, she would have chosen them. ‘You came from Velenstek?’

‘I did. I spoke with Sister Trensenda.’ He winced, as if that had been an unpleasant experience. ‘She continues to patrol aggressively through the winter.’

The supply caravan had passed them, and they started following it up the bare hill.

‘So she believes she can force Treesnatch to peace?’

‘She thinks that by persevering a while longer, she can convince them and Drubark that they are no match for the Empire. And she wants to underline her point by insisting on traditional methods. It involves…’ He waved his hands in front of him, looking for the right words. ‘The sisters wear only their leather doublets. No shirts or cloaks, their necks and arms are bare. And they wear warpaints.’

Emelyn shrugged. ‘The brave sisters in the myths fought like that. I think Trensenda’s smart to rely on traditions. That way, the orcs can remember just how powerful Auxiliaries are. And Trensenda looks good back home.’

‘I disagree. The sisters tire, constantly holding a heat-ward. And it is not necessary for military victory.’ When he saw Emelyn was pouting, he added, ‘The sisters know this, too, and that Trensenda does it for her own pride. She does not go on patrols herself, and she wears thick cloaks.’

‘Whatever.’ Emelyn didn’t really care. ‘Even if they’re unhappy, the Auxiliaries can’t be beat.’

Yeren didn’t look convinced. ‘Anyways, I also heard about Sigord’s captured brother. Treesnatch intends to show him at some warlord’s parade in the Free City of Karogeborg.’

Emelyn didn’t care about that, either. So she ignored it. She needed to focus on the essential.

The sight was breathtaking, from up near the summit. Snow-covered pines

stretched out in all directions. Emelyn thought she could see the gap in the trees to the east where the Trebflow ran, and the beginnings of the low hills in which Osmund's Clearing was hidden, to the north. The higher hills of the orcish tribes laid northwest.

'Things have turned out just like you said they would', she commented. 'Treesnatch was busy elsewhere, with the Auxiliary's deployment, and the hills stayed calm.'

'The hill tribes' raising an army to defend their border also helped', Yeren replied.

'Well, in any case, it's good for us. The hill tribes have left the trappers in peace, and Sigord still needs us to beat Auguonor Pinecones' mercenaries.'

'From what I hear, though, things haven't improved for your business. The trappers are not coming to trade their winter furs.' He looked at her quizzically. She had forgotten how piercing those yellow eyes were. 'I don't understand. What do you get out of all of this?'

She shrugged off his question with a wry smile. 'I do it for the good of the region, just like Astrid the Eye-to-See.'

They had reached the summit, and the gate of the fort people called the Old Redoubt.

The place was older than most folk knew, which is why they called it Old. It consisted of a flat patch of ground with a few rotting shacks, ringed by an arm-thick stone wall. Most of the buildings were in a too bad condition to use. The wall had crumbled down in places, but it had been patched up with thick beams, and was topped by relatively new battlements. The fort's previous occupants had been none other than Victyr's men, who had used it last summer for their bandit hunt.

Even with the fresh layer of snow, this place looked dreary. Wet tarps and cloaks drooped from rotting wooden beams. The snow was churned up in places, showing specks of mud. Emelyn's men were unloading the mules into a lopsided canvas tent. The only cozy spot seemed to be the stone fireplace, around which a few dirty and bearded men stood.

Emelyn wondered how things might have been different, if she had been a clan elder's daughter. Someone like Sylvan Sylvandottr, who had been born into comfort and was now marrying straight into a position of power. The woman had finally come to Trebkernstad in anticipation of her marriage to the city-chief. In her position, Emelyn wouldn't have had to travel to wet forts filled with dirty men in the midst of winter. She would've been free of all the worry.

Victyr had set up a large green tent near the fireplace, which Emelyn entered

through the half-open slit. Victyr looked rested and clean-shaven. Jesper, standing next to him, was dirty and had dark rings under his eyes. But, even in the midst of winter, his shirt had a deep slit that revealed a good part of his chest. He smiled when she entered.

'Emelyn!', Victyr called. 'You come at a good time.' He was often impolite, but he still expected respect from others.

'Well seen, Victyr', she answered. 'I bring supplies for another tenday, fresh foot-wrappings, and so forth.'

'Great', Jesper threw in. 'We'll grab some days' worth of rations and get going. We have work to do.'

That took Emelyn by surprise. 'You heard from Astrid?'

Victyr nodded. 'Jesper ran through half the night to tell us the hill orcs found Auguonor's band. We will ambush their camp tomorrow.'

'Well done, Jesper.' Emelyn tried to foster some camaraderie, the way she did with her employees. It could never hurt. 'Your dedication never ceases to impress me.'

The tall man snorted. 'Yeah. I wasn't cozily sleeping the night away.'

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. Without her, he'd be nothing. He wouldn't have a fort to stand in, and no food, either.

'Strange', Yeren's accented voice threw in. 'The Auxiliary did not know of this, yesterday morning. I was told everything was calm on the western front.'

'Well, it ain't, and we've got some orc to hunt!' Victyr's voice was eager, and it was obvious his men were rearing to go.

'Very well then', Emelyn said. 'We'll finally get that done. Victyr, you can take supplies, and all the men. These mercenaries are tough, you'll need every advantage you can get. Yeren?'

The hobgoblin shrugged. 'I suppose I will go with them.'

Emelyn should be glad the long, expensive wait was over. When this was done, she'd no longer have to deal with these backwoods squabbles anymore, and be able to work on her own plans.

But, Spirits. She'd slept very well, yet still she felt utterly exhausted.

If she hadn't known before, she was now certain that Victyr couldn't be trusted. She still needed him, though.

'Let's get to it!', the man said. His warriors began shuffling out of the tent.

'Victyr, Jesper, hold on a moment.' They looked quizzically at one another, but they stayed to hear what she had to say.

Emelyn had asked Yeren to leave the tent, but he was good at knowing when he needed to hear something. That was half his job, after all.

Fortunately, he was gifted with good ears. Though he didn't even need them: Victyr's tent was just a loose assemblage of tarps, so it was easy to find a small gap through which he could see and hear what was going on inside.

'After the ambush, when you're done fighting', Emelyn was saying in a low voice, 'you'll make a detour through Osmund's Clearing. No matter what happens.'

Victyr was frowning. 'Who are you to tell us what to do?'

'You're here at Astrid Vendriddottr's pleasure, I know.' Emelyn was speaking a bit too fast, and looking too insistently at them, to actually appear confident. 'But really, you should be listening to me. I'm the one who gave you this fort, and I'm the one who feeds you.'

'Came a bit late with the food, though', Jesper countered weakly.

Emelyn wasn't thrown off. 'And I'm the one who'll pay you.'

She threw a small leather pouch onto the table, clinking dully.

'Don't really need money', Victyr grunted. Then he shrugged. 'Doesn't mean we won't take it, though.'

She wasn't done yet. 'I don't share Astrid's great ambitions for peace in all the backwoods. I don't care about the fate of the orcs. I'm just a guildswoman, and I have business to get done. You can help me in that.'

Jesper didn't look convinced, but Victyr turned to him. 'There's no risk for us.'

Emelyn nodded and pushed her advantage. 'The Farn-Clans want the fur trade, and I'm the best placed to deliver that. You'll be lauded as heroes just the same, except if you follow me, you won't have to waste your entire lives here. And you'll get richer.'

'What do you need us to do?', Victyr asked. He was a man who could make up his mind fast, and an opportunist. Dangerous, in Yeren's eyes. But he was pretty much all they had left to work with.

'After dealing with the mercenaries, go to Osmund's Clearing. There should be trappers there, led by Aksel Svennson. You will tell them to start trading with Hellfar's Furs again.' She had a steely gaze. 'Forcefully, if necessary.'

Victyr was grinning broadly. 'That, we can do.'

Of the two, Jesper was the thinker. 'Yeren will be with us. What do we do if he objects?'

Emelyn shrugged. 'I don't think he'll give you trouble. If he does… get rid him.'

Yeren had to wipe a tear from one eye. He was happy, to see Emelyn having come so far.

Victyr nodded, then wordlessly made his way out of the tent.

Jesper hung back a moment longer. 'I'm very glad, Lady Emelyn, that we are now… *partners*.'

She was obviously put off by his hideous grin.

An Ambush to Remember

The Hills, Mjnfar

Astrid's arse was ice cold. She was sitting on a bear pelt, with bits of white frost stuck fast in its fur, but the whole thing was probably frozen solid. The cold creeped up through her spine, into her bones. Her nose was running and her cheeks were burning. Her feet were stewing inside her drenched boots.

For over a tenday, she'd been making a snowman of herself on the same three fucking hills. It all looked the same: featureless white slopes and thin pine trees. Sigord always told her the current hill's stupid name, which Astrid then promptly forgot, and assured her that the crazy bitch Huord and the others were keeping their eyes open for raiders from Treesnatch. So far, Astrid had seen nothing but overcast skies and snowflakes.

Apparently, they were staying close to the border between the Hills and trapper territory, but always on the orcish side. The tribes' main army was a ways further west, in a stand-off with the Treesnatch levies. Sigord's theory was that when Auguonor Pinecones's band came to raid, they'd come through here, in the gap between the Auxiliaries and the Hills army.

Astrid had a different theory. There was a gap here because this was the middle of nowhere, so far from anything that she hadn't seen even a tiny sign of life, not even the slightest smudge of smoke on the horizon, in the eleven long days and nights out here.

She was sitting in a spot where she couldn't see particularly much, like everywhere. The hills were pretty flat and covered in trees, so there were no lookout points and everything looked the exact same. Except for the sulking Astrid, there was also an orc keeping watch, some distance away. He looked funny, with a slit bone shielding his eyes, but Astrid was not in the mood for laughing.

The others were busy snoring away in their dome-shaped leather tents.

Yesterday night had been exciting. They'd been expecting that moment for days, but when it finally happened, they were still somehow surprised.

Huord-o-Goswog had returned, barrelling through the snow on her huge boar.

Astrid had been awake, so she saw it all first-hand, but she'd needed to wait for Sigord to translate for her afterwards.

Huord had spotted the mercenaries. They had scouts on war-wolves, so she hadn't gotten a close look, but she counted their foot-prints and estimated a score warriors. They had been making their way across the woods to reach trapper territory. Another night's march would put them in easy reach for a daylight assault tomorrow.

'This will be an ambush to remember!', Huord had shouted. Or so Sigord told her.

Astrid hadn't even given the order for Jesper to fetch the men from the Old Redoubt; he'd suggested it himself, and Sigord had told him to go. Astrid had ordered the other man to take scouting duty for today, though that's how they had planned to do it anyway, so she didn't feel any less useless.

She tried to think of something else.

She'd found herself thinking of her father, during the lengthy hours sitting and trudging through the snow. He'd always been unforgiving, insisting that Astrid come with him on trips into the wilderness, through harsh weather. Sometimes, they had a reason to go; sometimes, they went just for the sake of it.

Astrid had never understood why he didn't let her stay home. Not once. No matter how much she cried, or how bad the weather was. Not even her mother could convince him to stay, or not to take Astrid along.

She'd hated him, back when he was still around. Because he was always so harsh on her. But nowadays, she found herself missing him.

He had weaved little braids out of hempen string, sometimes. Ugly little things, rough and colorless. Beads and colored string hadn't really been his thing. Astrid still wore one of his bracelets, on her left ankle. She wasn't sure why. It made her feel real, maybe. It was always there, even in her worst moments.

She leaned back, and breathed out a little puff of white steam.

Spirits, was this dull.

Would be nicer with some company. At least she had had someone to talk to, before Jesper ran off.

She felt queasy, though, thinking of the man and his broad shoulders. He was a wild one, without any the inhibitions men of his standing usually had, and Astrid had caught herself biting her lip while thinking of him.

His easy manner and square jaw had finally gotten the better of her two nights past, when the whole company was sitting around a large fire and enjoying a shared meal. It was the end of a long and boring day. Jesper was, as usual, quite

forward, and Astrid went along with it. She'd drunk a lot of bitter but strong orcish spirits, and she wanted a distraction.

They'd moved on to her tent. Normally, Astrid's memory of sex was either fuzzy or enjoyable, but this one was different. She remembered lying on her back, her legs spread wide, tightly holding on to her blanket. She wanted to throw up from the booze while Jesper was pinning her down, grunting like Huord's boar while he rammed his cock into her.

After he'd left, she just curled up into a ball, and wept. Her bare legs were cold, everything was damp, and her stomach hurt.

He had an evil grin whenever he looked at her yesterday. She didn't want to talk to him, and stayed well away. She felt queasy, almost scared. That evening, she'd stayed at the fire with Sigord and the others, because she was afraid of going to her tent alone. His departure had been a relief, but she had still hardly slept, and as a result was both cold and tired now.

The all-tache would surely praise her, when she told them of her exploits. Of camping with a band of wild orcs, being scared of her own mercenary, and freezing her arse off.

Astrid ate some jerky and dried berries for midafternoon lunch. It was good food, because it didn't get hard from the cold.

She was nibbling at her last strip of jerky and wondering whether she should try to find some drinks to wash it down when she heard echoes of snow crunching.

The orc sentry had already noticed, of course, and was busy waking up the others. Astrid sighed and stayed put, waiting to see who was coming.

It was a long column of armored and fur-covered men. Victyr's party, finally here.

Jesper walked right at the front, neck and upper chest proudly exposed. When she saw his grin, she had to swallow a sudden surge of bile.

This was the first time Victyr and the orcs met, so introductions were in order. Astrid tried to take the lead, the way the guildswoman Emelyn would, but she felt pointless, annoying both Sigord and Victyr by forcing herself between them.

In any case, neither had much to say to the other. 'We wait here', Sigord said. She was the one giving the orders, after all. 'Wait for word from human scout now, and orc scouts tonight. Tomorrow, we attack. An ambush to remember!'

She grinned at Huord, then repeated that phrase again in Orcish. The crazy woman laughed and shook her thickly braided hair. Combined with her nice white fur cloak and her ridiculous eye-protector, she looked very strange. Like a white seal, perhaps.

Sigord's ambush party was now quite the force to reckon with. There were five orcs in addition to Sigord and Huord, thirteen men in Victyr's party, the hobgoblin Yeren, and Astrid was also present. If the plan worked and they actually did catch the mercenaries by surprise in daylight, it would be an easy fight. One to remember indeed.

Victyr's men turned out to be much more efficient at waiting than Astrid was. Instead of brooding in silence, they stoked a hearty fire, passed around a bottle of spirit, and sang heroic sagas. Looking at this merry band of brothers, with their beards and their axes, Astrid could almost be proud. Except she knew what ruthless, brutish men they really were.

The sun slowly set, the orcs awoke, and the scout was still missing. Sigord didn't seem overly worried, though, and neither were Victyr''s men. Everyone assumed he'd just gotten delayed, or lost.

They sent three scouts that night, including Huord on her tireless beast. They could not take any chances of losing the enemy, or taking too long to find and attack them tomorrow. They also kept the fire burning, but they were calmly getting ready for battle rather than carousing. The humans tried to get some rest, while the orcs talked softly and took it easy. They would have to get up before sunrise, and march and fight throughout the next day.

The human scout returned two hours after sunset, accompanied by one of the orcish scouts. He had searched far and wide for the mercenaries, but he hadn't found a trace of them, and then struggled finding his way back. Victyr laughed at him because he'd gotten lost, and spirits remained high.

Two hours before sunrise, the stars twinkling overhead, everyone was up and rearing to go. The tents and gear had been packed and stowed away under a tarp. Shoes were laced and wrapped, weapons were ready. But the scouts hadn't returned.

The sky was turning grey by the time an orc finally came trudging through the snow. At the sight of him, Victyr ushered his men to their feet. He was fingering his sword-belt while he waited for directions from Sigord.

The scout didn't sound successful, though, and Sigord was not happy. Astrid yearned for a sip of spirits to get her through the morning. When the shaman finally turned to the humans, her face was grim.

'Harog no find Auguonor. He searched all trapper forests, where they should be.'

The men grumbled angrily. Victyr bore a dangerous frown.

'Must be elsewhere', Sigord elaborated. 'Huord-o-Goswog will find.'

Astrid nodded. 'Let's wait for Huord. She'll have found where they're hiding, and we can still catch them today.'

Victyr snorted, quite clearly expressing he had not needed Astrid to tell him that. She didn't even look to check Jesper's reaction.

So they waited a while longer. The humans were clearly growing impatient, fidgeting with their weapons and treading the ground. The orcs were starting to feel tense as well.

It was almost midday by the time the stomping hooves of Huord's boar could be heard through the trees. Everyone stood bolt upright, tense as a bowstring.

The boar was sending snow spraying into the air behind it. It breathed nearly as heavily as Huord riding atop it. She almost tumbled to the ground, steadying herself on Sigord's shoulder.

Then she began blabbing in Orcish. Astrid gritted her teeth, extremely annoyed by the fact she could understand a word.

By the time Sigord turned to the humans, Huord was sitting against a tree, catching her breath. The orcs were muttering angrily.

'Huord saw the mercenaries', she began.

'Where?!', Victyr threw in impatiently.

'To the north. More than one day away. They run back to Treesnatch.'

Why? Had the mercenaries somehow learned of the ambush, and chosen to flee?

'Huord saw two demons with them. Bound at the arms, dragged behind fenrir war-wolves. One with yellow hair, one with orange.'

Demons? 'They have captured two Auxiliaries?', Astrid asked incredulously.

More than one man gasped. Even the hobgoblin Yeren's face showed surprise.

'They must have met a patrol', Sigord explained. 'And flee now, with the booty.'

It couldn't be real. Astrid always thought the Auxiliary were invulnerable. But then, if just two sisters met twenty heavily armed mercenaries at the end of a lengthy patrol…

And this was a serious problem for Astrid's plans. She had promised Sigord to kill or capture Auguonor Pinecones. Hopefully the shaman would accept the changed circumstances and stick to peace.

'Fuck!' One man rammed his axe into a tree. Others sat down dejectedly.

Astrid needed to defuse the situation. Cool everyone's heads, get them working in the same direction again. But she wasn't sure what to say without one half sneering at her, and the other half not understanding a word.

Victyr seemed to have kept his composure. With his left hand on his sword-hilt,

he turned to his men. ‘All right, boys, wipe those sad tears from your faces. We’ve got work to do.’ They looked at him, surprised. ‘I want to march for Osmund’s Clearing in twenty minutes!’

What was he doing?

‘Goodbye, Sigord. Would’ve liked to see your people fight.’

The shaman looked on impassively. What was going on?

Then he stood before Yeren. He squared up, Jesper and two other men standing threateningly at his shoulder. Victyr’s head almost reached the hobgoblin’s brows.

‘Master Yeren, we have no quarrel with you. Tell me where your guild stands.’

Yeren shrugged, his arms crossed. Why wasn’t he surprised?

‘I understand you want to build stability in the region. My guild supports this.’

‘Very well. Then you can come with us.’

Astrid felt an unquenchable rage building up in her. She had not made all this effort for nothing. She had not spent twelve goddamn days out here, just to end up ignored by everyone.

‘What the fuck!?’, she shouted. Loud enough for everyone to look at her, surprised. She was heating up nicely. ‘You think you can just make yourselves independent like that? Just go off and do your own thing?’

Victyr looked her up and down as if she was some furiously bleating sheep. Then he casually drew his blade and held its tip up to her face.

‘Yes, I think I can’, he whispered. ‘And there is nothing you can do about it. You can’t even stop me killing you right now, in this forest.’

Astrid felt all the strength blowing out of her, as fast as it had come. She didn’t really have any reason to be angry, really. Not at them, at least.

She was just disappointed with herself. At her own unbelievable stupidity. She had naively believed she was actually capable of making a difference, when in truth she was the same bumbling fool who had roamed Morencairn’s taverns. She, the great prophetic Eye-to-See, couldn’t even see the blindingly fucking obvious.

She was resigned to her fate. After all, there was nothing to lose. She was an endless disappointment, and everyone would be better off without her.

‘You haven’t been oiling your blade well’, she said coolly. Couldn’t really think of anything smarter. ‘Dwarf-copper is fragile, you know, you have to be careful with it. This will dull quickly, and it could break on you.’ Victyr had an angry frown. Well, at least she would die having put some of the smith-god Goibniu’s

knowledge to use. 'A cheap steel blade from the Empire would serve you just as well, and for half the weight.'

Victyr pressed the cold metal blade-tip against her throat. 'My sword might be heavy, you blind seer bitch, but it can still rip your throat open', he sneered.

Astrid nodded. 'It can.' He'd kept the blade-point nice and sharp, at least. She felt it nick her skin.

Victyr's certainty wobbled, put off by her fearlessness. 'Emelyn has a plan, at least. With her, we'll be getting something done. We'll be going places. Not stuck in bumfuck nowhere, achieving nothing.'

So Emelyn was behind this betrayal. Well, that shrewd little bitch certainly knew how to exploit an opportunity.

'I won't be cutting you down, though.' He sheathed his blade. 'I don't want trouble with Venlags, or the spirits. Just keep out of my way.'

Then he turned away to gather his men, leaving Astrid planted there.

Yeren looked unaffected by the whole situation. He would have watched Astrid's head getting cut off without even blinking. He leant close to Sigord, whispered something in halting Orcish, then sauntered off after Victyr.

And Astrid was just left there, alone in the forest with a bunch of primitive orcs. Discarded like the worthless piece of shit she really was.

It was done. Over. *She* was done.

No matter what, she could never succeed. Even now, when she had almost gotten there, the spirits conspired and made her lose everything. Why had she ever tried to prove herself? She was hopeless.

She wouldn't try again.

A Dangerous City

Karogeborg, northern Continent

A wolf's howl carried on the wind. The snow-covered trees rustled their boughs gently.

The Moon lit their way. Sigord did not need the spirits to guide her, though, because they were walking on a road. Despite all the snow, it had been used by many people, and even a wagon. This was, after all, the only road from Treesnatch and all the other tribal lands of Mjnfar to the Free City of Karogeborg.

After that failed ambush, Sigord hadn't known what to do. Her allies had left her sooner than she'd expected. But to Huord, the situation was clear: if there was a chance that her adoptive brother Ragnor was at Karogeborg, they had to go there. Even if they were just relying on one hobgoblin's word, and even if they had no idea what to do once they got there.

Karogeborg was a free town. It stood at the junction between Clan Drubark, the ocean-spanning empire that controlled Treesnatch, and Clan Bonecrunch, which spanned most of the Continent. It was a place which thrived on trade and war. It was filled with goods, and mercenaries, and money, and plunder. It was a very dangerous place.

But Sigord couldn't really stay away. She'd promised her tribe that she'd make peace with the humans and defeat the mercenaries of Auguonor Pinecones, and she couldn't return empty-handed. And Ragnor was her brother, after all, so she couldn't just leave him in enemy captivity.

Huord-o-Goswog was walking next to her, humming softly to herself. Sigord was glad they'd left the others behind, because now she could actually have some time alone with the woman. Not fawn over her at the same time as four males.

Huord walked with a smooth gait. Wrapped in that nice white fur, her pale face lit by the Moon's soft light, she seemed like a ghost. Like a spirit, sent by the gods to bring prophecies and love.

But she didn't talk much. Even when eating, she mostly just stared blankly. Sigord didn't know what to say, because she wasn't a talker herself. So they just walked in silence, next to one another. But that was also fine. Sigord felt emo-

tions appearing despite the silence. As if they were telling one another many things, just by being next to each other and making sideways glances.

It was at night that they were closest. Sigord liked to lie down as close to Huord as possible, without being too obvious. Sometimes, Huord wrapped an arm over Sigord, pressing her body with its bony trinkets and soft breasts against her. Those were the best moments.

The boar's grunts occasionally echoed through the forest. It was roaming around near the road, sometimes burrowing its snout under the snow to eat whatever it found.

Sigord's cousin Harog walked a few steps behind them. She often forgot he was there.

He was a few years younger than her. She'd asked him to come along because she felt someone more was needed, and he was the silent type, not like the others.

The other orcs, relatives of her's and friends of Ragnor, they'd left behind at the camp. Together with Astrid. Sigord briefly wondered what that helpless woman was doing now, abandoned by all her human friends.

She shrugged. Walking through the peaceful night, she dreamed again of Huord's warm body, pressed against hers.

Harog's toes were cold. His leather shoes never warmed up, not in the freezing night, and not while trudging through the snow. But he wouldn't tell that to anyone, of course.

He remembered his promise to his mother. Over a bowl of oats in their warm hut, before he joined the tribal army, and before he asked to join Wise Sigord's company. She was worried that he was too young to go fighting, and that he didn't know how to wield the rusting battleaxe his grandfather had left him.

'I'm big 'nuff', he'd told her. 'I'll help my brothers and make chief proud. I'll make you proud.'

She had held him tight. 'You'll make me proudest when you return with all your brothers, safe.'

Now he was fulfilling his promise. Not the part about returning with his brothers, but the part about making her proud and coming home safe.

It was great so far. Well, with the army hadn't been great, because they'd walked around a lot and then waited around a lot with very little food. But with Sigord and the Wild Boy had been great. He had good eyes and knew how to find his way in the hills, so he'd often been out scouting for Auguonor Pinecones. Walking

through snow was tiring, but he'd pushed through like a great warrior. And he could drink and argue with his older brothers and friends, in the morning.

His cousin Sigord asked him to come with her on this special trip because of his sharp mind. She said he had a way with words. Harog had never done much with words, he used his feet and his hands more, but he'd prove her right.

Sigord was a very wise woman. She understood the language of the spirits and she could see the future. She could also read the souls of people, which is why Harog knew she was right about him.

He was proud to be travelling with her. And Huord, the Wild Boy. Huord was a little crazy, but she was also very brave and very funny. After Red Beregor, they were the two people he'd most want to fight for.

The two women had stopped ahead, at the top of a little slope. He swiftly caught up.

The ground dropped away before them, as did the trees. A five minute run away, the dark walls of Karogeborg rose from the ground. They were massive, crenellated, stone defenses, studded regularly with square towers. Lamps shone brightly on the walls, and the city beyond was filled with light and sound.

Harog's mouth hung open. He was awestruck. The towers were taller than pine trees, and the moat was wider than any stream in the Hills. He had heard others talk of towns like Bomborg and Trebkernstad, but he had imagined familiar domed huts, just more of them, and ringed by a cobblestone wall.

'Aight', Huord-o-Goswog murmured. 'If ol' Ragnor be here sumwhere, he won't be easy t' find.'

Sigord was staring at the town rooves as if she saw right through them. Might be the Moon was showing her where Ragnor was.

'He has to be here', she said. 'I feel it.'

Harog knew it was true.

He set his shoulders. He was determined to prove his worth. He had disappointed her, as a scout, when he stupidly searched hill after hill even though the enemy wasn't even there. He wouldn't fail again. In fact, he was sure he would prove his bravery and earn his name soon.

It wouldn't be a tall stone building that stopped him.

The city was incredible. There were lights everywhere, burning brightly from windows and porches. The streets were filled with so many people, and mules, and wagons. How could they all live in the same place? How could they hunt and gather enough food to feed themselves?

They followed a main cobbled street, covered in a thin layer of snow pockmarked with frozen dung, to the town square. It was surrounded by tall timber and stone buildings. The largest of them, three stories high and capped by wolf weathervanes, looked like a warlord's palace. It had walls of foreboding stone with barred windows on the ground floor, and its adjoining courtyard laid behind a high wall.

Heavy drapes hung from its windows and rafters. Stakes topped with helmeted skulls adorned the roof's rim. A series of colorfully painted shields hung above the ground floor. Harog didn't recognize any of the sigils, except one: a black sword on a grey field, the sign of Drubark.

The square was bustling with people. A few canvas-roofed stalls attracted buyers, orcs in nice cloth talked with one another, and a group of watchmen in aketons strolled past.

'I s'pose we lookin' for a fort or prison?', Huord asked. 'Reckon that's where they'd keep 'im.'

Sigord shook her head. 'Won't get us anywhere. We need to ask.'

An orc woman wearing a fur-lined cloak of green wool walked past them. 'Hello', Sigord said, placing herself right in her way.

The surprised burgher looked Sigord up and down, glanced at her similarly rough-looking companions, then answered: 'Hello to you too. New in town?'

Her face was weirdly clean, and her hair wasn't hanging loose, but nicely bundled and braided. She spoke with an odd accent. To Harog, she was much weirder than Huord. She looked like some half-human.

'We're from the Hills', Sigord said. 'From the west.'

The woman grinned. 'You've come for the parade, yes?'

Sigord looked confused, but Harog jumped in. 'We heard 'bout a parade, and came to see! Don't know much 'bout it, though.'

'The criers have been announcing it for days', the woman explained. 'A Drubark warlord is staying in town! He'll hold a parade, with his great officers and soldiers. A sight to see, I'm told. And they'll show some war captives, too.' She leaned forward to add, excitedly, 'Rumour has it they've captured some Auxiliaries!'

Sigord narrowed her eyes at the mention of the demons.

Huord asked, 'D'ye know if the man Ragnor is one o' 'em captives?'

'The savage war-chief!', she nodded excitedly. 'They showed him already, some time past, but they're keeping him fresh. To show him again at the parade.'

'Where they keep him?', Huord wondered.

‘Oh, right here’, she said. ‘At the House of Drubark.’ And she pointed at the wolf-crowned house, with its leering skulls and heavy barred doors. Then she merrily said goodbye and walked off.

The three of them stood there, hands on hips, looking at the fortified mansion that towered over the town square. So this was where the Drubark warlord and all his warriors were staying. And, somewhere inside, Ragnor was kept.

‘Reckon we can’t just walk in’, Harog commented. ‘They probably wouldn’t let us back out.’

There were two guards near the door, both wearing aketons and short swords on their belts. There were sure to be many more inside.

‘No’, Sigord confirmed. ‘We’ll need a good plan.’

Harog was glad Sigord was his leader. She was the smartest. She’d come up with a plan, so they could get Ragnor out, and flee right back to the hills. It was a bit warmer here, but he was looking forward to leaving this scary and cramped town behind and going back into the open woods.

‘What’ll we do?’, Huord asked.

They had to stand aside as a rickety wagon clattered across the square. It stopped in front of the courtyard gate, then went inside. The gate closed shut with a heavy thud.

‘I’ll need some time, to come up with something’, Sigord said. ‘Watch the goings-on, spot an opportunity. We’ll have to find somewhere to stay. For a few days.’

Heart of Stone

Old Redoubt, Mjnfar

Emelyn finished the cup of delightfully sweet infusion, and put the neatly painted crockery back on it neat little plate. A brazier crackled in one corner of the fur-and-canvas tent. She actually enjoyed being here, nowadays.

'Thank you very much for the conversation', she said to her two guests sitting opposite the table: a trader in a broad dark coat and fur hat, and his lovely young daughter, who was gingerly holding her cup in both hands.

The girl's golden hair was tightly bound in a crown braid. A tasteful black choker showed above her green cloak. It was made of black satin and adorned with a series of silver studs forming runes of Gaya, the spirit of youth and innocence. She reminded Emelyn of her own little sister Hanna, the way she might have looked at that age. If she hadn't been in the south then, locked in some Imperial monastery.

Emelyn had to swallow a wave of sadness at the thought of her. Hanna, or Mylinna, was lost. She had always been too busy with her own plans, with her mercantile career and her grand aspirations. She hadn't seen her sister in moons, thinking there'd be time later to catch up. She had forgotten about her, and now she was gone. Captured by orcs, likely killed. Emelyn would never see her sparkling little sister again.

The stranger, a girl she did not know, finished her tea and looked at her father.

'And thank you kindly for your hospitality', the man said.

Emelyn was on the verge of tears. She struggled to hold them back and keep a confident pose.

'The day grows late', she heard herself say, 'and I took the precaution of having the hunting cabin, at the foot of the hill, heated up. You are welcome to eat with us this evening, and stay in the cabin overnight.'

The merchant beamed, and his daughter gave a shy smile of her own. 'You are too kind, Master.'

Emelyn stood up and accompanied them out of the tent. 'It is the least I can do. You came so far through the winter woodlands, after all.'

She smiled and bowed them goodbye, watching as they walked across the yard of the Old Redoubt.

This place had changed a lot over the past tenday. Several new tents had popped up alongside Emelyn's, the shacks had been shored up, and the soft ground had nicely frozen over. Nearly half a hundred people now stayed here. Trappers visited to talk and sell furs, merchants sold them wares from Trebkernstad, and even an apprentice blacksmith had set up shop to supply Victyr's men. The two stables were filled with mules.

It was like a warlord's keep, in small. That would make Emelyn the warlord. A small one, but a lord nonetheless.

Yeren was walking towards her. Here was one man who always looked the same. Emelyn appreciated his steady presence more than she'd like to admit.

'Where have you been?', she asked.

He moved his jaw from side to side, the way he always did before speaking the human tongue. 'Victyr and I just ran across a mutual acquaintance. It was quite an eye-opening moment.'

'Oh, really? Who?' Emelyn hadn't expected those two to share any friends, especially not out here.

'Just a dwarf who did business with us, at different times. Quite a stubborn man, but he is also used to getting things the way he wants them. He already left, though, hoping to make it back to town not too long after nightfall.'

Well, good for him.

At least he wasn't constantly alone with all his worries, like she was. She'd been sending Victyr's men to some of the trapper villages, telling them that Emelyn and the Auxiliary would protect them, and encouraging them to come to the Old Redoubt and trade. It worked well enough, but she'd only reached half the trappers so far, and in the long run this strategy was unsustainable. She wouldn't be able to maintain twenty armed men and a castle in the middle of nowhere indefinitely.

'Tell me, Yeren. Am I doing the right thing?' She supposed he might have an answer. He always seemed so determined, so certain of what he was doing. Such a man must know how to tell what is right. She imagined that's why he'd stuck to her side so far.

He shrugged. 'I don't think there exists a right thing.' Seeing she wasn't satisfied with that answer, he added, 'I suppose it's right if you feel good about it. How do you feel?'

Wretched, she wanted to answer. All this effort, she felt like she was running all the time, with no clear destination. It was exhausting.

'I feel like this is right, because it does good', she answered instead. Well, it mostly did good for her personally, she realized. She was just chasing as much power as she could possibly reach.

'Then, what you are doing might be right', Yeren said.

Emelyn sighed. They had reached the cluster of canvas tents where Victyr's men rested, since their return from a long trek eastwards.

She wasn't sure whether what she was going to do right now was good. She felt it was wrong, but at the same time her mind told her it was necessary.

'You did good work in the east, Victyr', she told him. 'Many trappers came to trade their furs.'

He was smoking, and puffed out a little cloud. 'Most didn't need much convincing', he explained. 'They've seen the Auxiliary bastards in action, so they feel safe enough, and they want to exchange their winter furs for food and whatnot.'

'Few have come from the north, though.' Victyr had visited Osmund's Clearing a tenday ago, telling Aksel very clearly that he was supposed to stand down and trade peacefully. However, not one trapper from the entire region had come, and Emelyn heard they were looking for a fight with the orcs in the hills. 'I need you to go back to the villages there, tell them very clearly they're to stop making trouble with the tribal orcs. Teach Aksel Svennson a lesson, if you have to.'

The trappers would probably need some serious convincing. Emelyn did not want to imagine what Victyr's people would do to the poor saps. But she told herself it was necessary. Else, she would never gain control of the western backwoods, and the trouble in the hills might lead to outright war.

'Tell them you speak in the name of Trebkernstad and the Farn-Clans', she added. 'But make it clear they should do as you say for their own good. For the trade and for the protection. Alright?'

'We'll make it very clear', Victyr grinned. 'Eh, boys?'

Jesper was smiling hideously. 'Sure will.' Then he winked at Victyr, and added, 'But we'll relax first, right?'

The blonde-haired man, the pride of his noble clan, nodded. 'Gotta stretch our legs in a nice cosy cabin.'

A few of his men guffawed. One slapped his back. If Emelyn wasn't their boss standing in her own castle, she'd be terrified of them. They were little more than a pack of bandits.

As she turned to leave, she heard Jesper whisper one of his friends, 'I get an

itch to squeeze her little tits sometimes. Don't you?' He was barely pretending to lower his voice, and clearly intended her to overhear him. She didn't know what to reply, so she turned her face away and walked off as if she hadn't heard.

They were getting harder to control. It was mostly Victyr, growing confident in his own position and ever less respectful towards Emelyn and everyone else. His men just followed his lead.

She spoke, more to herself than to anyone else. 'It doesn't feel right, using these kinds of men to do what they do to those trappers. Makes me wonder if my own power is worth the suffering of those poor people.'

Yeren was still at her side. She'd almost forgotten. 'All you need is a virtuous goal', he told her. 'As long as you pursue that, everything you do is right.'

It was good, to hear him talk. To hear his sharp voice give cool advice.

'How do I know what my goal should be?', she whispered.

'That's the hard part.'

Right. He didn't set his own goals.

Her goal had once been to restore order in the backwoods, so trade could flow again, and the fur business could become profitable once more. But the goal had blurred over time, and now it had grown. She was trying to forcefully claim the loyalty of the trappers, in return for protection. The way a lord did. And she liked it, to wield power. It made her feel like this was what she had to do. To be successful.

But she didn't know where it was going. Would she stop once the western backwoods were under her control?

She didn't even know how long her current hold would last. Whether everything would fall apart, making all her efforts pointless.

'Do you have any idea how the Auxiliary is responding to the capture of their two sisters?', she asked Yeren. Something like this was supposed to be impossible. It was sure to shock people, and force the Empire to some kind of action.

'I know as much as you', the hobgoblin replied. 'Sister Trensenda wants to ignore the loss, and continue as if nothing happened. Some Imperials argue for a full retreat, from the entirety of Ferdr's Isles. And I hear the human sisters are complaining, they want to deploy more forces and push against Drubark. Find out where the captives are and free them. But the humans never had much say, and they still struggle to find a voice.'

Emelyn shuddered to think what would happen if the Auxiliary withdrew. She'd probably lose everything. Somewhere deep down, she was hoping for a great army to arrive, force its way to Bomborg, and bring her sister back.

It was probably best not to think about the Auxiliary at all. Just like she ignored Yeren's mysterious guild, and what his mission actually was. She had no control over these things, so thinking about them made her anxious, more than she already was. Rather talk about something else.

'The merchant just told me that City-Chief Kaspjer is raising more men for his town guard', she said.

'Oh?'

'Two score, apparently. A proper little army! To pay and equip all these troops, he needed to get funds somewhere.'

Yeren only nodded.

'And he also has that marriage of his coming up. No small expenses, these, and he's already broke.'

'The Farn-Clans won't talk to him without Astrid, and he already has high debts to the banks', Yeren wondered.

'So you know what he did? He requisitioned all the artisans' funds! Calls it an emergency, and sends his thugs to roam through the Burg and take whatever they can get their hands on.'

Yeren only shook his head. 'That will doubtlessly earn him some serious grudges.'

Emelyn gazed ahead, at the clouds above the curtain wall. 'It makes me wonder… if the guilds will stand for this. If they will continue to support him.'

He gave her a sidelong glance. 'Perhaps they will not.'

Now Emelyn realized what she'd been working towards. What she had subconsciously dreamed about, what had driven her to make all the difficult choices she made.

It could work. If she had control of the backwoods, and the support of the guilds, the Farn-Clans would have to accept her. And there had to be a way to get hold of the trapper men, and use them against the city-chief…

'It makes me wonder if they will stand for a replacement.'

Yeren was looking at the sky, too. 'You should be careful of the goals you set yourself. When you climb too high, the branches become too thin to bear your weight.'

He didn't understand. She didn't have a choice.

It was because of him that she'd chosen this path, after all. She'd decided to be ruthless like him, and to do what needs to be done. As city-chief, she could set things right. End Kaspjer's corruption, defend the trappers properly. It would make it all worth it.

Without this goal, it was all meaningless. Worse, it was all wrong. This was her only choice. She could see a future in which she became city-chief, and she had to pursue it. She had to be ruthless.

She gazed smugly at the clouds, as if they belonged to her.

Then a cold pang of realization set in. She hadn't heard the warriors' raucous laughter in a while. Victyr had talked about relaxing, stretching his legs in a cabin… Jesper's ugly grin filled her mind.

'The hunting cabin', she breathed. 'The merchant's daughter.'

No. No, it could not be. She couldn't let it happen.

Yeren looked worried. 'Don't take this risk', he said. 'Ignore it. Stay here, think carefully about your future.'

She couldn't. Maybe she was trying to be ruthless, but she couldn't let these kinds of things happen right under her nose. Not to that innocent merchant's daughter.

She rushed towards the gate. Yeren looked as if he was considering to hold her back, but he didn't stop her. She ran outside and straight down the hillock, towards the cabin below.

It looked peaceful, from outside. Gentle wisps of smoke trickled from the chimney.

But blood was pounding in Emelyn's head, and her vision was shaking from the heavy footfalls. She panted and her vision was blurry.

She stumbled to a halt. The cabin door was leaning open, the snow in front trampled by several sets of feet. Why wasn't she wearing her sword? Whatever, there was no time.

She strode inside, and gasped.

A frail little girl laid on the oak table. Jesper was squatting over her, holding her down by the shoulders. Victyr had his back turned, but Emelyn saw his bare legs and the trousers at his feet. A few other men were standing near the fireplace, and the merchant was cowering in a corner.

'Stop it!', she shrieked.

They looked at her with frowning faces. Jesper scowled. Victyr slowly turned around, scowling.

'Now what the *fuck* are you doing here?', he sneered.

Emelyn should be terrified. But she just felt anger welling in her and her face turning red. 'Just what in the fucking Spirits is *wrong* with you?', she shouted, bits of spit flying. She walked right up to Victyr and stabbed her finger against

his chest. 'I need you to make peace with the trappers, not… not… rape my partners, damn Ferdr!'

She waved a hand at the shivering girl on the table.

Victyr was taken aback by her strong advance. 'Men got to relax', he muttered. His legs were caught in his trousers, so he couldn't step back.

'Then go to a chain-house if you have to!', she shouted. 'Or plough your fucking selves!'

Jesper was standing in front of the table, now, threateningly resting a hand on his sheathed dagger.

'Just do your jobs', Emelyn added, calming down. 'Get your pay, then do whatever you bloody want. After we're done.'

It seemed Jesper was considering an alternative solution. But Victyr just shrugged and sighed. 'Great. Now I'm out of the mood.' He unceremoniously pulled his trousers back up. 'I won't get it hard again with Master Emelyn watching. Let's pack it up, boys, have our fun later.'

He pushed past her, leading his men out the door.

Emelyn's eyes were on the teenage girl, sitting on the table and holding her legs. She grabbed the girl's cloak from the hook near near the door, and wrapped it around the girl's shoulders. She was shivering and staring blankly at the floor.

She looked very different now. So thin and bony. So frail. Her hair was a mess. Tears were streaming from her eyes, and someone had struck her left cheek, turning it an ugly red. She still wore the black choker, but someone had tugged on it so it was stretched out, hanging unevenly off her neck. A few of the silver studs were gone, breaking the runes of Gaya.

'Please leave us', the merchant said.

He had an ugly streak of half-dried blood on his face, running from his forehead down to his chin.

'You're wounded', Emelyn muttered.

'I will bar the door with whatever I can find, and spend the night terrified of whether they might return. And tomorrow, we will leave with all haste.'

Emelyn thought to argue. To offer them her tent in the redoubt, at least. But Victyr's men would be there.

She had expected gratitude. She'd imagined herself holding and comforting her crying little sister.

But then, she'd been the one to cause this. She was the one who paid Victyr's party to do what they did.

The door thudded shut behind her. Yeren was nowhere to be seen. So he would

just have left her to her fate, if things went badly. She was surrounded by men she couldn't trust, or worse.

Victyr and Jesper were strolling up the hill, laughing and boasting loudly. Two others were throwing snowballs.

She had to have a heart of stone. Close her eyes to the horrors. There was no other way.

Captives of Drubark

Karogeborg, northern Continent

Everywhere, people cheered. They lined the cobblestone street on both sides. Some waved bits of fur and scraps of cloth, broad smiles on their faces. Many torches and lamps were set on the walls or suspended from poles. It was a dazzling amount of light and sound, and the parade hadn't even started yet.

The three Hills orcs, standing towards the back below high stone arches, felt greatly out of place. They were wrapped in their fur cloaks, standing out among throngs of orcs in wool and tailored coats. Harog stared wide-eyed at everything. Huord had a dirty sneer, which she'd had more and more often in the last few days. And Sigord was just trying to stay focused, keeping an eye on the road so she wouldn't miss the parade passing.

'If Ragnor ain't here', Huord grumbled, 'I start killin' these bleedin' fools.'

The roar of the crowd became even louder as a group of riders appeared down the road. A small boy nearby was energetically waving a scrap of black cloth tied to a stick.

The warlord and his men looked stunning. Whereas the Auxiliary demons were more of a silent threat, these Drubarks showed off their wealth and their power. They rode on large tusked bovines, and each of them wore armor of shining metal plates over their well-made aketons. The warlord himself wore a sable-fur cloak and black leather gloves, with which he waved to the crowd. Some of his men had long spears with bits of fur attached beneath the blade, and others carried staves adorned with clattering bones, pelts, and black and grey cloth.

Behind came soldiers marching in step, the rumbling of their heavy boots impressing even Huord. They bore round iron helmets, spears, and round-shields painted in colorful patterns. Sigord did not have enough fingers to count them all; there were probably half as many in this column as in the entire Hills army.

The crowd further down the road was laughing and jeering. Sigord strained her neck to glimpse beyond the ranks of soldiers, spotting some shabby-looking people flanked on both sides by soldiers.

So these were Drubark's war prizes, the parade's main attraction. There were

slaves and prisoners of war of all races: humans, hobgoblins, elves, a bugbear, and a lot of orcs. They wore plain shifts and were fettered to one another by the neck, keeping their heads down as the burghers slung insults and small objects at them.

According to a crier, the next three individuals were very dangerous: fierce enemy warlords. They were burly orcs, bound with iron at the wrists, and walking bare-chested to display their muscled torsos as well as the numerous whip-lashes which they had received.

Ragnor was one of them. He looked much thinner than Sigord remembered, but his head was proudly raised. Seeing him, and the numerous scars on his arms and back, Huord hissed in anger. She looked ready to throw punches. When the captives passed and walked on down the road to the square ahead, Huord followed at the back of the crowd, keeping Ragnor in her sight.

Sigord wanted to follow too, but a crier's calls caught her attention. 'Demons! Fierce demons from beyond the Sea!'

The crowd was louder than ever. There were shouts of 'Auguonor!' and 'Pinecones!' and 'Fuck the demons!'.

Curiosity held her back. Huord would manage on her own for a moment; Sigord had to see this.

The mercenaries of Augonor's band looked terrifying. They were broad, taller than any Hills orcs, all of them wearing shining mail and breastplates and matching brown cloaks. Pinecones himself walked at the front, a terrifyingly large orc, with three old scars running right through his twisted face. He had a long sword at his hip.

Harog whispered, surprised. 'I didn't think the demons would look so… normal.'

They had two humans with them. Both were dressed in little more than rags, and fettered at the neck and wrists with magic-deadening metal. To complete the picture, hempen rope was bound around their upper bodies, running through a ring in their collars. Mercenaries led them as if on a leash, occasionally jerking the rope to make them stumble forwards.

Sigord knew these were real demons. She saw it in their lean but strong bodies, in the way they walked and held themselves. They had the souls of fighters, though the Moon had been harsh to them, and their inner fire was now quenched by the spirits of pain and fatigue.

She also recognized the first of the pair. Her head was bent, but her fiery hair was tucked back, and her face was stoically set. It was Sister Tryss. The other

looked very young, and hid her face behind her straight golden hair. Sigord did not know her.

A few more soldiers, probably Treesnatch warriors, followed behind Auguonor's band, but that was the end of the parade. Sigord wanted to join Huord in the square, but everyone else had the same idea, so Harog and her were stuck in the throng.

By the time they finally made it onto the square, it was filled with people. The warlord, the troops, and the mercenaries seemed to have disappeared, but lots of burghers were massing around a high canvas tent erected in the center of the square. Huord was nowhere in sight.

Sigord pushed her way into the tent. Maybe Ragnor was there.

It was a slave auction. The fettered captives were lined up behind a wooden podium, and a salesman was presenting each individual. Of the bare-chested "captured warlords", there was no sign.

Sigord glimpsed the railing of a tall wooden fence, at the other end of the tent. She headed towards that, Harog tight on her heels. She had to shove people aside more than once. She was not gentle.

The fence formed a large pen. In the center huddled the two demon women. A salesman was loudly shouting about the dangerousness of Auxiliaries, making more of a show than a sale out of it. A mass of people was pressing against the fence to catch a glimpse of them. Tales of their fearsomeness were well known.

Sigord's hands found a latch in the fence. She slid it open and walked into the enclosure. She rarely acted by instinct, but sometimes the spirit inside her just took over. When she was around Huord, that spirit froze her still; but now, it made her move and do something much braver than she would have ever dared.

The noises and shapes around her were little more than a blur and a dull throbbing; the only image in her mind was that of the red-haired demon, sitting sideways on the ground. She was drawn to it, fixing it in her gaze, squatting down right in front of it. When Tryss looked up and met her eyes, Sigord felt a flame roaring along her spine.

'This is Sigord, daughter of Chief Red Beregor, and Grand Shaman of the Mjnfar Hills', she heard Harog say, somewhere far away. She didn't care. The demon's face filled her mind.

'So even demons can be brought low', she whispered.

The human face smiled faintly. 'Good night, Wise Sigord.' Her voice was raspy. Sigord had never met a demon with a cold. 'Have you come to buy me?'

It felt as if they were together, in another world. Alone in a sea of fog.

A little marmot gnawed through a chain, and then ran, ran, ran.

'I do not have the coin', she answered. She had never liked the demon much. 'But I have this.'

Sigord's file was hidden in the palm of her hand. It was the only steel object she owned. She used it to file bones and stones.

Tryss looked at the tool in her lap in silence. Then she nodded, and hid it in her mouth, and lowered her face.

Suddenly the world returned. The noise of the people all around, the cold air smelling of dung.

Sigord struggled to her feet, and saw herself facing the salesman.

'Well?', he asked in the strange city accent.

She just shook her head. She didn't know what to say.

'In the Hills, we face many demon attacks', Harog threw in. 'It is good to see them like this.'

There was a loud clatter as a fence gate swung open, and a group of guards and a fat, well-dressed orc stomped in.

'Chief Burrgo of Vorrev!', a guard announced. The salesman turned to welcome the potential buyer.

Sigord and Harog snuck out and disappeared into the throng. Harog was pulling her along, trying to get away as fast as possible.

'What you been thinking?', he hissed. 'Why did you have to do that?'

Sigord shrugged. 'Just had to.'

He shook his head, but the anger was leaving him. 'You're as crazy as Huord-o-Goswog!' Then he grinned. 'D'you hear how I talked us out of that? Just like you said, I can use words good!'

She nodded absently. She'd just spotted Huord, leaning behind a stack of crates, staring intently at the towering, skull-crowned House of Drubark. They'd escaped one wolf's maw to throw themselves right into the next.

'What do you see?', she asked, walking up to Huord.

The Wild Boy turned on her, angrily. 'Where you be? I follow Ragnor, and Auguonor bad guys, all the way, and you be nowhere! Ragnor gone now, in there!' She was pointing at the House.

Sigord sighed. For almost a tenday, they'd carefully observed the house, and she had collected ideas for a plan. 'We'll have to get him out', she said. 'But my plan's not ready yet.'

'No!', Huord hissed. 'Enough waitin'! They all away now, celebratin' and whatever. We must do it now!'

'But…'

'No excuses!'

Huord's determination was as sharp as Tryss's. Sigord glanced at Harog, but he seemed to be leaning towards Huord.

They were right, after all. Now would be the best time to break Ragnor out, when everyone was at the slave sale or off drinking with the warlord. But her plan was not finished… Though that was just an excuse for something else. She was scared of what would happen after Ragnor was free. Scared for her relationship with Huord, and scared for her leadership of the Hills.

'You plan. It will work?', Huord asked.

There was no sense putting it off any longer. 'It will get us inside.'

'How?'

Sigord told them her plan. Huord grinned widely, looking forward to the chaos. Harog smiled also, eager to finally prove himself.

An hour had passed, but the nearby square was still full of sound. Harog stood in the middle of a small cobbled street. He looked a bit strange, with his shaggy fur cloak, and he was tensely chewing his lip.

Hooves clattered on the hard ground, announcing the rickety wagon's appearance. It brought supplies for the House of Drubark every night around the same time.

The old man reared his mule in and called, 'Whaddaya want?'

Apparently, he judged the city safe enough, and the young Harog inoffensive enough, to not feel threatened.

'Your wagon', Harog replied.

The man's eyes crossed as Huord struck him with the flat of her battleaxe. He slumped, and she pushed him off onto the snowy ground with her foot.

'Let's go!' Huord and Sigord nestled into the bed of the wagon, behind some crates and barrels, and hid under some canvas. Harog had an excited grin.

'I'm gonna do great tonight!', he said. 'Gonna earn myself a name, just watch!'

'Just get us inside', Huord muttered.

The wagon shook as it got underway again. Everything shuddered as it hit against the cobbles beneath the snow.

Sigord watched through a gap in the side of the wagon. Harog guided it into the square, past the tent with the slave auction, right up to the heavy gate of the House courtyard.

'I'm new', she heard him say to an out-of-sight guard.

'Just wait in the yard', a rough voice replied. 'The quartermaster's out drinkin', but we'll find someone to take care of you.'

The gate squealed and the wagon rumbled forward again. Sigord could only see the drab moss-covered stones of a wall while the gate slammed shut and the wagon shook from Harog's dismounting.

'What now?', he asked, pulling the canvas away.

Sigord caught her bearings. The main mansion was to the right of the wagon: it had a stone fundament, but the upper floors were built from heavy timber. Several low wooden buildings ringed the courtyard. At the back, a firewood shack met with a wooden flight of stairs that led up to the house's first floor.

Apparently, there was no one around. They really were all busy.

'Let's put the wagon in the corner, by those stairs', Sigord said. 'And nicely stack some wood around it.'

They swiftly unhooked the mule and pushed the wagon into position. They threw cut logs beneath the wagon and the house, working as fast as they could. Sigord's arms were full of splinters and she had somehow hurt her left shoulder. But they needed to be quick, in case someone showed up.

'That'll be enough', Huord declared.

Now to the hard part. Sigord preferred just talking with the spirits, but as shaman she was also supposed to cast magic. She didn't like it, because it was difficult and tiring. She focused on the pile of logs beneath the wagon, plucking strands of energy from beyond, focusing them on a dry log. She carefully moved the fingers of her right hand in a precise pattern. Wood crackled and a thin stream of smoke curled into the air. Sigord focused, building on the ember…

Air whooshed past her face as a huge flame suddenly engulfed the wagon and half the shed. Huord cracked a big smile, swung her arms in broad circles, and shouted triumphantly. The flames roared and leapt higher, licking against the wall of the first floor.

The fire was spreading, catching onto the building.

'Quickly!', Sigord gasped. She ran towards a dark opening in the stone wall, where stairs led down into the cellars. While everyone was distracted by the fire upstairs, Sigord and her companions would break her brother out of his cell and flee unnoticed.

She stumbled down the flight of stairs two at a time, her speed keeping her from falling over. She hit the damp ground running, past a room filled with bottles and salted meat, past an open metal-barred door.

A wide-eyed orc in a dark aketon was walking towards her. She raised her club

and bashed him across the face before he could speak. He knocked his head against the wall as he fell.

Barred doors lined the corridor on both sides, dark cells beyond. This was the right place.

They looked around. All of the nearby cells were empty. They had probably held the war captives that Drubark was now selling off.

They walked further down the corridor, more carefully this time. Harog was in the lead, holding his old axe in front of him.

There were broad stone arches here, each set with metal bars to create more cells. One of those cells was open, the bloodied body of a guard lying in the doorway. Another dead guard had been stabbed in the back further along the corridor.

That hadn't been part of the plan. But Sigord's plan ended soon anyway: she had no idea how to get back out.

'Damn', Huord whispered, but she was grinning. 'Lookin' like Ragnor was faster than us.'

'Well, let's go after him!', Sigord said.

They walked past the body of the dead guard, and some closed cells. These ones were occupied, but Sigord didn't bother looking. She was staring at the stairs ahead, leading upwards.

They came into a wood-panelled room. Eye-watering smoke hung beneath the ceiling. People were shouting somewhere. Sigord thought she could hear the fire's' dull roaring in the background.

She jumped at a loud crashing noise through an open doorway to the left. They all turned to face it, weapons raised. The wood creaked under someone's heavy footfalls.

Ragnor appeared in the doorway. His eyes were watering, his bare chest heaving heavily, and the swords in both his hands were drenched in blood.

He grinned when he saw the three familiar faces. 'It's great you joined the party!'

Huord had tears in her eyes. Sigord though it wasn't because of the smoke, they looked like tears of joy.

'This way's no good', Ragnor said, pointing from where he came with a bloodied blade. 'Better go the other way.'

Young Harog raised his own weapon eagerly. 'I'll take the lead!'

They crossed several rooms and corridors, sticking to the same direction. They hoped to find an exit, somewhere.

After running down a hallway, there was hardly any smoke left. They entered

a room with a stone wall opposite, set with a window showing a dark street outside. There was a door next to it. 'We made it!', Sigord breathed.

Ragnor was almost too weak to walk, so Huord was half carrying him. Sigord's mind was filled with tumbling emotions so she had no space left to think. She only saw that door, that escape.

A man stepped into the room, blocking the door. He was so tall his head almost reached the ceiling. He did not wear a shirt, so Sigord saw his bulky muscles bore several old scars. He casually held a two-handed sword in his right hand. And his face was marred by three ugly scars.

'You aren't getting away so easily', Auguonor Pinecones sneered.

His pecs jumped as he smoothly entered a swordsman's stance, taking the longsword in both hands.

Harog put on a brave face and squared his shoulders. 'I got him!', she shouted, raising his right arm with the battleaxe held high.

'Name me Harog Firesmoke!', he shouted, aiming a powerful swing at Auguonor's left side.

The orc easily sidestepped, letting the axe swing past him, then swung low, slashing just above both of Harog's kneecaps with the very tip of his blade. Sigord's cousin gasped and lurched forward, aiming an unsteady blow at Auguonor, but it struck sideways and barely nicked the man's arm.

The mercenary shook his head as Harog fell to the ground, flipping his longsword backhand and stabbing sharply down. 'Harog Stabbed, more like.' He grinned, his evil eyes sizing up the remaining opponents.

With a shout of rage, Ragnor tore himself away from Huord and flung himself forward. Auguonor moved faster than Sigord would have expected, swinging his sword up - still backhanded - to slice the air right where Ragnor would have stood, if he hadn't thrown himself backwards at the last moment.

Still, the blade's tip slashed across his face and spattered red blood on the ceiling. Auguonor grunted and transitioned back to a two-handed grip, fixing his eyes on Ragnor and his two swords.

Since his focus was elsewhere, Sigord raised her hand to cast a spell. He must have seen her from the corner of his eye, because he took one step and towered above her, the pommel of his sword sailing for her nose. She jumped back, managing to land a glancing blow at the side of his head with her club at the same time.

He turned back to face Ragnor's attack. He raised his sword to catch a swing from above, but he was too slow. He didn't move fast enough to avoid a second

strike from below, stabbing a deep wound in the side of his stomach. Then Huord summoned a ball of fire on his left side, searing his shoulder and part of his hair.

He stumbled back, desperately parrying Ragnor's blow. He caught one strike, a second, but the third cut right across his hands. He howled in rage, spit flying from his tusks, but then blood gushed from his mouth as Ragnor buried a sword in his neck.

The huge orc tumbled to the ground, slumping against the stone wall right next to the door.

Smoke roiled into the room from a hallway to the left, and the whole building trembled as something collapsed. Ragnor flung the door open and stumbled out into the graying night beyond, Huord tight on his heels. Sigord gave her cousin a final glance, lying face-down in his own blood. His unbloodied battleaxe laid next to him. Then she stepped out after them.

The morning sun pierced through the clouds, bathing the landscape in a blinding light. Sigord, Huord, and Ragnor stood among the trees, panting heavily. Somehow, no one stopped them on their flight from the burning House of Drubark, or in their dash through the open gates and out into the countryside. They'd only stopped once they reached the safety of the woodline.

Sigord felt exhausted. She saw specks of blood on her hands and wanted to puke.

But Huord-o-Goswog had a broad grin on her crazy face. 'We shown them fuckers!'

They could faintly hear bells and shouts from the distant city. A tall column of thick black smoke rose into the sky.

So they had won. But Sigord didn't know if it had been worth it.

She'd lost her favorite little cousin, brave beyond reason, because he'd fought for her. She was glad Ragnor was back, but she feared she'd lose the rest as well now. That she'd go back to being alone, with Nature as her only companion.

'May Harog join his forebears with glory', Ragnor muttered.

'He be brave to the end', Huord stated. 'He go to 'em as Harog Firesmoke!'

Ragnor nodded. A faint smile found its way onto his lips.

'And you', Huord continued, placing a gentle hand next to the ugly red scar running straight across his face, 'shall be Ragnor Scarred.'

He grinned. 'That's a name to be proud of.'

Sigord watched the city and the roiling smoke, wondering where her path might lead.

The two others embraced and grunted softly, rubbing their tusks against one another. Enjoying their reunion.

Sigord could forget about Huord. About the Wild Boy's warm body against her own. Ragnor had taken her back. Now she had to make sure he wouldn't take her own tribe away from her, as well.

'Let's go', she said, interrupting their loving embrace. 'We've got to get further away, in case they come looking.'

Into the Mountains

Nordvejken Mountains, northern Continent

Small white clouds scuttled across the sky. The white sun stood high, bathing the snowy trees and slopes in light. A dozen wagons stood alongside the road. Several tarps were set up against them, and between the nearby trees. Orcs snored in their shade, sleeping through the day.

The cage door swung open with a faint squeak. Magic-deadening shackles plopped into the snow.

Squatting in the opening, Tryss looked back. Mylinna sat there, sprawled against the bars in a corner. Wisps of shaggy blonde hair hung over her tired face. She gave a little smile and nodded, encouraging her to go on.

Tryss gently dropped onto the ground. Tears were streaming down her face. She swiftly moved away from the cage and the road, sneaking up between the trees. The cold numbed her bare feet through the weak heat-ward.

She wore a coarse linen shift that barely reached her knees, and had a thin blanket draped over her shoulders. Aside the small metal file in her right hand, she had nothing else.

She blinked and opened her eyes wide, trying to see through the watery blur of her tears. She licked the salty water with her tongue. She crouched behind a tree, trying to get her bearings. Her heart was pounding and she barely felt the bark against her left hand.

The slightest thought of Mylinna, left behind in that cage, brought forth a new wave of tears. Tryss was exhausted and undernourished, and she could barely control her magic.

But she needed to move, push on. Else she was doomed.

Do it for Mylinna's sake, she thought.

Swallowing her sadness, she gazed up into the trees. There weren't many sentries, and she managed to spot this one by the little feet poking out from behind a trunk.

She snuck up to it, whisking over the snow like a wraith. She channeled all her

frustration, all her rage, in this one moment. She lunged around the tree and stabbed with the file, burying it right in the goblin's soft throat.

The sentry was sleeping on watch, and barely woke up while choking on its own blood.

Quick. She had to be quick. She padded over its pockets, finding some bread and hardtack in a little pouch. It wore a dagger, too. Tryss took the whole pouch, slinging it and the dagger over her shoulder.

Goblins have large soles. She pulled its leather boots off, tearing the leg-wrappings, and pushed them onto her own feet. They were too short and too wide, but she could barely feel her feet anyway.

Tryss did not dare spare one glance back at the wagons. She feared to see an orc, drawing its bow at her. And she feared she might run right back to the cage if she saw Mylinna's slumped shape.

Instead, she snuck a bit further up, and once out of sight began running.

She quickly found her rhythm. In the monasteries, they made you run for days on end. The steady mantras burned into your mind. Even now, when Tryss had barely been able to stand upright, she had little trouble throwing one foot in front of the other, and even enjoyed the fresh air streaming against her face.

She hadn't run for almost a moon. Since the encounter with those mercenaries. First to flee, and then to go back, when she heard Mylinna's cry for help. She hadn't expected to ever run again.

Trees whipped past. She found a little stream, which she followed. Running up the slope. West, she hoped. She couldn't trust her feeling of time too much.

The trees became sparser, and were soon all gone. The stream also disappeared beneath a roof of snow.

Tryss ran on. She was warm enough that she didn't need a heat-ward, but she did have to focus on an adhesion-ward to keep her feet from sliding around inside the boots.

She was heading up a steep slope, seeing fells rise on either side and ahead. The valley was very deep, and a rocky, snow-capped mountain peeked out far ahead, above its crest.

Cold wind carried whole clouds of powdery snow into the air and whipped against her face. It stung, and bits of snow trickled down her chest, but it helped draw her mind out of its numbness and sharpen her thoughts.

The mountaintop far above shimmered gold in the sunlight. Tryss would probably have to cross over it, to reach the coast on the other side. It looked like more than a day's march, and far further than she felt able to go.

Her legs felt sluggish. They could barely keep up with the rhythm of her run. Her energy was low, and the snow dragging against her feet did not help.

She stumbled and lost concentration at the same time. Her left foot flew out of its shoe and she tumbled face-forwards into the snow.

She laid there a moment, enjoying the white coolness against her aching eyes and the feeling of her skin going numb.

Then she forced herself to sit up, and dig her shoe out of the snow. She couldn't continue running, but in this deep snow it probably didn't matter much anyway. She forced herself to her feet, shook the powder off, and began trudging steadily up the slope. Eating a stick of dried meat as she did so.

She looked back now and again, at the dwindling treeline far below. They'd discover her escape any moment now, and by nightfall at the latest, the fenrir riders would be roaming the fells, looking for her. She had to get as far as possible before that happened.

Poor Mylinna. Her sweet face was branded in Tryss's vision, appearing against the blank canvas of white snow. She could barely believe she'd left her sister behind, at the mercy of these brutal people. She should have stayed and comforted the little girl. Protected her. Tried to escape with her. But Mylinna would never have been able to run.

Mabye Tryss should just give up, and go back to Mylinna? It would be so much easier. She wouldn't have to keep walking, and deal with her regrets…

The wind carried a faint howling up the slope. Fenrir, out on the hunt. The flurries had probably covered Tryss's traces, but she would be all too visible as a dark speck against the snow cover. Especially once the sky darkened and the moon showed.

She probably couldn't go any further, anyway. She was struggling to keep from blacking out and she was shivering from the cold. She had to take care not to stick her tongue between her loudly clattering teeth, for fear of biting it off.

A tiny gap beneath a large rock beckoned. She nestled her back into it, folding her legs up against her chest and wrapping the woolen blanket over herself. She couldn't feel her feet or her hands, and even her chest felt ice cold.

She did feel the spot between her shoulder blades where her captors had branded her, though. Usually it was a constant itching, but now it felt more like a constant stabbing, right in her back. And her tongue ached badly where they had attached a piercing.

She just about managed to cast a heat spell, focused on her stomach. It gave her

core and thighs a bit of warmth. She nibbled at some hardtack, trying to ignore the shivers and her aching neck and the regrets about Mylinna.

Tryss felt herself dozing off. She had to stay awake. She didn't trust herself to keep the heat spell active in her sleep. It would mean certain death in winter's cold embrace.

Her thoughts roamed to the past. To Mylinna. To the two of them, at that polar port. On their first deployment together, before Trebkernstad.

Mylinna was eighteen, then, fresh from the monastery. The sisters of the chapter loved her. She was so full of wonder. How often, when they hiked over the glaciers, did she wander off too far on her own? Tryss had had to watch her closely, lest she fall into a crevasse. They'd joked about putting a leash on that girl.

At night, whenever Mylinna had watch duty on the tower roof, Tryss always joined her. To help her keep her eyes open, and share some warmth against the icy cold. She was like a little sister to her, to the whole chapter. They would all have given their lives to protect her.

Tryss had held her, at night. When she cried because of the cold. And when she cried because she missed her sister. Her real sister.

Tryss was curled up between a cold rock and cold snow. She shivered, alone, through the night. Outside, it was dark, and fenrir riders roamed.

The wind blew savagely, whipping her hair one way, then the other. She had stumbled along, desperately, since the early hours of morning. She was high up, now. The great gold-lit mount loomed on her right, but she thought she could see a lower pass, somewhere ahead.

She probably wouldn't be able to reach it, though.

She had not found a single scrap of food anywhere on her this morning. She felt like the wind might just push her frail body over and send her tumbling down the mountain. She could barely take a step.

The linen shift had gotten stuck to the ichor oozing from the infected branding on her back. Whenever the cloth moved, it caused her searing pain.

A bearded vulture soared overhead, little more than a dark smudge in her blurry vision. It let the wind carry it, looking curiously at the woman struggling through the snow below. She might be a ready meal for it, in a few days.

It gave a sharp cry when its left wing suddenly cracked, bones splintered by some unseen blow. It tumbled out of the sky, spinning around and around before landing in a puff of snow.

The large bird croaked, shuffling desperately. It turned its head one way, then another, trying to move its broken wing.

Tryss didn't care. She ripped off its other wing, ignoring its desperate shrieks. Red droplets of blood sprinkled onto the snow. She dug her fingers into the open wound and ripped the bird open, splashing blood all over herself. Her dagger stayed forgotten in its sheath.

Tendons ripped and bone snapped. She pulled wet chunks of flesh from the warm carcass, trying to catch the slippery bits between her nails to pull them out. She chewed and swallowed the squelchy bits, warm blood dripping down her chin.

Then she pushed her fingers between the bird's ribcage and pulled it apart with a wet crunching sound. She leaned down and ate the flesh directly out of the carcass, choking as the blood filled her nostrils.

She shivered, kneeling in the cold. Her eyes were sticky from the blood and her stomach growled angrily. She felt even hungrier than before, but the sight of the remaining feathered bits of meat lying in the snow revolted her. She struggled to her feet and stumbled away, trying to forget what she'd just done.

She walked through the cloud of snow, pushing her numb legs on. She didn't believe she could make it, but there was nothing left to do except push on until she fell.

The sun shed cold light from far above. The fields of snow blinded her.

The slope evened out. She was walking on flat ground, almost throwing herself forward to see what laid on the other side.

The mountains dropped away beneath her. Far below, they gave way to rows of dark trees, spanning the distance to the coast. Silver light sparkled on the Moonsea.

Tryss took a step down the slope. A thin column of smoke, rising from somewhere along the coast, beckoned to her.

Finding the Way

The Hills, Mjnfar

The night sky was overcast. Not a single star twinkled above.

Astrid liked it that way. She was lying in the snow, letting her thoughts roam. She felt the cold creeping along her back, but it didn't bother her. The cold mixed nicely with her drunken drowsiness.

She held the crude jug to her lips, noticed it was empty, and threw it away between the trees.

Some of the louder shouts in Orcish echoed across the village to her. They sounded threatening, which Astrid liked. She needed to be punished for failing and being pathetic. Maybe it was a kind of atonement, to be out here, alone with her own disappointed self.

She'd switched to sleeping during the day, like the orcs. She wasn't sure why. Maybe because in the dark, her own existence felt less noticeable. She had tried once to just lie down somewhere, and let the snow cover her, so she could disappear for good. But it had been too cold.

She hated that smug bitch Emelyn for betraying her. And Victyr, for breaking his promise. She shouldn't have chosen them as her allies, if she had had the choice. But she didn't.

Maybe she was cursed from birth with bad luck, just the way she was cursed with being the Eye-to-See.

Well, an advantage of being out here alone was that she didn't have to care about her visions. She could just let them go, and do nothing. She had put so much effort into doing good, to be noticed by Vendrid and the others, but it turned out none had been watching anyway. No one had come looking for her, after all, and she'd been staying here for two tendays.

Snow crunched as someone walked up to her.

'You got any drink?', she asked. She was slurring her words.

The person sighed and dropped down next to her. 'They still talkin' o' war'. Sigord.

Astrid barely cared. 'That's bad?'

‘Treesnatch moved its army closer to us, now Red Beregor and Agrig-o-Goswog are lookin’ for a fight. And Ragnor Scarred shouts we have to teach the poacher ‘umans a lesson. Times are as dark as the sky. The Moon hides and does not give guidance.’

‘Tell them to do something else, then.’ Astrid shrugged.

‘They don’ listen to me.’

She sounded sad. Well, Astrid was sadder, if that was any comfort.

The orcs didn’t really have a choice, though. The trappers were stealing their land, and they wouldn’t stop with just five hills. At the same time, war with the humans was dangerous: the trappers had the support of the Auxiliary, and fighting against the Auxiliary is never a good idea.

‘If we fight, there will be more like Terrog’, Sigord continued. ‘And Harog.’

Terrog was one of her cousins. The second one she’d lost.

He had gone to check rabbit traps in a southern hill, and run across some trappers. He tried to run, but they shot him with an arrow, then beat him bloody with sticks and kicks. He had still breathed faintly when the orcs carried him back to the village, but he died soon after. It happened two days before Sigord’s return.

It was terrible, what was happening to these poor souls. Everyone was against them: Treesnatch, the trappers, the Auxiliary. They were losing their hunting grounds and no one was going to defend them.

Meanwhile, Astrid just laid there in the snow. Wallowing in self-contempt.

Spirits, she hated herself. For everything.

And she didn’t even have alcohol to make it bearable.

‘What if the Auxiliary made peace?’, she asked.

‘The demons will not help’, Sigord replied.

But… perhaps they would.

‘I could go see them. Maybe I can convince them to stop the trappers…’

The shaman snorted. ‘You shouldn’t go. We don’t need you.’

She was right not to rely on Astrid. That could only lead to disappointment.

But then, she didn’t need Sigord’s support. It didn’t matter whether she was being useless in the Hills, or being useless elsewhere.

Trying couldn’t hurt. That’s what her father used to say, before doing something difficult.

She found herself missing him more and more, nowadays. Probably because she was out in the wilderness, and all his lessons returned to her. ‘Dad’, she thought, ‘if I ever see you again, I’ll say sorry for everything. For what my mom did, and for what I said to you when you left.’

Sigord was having thoughts of her own, trying to convince herself that war would be fine. 'My chief father, and my brother, and Huord's father, they good at fighting', she whispered. 'They can win.'

Astrid wondered if the shaman would ever realize she had a voice of her own, and that people actually listened to it. That she could stop the flames of destruction from catching by just uttering some words to her tribespeople.

But Astrid had her own problems. How to convince the Auxiliary to broker a peace, and how to get to its headquarters at Velenstek in the first place.

She wandered along a well-trodden footpath under an ugly grey dawn. Few orcs had even cared to say goodbye to her, and Ragnor Scarred had needed some convincing before he accepted to escort her even this far.

After that grueling night hike to cross the contested ground, things should be easier. She could follow the trapper paths eastwards through the woods, all the way to Velenstek.

The first isolated hut she passed had no smoke rising from its chimney, and its windows were shuttered. There was nobody home; Astrid did not bother to check. The owner had probably left to seek safety in one of the villages, or he had joined the small army in the hills to the southwest.

The grey dawn had turned to a grey midmorning when the footpath entered a large stretch of cleared woods. There was a light downwards slope. At the other end of the clearing, clustered tightly together, were about ten squat huts. Smoke trickled lazily from three chimneys, and aside a woman splitting logs, the village looked empty.

This was just the kind of place where Astrid imagined dad had gone, after he was exiled to Mjnfar. A forgotten little village, in the midst of the wild woods he so loved.

The woman had stopped splitting wood and warily watched Astrid's approach. She held her heavy axe in both hands, ready to use it.

'Well seen! I am Astrid.'

The backwoods woman did not show any pleasure at her appearance. 'I'm Birgitt. What do ye seek in Osmund's Clearing, in the midst of winter?'

Astrid wondered where everyone else was. She noticed some movement in the occupied huts, people sneaking a peek at her through the windows, but the village was far from full.

'I am traveling east.' There was no need to say anything more than that. 'Where are your people? The village seems near empty.'

Birgitt shrugged. ‘Law’s left the land. None stop Wicked Emelyn’s thugs from coming here and stealing from us, and orcs kill our folk. The men said they ‘ave to make their own law.’

Astrid swallowed, looking at the heavy axe still held threateningly in the trapper’s hand. She put a hand to the amulet of Goibniu on her neck, though at that moment the feel of the hemp bracelet on her leg was much more comforting.

Emelyn’s thugs. So Victyr’s warriors must have come here. Instead of building peace with Astrid, they had opted to plunder the countryside for that bitch.

‘What did these men of Emelyn want?’

‘Stupid stuff’, Birgitt muttered. ‘They tell us to go trade at the Old Redoubt. Fuckers think they can boss us ‘round! Aksel was real angry, he talked with the other trappers o’ the region an’ they agreed to take up weapons. To protect ourselves!’

Astrid’s fists were clenched. So not only was she the only one actually trying to fix things, but that selfish shrew Emelyn was the one who broke them in the first place.

‘Can I talk to this Aksel?’

The woman shook her head. ‘He’s off wi’ the other fighters, keeping orcs off our land. Oystein left for the city. So there was only one man left, to talk to Emelyn’s bastards when they came back, a tenday ago. Romund he was called.’

Romund. The name hit her like an avalanche of snow falling off a tree. Could it be? Was it truly him, here?

Maybe that’s why the spirits were making her think of him all the time. Their souls had been nearing one another, and now they would finally meet.

Astrid’s throat was so tight she could barely speak. ‘Can I… see him?’

Birgitt shrugged, hunched her shoulders, and swung her axe. It buried itself into the stump with a solid thud. ‘Sure. Follow me.’

She wondered what he looked like, nowadays. It had been… how long? Almost a decade. She remembered him as a muscular but very gentle man.

They walked away from the houses and into the forest. Milky icicles hung from the trees.

She had to be realistic. He was probably quite old, now. And she shouldn’t expect him to open his arms wide from joy when he saw her.

‘Here it is’, the woman grunted.

They stood among the pine trees, facing a large old oak. Something hung from one of its lower branches, swaying slightly.

Astrid blinked. It was a corpse.

He had hung there a while; his skin was dark and frost had formed around his eyes. He had thinning grey hair and beard, thick arms… and bracelets of hempen string.

Her vision blanked out. She fell forward, onto her knees, and retched dryly. No. No, it couldn't be. So many years… She had missed him so much… Tears streamed down her face. She looked up at him, at the frozen face, willing it back to life.

He had felt so real to her. Like he was almost close enough to touch.

Now he was here, but infinitely far away. Too far to ever meet again.

Astrid thought about burying her head in the snow. Choking herself to death, right here, and joining him in the Ether.

Why, why did the world have to be so cruel? Why did the spirits conspire to make her so wretched?

Damn it. Damn everything.

'We ain't cuttin' it down', Birgitt said.

That damn woman was standing right there, hands on her stocky hips, looking at the dead man with contempt. She had no care at all for Astrid's despair.

'It's Romund's fault that Svenn died', she continued. 'Svennson says he had it comin'.'

How could any man, ever, deserve such a fate? Least of all her father.

'I think leavin' him here is the right message. Show those sons of bitches of Emelyn's that we don't care none about her threats.'

And with that, she turned away and stalked off back to the village. To finish splitting her logs.

Astrid just sat there, on her knees, looking at her dead father.

The axe's thuds echoed rhythmically among the trees.

Romund her father swung gently one way, then the other.

This was wrong. Everything about it was wrong, should never happen. Trappers shouldn't be dying, out in the wilderness. They shouldn't be harassed by thugs. They shouldn't go to war with their neighbours.

No one should find their father hanged from a tree.

Astrid had to stop this.

Talking with a Monster

Velenstek, Mjnfar

Emelyn twisted the empty oil lamp in her hands, telling herself again and again that what she was doing was necessary. She had to become city-chief, only that way could she stop all the horrors that were going on. Bring peace, prosperity, stop the war.

First rays of sunlight pierced through the wide-open window and entered Emelyn's plain little room. Ygumenkka Trensenda had promised to talk to her today. Emelyn would have to be respectful but determined. Give compliments to Trensenda and tolerate her eccentricities. She could do this. This was not the first time she led a diplomatic talk, after all.

The situation in the western backwoods was getting worse. The trappers refused to listen to her and got ready for war instead. And Victyr's men had shown themselves profoundly unsuccessful.

Just thinking of those thugs gave Emelyn a sour taste in her mouth. They had apparently brutalized some trappers, even killed one, when she just wanted them to talk convincingly. When she and Yeren left for Velenstek, the men had been lounging at the Old Redoubt, gloating about having sent an enticing offer for whores from Trebkernstad. So now they were probably drinking and fucking, spending their money as swiftly as Emelyn paid them. Putting everyone to shame.

She only needed them until the moment she took power. Then she'd discharge them, and even exile them from Mjnfar. It might not fix all the harm they did, but it would stop them from doing any more.

She gazed out of the window, spinning the oil lamp between her fingers. People of all races were scurrying around the busy village, but the handful of women dressed in creaking brown leathers stood out. Auxiliaries, looking every part of the legendary warriors they were.

Emelyn needed them, too. Ideally, she'd have them fight for her, but she didn't have the authority to give them orders. Instead, she was here to ask them to do their duty: defend the border. If she could convince Trensenda to intervene

in the west, the trapper army would have no one left to fight, and then Emelyn could make a deal with them to help her oust Kaspjer.

She felt better, nowadays. Now that she had a clear goal. She could keep going even through the tough moments, times like Victyr's return when he announced he'd killed someone and that the trappers still wouldn't budge. She still worried, but at least she could push on without the constant crushing weight of doubt.

She put the lamp back on its plate with a little clink, then stood to stretch her legs. She'd go catch some fresh air outside before getting breakfast. It couldn't be long now before Trensenda called for her.

Astrid had expected some kind of menacing fortress. Tall stone walls, or at least a thick log palisade.

Instead, Velenstek was ringed by an earthen rampart and sharpened stakes. Nothing more defended the two dozen huts and their many occupants. But then, a force specialized in scouting, which could see an attack coming from days away, and so thoroughly superior militarily that it would never be attacked anyway, probably didn't have to fortify its base. No more than necessary to make the road the only practical point of entry.

Astrid was also surprised by the sheer number of people here. It felt like a small town. There might only be thirty Auxiliaries, but they brought with them three times that number of attendants, as well as a plethora of pack animals.

And Mikk, the boy from Trebkernstad, was also there, sowing a leather jerkin. It was nice to see him here, alive and well. He was busy with his work, though, so Astrid let him be and went on.

But what surprised her most, while wandering between the little huts, was Emelyn's presence.

That woman was right there, next to an empty wagon, looking up at the sky. Hands resting lightly at her side, a steel sword slung from her belt. Standing carelessly, without any guards around her, as if she wasn't a merciless backwoods warlord.

Astrid must have been quite obvious, with her shaggy orc-made furs and distraught hair, because Emelyn immediately recognized her and raised her delicate little brows.

'Astrid! What a surprise!'

Her words sounded gentle and genuine. A little snake, adopting this kind manner to hide the venomous monster inside.

'I'm surprised too', Astrid muttered. She wished she'd be drunk, so she could

more easily stand the revulsion. ‘I would have rather hoped never to see you again.’

She looked a little hurt. ‘I’m sorry to hear you say that.’ Then she added, ‘I don’t know what you’ve gone through. But what I do is for the best…’

The wicked woman didn’t even think to ask where Astrid had been the last two tendays. It wasn’t surprising, after all, given how callous she must be. To commit the horrors she did without hating herself for it.

Astrid might be a failure, but at least she tried not to be evil. She was giving her best to do good, in fact.

That perfect little face, turning up its little nose, filled her with disgust. ‘Do you actually believe that what you do, what you tell those murderers of yours to do, is right?’

Emelyn’s emerald eyes locked with hers. ‘I don’t know’, the guildswoman breathed.

There was nothing more to say.

Astrid shrugged, then spat on the ground. Between Emelyn’s feet. And turned away.

She might look like a crazy hermit, and speak only half as well as that woman, but at least she knew she was the better person. If the spirits cared at all, then they had to be on her side. No matter how slim her chances might seem.

The sun was setting by the time Trensenda’s invitation came. Emelyn had walked all around Velenstek, then sat and whittled down a stick with her sword, then walked around again. She was annoyed, having had to wait so long, but she was also more than ready now. Her arguments were sharper than the sword’s blade.

Sister Trensenda’s hut was next to the main hall. It was a small, single-room affair, but stepping through the doorway Emelyn felt like she entered a whole other world. The air was hot and sweet, scented by incense sticks and heated by a roaring fire in the hearth. The walls were covered in patterned tapestries, the table to one side was loaded with food.

There were two seats facing one another. Trensenda lounged on one, loosely draped in black cloth, sucking at a chicken leg. Judging by the small pile of bones next to her, she’d been at it some time. While Emelyn had waited outside.

‘Ygumenkka’, she greeted cheerfully. She needed her diplomatic smile.

‘Master Merchant.’ Her voice was harsh, much worse than Yeren’s.

'I thank you for taking the time to see me', Emelyn went on. 'I come to you with a simple matter, but one of capital importance for the region.'

She had her plan all worked out. First, she'd argue about the Auxiliary's formal duty. Then, she'd feel out what Trensenda really wanted. Whether it was wealth, or fancy gifts. Perhaps she could even be involved in the coup against the city-chief.

There was a wet sucking sound as Trensenda went after some marrow, then the bone crunched between her spiked teeth.

Emelyn still stood there, waiting to be invited to sit. She was getting decidedly uncomfortable.

At a vague wave of the hobgoblin's hand, she sat down and leaned forward. The woman's yellow eyes were gazing off somewhere behind Emelyn's shoulder.

'Ygumenkka. I understand you are a woman of principles, and a busy one at that.' Though they probably weren't good principles, and since the kidnapping the Auxiliary had been mostly staying in Velenstek. Trensenda probably lounged here all day. 'As an Imperial servant, you have a strong sense of duty.'

The hobgoblin burped, looked at the dabs of grease that had fallen onto her dress. Then she carelessly adjusted the cloth, cupping her large breasts as she did so.

There wasn't even a nod. Emelyn pushed on. 'Your mission, in these woods, is to ward the local peoples from barbarian threats.'

Now she snorted. 'Bunch of primitives, either side of the border.'

'Well… The orcs in the west, they push into the marches. Prepare for war with the trappers. The Auxiliary must intervene!'

Trensenda looked down at her over her broad nose. 'I don't *have* to do anything, and I hardly care for a bunch of backwoods humans getting themselves killed.'

Trensenda was a proud woman. Emelyn had to work on that, flatter her, even though she rather wanted to stab her sword through the disgusting hobgoblin's chest. 'Your reputation as a strong commander is well known, Ygumenkka. Certainly a capable, aggressive officer like yourself would seize the opportunity and march west.'

She chuckled and tossed a bone across the room. Then she righted herself, licking her disgusting greasy lips, and told a story. 'There were two little goblins in the Emperor's great army, who got themselves captured by the enemy.' She plopped an olive into her mouth. 'The Emperor regretted the loss, but he knew that is the reality of war.' She spat the pit out. 'The goblin rabble shouted and complained. Told him to save the captives. But he wisely ignored their foolish

cries.' She ate another olive. 'Unfortunately, one fucking little goblin escaped. At the sight of him, all the others cried twice as loud, forcing the Emperor to pause his advance and instead use his entire army to try to free one single miserable captive.' She spat out the pit. It tumbled on the floor and came to rest next to Emelyn's foot. 'And he lost the war because of it.'

Emelyn did not like where this was going. But she forced herself to keep her countenance, be diplomatic.

Finally Trensenda stopped looking past her and actually spoke to her. 'As you might have guessed, this story alludes to real events. We're in the midst of it right now.'

Emelyn swallowed. 'Those little goblins… one of the captured Auxiliaries escaped?'

Trensenda snorted. 'So your primitive brain isn't that tiny, after all. Amazing.' Emelyn fumed, but she kept her mouth tightly clamped. 'Sister Tryss fled over an entire mountain range and to a dwarven city, just to be a thorn in everyone's side.'

It was great news. Well, not so great, because it meant Hanna was still out there, somewhere. Stuck in savage lands. But at least Tryss was free, now.

Trensenda wasn't done. 'And the human rabble everywhere is in an uproar. They hear Tryss's sad little tale and foolishly accuse us rational hobgoblins of callousness. Even the Auxiliary isn't free of such notions. They're sending a small army, to attempt a rescue effort for Sister Mylinna. It's pathetic.'

Emelyn wasn't sure whether she should cry or laugh. Tryss's escape filled her with joy. But she hated being here, with Trensenda. Somehow every word that came out of that spiked maw was worse than the previous.

This woman was supposed to inspire and care for the Auxiliary sisters. Not shrug off the girls' lives as if they were meaningless. 'I'm glad rescue efforts are being made', Emelyn said, as nonchalantly as possible.

'Pah. If it was up to me, I would send that army back. We've got more than enough of your race in our Empire.' Then she lit a thick pipe with a flick of her hand, and puffed out a noxious cloud of smoke.

Emelyn gnashed her teeth. That was her sister they were talking about. Whose life Trensenda cared nothing about.

She forced herself to stay focused, but the hobgoblin's despicable smile and the drugs she smoked filled her with disgust. She could hardly believe she was trying to work together with this monster.

Still, she managed to utter, 'If you intervene in the west, we might come to some mutual advantage…'

For the first time this evening Trensenda seemed interested by something she'd said. 'Oh? What kind of advantages do you imagine?'

Emelyn imagined Mylinna, locked somewhere in a dark cell. And Trensenda's gloating face, floating in the noxious mist of her pipe. Caring only about herself, and not at all about human lives.

She felt her face turning red. No way would she make a deal now, through the smoke, with her sister's killer. 'None!', she snarled. 'Just the sense of your accomplished duty!'

Trensenda leant back, sighed, and let out another puff of smoke. 'Shame', she muttered.

Emelyn wanted to fling fists in rage. She clenched them instead, but she was at the edge of her seat.

'I was seeing the possibility of a deal', the hobgoblin continued. 'But I must have been mistaken. In any case, I am being replaced. I think it will be just fine if I stay here until the reinforcements' arrival, no matter what happens in the west.'

Emelyn had had enough. She didn't need the Auxiliary, she could change her plans. She certainly wasn't going to treat with a callous, drug-addled monster.

'Goodbye', she spat, and stomped out of the hot, noxious room. She needed to get some fresh air.

Think about alternative plans. Get into the castle during the marriage, maybe, and use Victyr's boys for the manpower.

She breathed deeply, outside, looking up at the weakly twinkling stars.

She should say goodbye to Hanna properly, one day.

Astrid sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes, but they were dry. She'd imagined that tears had streamed down her face, but apparently none had formed while she sobbed silently.

The memory of her father hid at the back of her mind while she was distracted on the road, but now, after a long day of stressful waiting, all the pain had welled back up. Happy memories of her past, back when dad was still with her, mixed with the ghastly picture of his corpse swinging in the cold air. Other thoughts and doubts and worries welled up as well, and Astrid drowned in them.

She was so wretched.

The only thing keeping her from giving in all the way was the bracelet on her

left ankle, which she squeezed through her foot-wrappings. That, and the cool weight of Goibniu's talisman against her skin.

And the presence of the Auxiliary women around her. Somehow, she still fought to hold up a composed appearance. She fought to seem respectable, just like she had back in Venlags.

What was her mother thinking in that moment? She probably thought her dead. Gerlyn, and her other drinking buddies, probably thought her dead, too.

Somehow, Astrid didn't miss them. She hoped they heard news and thought of her, but she didn't really care to see them again.

They had probably forgotten her, anyway.

'Ygumenkka Trensenda will see you now.' The voice was smooth, human, but the accent was sharp and broken.

It was an Auxiliary, clearly. The orcs called these women demons, but they didn't strike Astrid as particularly inhuman beings. Aside from their different language and their odd magic-derived quirks, she could hardly distinguish them from regular people.

This woman, for instance, spoke in a formal manner, but Astrid could feel the edge of annoyance. Her brown hair was loosely bound and there were dark rings under her eyes. Below the leather skirt, her supple legs were fully exposed to the harsh cold. Astrid had heard the Auxiliaries did this to display their magical abilities, but she also heard rumblings that the sisters themselves didn't really like doing it. She couldn't really judge, but she personally much preferred her cloak and woolen clothes over some heat-ward.

The Auxiliary-attendant didn't wait, but turned around and headed off towards the chief's hut.

Well, there wasn't any reason to put it off. If she was to make a fool of herself, it was better to get it over with quickly.

Astrid stepped past the rough wooden door and into the hut.

Her eyes burned, and it wasn't because of the memories, but because of the smoke. It was very hazy in here. The heat emanating from the roaring fireplace, and a background smell of sweet incense and chicken, made everything even more noxious.

But Astrid wasn't bothered that much; in fact, the atmosphere brought forth good memories of time spent in dreary inns. The biting smoke wouldn't bring forth any tears, either; they were already all spent.

The hobgoblin Trensenda lounged on an upholstered chair. She drew from a pipe and exhaled a puff of white smoke.

'Well seen,' Astrid spoke, in a voice as clear as she could muster.

When the hobgoblin showed no reaction, she sat down in the other chair.

She didn't have a pipe to hand, but there was a filled glass of wine on the nearby table. Good enough. She matched Trensenda's nonchalance with a careless sip of wine and an appraising glance at the colorful tapestries on the walls.

It seemed Trensenda was dragging it out, which suited Astrid. It gave her more time to remember what she was even trying to achieve here.

She sipped at the overly sweet wine while she gathered her thoughts.

She had to stop the bloodshed somehow. Keep the trappers and Auxiliary from mercilessly slaughtering the orcs of the Hills.

And somehow, the solution to this problem had to be found in words, spoken through hazy hot air, to a careless-looking hobgoblin.

Trensenda popped an olive into her mouth, and Astrid did likewise. Her straight front teeth stripped the pulp from the pit much faster than the hobgoblin's molars could. While Trensenda was still chewing, Astrid pursed her lips and delicately spat, sending the pit soaring across the room to land somewhere behind Trensenda. Then she met the hobgoblin's eyes for the first time.

The ygumenkka raised her brows, then slowly leaned forward. She carelessly spat her pit into a dwarf-copper dish, put the pipe away, and clasped her hands in front of her. Her sneer was gone, replaced with a casual grin.

'Daughter Superior, your presence honors me.' For a hobgoblin, she spoke Skijspik surprisingly well. Much better than most orc whores in Morencairn. In fact, it was spoken clearly enough for Astrid to notice the mocking tone.

'It is an honor for us both, Ygumenkka', she replied. 'We are after all both spiritual leaders, always intent on keeping our flock safe.'

The hobgoblin frowned angrily. 'Don't you dare', she hissed. 'Do not compare me with the likes of you. Your kind is so simple-minded, so naive, it… it enrages me.'

Astrid shrugged. To be honest, she'd often thought similarly of her fellow humans, looking out of the tavern window at toiling pettyfolk. She also wasn't really put off by the hobgoblin's superior manner, weak drugs, or frisky dress. She had seen it all often enough.

Obviously false deference was probably the best response. 'Forgive me, great ygumenkka. I come to you with a humble plea concerning the western hills…'

Trensenda snorted derisively. 'Again? Why are you all obsessed with those insignificant hillocks?'

Astrid hid her surprise. Someone had approached Trensenda about the Hills… It must have been Emelyn. Then it was probably too late.

But then, everything Astrid did was hopeless. So she went on. 'The trappers are trying to take advantage of the unrest with Treesnatch and want to spark a war with the hill tribes', she began. 'This would cause considerable chaos and harm to everyone. The Auxiliary should intervene, block the trappers from entering the tribal hunting grounds, keep the peace. As is your promise to Trebkernstad and all the people of Ferdr.'

Trensenda leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms. She had a devilish grin and glint in her eye. The human Auxiliaries clearly weren't demons, but Astrid had found a good alternative candidate.

'Help the orcs, you ask? A humble plea by the representative of the Farn-Clans, believed lost in the western wilderness, to intervene against the trappers? Don't kid yourself!' She guffawed. 'If I move my soldiers, you fool, it'll be to smash these tribes to splinters and take all the land I can grab! I'm after glory, not holding up a shield to protect some primitive barbarians!'

Astrid wanted to hit herself on the head. She was no good at talking. She was just a blundering fool, babbling out whatever came to mind and messing up everything in the process.

She'd said far too much, far too quick. In her position, Emelyn would have carefully tested the water first, measured what is possible. And what definitely isn't.

Clearly, Astrid's plan had been hopeless from the start. There was no way she could convince Trensenda to protect the orcs, it was obvious now. The woman just sat here in the warmth, enjoying glorious thoughts, in command of a group of super-soldiers while caring nothing about loss of life, whether on the enemy side or her own.

Astrid had to change tracks.

'I understand, Ygumenkka. It was foolish of me to ask such a weak move of you.'

The hobgoblin perked up at that.

'I can only imagine, being stuck in these backwoods, with a force too small to do much of anything, you can't help but get bored', Astrid continued. 'And you get no support from the monastery.'

'That's right!' Trensenda was sitting up, displaying an angry frown. 'Since those two foolish soldiers got lost, all I hear are complaints! They want reports all the time, those good-for-nothing humans send letters asking me to explain myself or send apologies, and meanwhile I don't have any proper troops to actually *do something*!'

'If you ask me', Astrid added, sipping more wine, 'if those soldiers got themselves captured, it's their own fault. Little you could have done about that.'

Trensenda snorted and nodded. 'Your are right. But what does it matter, now they are saying it's my fault, and I'll be replaced as soon as the new force arrives.'

Astrid smiled and took hold of the wine jug, refilling for the hobgoblin. One thing she could do was drink and speak words.

'You know, in my life, I have one big regret, I think.' She took a sip. 'It's that I never could show people my worth, back at Venlags.'

'Oh?'

'I was there, Daughter Superior and everything, but I never used the opportunity to actually show myself a leader. And then they sent me off to these backwoods.' A bit of embellishing couldn't hurt. 'In your position, I think I'd make use of the opportunity while I still can. Show them all what I'm really worth…'

The wine and the drugs were getting to Trensenda. She had a grin on her face and leaned forward eagerly. 'What are you thinking of?'

Astrid spoke of bold offensives and great tactical maneuvers. An expedition into enemy territory, forcing an early fight, perhaps even sending scouts all the way to Karogeborg. Ignoring the petty trappers and hill orcs and their meaningless squabbles, and instead speaking of a glorious campaign against a powerful enemy. And promising all the honors and commendations Venlags Domen could bestow.

Trensenda loved it.

The logs in the fireplace were little more than embers, and Astrid was out of ideas. She didn't have anything more to say about military valor and bold initiatives. But she didn't have to speak anymore: Trensenda was dreaming, gazing at an empty spot, imagining expeditions and war.

In truth, Astrid empathized with the hobgoblin. They were very different individuals, but still Astrid understood the situation she was in. She had had great dreams, but she had failed, and she was now stuck, surrounded by people who owed her obedience but nonetheless despised her, without a clue what to do or where to go. Not so different from Astrid's fate as Daughter Superior, after all. Maybe that's why she had known what words to speak, how to light that little spark of motivation that remained in the hobgoblin.

The time had come for Astrid to take her leave. Trensenda didn't need any more talking to, and she was quite drunk.

The fresh night air filled Astrid's lungs, and her head felt clear. Goibniu's talisman pressed coolly against her skin. She might not have managed to get the

Human Auxiliary's support for the Hill orcs, but now that wasn't necessary anymore, either.

She would go to the trappers and convince them to stop their attack. That's what she had been raised to do, after all: a cleric's job was to talk to people, and convince them of stuff. She actually believed she could do that.

And even if she failed, then she'd at least help the orcs fight. The Hill tribes' warriors would beat those fucking trappers. And avenge Astrid's father.

Golden Sunrise

Velenstek, Mjnfar

The fluffy white pines were bathed in a golden light. A lone hawk circled in the clear sky, its screech echoing over the countryside. Its lazy flight took it closer to the sun, and it disappeared in the blinding light.

Yeren sat on a big boulder, near the top of a hill. Velenstek was somewhere between the trees, its location visible only by the trickle of smoke wafting in the air.

It hadn't snowed in days, so the sun and wind had dried the stone. It was cold, of course, but it was still nice to sit on. And the sun's beautiful rays warmed him up.

The snow crunched faintly beneath the human's feet as she walked up the hill. Yeren knew that Auxiliaries could use magic to walk nearly silently if they wanted to. But there was no reason for her to do so now.

'Good morning, Yeren', she said.

'Well seen, Sister Terlena', he answered. 'Please, join me on this rock. The sunrise is gorgeous.'

Terlena, his old acquaintance from Contje, sat down next to him. She looked the same as she had when they last met, back at the Ferdrheim monastery; it wasn't that long ago, after all. She had switched out her grey robes for the supple and utterly unprotective leathers Auxiliaries wore on deployment, and she now wore a long and a short blade on her belt. The metal clanged gently against the stone as she sat down.

'You must like being out in the wild once again', he said.

He was looking forward to chatting with her. Terlena was one of the few humans who didn't have an insufferable accent.

'More or less', she shrugged. 'This hasn't been an easy deployment. And the cold is getting to me.'

She sighed. The hawk shrieked, and plunged down between the trees. Yeren sat in silence.

'At least we're hearing some good news', she added.

Yeren nodded. ‘They’re sending a small army to help you, I heard. And Sister Tryss is now safe and well.’

Terlena wrapped her arms around her bare legs. ‘I’m very glad that Tryss is in good health now. Her captivity, and her escape over the mountains, was horrible.’

Yeren couldn’t really imagine it. He’d never been a captive, and he’d also never been in the wilderness without proper equipment. In fact, he knew he wouldn’t have survived Tryss’s ordeal, but he also wasn’t an Auxiliary.

She went on. ‘And I’m glad they’re sending reinforcements, too. But I don’t know if we’ll be able to get to Mylinna.’

‘Karogeborg has raised a big militia and mercenary force’, he agreed. ‘And Drubark seems to be preparing an army in North Mjnfar.’

‘We’ll try to push into orcish territory, as far as Bomborg if needed’, she said determinedly. ‘But I don’t know if we’ll find her. I fear we’re much too late.’

Yeren could only agree. Tryss had escaped her captors well to the north of Karogeborg; Mylinna, if she was still alive, was probably somewhere deep in orcish territory, far beyond the Auxiliary’s reach.

‘I tried to find her on my own, you know’, she added. Yeren raised his brows. ‘I don’t know Mylinna personally, but still I hoped to free her. I had some days of free time, so I went on a ranging north. Visiting orc villages, watching Bonecrunch patrols, trying to find a trace. Nothing.’

‘You were brave, if not foolhardy’, Yeren said. From up here, the wilderness looked calm and peaceful, but he knew there were many hidden dangers. Especially in orcish territory.

‘I had to go on that ranging’, she retorted. ‘For myself, for my own peace of mind. I had to do something. And I wanted to get away from Velenstek and the Ygumenkka a bit.’

‘I admire you, you know. You’re free.’ In a way, she was everything he wasn’t. ‘You decide for yourself what you want to do, and what you need to do. You have a mind of your own.’

She frowned. ‘And you?’

‘I don’t make decisions. My guild does. I wouldn’t be able to act like you did, because nothing matters to me.’

She shook her head. ‘You know that’s not true, you narrow-minded hobgoblin. And I know it too.’

Now he frowned. ‘No, don’t bring that up. It’s not important.’

‘I know you don’t talk about it. But this is what old friends are for. It’s why you need me. To talk, to let these things out.’

‘What happened in Contje, it was a mess. I wasn’t myself.’

‘Yes, you were. You’re hiding behind your guild now, but you’re still the same person, inside. And we have to talk about it.’

And so they did. Bringing up one of the worst moments of Yeren’s career.

Contje was a human settlement to the south, on the Continent. Yeren accomplished some of his first guild contracts there, mostly dealing in local politics with neighbouring orcish tribes. He’d stayed at the local Auxiliary garrison, where Terlena was an officer, and he’d gotten to know the local sisters well during previous missions.

His third mission was a mess from the start.

The theory was simple: Yeren was to act as the local expert, to guide a group of assassins so they could kill a tribal leader. The orc was a subject of Contje’s, but he was stirring up trouble among the vassal tribes and trying to gain independence. Assassinating him was a dubious and dangerous undertaking, but Yeren had been confident the guild knew what it was doing, so he hadn’t asked any questions.

Things went well enough at first. Yeren managed to find the place - without the help of the Auxiliary, because he had orders not to involve them - where the orc would be in a day’s time, and sneak with the assassins undetected through the countryside. They broke into the small castle and subdued the three guards there.

To Yeren’s surprise, there was also a young orc and two handmaidens in the house; she was the target’s wife. That evening, while eating with the assassins, he learned they intended to kill her as well. This part of the mission had been kept secret from Yeren.

The following night, he was wracked by doubt. The woman was so young, so innocent, he couldn’t possibly imagine her being a threat to the guild. In fact, he knew from talking to her that she was from far south, and that she was wholly uninvolved in her husband’s politics.

In a bout of mercy, Yeren went against every rule he’d set himself for his mercenary’s career. He decided to save her life.

While the others slept, he convinced her to leave the castle. The two of them, and her two handmaidens, fled in the early morning. They escaped unnoticed and walked on foot towards the coast.

Meanwhile, the assassins waited for the orcish lord in a patch of pine trees in front of the castle. The scent of pinecones was strong in the air.

When their mark finally arrived, he looked barely surprised, and even laughed. There was a bloody fight, at the end of which the assassins lay sprawled dead on the forest floor. This earned the orc his name of Auguonor "Pinecones".

Now Pinecones' wife suddenly found herself in a much more dangerous position: her husband, enraged that she had dared abandon him for dead, sent warriors and missives to have her hunted down.

Desperate, hounded by mounted orcs, Yeren's party jumped aboard a small fishing skiff and sailed onto the ocean.

But one unfortunate event followed another, and a storm came. The small boat was flung around by the massive waves; its mast split and shattered. Its occupants were thrown out and pulled away by the water's great strength.

A day later, Yeren washed ashore one of Ferdr's Isles. Alone on a pebble beach.

Of the orc and her handmaidens, there was no trace. They had been swallowed by the sea.

'You didn't return to Contje after that', Terlena said. 'I didn't see you again until your recent visit at the Ferdrheim monastery.'

Yeren nodded. 'I had to take some time for myself. Let what happened go through my head.'

Terlena's voice was soft. 'You see, that heart of yours isn't just a block of ice. You do know when to act on your own initiative.'

'I don't', he replied sadly. 'I shouldn't have done it. The one time I made my own decision, it was wrong.'

She stayed silent.

'If I had just followed orders, that woman would still be alive and happily together with her husband. At peace. Not dead, at the bottom of the ocean, while fleeing from the man she'd loved.'

Terlena shrugged. After a while, when a cold breeze had blown past, she spoke. 'Sometimes, you don't have a choice. You have to do what's necessary. You have to do what's right, even if you don't know what the consequences will be.'

He wasn't so sure. He wanted to believe it was possible, to make the right decision on one's own. But he wasn't sure whether he had the strength to dare doing so again.

What would happen if there came another moment, when he'd have to choose between his orders and his feelings? Would he choose the same way he had in Contje, that fateful night among the pine trees?

But that was his own question to ponder, and his own answer to find.

‘Tell me, Terlena’, he changed the subject. ‘How fares Sister Flavina, from the Hospice?’

Terlena turned to him, surprised. Then she narrowed her eyes, and finally she nodded curtly. ‘Flavina struck me quite silent, for a while… after you left. But she put great effort into her sword mantras, and later she transferred to the lumber sisterhood.’ Yeren nodded. ‘She wanted to volunteer, to be part of Ygumenkka Trensenda’s detachment. She was disappointed when she wasn’t selected.’

Yeren chuckled softly. ‘She did strike me as that type, wanting to go on an adventure.’

‘It’s not that rare, you know. For young sisters to seek experiences of that kind. Auxiliaries are humans after all.’

He was glad that Flavina hadn’t taken his departure too badly. He hadn’t had a choice, of course, but that didn’t make him free of guilt.

‘I’m glad you asked about her’, she added. ‘But it’s over now.’

Yeren agreed. ‘I’ll let it rest.’

‘Still’, she added, ‘I see you have some soul left in you, no matter what you say. As long as you keep that, as long as you keep caring about people, you’ll be able to do good.’

‘I hope I will.’

He sat a while longer, looking at the snow-covered trees and the lazy clouds. The yellow sun had risen a bit higher above the treetops.

‘I should get going’, he said, slowly rising to his feet. ‘Master Emelyn wishes to travel to Trebkernstad and overthrow the city-chief.’

Terlena laughed and accepted his hand, standing up as well. ‘It seems the man will have a memorable wedding. But I must get going too; the sisters and I have an ygumenkka to overthrow.’

The Battle of Winter Hills

The Hills, Mjnfar

Astrid hunched her shoulders against the cold. The distant sun had slid behind a grey cloud on its journey down towards the horizon; it would be dusk soon.

After her visit to Velenstek, she'd walked fast, as hard as she could, to get to the Old Redoubt. She knew there wasn't much time: chances were, the orcs of the Hills were already at war. Treesnatch had seemed eager to fight, before she left; and the backwoods humans had been getting ready for an attack of their own.

As usual, she didn't really have a strong plan made up in her mind. She wasn't the right person for that. But she knew what she wanted: to stop everyone from killing one another.

She'd needed to go by the Old Redoubt, because that's where she'd left most of her clothing before leaving for the Hills, almost a moon ago. If she was going to talk to the trappers, convince them to stop the war, then she needed to look like Astrid Vendriddottr. Not some scraggly hermit.

Luckily, she reached the hilltop fort before Emelyn. It had been busier than she remembered. The people there seemed tense; the trappers all carried some sort of weapon, and the two men of Victyr's party she saw looked eager to be going somewhere else. Their packs were ready next to the mule stables, and they were wearing traveling cloaks, checking often to see if they could spot Emelyn's return.

Astrid had made herself inconspicuous, mixing among the trappers and the merchants. She managed to find the pack with all her belongings, and changed out of her furs into some proper traveler's clothes.

She'd chosen to take a risk and spend the night in the Redoubt. It was already late, and she had absolutely no interest in walking out to sleep in the cold. This had allowed her to eat around a fire with some merchants, getting to know one of them in particular: a man named Oystein.

The two of them were traveling together, now. Had been for almost two days, riding his three mules through the snow into the deep backwoods, following the tracks of the trapper army. The man stayed silent, most of the time. He had some

kind of great weight on his shoulders, worrying him. He was a trapper, like Astrid's dad had been… Before…

She pulled herself together. She shouldn't let her mind drift. She had pondered about herself, about her past life, for the entirety of the past two days. That had to be enough.

They were nearing their goal, and she needed her plan to be ready until then. Get her thoughts into order.

A doe stalked among the trees, not too far away. It seemed not to care about their presence at all, casually glancing at Astrid before trodding off.

She was lucky to have met Oystein. The old white-haired man was also traveling to the trapper army; he said he was carrying a bit of hardtack and other food, as much as he could afford, to 'take care of the boys out there'.

They had to reach that army before it was too late.

Astrid's mind wandered off between the trees. To a charming little woodcutters' village, nestled among sweet pines in the fresh bloom of spring. Her father was there, chopping wood. Keeping a kind but careful eye on the village children, who were all merrily running about. His big round face was in front of her, in the middle of her sight, smiling like she imagined he used to.

Through a blurry haze, Astrid saw the white woods around her. Everything was silent, and cold.

Her mother stood there, to one side. Stepping lightly on the snow, looking impassively at her. It was a stern face, but now Astrid could see the love in those sharp eyes.

The apparition did not speak. Vendrid just floated there, alongside Astrid, watching carefully. Gently.

Her mother had always been there for her. Given her the space she needed. She was supportive, almost too much. Heck, she'd even allowed Astrid to waste most of her days out in town, in the taverns.

She always put too high expectations on herself. When she worried about learning cantics, terrified of messing up, her mother had said it was all right to make mistakes. When Astrid had to prepare that one marriage ritual, she was overwhelmed and in the end just gave up completely, even though her mother tried to help. Vendrid never judged; it was always Astrid's own thoughts in her mind, belittling her, being too harsh on herself. Setting too high a bar, and hating herself so much for failing, that she ended up being the very failure she loathed to be.

She had not believed she could be a good cleric. She'd been terrified of being the Eye-to-See.

But all this time, Vendrid had just wanted one thing… for Astrid to be herself.

The Eye-to-See wasn't supposed to be some impossibly perfect person. She didn't have to be a holy paragon of morality, like some otherworldly force. That's not what it meant to be a cleric.

Maybe she had noticed this a bit, in the past. That people listened to her, respected her opinion, even when she'd just been speaking her mind rather than reading omens or reciting scripture. She'd assigned this to the foolishness of people, mostly. To some bogus abuse of holy status.

But that was the whole point. She was just a human, like anyone else.

She had it in her to be a good person, someone who carried the wisdom of her mother and the compassion of her father. Someone whose years of study had taught her the history of the past centuries, someone who understood the mechanics of the spirits, someone who knew how people worked and what they needed.

Her eyes could see a better way for people to take. She could draw on the power of Goibniu, she could speak in the name of her temple and in the name of all the Farn-Clans. She had the power she needed to guide people, to light them on the proper path.

She could be a leader.

It would take some time to get there. Even know, at the thought of speaking to the trappers, she was scared that she would fumble her tongue and mess it all up.

But she knew she could do it. All she had to do was follow her gut. This was no challenge of competence; it was just her best attempt to do good. Not trying was worse than failing.

Astrid Vendriddottr, the Eye-to-See, squared up in her saddle.

She could see the trees around her. The big pointed ears of her own mount, the two mules ahead of her, the dark cloak and furry hat of Oystein riding up ahead.

But her parents were also there, smiling at her, from either side. Well, they weren't *really* there, but she could imagine them very clearly. And feel their strength inside her.

She was wearing the heavy yellow cloth of Venlags. The coat's edges were embroidered with copper string in intricate patterns; it almost twinkled faintly when she held her wrist up in the sun's dimming light.

Her clothing showed power to the outside. But Astrid could also reach within, through the cool talisman on her chest, to feel the amazing warmth inside.

Churning flames, the roiling might of Goibniu. The great power of the spirit of smithery, there within her. She hadn't often felt his presence, not so clearly. It gave her confidence.

Two men stood in the snow, not far ahead. They were wrapped in furs, both holding simple copper spears.

'Stop, you there!', one of them called. 'What brings you out 'ere?'

Oystein stopped his tired mule and took his cap off to better show his face.

He cleared his throat. 'I'm Oystein of Osmund's Clearing, and I bring food…'

But neither man was listening; something else caught their attention.

Astrid had dismounted and walked forwards. She lowered her hood and pushed her cloak back, revealing the bright ritual dress and her flowing golden hair. She held her head up; she was actually decently tall, and these peninsula folk were a bit short on average. She seemed to tower above them.

'I am the Eye-to-See', she announced.

Nothing more needed to be said.

The two scouts lowered their heads, but then glanced at each other, unsure about what to do.

'I have come to speak to your leaders', Astrid added. They probably did need the extra bit of direction. 'Please, show me to them.'

They nodded, bowing their heads again. 'Yes, yes, my lady.' They were surprisingly eager to serve.

It was a pretty short walk up a level slope. Astrid was a bit surprised that they'd gotten this close to the trapper camp before being spotted.

There was no stake wall or perimeter of any kind, the camp was just there. It consisted of quite a few tents, most of them looking like improvised assemblages of canvas and fur. There were men all around, at least several dozen.

Astrid was also surprised how tired many of them looked. They had dark rings under their eyes, their shoulders were hunched. Most stood shivering next to soggy little fires.

She was surprised most of all, however, by the attention she was getting. She had made public appearances, in the past, but now every single eye was fixed on her. One man, who had been putting a stick into a fire, was frozen in action, following her with his gaze.

'My lady?', one of the scouts asked, turning around and smiling shyly.

Astrid, working hard to maintain her aura, tried to give him a magnanimous look.

'Please tell me, my lady', he went on, 'are you a priest? Do you know the rites of passing?'

She nodded. 'Of course.'

'And… my lady, is it possible to absolve the souls of people even if you don't have their body?'

Astrid put a gentle hand on the man's shoulder. 'Of course it is still possible. In fact, I would like to do so as soon as I can.'

He looked reassured, a little smile cracking his tired face.

They had reached the commander's tent.

It was set up on a patch of flat ground near the crest of the hill. On the other side, the setting sun tinged the sky a cold orange; the snow-covered land was dull grey. Wisps of fog formed in the vales.

A dog pen had been set up nearby by tying sticks to tree trunks. There were two large mastiffs inside, huddled next to one another in a corner for warmth. They still growled fiercely at Astrid, raising their heads to display angry maws and hungry eyes.

The tent itself was quite large, a big rectangle of brown canvas. A deer's skull was set above the entrance.

Not very welcoming, all in all. But Astrid had already come this far; what was the worst that could happen?

If they killed her, the world would be rid one crazy bitch.

She raised her chin, nodded at Oystein, wished for a shot of something strong to drink, and walked in.

The Sky could not be seen. Dense fog crept around Sigord, wetting her face, drawing the warmth out of her. The night was silent. The Earth did not tell her a thing.

All she could see were a few dark silhouettes of trees, one next to the other, shadowy as wraiths. It looked like the land of the dead.

The Fog does not speak; but perhaps this is what it meant to say. A promise of doom.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the Fog drew away. A gentle breeze was blowing.

Before it left, Sigord held her hand out to it.

'Why is it it all so dreary, oh Fog?', she whispered. 'Why has death come so near?'

There was no answer.

Some distance behind her, echoing among the trees, she now heard the voices

of the tribal leaders. They were standing in a big circle around the fire, doing a thing they smartly called war council. Planning to attack the humans, who had set up a camp of their own, right on the next hill over.

With the fog dispersed, she could see them. There were a handful of orange lights out there, in the darkness, marking where the trapper army had entered into the Hills. The angry light of the fires was ugly, fickle, in comparison to the gentle white pinpricks in the Sky above.

Sigord wondered where the doe in her dreams had gone. Whether it was still busy judging its own reflection.

But Astrid's undertaking didn't really matter, anymore. There were no demons coming here, whether to harm or to help. Treesnatch had also left. Nobody important actually cared about the Hills.

This would just be a meaningless fight, a battle on wintry slopes between two neighbours.

Then Sigord remembered the little mouse. Sitting there, in its patch of grass, while everything around it was catching fire.

She shook herself. Something faintly smelt burnt.

It was not easy, but she had to do something. Maybe she would manage to squeak loudly enough.

Holding her nice staff tall in her right hand, she trudged back through the snow. Past the warriors, sitting silently in little huddles, towards the hateful orange light of the war council.

Everyone was there. Ragnor Scarred stood on one side, angrily saying that the orcs should attack now, to quickly win the war before all the food was gone. Huord stood on the opposite side, her arms crossed. Red Beregor wore his full war-furs, casually brandishing his huge battleaxe, the antlers on his head casting dancing shadows among the trees. And there was also Agrig-o-Goswog, his bare chest painted with terrifying patterns, nodding in agreement with Ragnor.

Sigord stepped into an open spot in the standing circle. Only a few people noticed her. Ragnor continued speaking loudly, oblivious to her presence.

She was more than a little annoyed. It was always like this. The big warriors only cared for their own words, and they never asked her to say what she thought.

Cold air rushed into the circle. The flames dimmed down, sputtering weakly.

'I wish to speak', Sigord announced. White light seemed to radiate off her.

Everyone fell silent. Ragnor's mouth hung open.

She wasn't sure why she'd done that. Now they were all staring at her.

Maybe that was the point.

‘The warriors are tired’, she began. ‘For many days now they have marched and camped outside. They eat little.’

She felt hot, speaking like this, with everyone’s eyes on her. Powerful eyes, like those of Beregor and Agrig and Ragnor. She was squirming, but she had to go on.

‘The animals of the woods are scared. Most have fled from here. The spirits stay silent, even the Moon does not show itself.’ The young moon had slid behind a cloud, but if this was really a sign, she did not know. ‘Doing war tonight will only bring us hurt and dead.’

Somehow, they were all still silent, listening attentively. She felt eyes on her. Gentle eyes, those of Huord.

‘I will go make peace tonight’, Sigord decided. ‘Make the humans see what is right and leave our territory.’

Now she waited for the complaints. They would shout angrily. Some would say that she had already promised to do this last time, and that it hadn’t worked. Others would ask why she dared to make such a decision alone, and say that war was the chief’s matter.

But they all remained silent. They had their heads bowed, as if she had said something very wise.

Huord smiled. ‘If ye will, I’ll come with! My boar will carry us fast an’ silent. And I’ll speak fo’ the Wild Boys.’

Her father, the First Axe, nodded.

Apparently, that was that. No one else said a word. Red Beregor stared at her with crossed arms, his face unreadable. Ragnor Scarred still looked a bit dumbfounded.

‘We are blessed, that the spirits come to guide us at such a time’, Red Beregor finally said. ‘We can wait a while longer with the attack. If you succeed, then we will be spared much bloodshed.’

The council broke up.

Sigord found herself a bit surprised. That they had actually listened. That she had actually spoken. Why was it so easy?

Huord squeezed her arm. ‘Let’s go, Sigord. Me boar’s up and ready.’

The huge creature had somehow snuck up right behind her. She shook herself.

Huord swung easily up the massive animal, and held out her hand. Sigord took it, climbing up behind Huord and wrapping her arms around the pale orc’s waist.

Without a word, the boar turned and trudged off, through the area where the tribal army had been waiting. The warriors were standing up, heading the other way, towards their tents. Many waved and gave silent cheers.

Then the boar was past them, in the silent woods. There really weren't any animals around. It was all deathly still, the only noise being the occasional human voice carrying down the slope, and the clicking of the bones on Huord's necklace.

The Moon showed itself again. Sigord used it to show her the way, past the human sentries. These people were basically blind in the dark, but it was still good to be careful.

Huord's boar somehow stepped more lightly than the wind.

There were voices up ahead, muffled by sheets of canvas. Two dogs were growling.

Sigord squeezed Huord a bit tighter. Maybe this was goodbye.

She had jumped from one fire straight into the next.

Aksel Svennson, the leader of the trappers, was clearly at the edge of exhaustion. His head hung low, and he held on to a tent pole for support.

Still, Astrid was surprised by the amount of emotion - the sheer force of rage - he could bring to bear. First, he was angry to have been disturbed tonight, saying he was planning his attack for the next day. Then he was surprised to see Oystein, whom he apparently knew quite well, and flung some insults his way.

But now she saw that he was, most of all, just full of bitterness.

'Ye just left', he admonished Oystein. 'Ye fucking abandoned the Clearing. Only Romund was left there when… when…'

Oystein swallowed. 'I know, I heard. I'm very sorry. But you know things wouldn't have been much different, even if I had stayed.'

Aksel almost had tears in his eyes. But, mostly, his face was contorted by rage. 'So what! Ye can't just leave your people like that!'

Astrid tried to get things back on track, while keeping her own composure. 'I'm very sorry for what happened to you at the hands of Wicked Emelyn's thugs, and for the hardship of all the people of the backwoods.'

She was surprised how calm she managed to be, actually. The thought of her father's loss didn't cause her sadness, but confidence.

Whatever went down, she was trying to do the right thing.

'Just leave', Aksel went on, turning away from Oystein. 'Let us deal with our own problems, ye don't belong here anymore.'

'I brought you food…', the old man tried.

'Won't make much difference', Aksel spat. 'We're fighting this out now, however it goes. Don't need no help from outsiders.'

The dogs outside snarled. Despite her many layers of clothing and the comfort-

ing warmth of her certainty, Astrid felt the cold creeping in. And she was getting hungry.

She found it difficult to imagine why these trappers had actually stayed out here, with makeshift shelters and little food, for tendays. With only merciless fighting to hope for. They had warm huts at home. Why were they here? Was it really just because they wanted more hunting grounds?

A cold breeze blew against Astrid's neck. She turned around, surprised to see an orc standing right in the entrance.

'Well seen', the shaman Sigord uttered in a grating voice.

Aksel looked terrified. He lunged towards the side, reaching for his hatchet.

But Oystein moved up to him, placing a hand on his shoulder, stopping him from moving forward. Sigord shook some of the snow off her shoulders and stomped in, followed by Huord in her white fur coat.

'What the fuck ye doin' here?', Aksel shouted, brandishing his hatchet.

'I come in peace', Sigord responded. Astrid had never heard the orc speak Skijspik so clearly.

Aksel looked hardly convinced. His head was turning red. But Oystein spoke to him softly, holding him back, and it almost seemed the young trapper was reassured by the old man's presence.

Astrid stood tall in her clerical dress, wishing for a nice staff like Sigord's and holding on to a tent pole instead. She spoke up: 'You speak for the tribes, then? What have you come to say?'

The orcs might have less fancy clothes, but they both had a strong aura of their own. Huord looked like some mystic seer, and Sigord appeared to bear great wisdom. 'We want to have peace', she explained. 'The trappers must go away from our Hills.'

'Go on', Oystein whispered to Aksel. 'talk this out with them. It can't hurt.' He had a hand on the young man's shoulder.

Aksel growled in hardly contained fury. 'Now ye want peace, ye murdering fucks? Ye kill, ye steal, and then ye just want it to be over?!'

Sigord looked a bit taken aback, raising her left hand in a sign of warding. He went on. 'Ye sent poachers into our land! Ye hurt us! I can't just give it up, let it be! Ye need to be punished!'

Astrid tried to stand before him, be a calming presence. 'Come now, Svennson, let's approach this with a cool head…'

'They killed my da!', he shouted, spit flying at her face.

Ah.

That made things a bit more difficult. The dogs outside were barking.

Luckily, it seemed as if some of the fire was leaving Aksel. Oystein almost hugged him. 'I'm sorry, Aksel', he whispered.

'I understand your pain', Astrid added. 'I lost my father too. But please, let the orc speak. Hear what she has to say.'

Aksel did not look happy. Tears welled in his eyes. He sniffed loudly and nodded.

'I be… sorry for when we killed the human', Sigord began. She talked about the time, two moons ago, when she and her tribesmen had tracked down poachers in their territory. How one man raised his bow at their approach, and how he was killed in return.

Aksel was squatting on the ground, barely holding back his sobs. Oystein briefly went outside to speak to some trappers who had heard the commotion.

'This man Svenn is not the only dead', Sigord went on. 'I lost some people dear to me also. Terrog, you killed, because he walked too close to your territory.'

Aksel slowly composed himself and stood up shakily. Astrid wasn't sure if his eyes showed hate or sadness.

'So many dead. So much pain…' He almost whispered. 'But how can we just stop it here?' One dog barked angrily outside. 'We can't just leave, forget it all.' He twisted the hatched in his hands. 'I hate ye. I should fight ye, kill ye.'

Astrid tried to bring him to reason. 'You've already suffered too much. Let this be enough. Stop looking for a pointless fight, go home, wait out the winter. Send off your dead with some proper respect, rather than causing more.'

'We too just want peace in the Hills', Sigord added. 'Don't want your land, don't want no war.'

Aksel looked unsure. Astrid didn't know what else he needed to be convinced.

'How can we trust you?', Oystein asked, returning into the tent. 'What guarantee do we have the orcs will leave us alone, and stop poaching from us and raiding us?'

Aksel nodded. That had probably worried him, too, aside from the desire for vengeance that obviously blinded him.

'Leave our Hills, and we leave you in peace', Sigord explained. Then she added, 'There are many dead, and they are restless. Some bodies are lost. We can build a burial mound, so as not to forget.'

There seemed to be a spiritual power inside Sigord, strengthening her words with indisputable wisdom.

'This is wise', Astrid added. 'We should build a tumulus, under the augury of

Sakkerbold, so that the souls may rest. A holy place, for all the people that were lost this winter.'

Sigord nodded. She looked sincere. Huord had an empty gaze, but she also didn't understand a word that was being said.

Aksel still seemed unconvinced, frowning deeply. 'I respect the dead, priest, and I agree with what ye say', he finally explained. 'I would very much like ye to bless their souls. But I also have all the people o' the backwoods to think of. If we just stop here, send everyone home, we're no better off than we started. Maybe the orcs will attack us from behind, maybe not. But come thaw, we still won't have any trade, no food or clothing. We'll be at the mercy of the Old Redoubt.'

'Well… I'm sure we can find a way around that', Astrid pondered. 'You can go around the Old Redoubt, trade directly in Trebkernstad. I can speak with the Farn-Clans, perhaps set up a new guild…'

Aksel bit his lip, looking almost convinced. Oystein spoke for him: 'Aye, let's take our trade into our own hands! The Trapper's Guild, we should call it. I know some folks in Trebkernstad. And if they won't have us, we can look north, to Bomborg…'

After conferring with one another, the orcs nodded, and Sigord tentatively asked whether perhaps the Hills would also be able to trade furs with this guild.

'Why not?', Oystein laughed. 'Come, Aksel, let's put an end to all this suffering. Actually work together with these durned orcs for once; they're trappers just like us, after all. See to our dead, wait out the winter, and build our own lives back up come thaw.'

Finally Svennson shrugged, showed a faint smile, and held out his hand to Sigord. 'To peace.'

The orc bowed her head and seized his wrist, then leant in for a full embrace. 'To peace!'

Sigord and Astrid sat together on the crest of the hill. The sky was turning grey above the roiling mass of fog in the vale below.

The Moon was happy. It didn't speak today, but she was sure of it anyway, because she felt it. Death had been warded off, and the Moon liked that. The Moon liked life.

The little mouse had finally dared to poke its head out, and it had actually succeeded. Now the flames were doused and the grass had a chance to grow green and strong.

'What will you do now?', she asked Astrid. The woman had been silent for a

while, apparently plunged in her own thoughts. Or maybe speaking to those strange spirits of hers, the spirits of Metal and War and what not. Sigord had no idea how such beings could even exist, or where to find them, but then she came from the forest, not from some big temple on an island.

The Eye-to-See shrugged. She had a beaming smile, though. 'I'll stay for a few days, to be sure', she answered. 'At least as long as it takes to build the tumulus, and for the ceremony. To say goodbye to Aksel's dad, and to mine, and to your cousins.'

Sigord missed them. Harog Firesmoke and Terrog had been two merry souls. The village would be a bit more empty without them.

But now they were gone, and she was glad that she could soon properly say goodbye to them.

'After that, I think I'll head south', Astrid went on. 'Finally return to civilization, feel the warmth of a stoked hearth.'

She had a faraway gaze, looking at things only her eye could see. 'I'll return to Farnijsel, say hi to my friends, and… and I'll hug my mom.'

Sigord nodded. That was good. It was nice that the golden-haired priestess was here, but the Eye-to-See had more important places to be, now.

'You have fought your battle, Astrid', she said. 'It was a battle with yourself. But now you see yourself for who you are, for who you can be. You have won.'

The human nodded, fidgeting with something on her left ankle. Then she breathed a happy sigh.

'You fought your battle, too, and you did well', she said, turning to look Sigord in the eye. 'You saved your tribe much hurt, by doing this.' The sky was turning blue. 'I'm sure they're very glad to have you as their shaman.'

Sigord swallowed, feeling a tear welling in her left eye.

Astrid was right. Her people were lucky to have her, and she was very happy to have them.

Huord stood there, a ways down the slope, a white apparition in the mist. Smiling, waiting for Sigord.

She was so, so glad to have them.

The two women stood. Astrid of Venlags Domen, and Sigord of the Hills. They may be very different, but they shared a lot, too.

They hugged, closing their eyes as the fog slowly retreated under the warmth of the rising sun.

Wedding Day

Trebkernstad, Mjnfar

Snowflakes fell, prickling Emelyn's face, bathing the road and the entire hill in a layer of powdery white. Hiding the brown ruts underneath.

Yeren and she were slowly walking up the road, having just left the town proper. They were headed towards the hilltop castle.

She took one step after another, trudging through the soft snow, pushing on. Even though she was anxious, even though that looming stone fortress was foreboding.

It was a busy time in Trebkernstad. Two score levies had been raised, and were busy both shoring up the defenses of the town as well as preparing for some kind of expedition into the backwoods. Then, just yesterday, ten Imperial ships had arrived, bringing a large Auxiliary contingent to Mjnfar. They'd set up a camp outside of town for now. And of course the city-chief's marriage to Sylvan Sylvandottr was finally taking place.

Emelyn continued talking through her plan with Yeren. 'So this evening, we will both stay inside the castle', she said. She had to be sure it would all go right. 'At the fourth hour after dark, Victyr's men will walk from their hiding place in the woods straight to the castle. They shouldn't meet anyone until they reach the outer gate, which will be easy enough to get through.'

He nodded, looking down at the path through slitted eyelids.

'At the same time, you will open the door to the keep from inside', she went on. 'City-Chief Kaspjer will be busy celebrating his wedding, he won't be expecting an attack. Especially not since he's called up all these extra levies. So the men can probably sneak in the entire way.'

They walked past the road's first turn as it wound up the hill. It was pretty busy; they were not the only ones attending Kaspjer's marriage. But the other people were far enough away that Emelyn wasn't worried about them overhearing, as long as she kept her voice low.

'Then we surprise him, overpower his guards. Lock him in somewhere, hold the keep while things settle down and I take control.'

She was most worried about this stage. Everything else was straightforward. But she couldn't really know how everyone would react.

Kaspjer's own men probably wouldn't be an issue, they were only loyal to the coin pouch. The Auxiliary shouldn't involve itself, especially if she promised to work with them, though she didn't know any of the new arrivals personally and of course couldn't work things out with them in advance. Then there were the other power-holders, about whom she had even less of a clue, but all of whom might put stones in her way. Perhaps the guilds would have something to say. Maybe the local clergy would complain. Maybe even the Farn-Clans would come knocking.

But it should be feasible. They just had to push through now, get Kaspjer out, then hold the castle. Emelyn's position should be unassailable, she was certainly the best option for everyone involved. When this was finally over with, it would all be worth it. She could secure the backwoods, consolidate trade, make peace with everyone.

They finally reached the top, standing at the back of a small queue of well-dressed burghers waiting at the outer gate to be let in.

Pennants flew from tall poles on either side of the entrance. Green cloth, embroidered with white runes. The four guards at the entrance, clearly levies, all wore some kind of green clothing.

Emelyn had put on her nicest blue dress, embroidered in yellows and whites with classic patterns. She wore silver jewelry on her wrists, and had ordered a nice new scabbard made for her steel blade. Yeren had donned a long white tabard, hiding the chain mail beneath. His sword and dagger hung casually from his belt.

It was finally their turn. 'I am Master Emelyn of Hellfar's Furs', she presented herself. 'And this is Master Yeren.'

The levyman facing her looked a bit uncertain, fidgeting with his spear. She was clearly important enough to be let in, but he hesitated to allow the armed hobgoblin entry.

Inside, a section of the courtyard had been transformed into a pavilion by suspending a tarp from the keep and the walls. The first part of the event would take place there.

Emelyn spotted the castellan, chatting with some guests. 'Castellan Ulff!', she called merrily, pushing past the guards.

He turned and gave a broad smile. 'Master Emelyn! How good of you to come!' He held out his arms for a formal embrace.

‘Have we arrived on time?’, she asked.

‘Yes, yes, of course, it is only just beginning’, he explained. ‘This is the public ceremony. The city-chief will present his bride soon, and she has promised to sing for us. Afterwards, in the evening, there will be a banquet dinner in the main hall. Will you be so kind as to join us?’

Emelyn nodded eagerly. ‘But of course. In fact, I would like to attend the sunrise lauds in the city-chief’s honor on the morrow, as well. Would it perhaps be possible to stay overnight?’

‘But of course. I will see what I can do.’

With that, he cheerfully wandered off. She was in. Standing in the midst of Trebkernstad’s notables, Yeren at her side.

She was starting to feel like she fit in. A year ago, she would never have thought she’d be anything more than a merchant’s assistant. But now she was already a little lord of her own, and soon enough she hoped to be city-chief herself. She just had to push a little further to get there.

Perhaps, once she reached her goal, she could forget about everything that had happened along the way.

The area was quite large, and full of people, but at the same time it was easy to get an overview. Kaspjer’s armsmen, with their green livery and dwarf-copper weapons, moved about at the throng’s edges. Some were carefully keeping their eyes on the guests, others were busy getting things ready. The man himself stood at the other end of the pavilion, chatting merrily with some burghers. Of the bride, there was no trace.

Most of the guests were obviously wealthy, all guildsmen from the Borg, but few of them were actually important. There was the priestess of Ferda in resplendent green, holding her head high. And there were two Auxiliaries, wearing their usual leathers, but also wrapped in heavy grey cloaks - a sharp contrast to the “traditional” bare skin Trensenda had required in Velenstek. Emelyn saw no point approaching any of these people.

One man, though, was quite conspicuous. Standing barely as tall as the other guests’ shoulders, there was a broad black-bearded dwarf. He wore crimson red, and though Emelyn didn’t know him personally, he was obviously a representative of Thain and Gerth, Hellfar’s Furs’ primary financier.

Before she could approach him, Yeren lightly held on to her shoulder. ‘Don’t be too quick’, he whispered in his grating voice. ‘You are not the only one watching the dwarf.’

She looked around. Indeed, two of Kaspjer's people - his old guards, not levies - seemed to be keeping a careful eye on the man.

'Why are they watching him?', she asked Yeren.

'It's not only him', he replied. 'There's three or four folks here that are being watched. Those people who can be a threat to Kaspjer, I would suppose.'

Emelyn wasn't sure what to make of this. She could tell that the dwarf banker and a union leader were being watched, but she couldn't guess why. These were powerful individuals, certainly, but they were just guildsmen. They couldn't actually threaten Kaspjer, with his soldiers and his castle.

Shouldn't they be watching her? She controlled the backwoods trade, after all, and she commanded a retinue of armed men.

But none of the guards even glanced at her.

'Everyone, please!', Kaspjer called. He was standing on top of a small wooden platform, set up on the slope of the keep's broad earthen base. 'Cheer for my bride!'

Sylvan appeared at the top of the flight of stairs leading into the keep, and the crowd exploded with applause.

She was wearing a smooth, close-fitting green dress, wearing only a bit of ermine on the shoulders as an acknowledgement of the cold. She moved with incredible grace, seeming to float over the soft snow as she made her way towards the city-chief.

She took his hand and swooped up onto the platform, holding out her arms and bowing to the crowd. The people cheered even louder.

'Today I am wedding Lady Sylvan, and after tonight she will be mine!', Kaspjer continued. He put an arm around her hip, but she kept facing the crowd.

Apparently, the woman had been one of the singers at the Skrifesst. Not the main one, but still. This was the kind of person who was an honoured guest at Venfer, not someone who married a city-chief in Trebkernstad.

Little girls threw some pinecone flakes into the air. Emelyn believed they were the castellan's daughters.

The people flocked more closely around the platform to get a better view. Kaspjer stood there beaming as Sylvan began to sing.

Emelyn looked around, trying to see if she noticed anything out of the ordinary, when a deep voice spoke. 'Not a cheap affair, such a wedding. All these nice green banners, they had to be purchased in Ferdrheim.'

She was surprised to see the dwarf standing right in front of her. He grinned, and nodded to Yeren.

‘Master Dwarf! Well seen. I must say, it has unfortunately been quite a while since I could last speak to a representative of Thain and Gerth, even though you are such good partners of my business.’

He shrugged. ‘Well, the vagaries of life pull in odd directions. You have also come to wish the city-chief all the best?’

Now she wasn’t sure what to reply. ‘So I have.’

‘I must be careful what I say here, since old Kaspjer for some reason does not fully trust me or my guild.’ He grinned. ‘In any case, the man is not making himself very popular among my colleagues right now. He’s taken on some considerable debts with all his military and leisure expenses, and there seems no betterment in sight.’

Yeren piped in: ‘There is some trade, thanks to Master Emelyn’s efforts, but the backwoods are far from in order. Some areas remain stubbornly isolated.’

Emelyn did wonder a bit what was going on out there. Apparently the western trappers had made peace with the hill orcs, and Astrid was involved somehow, but they still refused to treat with her men. Well, that was a minor problem, which she’d take care of once she controlled Trebkernstad.

‘You say the city-chief has made himself unpopular among your peers?’, she asked the dwarf.

‘Aye’, he nodded, raising his brows up meaningfully. ‘He has debts he doesn’t intend to repay, he’s stolen some property from good guildsmen, and he’s about to spend considerably more on whatever military campaign he’s planning. Even the Farn-Clans have lost their patience with the man.’

Sylvan’s song had reached some high notes, her voice echoing shrilly. Kaspjer stood next to her, licking his lips. His eyes seemed to meet Emelyn’s for a moment. He looked like he was gloating.

‘What I’m saying is’, the dwarf went on, ‘there are very few people who would complain if City-Chief Kaspjer were to be… replaced.’

He grinned, though for some reason he wasn’t looking at Emelyn, but rather at Yeren.

Then he excused himself and disappeared in the crowd.

Emelyn glanced at the mercenary, trying to tell what was going on behind that unreadable face of his. He just shrugged, and watched the spectacle.

There was very little Emelyn could do but wait and let things run their course. It made her agitated, feeling like she was powerless and just letting things happen around her. But she had to show patience.

Sylvan withdrew into the keep after the singing. The outdoor event went on for

a bit longer, with some drinks being passed around and a fire-show on the stage, but Emelyn cared little for it all. She just wanted things to move on.

Was she in over her head? Probably a bit.

But it was normal to feel like an imposter. She simply had never come this far before. Two moons ago, she was stressed about being a master merchant, but now managing Hellfar's Furs wasn't even prime on her mind anymore. She would quickly get used to town politics, and she'd be able to treat with guildsmen like this dwarf easily enough.

It couldn't be that hard. She just had to go on, push through, get it done. Then it would be all right.

Emelyn sat on the edge of her bed. It was still neatly made, untouched. She was still wearing her blue dress, the sword hanging on her hip, the cloak on her shoulders. It was a bit warm, but it didn't matter. She wasn't about to sleep.

The dinner banquet had been a noisy thing, with too many guests sitting squeezed next to one another in the garishly decorated city-chief's hall. He'd sat merrily next to his bride, often holding up his cup of ale for some cheers, and telling the priestess to bless the couple in Ferda's name again and again.

Then the evening had petered out, most of the guests left, and Emelyn and Yeren had been shown to their rooms. There were few guards around, definitely not too many to handle. She was glad; it looked as if everything would work out.

Now it was time. Yeren had left to open the outside door, and Victyr's men should be entering the keep at any moment. Emelyn had to be ready to take control.

She fidgeted with her gloves. What if Victyr was stopped outside? What if Yeren couldn't open the door? She'd be stuck in here, surrounded by Kaspjer's men. At his mercy.

But that wouldn't happen. She took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to remember why she was even here. Why did it have to be her?

She had been running, running, running, without rest, for too many tendays. Always pushing on, ignoring the ugly sights, reaching for a goal that was just a bit too far away to grasp.

She was getting weary.

But it would soon be over. Just this night, and then a bit more effort afterwards to tidy things up, and then she could finally rest. Then she would have the town, and everything else would solve itself on its own.

It was time. She should hear Yeren's knock at any moment…

The door flew open with a bang.

Men with grim faces stood outside. They wore green aketons.

Something had gone wrong. Emelyn jumped to he feet, but she hesitated. There were at least four of them, and they were all bigger than her. She didn't even know how to use her sword.

Rough hands grabbed her arms. Her blade was drawn out of its scabbard and fell to the floor somewhere. Then they were dragging her along the dark cobblestone corridors, right down a flight of stairs and into the main hall.

It still smelled of the food from a few hours earlier. The tables had all been pushed to the side, but they weren't cleaned, dirty dishes still piled on them.

The guards holding her let go and pushed her forwards. She almost fell over, but kept on her feet.

A dozen people stood at the other end of the room. Kaspjer was next to his raised chair, standing triumphantly with his hands on his hips. Next to him was his wife Sylvan, still beautiful and composed. There was also Castellan Ulff, and an Auxiliary, and a half-dozen guards.

Kaspjer gave a dry little laugh. 'Well look at you! Thought you were holding all the cards? With that simple little plan of yours?' He grinned, and stepped down from the pedestal, holding his arms wide. 'You never had a chance!'

Emelyn wasn't sure what to say. She struggled finding her bearings, and making sense of the situation.

There hadn't been any sounds of fighting. Yeren wasn't here. What was going on? How did Kaspjer know?

'You look like a hound backed into a corner!', he gloated. 'Confused, trying to understand things. Let me tell you: I knew this was coming! The entire time, the last few days even.'

Emelyn stammered. 'But… how?'

He pointed victoriously at the Auxiliary. A tall woman, with two swords on her belt. 'This here is Sister Terlena. She arrived from Velenstek, three days ago. And you know what she told me? She told me you, wicked little Master Emelyn, were planning to overthrow me! You, a backwoods merchant! You are such a fool.' He looked far too sure of himself. 'Guessing your plan was easy. Especially when the Auxiliaries spotted your men, hiding out in the woods.'

So he knew it all. Emelyn couldn't think of a way out of this, not surrounded by soldiers, in the city-chief's own castle.

She had been such a fool. Her plan had been too simple. Too optimistic, and too

easy to see through. Especially with the help of supernatural warriors. How had she not guessed that the Auxiliary would side against her?

'You see, the Auxiliary here, all they want is stability. And I offer stability. And military support. You, with your messy activities out in the backwoods, you just bring chaos. Restlessness. But now I have the wild animal caged.'

He laughed again, then walked to a shelf on the right wall, standing on his toes to grab the slender green bottle that stood atop it. He held it out towards Sylvan.

'You remember this bottle, woman? You sent this eve-spirit to me when we were betrothed.' He began ripping off the wax seal. 'As a gift, for when we would marry. Well, now the time has finally come! Let us drink, and celebrate our spring campaign into the backwoods.'

He pulled the cork out with a neat pop. Sylvan beamed at him.

The Auxiliary Terlena frowned. 'You said you would join the fight against Karogeborg', she spoke with a thick accent. 'Not go to the backwoods.'

'Well', he shrugged, holding his bottle up like a sceptre, 'first I gotta see to the trappers. Make them accept my authority, properly. They have to answer my levy. And then, I'll come help you, with an even bigger army!'

Terlena looked unhappy. Emelyn threw in: 'You can't do that! Half the trappers don't even agree to trade with me, out of pride. They won't submit to your levy, they'll go to war instead!'

He again shrugged, holding the elegant bottle to his nose and smelling it. 'Then so be it. They're my subjects, let them feel it.' He held it to his lips, but did not drink yet. 'Where are the others, anyway? They should be done finishing off that hobgoblin and those young fools from Ferdrskjand by now.'

'What do you mean?', Terlena asked. 'I promised you my sisters would capture Master Yeren, and you agreed to leave the others locked outside. Victyr Ulfson and Jesper Sylvanson cannot be killed, they are important heirs.'

Kaspjer raised his eyebrows as if he hadn't known, and winked at Emelyn.

Then he turned around carelessly, smiling at Sylvan again. She walked towards him, gazing into his eyes, deeply in love. He held the bottle up towards her. 'Fuck them all. It's better to be rid of them. This first sip is for you. For us.'

He was utterly confident in his victory.

Emelyn dropped her head. It was over. Kaspjer would probably have her exiled, or executed. And the backwoods would fall into bloody chaos.

The bottle clinked as it fell onto the carpet. Kaspjer looked confused. He held a hand up to his throat, tried to clear it. A little cough came out instead.

As his face turned red, he reached out towards Sylvan. But she just stood there, three steps away, hands folded. Smiling at him.

He tried to take a step, but crashed onto the floor instead, face down.

A moment of stunned silence.

Two guards rushed forward. The others looked about in confusion. Only Sylvan just stood there, apparently content.

Someone grabbed Emelyn's arm. The castellan shouted at everyone to stay calm, and ordered the guards to go check the outer gate.

The big double doors opened inward.

Yeren stood there, in the doorway, a hard frown set on his face. Behind him stood Victyr, and Jesper, and his men, all armed to the teeth. And there were Auxiliaries, too.

'Silence!', he shouted.

In this tight space, Yeren had to keep things calm. There were too many people, too many weapons.

He had his sword drawn, ready to use. One of the fool humans held up his blade, as if in a challenge. In a flick of the wrist, Yeren nicked the man's arm, forcing him to drop the weapon. The others, clearly terrified, moved back.

Sister Terlena held her shortsword to the castellan's neck.

'The chief is dead', Victyr announced, proudly walking into the middle of the room and nudging Kaspjer's shivering body with his foot.

He opened his arms and Sylvan fell into them. They kissed, wrapped in one another's embrace.

Then he smiled at the dumbfounded guards. 'Long live the new chief.'

There was no complaint. The guards, realizing the wind had changed, all lowered their heads. The castellan looked flabbergasted, but he followed suit. As for Emelyn, standing to one side, she seemed too confused to bow.

That was dangerous. Victyr was vindictive. But, fortunately, the man was more preoccupied with the woman in his arms than with her.

'Oh, Sylvan, for how long have we loved one another', he was saying. 'Since we were golden haired children. And how sad we were, that we could never be together… except we can.'

He grinned and kissed her again.

Yeren kept a careful eye on the guards. None of them should be dumb enough to do anything foolish, but you can never know.

‘Castellan Ulff, I present you myself, your new boss’, Victyr went on. ‘I intend to rule Trebkernstad, by my authority as chief of the new Clan Sylvanelske.’

Jesper Sylvanson whooped and laughed. ‘My sister alone should be enough of a prize for you, Ulfson, you greedy bastard!’

Victyr winked at him.

The castellan bowed deeper, searching for words. He was probably doubtful about the legitimacy of this self-proclaimed chief, even while surrounded by said chief’s armed men.

‘I take Sylvan as bride by my own authority, and with the permission of her brother Jesper’, Victyr explained, strolling casually around the room. ‘But chief I am with the support of the guilds.’

He rested a friendly hand of Yeren’s shoulder, making the message clear. The castellan nodded.

‘And the Empire naturally accepts my claim.’

Sister Terlena raised her shoulders, but she didn’t contradict him. ‘Since Chief Victyr intends to honor his predecessor’s promise and support our war effort, we do see him as a partner.’

And with that, it was done. Victyr’s retinue cheerfully slapped one another on the back, while the Auxiliaries went from guard to guard and relieved them of their weapons.

One of the sisters stood out to Yeren. She had a gentle face and long, silver hair.

It was a bit of a surprise, to see Flavina here. She had changed. She looked more firm, moving with grace but determination. When one guard tried holding on to his spear, she yanked it out of his hand with surprising force, and stared him down with a steely gaze.

Yeren didn’t try to draw her attention. She ignored him, and he would do the same.

He would have liked to speak to her, but now he had to stick to the mission. The situation was still tense, he had to stay on his toes.

Then Victyr walked towards Emelyn. So he hadn’t forgotten her, after all.

She almost shrunk away from him, looking a little scared.

He slapped her backhand, flinging her head to the side. Then followed up with a left-handed punch to her gut, folding her over onto the ground.

‘Fucking bitch’, he snarled.

He spat onto her hair, and kicked her squatting form for good measure.

‘Can’t fucking stand her’, he explained. ‘Thinks she has some right to lord us

all around. That she's better than me, for some damn reason. Worthless, is what she is!'

He straightened up, and looked around. Everyone's attention was fixed on him.

'Well, I won't be mucking about in the wilderness anymore. Got grander things to do.' He smiled warmly at Sylvan, as if everything was wonderful.

Then he casually said, 'She's too dangerous to leave alive. Too many connections with the trappers and merchants. Jesper, Yeren, take her to the other room. You know what to do.'

And with that, the matter was concluded. Jesper eagerly stepped forward, leaning down to grab Emelyn under the armpits and pull her to her feet.

Focus on the mission, Yeren thought. He had managed to stay rooted in place, and keep silent, up to this moment. Now he just had to follow Jesper, and say nothing, and let things run their course. Then this mission would be over.

His orders were clear. Make sure Victyr Ulfson becomes chief, and follow his commands. Make sure he knows he owes his position of power to the guild.

The bigger picture wasn't part of Yeren's orders, but he could guess it well enough. Install a stronger, more obedient leader here in Trebkernstad, guaranteeing the town's stability and making trade more reliable. Maybe support military efforts in the region, too.

'Let's go', Jesper growled. He hauled Emelyn out the double doors.

Yeren shook himself. And followed, in silence.

Things had gone well. It was basically finished. Tomorrow, he would leave this town. Go somewhere warmer, maybe take a break for a while. He deserved it.

There really was nothing he could do, this time. Helping Emelyn would make the guild an enemy of Victyr. It would undermine the mission, and all the guild's efforts in the area for the past few moons as well.

She probably deserved this fate, anyway. He had witnessed her cause enough harm to others.

There was nothing he could do. They were in Victyr's castle, surrounded by men loyal to him.

Jesper pushed the woman into a small room to the side of the entryway. Yeren walked in behind him and closed the door.

Emelyn sat there, on her knees, tears in her eyes.

Jesper grinned, crossed his arms, and leaned against a wall next to the door. 'You do the honors, hobgoblin. I hear you got a mean swing.'

Yeren breathed deeply once more and pulled himself together. This would be over quick.

He set his jaw, took hold of the sword-hilt, and slid the curved blade out in a smooth motion.

He looked impassively at Emelyn's blubbering face. It didn't move him.

He could not take his own initiative. It would be a mistake. There was no hope.

Steadying himself, he raised the blade to the right, holding it with both hands. Jesper breathed in expectantly. Emelyn squeezed her eyes shut.

He swung.

It was a clean cut, slicing in a smooth arc through the air. Passing clear above Emelyn's head to slash right into Jesper's bare chest.

The man gasped, blood gushing out of him. Yeren took a quick step forward and stabbed upward, through his jaw and into his brain.

He crumpled onto the floor.

Emelyn sat there, shaking, not really realizing what was going on.

Yeren cursed softly. He'd done it again. He had messed up.

He held out his unbloodied left hand to the woman, and helped her to her feet. 'Quickly, now', he said, moving to check outside the room.

The entryway was empty. Voices came from the main hall to the left, but the passage to the open outer door to the right was clear.

Supporting Emelyn with one hand, holding his sword in the other, Yeren rushed outside as fast and as silently as he could. They clambered down the wooden staircase and across the deserted courtyard towards the stables.

There was a stablehand there, but the woman stayed silent at the sight of Yeren's blade. He grabbed the best two mounts he could find - two mules, already tackled - and began leading them out.

'Wait', someone said in Goblin.

Sister Flavina was fast approaching out of the darkness. Yeren dropped the leads and reached for his sword, but she was already on him.

Embracing him tightly. 'I knew you would leave, back at the monastery', she whispered.

'I knew you would understand', he replied. He wasn't sure what else to say.

'I don't begrudge you', she said, moving away a bit to look at his face. 'I know that we shared something real, but for a moment.'

He nodded. She gave him a little kiss on the cheekbone, then stepped away.

'Farewell, Yeren.'

She slipped swiftly away, back into the darkness from where she had come.

He lowered his head. 'Farewell, Flavina.'

He picked up the two leads, hushed the mules to be silent, and walked over to where Emelyn was waiting, near the gate.

The girl was hugging herself, shivering in the cold despite her thick cloak.

Still, she smiled. 'Thank you', she said as she took a mount and swung onto it.

Yeren did likewise. They trotted off, out the open gate and into the sea of fog.

He didn't know what laid ahead. He couldn't see a thing. There was no mission to guide him, no guildshouse to head to.

The unknown was beautiful. A roiling white mass of beauty and promise.

'I still can't believe it', Emelyn whispered. She had calmed down now, and was also admiring the mist. 'I feel so incredibly light… as if I have been freed.'

She breathed in deeply. 'I don't care about being a city-chief. I'm just grateful to have come out of all this alive.'

She smiled. Sincerely, out of real joy, something Yeren hadn't seen her do since they met.

'I don't have to go on. I can just leave it all behind. I can stop making plans, stop thinking about getting somewhere. Stop… letting horrible things happen. I'm free.'

Yeren smiled, too. He was still a little worried, but he felt nice and warm inside.

Perhaps, for once, he'd actually made the right decision.

They rode on, disappearing into the fog.











A Word

Thanks for reading! This *Lost in the Fog* book project has been really fun, and I'm quite proud of the result.

If you liked the world presented here, maybe you'll also like the works below. They aren't narrative stories, unfortunately.

Ferdrskjisle. A lore booklet about the human population of the archipelago in which this story plays.

Fandom Wiki. Found on the *kartecaedras.ch* website, the wiki has lots of interesting articles. It also expands a bit on some characters and events mentioned in this book, notably on Emelyn Annikadottr and on the Captives Scandal.

Vor Gar'Bordun in the Primitive North. An expedition's log, written in the perspective of an orc scribe. Trebkernstad is mentioned! Only available digitally.

Rise of Humankind. The classic reference. The Ferdrskjisle are barely even mentioned, but some of the grander world context is presented in this colossal history textbook.

I would also like to briefly give some acknowledgements.

Thanks to my grandparents, who hosted me while I drafted and wrote the meat of this narrative.

Thanks to my partner Mel, who proofread the first third of the draft and gave me very useful feedback.

Well seen

Simon

Dense grey fog all around.

A bull bellowed fiercely. It charged straight ahead, digging chunks of wet earth out of the ground. It ran on and on, but there was nothing there. Only fog. Exhausted, it stumbled and fell. And snorted happily.

A hawk flew in circles, high up in the air. It could not see the ground, only a sea of fog. But it kept on circling. It knew nothing else. Perhaps, by just letting the wind carry it away, it would be able to rise above the clouds and into the sunlight.

A doe stood by the side of a lake. It pranced, gazing carefully at its reflection. It tried hard to look beautiful. But it did not realize there was no one watching, except its own reflection.

A mouse huddled in the grass. It was scared and did not dare poke its head out.

Then the grass caught fire, and the mouse was wreathed in flame. It squeaked shrilly. There was the smell of burning flesh. The stench of smoke, of burning, of acrid smoke…