

# The Black Lion:

## Chapter 2 - One Big Happy Family - Part 1

By John McCabe

It was hard to watch her leave. He hated to admit it, but he had almost given up hope of ever seeing her again and to have her walk in like that was unbelievable. He had begun to hallucinate and sometimes found it difficult to know reality from imagination. Only the small glass bottle in his hand and a faint trace of her fragrance convinced him it had all been real. Herr Blutfelden had been quite brutal in his questioning and Matheus had been close to dying, but every time, the Heldannic priest would heal his worst wounds and then the process would start all over again. To hear from Anya that it was Vatermont and that his child would be born this summer. "His child", he thought with a pained smile. He had never given much thought to starting a family. His own childhood had been, how would he describe it? Short. Not the kind of experience he wanted to replicate, and he had always felt that he would not make a good father. But that choice had been taken out of his hands. She had walked into Olson's Alehouse and Inn and he knew there and then that she was the one. He just needed to convince her of that. He smiled thinking back over it all. He found the memories gave him renewed vigour; his fracturing mind was consolidating. He was getting out of here. Somehow, she had organised it and he just needed to be ready.

He had picked up from the guards during shift change that the Rangers of Altenwald were causing some difficulties for the knights. There were two things that pleased Matheus about this. The first one obvious, Halvard was taking the fight to the occupying force and secondly Herr Blutfelden had not come for any more "chats". The guard at his cell door did the bare minimum required, allowing a servant to come in and empty his bucket and bring the occasional morsel of food and water. Two or three nights later, he was not sure, it was difficult to measure time when he could not see the sun, and it happened, the time had come. He heard a whistling sound, followed by a short yelp of pain and surprise from the guard outside his door. He wasted no time and pulled the glass vial out from his ripped and stained clothing.

She had told him to use it on the chains so he was careful not to get any on his skin. It appeared to be a clear liquid but when he applied several drops to his chains they began to hiss, smoke bubbling forth as the acid ate through the metal in no time. He still had the manacles attached to his wrists with about two feet of chain dangling when he struggled to his feet, leaning heavily against the cell wall. "By Odin", he muttered, "I'm like a day-old lamb".

"Eh Hello, in there? Whenever you're ready. We need to get out of here". The voice came from the corridor outside his cell.

Taking a deep breath, he walked to the door and peered through the grill. He could not see the speaker and could just make out the legs of the guard who appeared to be sitting on the floor. "Hello?" he whispered.

“Yes, we’re here to get you out of here but you’ll need to do the next part yourself. Can you get that door open?” the voice asked.

He looked at the door, it was sturdy and he had little doubt that he could have broken through easily on any other occasion but not right now. He had been battered and starved, his legs and back were stiff and sore from lack of exercise. He rested his forehead against the door. “Was this how it was going to end?” His famed strength would fail him and he would be doomed. He would never see Anya, would never see his child born. He slammed a fist against the door but it barely budged. He took a breath “Come on Matheus, think”. Was there something he could use as leverage, something he could use to multiply the strength of his weakened state? He looked quickly around the room, but there was nothing, a bucket, the remains of the chains secured to the wall and the glass bottle. He quickly picked it up and examined the contents hoping there would be enough left. He moved as quickly as he could back to the door and kneeled down in front of the lock and started pouring, as best he could, the acid into the lock. It immediately began to hiss and smoke so he stood back letting it do its work.

“Hurry up will you. We’re on a tight schedule”, came the voice again from the corridor.

He stepped back up to the door and looped the chains dangling from his wrists through the metal grill and then gripped the ends. He placed both his feet on either side of the door and leaned back. He strained against the locked door, hoping the grill would not come free before the lock gave way. His muscles bulged, his back strained, black clouds flashed across his vision and he felt light headed, but it was now or never. His weight, whatever strength he could muster, the acid working on the lock and his renewed thirst for freedom were enough. The bars on the grill bent inwards, the sound of splintering wood and finally the door came loose and he fell heavily to his side. Scrambling quickly to his feet he grabbed the door and opened it all the way, revealing the corridor and the unconscious guard.

“Over here”, called the voice again.

He walked out in to the empty corridor.

“Down here”.

He looked down to the small hole with iron bars and could make out the face of a man with a long neatly trimmed moustache. A child might get through once the bars were removed but there was no way Matheus was fitting through that.

“Ok, we’re nearly there. I just need you to get that the dart from the guard’s thigh and return it to me. Oh, and give him a tap on the head with that chain. Nothing too hard we don’t want to kill him. Just enough to leave a mark. Understood?”

Matheus nodded and walked back to the guard. He pulled the needle like dart from the guard's leg and then removing his helm he walloped him across the side of the head. That was going to

leave a mark, not to mention a headache but he was getting off lightly as far as Matheus was concerned.

He quickly moved back to the hole in the wall and handed the man his dart. "Now what?"

"Well, now we have to go to plan C".

"Plan C, what's that?"

"Well, you're not going to fit through those bars you're far too big",

"Yeah, sorry about that", muttered Matheus sarcastically.

"That's alright, we have Plan C, here drink this" he said pushing a glass bottle through the bars on to the corridor floor.

Matheus picked it up and looked at it suspiciously, "What is it, more acid?"

"No, no, you drink it".

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. We didn't go to all this trouble to get you out only to kill you. Now hurry up, please".

Matheus pulled the stopper off the bottle and knocked the liquid back. He felt a slight dizziness as the corridor seemed to swirl and sway around him. He felt like he was falling, the ceiling shooting away from him, like the floor had fallen away and he was falling down a hole. Suddenly it stopped and he realised to his amazement that the bars on the hole were now like massive pillars of steel, between which he could easily walk. He had shrunk down to an impossibly tiny size. The large face with the moustache grinned at him through the bars.

"Plan C in progress, let's go, no time to waste". He raised his hand, palm up and Matheus ran forward on to it. Once there the man carefully used his second hand to make sure he did not fall off and Matheus gripped one of his fingers.

"Good, that's the relatively easy part done. I'm Ansel, he's Jakob and you're Matheus. Introductions are out of the way, now it really is time to go".

There was not much for Matheus to do but hold on as Ansel and Jakob splashed through the dark tunnel. Ansel slipped Matheus into the breast pocket of his coat and walked steadily along, holding a torch in his hand with Jakob a few paces ahead. They spent about an hour in the tunnels beneath the fortress, water gushing from pipes connected to different parts of the city above. Pipes containing overflow from the rainfall that fell on the streets but also human waste. There was one occasion when the men were in water almost up to their chests but Ansel was careful not to lose Matheus and proceeded with caution.

"Well Jakob what do you make of our friend here. Think it was worth the effort?"

Jakob stared hard at Matheus like he was seriously giving some consideration to just squashing him there and then. After a moment he grunted "I just hope he doesn't make me regret it".

Matheus was in the dark, literally and figuratively. He was sure he did not know this man, but this man, Jakob, seemed to know him.

"The potion's effects will wear off soon. Let me know if you are starting to feel funny and I'll take you out of my pocket," said Ansel.

The men continued, Jakob periodically glancing at the map he held of the tunnels they were in.

They eventually emerged into the outside world, a soft breeze blowing. Two other men were waiting for them. Without a word, they ushered them into a waiting boat, although Jakob remained behind.

"I think it's time Ansel", called Matheus.

Quickly he took Matheus from his pocket and placed him carefully on an empty space on the boat seat opposite him. Matheus returned rapidly to his normal size causing the boat to rock and the rowers to break their stroke while they readjusted to his added weight.

He looked down at himself checking that all was as it should be then he looked at Ansel. "Thank you for this". Ansel smiled, the chains on Matheus's wrists rattling.

"Let me take a look at those". He produced a set of lock picks and set to work on the locks. One by one, they sprung open and he carefully dropped both of them overboard to sink below the surface.

Matheus rubbed his wrists which had been shackled for months, the skin broken and scabbed. The men sat in silence, the only sound was the oars hitting the water, propelling the boat onwards. The journey ended by the side of a ship and Ansel climbed some netting that had been lowered over the side. He indicated that Matheus was to join him. A brief word of gratitude to the men rowing the boat and he clambered up onto the deck of the ship.

Once on board he saw Ansel talking to the captain of the ship, a Minrothad elf. She appraised him as he drew near and did not return his nod of greeting. "Take him below, Ansel".

Ansel led him to some quarters with two bunks and without another word he lay down on the soft bed. After spending months lying on the cold hard floor of the dungeon cell it was incredibly comfortable. He sighed in relief and almost immediately fell asleep.

He was awakened by Ansel who had some fresh new clothes ready for him. He had intended to offer these to Matheus earlier but the big man had fallen asleep before he had the chance. They shared a breakfast and Ansel gave him two potions that immediately sent a warmth coursing through his bruised and battered body healing it. "Thank you, Ansel for getting me out of there".

“It was no trouble at all. Well, it was a little trouble but we always had faith we could do it. You have some friends in useful places that ensured the mission would succeed. You need to lay low for a while or you'll waste all the time and resources put into getting you out of there”.

“Why did you have me strike the guard across the head when he was already unconscious?”

“I wanted to keep the Knights guessing. I don't want them to know how I actually did it you see. If they find that the guard has a lump on his head, then they will assume he was knocked out. He'll have no recollection and won't be able to reveal he was actually hit by one of my darts. The bars on the grate were undamaged and far too small for someone of your size to get through so they won't think we got out that way or at least they won't be sure. That's what it's all about, feints and uncertainties”, he smiled.

Ansel had grown up in Darokin and was about the same age as Matheus at around twenty-four years old. He was a rakish figure just under six foot in height with shoulder length black hair and cleanly shaven but for a well-groomed moustache. He had somehow ended up on a ship after a night out drinking with friends and when he awoke the next morning found himself conscripted on to the ship. It was not an enjoyable experience as he explained. He spent the first few days leaning over the side sharing his meals with the fish but over time he eventually found his sea legs. He had been all over the Sea of Dread and many of the port cities but he had a special fondness for the Islands of Ierendi. He had told Matheus of the sun-soaked beaches, the food and of course the women.

“So beautiful, Matheus. You wouldn't believe it. When I'm a bit older, I intend to retire there. I'll have enough money to buy a nice home and live out my days”, he smiled, his eyes gazing off into his imagined future.

A few days later Ansel had informed him that they would be arriving at Landfall. They would be going in with some of the crew who had some business to conduct. Along with the new clothes and healing potions, he had provided Matheus with a sword and some coins. Enough to keep him going for a couple of months, longer if he was frugal. Matheus had heard of Landfall and had been warned by Ansel to be alert as the place was full of cut throats and thieves. A dangerous place to be sure, but also a good place to disappear.

They had wandered through Dockside into the Market square. The ramshackle huts mixed in with the sturdier buildings of the businesses and guild halls. The town was full of tough looking men and women, beggars and street urchins looking for food or an easy mark. It was not a place Matheus wanted to stay in too long. He found the stench and the closeness of the buildings disconcerting. Ansel though seemed totally at ease in this environment. He was as at home in this crime ridden urban setting as Matheus was in the wilderness of the Heldann Freeholds. As carefree as he appeared however, Matheus noticed that his hand never strayed too far from the rapier by his side. While Matheus could spot tracks and trails invisible to all but the most experienced woodsman, Ansel could spot pick pockets and beggars with sob stories

that were mere fabrications, distractions. He sent them all packing and soon they were left alone. The predators, of which this port town had many, left them to find easier prey.

Market Square was filled with gambling halls and some places to get food and drink. Matheus had no desire to gamble but Ansel's eyes lit up with pleasure and he had assured him they would not stay too long. Matheus and Ansel obviously had very different definitions of 'not too long'. After a rocky start Ansel's luck began to change and he was soon winning back all his losses and more. Thankfully he was able to quit while he was ahead and had led Matheus to an Inn called the Happy Harlequin. After they had secured their lodgings, Ansel had suggested that Matheus get a haircut.

"You look like something the cat dragged in. You'll never find a woman looking like that. At least not the kind you could take home to your mother".

Matheus had scowled at this but one look in the mirror convinced him that Ansel was right, he looked a mess. A visit to the barbers sorted this out. Ansel had advised that he cut his hair very short and lose the beard. There were a lot of spies and bounty hunters in Landfall and it might be best to change his appearance as much as he could. They had to assume there would be a reward out for his capture.

They were staying at the Happy Harlequin for about two weeks and Matheus had been amused and entertained in Ansel's company. He looked like a bit of a fop but had shown himself well able to handle himself when needed. Landfall was a place where it was very difficult to stay out of trouble. Brawls were a regular occurrence. Sometimes between people who had drunk too much, sometimes over women, sometimes when a pick pocket was not skilful enough and sometimes for no obvious reason at all. Usually, Ansel could talk his way out of a fight, he was very good at this, but sometime this was not always possible. Despite his neat and cultured exterior, he was not above taking advantage of an opening with head butts and eye pokes.

During one of their conversations Ansel had been talking about the plans made to get Matheus out of Freiburg and mentioned the costs involved. Costs that Jakob Arendt, Anya's father had covered. Matheus was silent, annoyed with himself for not considering this.

"That man, Jakob, was Anya's father?"

Ansel nodded an amused look on his face.

"He didn't look too happy to see me. Kind of looked like he wanted to squash me".

Ansel smiled. "Well, you were playing around with his daughter so you can't blame him and besides he didn't and you're here now".

"It wasn't like that", replied Matheus, a little annoyed that Anya's father thought this way but realised quickly that if the roles were reversed, he would probably be angry too. He would need to prove to him that he was a good man and would take care of Anya.

“You said Jakob covered the costs of getting me out”.

Ansel nodded.

“How much are we talking about?”

Ansel shrugged but thought for a moment, “Five or six thousand”.

Matheus’s jaw dropped, “Gold?”

Ansel looked at him with amusement “Of course gold, what else?”

“I’ll have to pay that back. It’s only right”.

“I’m sure Jakob doesn’t see it that way. You are practically family after all. Consider it an early wedding present, a dowry if you like”, said Ansel clearly enjoying Matheus’s discomfort and surprise that he appeared to be well informed about Matheus and Anya’s relationship.

“I’ll pay it back. Maybe I can get work here”.

Ansel laughed silently and looked up at the ceiling of the Inn. “Pay it back he says”. Then he looked at Matheus his hands clasped together and leaned forward on the table. “Do you have any idea how long it would take you to save that much money working in a place like this?”

When Matheus merely scowled, he continued, “If you are serious about paying Jakob back and I can see that you are, then you’ll need a much higher return for your services”.

“Doing what?” asked Matheus in a low voice “I am not a thief”,

Ansel looked at him thoughtfully, “That’s alright, it’s not for everyone we all have our skills, our paths in life. You’re a woodsman, a ranger, you can fight and you’re strong. Have you ever considered joining an adventuring party?”

Matheus shook his head.

“You should give it some thought. The risks are high, death and disfigurement are almost certain, but the rewards can be spectacular. Gold, gems, even magic, it could be the answer to your problem”.

“Adventurer, eh?”

“Yes, I did it myself for a bit. It can get a bit hairy at times but as I said, very rewarding”.

Matheus thought for a moment and then nodded his head. “Ok, an adventuring party, big risks, big rewards. That’s what I’ll do. The sooner I get the money, the sooner I can get back to Anya”.

“Well, yes and no”.

Matheus looked at Ansel with a questioning look.

“You have to lay low and I was thinking it would be best to get some more distance. There’s a ship leaving in a day or two. South to Ierendi as it happens. A much nicer, warmer and altogether more pleasant place to do that. A few months, maybe a year and then you should be alright to return. I’m sure you’ll find adventuring opportunities there too”.

Matheus had started shaking his head when Ansel said Ierendi. “No, no. I’m staying around here. Worse case I can always walk back. Taking me on a ship miles and miles from here? Not going to happen”.

They had argued about this for some time and not even Ansel’s persuasiveness could change Matheus’s mind. In the end he gave up with a sigh “You are one stubborn, ox brained...” He rested his forehead on the table “Ok, we stay, we’ll just scrap that and move to our newly decided Plan B. I’ll ask around, see if I can find a party in need of anyone with your talents”. He sat back in the chair and then grinned “I hope I find a nice girl like your Anya; someone I enjoy being around all the time. I doubt it but stranger things have happened”.

## One Big Happy Family - Part 2

About a week later and Ansel introduced Matheus to his newest family, an adventuring group who had arrived in from Helskir, on the Isle of Dawn. The group consisted of a cleric of Zirchev, who was the party leader, an Alphatian mage, a fighting man with crisscrossing scars on his face and a huge long-limbed warrior taller even than Matheus. They had been adventuring on the Isle of Dawn and were looking to head further north into Norwold. Their party had consisted of more members but they had lost some and others had decided to stay behind. They were in need of someone with wilderness skills and someone with Ansel's talents. Matheus had been surprised at this, thinking it was something he would be taking on alone and therefore parting ways with Ansel. Ansel had explained that he was running low on funds and he was getting tired of Landfall anyway.

Over the next few days, they rested and prepared for their journey north. The cleric of Zirchev was a tall strong woman, with pitch black hair and copper coloured skin. Ansel had told him that Marwa was a Thothian from the Isle of Dawn when he asked about her accent. He had a good feeling about her abilities and as he said, "she seems to have her head screwed on properly". Matheus agreed. He had met a lot of people in positions of authority, leaders of men in the fight against the Heldannic Order and she seemed solid.

The mage, Sudoska, a man with curly red hair had a habit of lowering his head to peer over his glasses whenever he spoke to you. He was not very talkative and gave the impression that everyone's job was to keep him safe. They were hired hands, servants and he seemed to consider himself above all the others except Marwa, whom he viewed as almost an equal.

The fighter with the scarred face was a Thyatian, of medium height, a solid compact build, called Manian. He was a friendly man, especially to those who knew about horses. He got on well with Ansel who loved gambling on horse races and therefore was very interested in whatever Manian knew about the topic.

The last member of the party was Rorc Halftroll. Never had someone been named so well. If a troll had been transformed into a human, he would look like Rorc. Long greasy black hair, with a long-pointed nose, he stood almost seven feet tall. He was not as powerfully built as Matheus, with long arms, legs and torso. He wore a grubby leather jerkin and wielded his battle-axe with one hand. There had been an unspoken challenge issued to Matheus a look that said, "I'm the muscle in this party little man and don't you forget it". He was from Ostland in the Northern Reaches. Matheus was very familiar with these people as his own father had been from Vestland. Conflicting memories surfaced regarding his father. The early ones were good, the older ones not so much. He had decided very early on that he did not like Rorc Halftroll and it appeared that the feeling was mutual.

Matheus managed to secure some maps of the area they were headed into. He had not been this far north before but he was used to the type of weather and terrain they would have to deal

with. He used his last remaining gold to buy the equipment he would need including a set of leather armour. He was still annoyed with the loss of his axes but that could not be helped now.

Before heading north, they were going to see an Alphatian mage called Felspel who had a job for them. They met the mage at his home southeast along the coast from Landfall. It was a simple building made from wood and stone overlooking Kamminer Bay. He was a lean man of average height and wore long black robes with a grey crescent moon on the back. He stood out in front of the building as they approached. Matheus could not help but think he looked very vulnerable out here so far from civilisation. He laughed inside and reminded himself that Landfall was far from civilised and maybe the mage was safer here after all.

Marwa made the introductions and Felspel seemed pleased with the party. He explained that his wife, Marguerite, had been enchanted by a rival who was jealous of Felspel. The enchantment had caused his wife to turn against him and see him as an enemy. Felspel had been able to thwart the assassination attempt made by his rival and slain the man. Unfortunately, his wife had fled before he could remove the enchantment on her. He had managed to track her to a cave system not too far from here but had discovered that she had been taken by the humanoids that lived there. He wanted to hire the party to go in and rescue her.

It all seemed straight forward, and the party had located the caves easily enough. Rorc had made disparaging comments about the mage not being man enough to rescue his own wife and therefore not being worthy of her. They had gone in and had fought their way through a number of hobgoblins, all the time going deeper and deeper. Sudoska, their own Alphatian mage had proven his worth in many encounters but during one such encounter his glasses had been knocked from his head. Rorc had stood on the glasses and crushed them beyond usefulness. It had seemed to Matheus that Rorc had done it on purpose and Sudoska had screamed at Rorc voicing Matheus's thoughts. Marwa had been forced to step in and calm the situation down. They had rested that night in a cave they had made secure but, in the morning, while everyone was getting ready for the day Sudoska was complaining loudly, restarting the argument from yesterday that had not really been settled. Without his glasses he was unable to read from his spell book and learn more spells for the day ahead. He had one or two spells still memorised but would be severely compromised and unable to help the party very much.

They were discussing their next course of action when Matheus found tracks that could possibly be Marguerite as they were small and quite new. Marwa had decided to press on despite the opposition of Sudoska. It almost proved to be a fatal decision when later on they were ambushed by what they had originally thought were more hobgoblins. The confusion was short lived, these creatures attacked with wickedly sharp claws. Manian called out in pain and collapsed onto the ground his sword falling from his grasp. Matheus had charged in stopping the killing blow to his paralysed comrade opening a gash across the arm of the creature. It withdrew momentarily but then leapt forward again, this time attacking Matheus.

Marwa cast a spell freezing one of them in place. A spell Matheus recognised as the same one cast by the Heldannic Knight on him which had led to his capture and imprisonment in Freiburg. It was a tough fight, but they defeated the remaining creatures and returned to the one still alive but held in Marwa's spell. Sudoska told them it was a thoul and Marwa did what she could for Manian. They had tied the thoul up with the intention of questioning it. Ansel had gone on ahead to scout and returned with news of another cavern branching off that contained more thouls, females and some young.

It took a few minutes, but Manian recovered and was able to get up and reclaim his fallen sword. He walked up close to the creature fascinated. "It hit me with that claw and the strength just disappeared from my body".

Sudoska mumbled to himself about taking a sample for further analysis.

To Matheus this was all just a means to an end. He did not want to be here fighting hobgoblins, thouls and dealing with a Mage's love life. He had a family of his own and as soon as he had enough saved, he was heading back to Anya, hopefully before the child was born.

Rorc too was interested in the thouls, his ears almost visibly perking up when Sudoska explained they were a magical cross breed of ghouls, hobgoblins and trolls. He walked up with his knife drawn. "Do they heal like trolls?"

"Get away from him, Rorc", said Marwa with a commanding voice.

Rorc chuckled and replacing the knife in its scabbard, walked to where Ansel had said the female thouls were.

There were about 5 females and a number of young, though it was hard to be sure of exact numbers as they were hiding behind overturned furniture.

"Any sign of Marguerite?" asked Manian.

Ansel shook his head, "not here".

With the thoul safely tied up Marwa joined them at the entrance to the room. Sudoska wanted to use a fireball spell to eliminate the remaining thouls but much to Matheus's surprise Rorc was vehemently against this. For a man that seemed cold blooded and ruthless, it caused him to reappraise the lanky fighter. Ansel was sent to scout ahead in an attempt to locate the mage's wife. Rorc appeared to have won the argument and Sudoska said no more.

Twenty minutes later Ansel returned with news that he had located Marguerite. She was locked behind a secure door which he had not opened but he was able to talk to her through the door and assure her that help was on the way.

Marwa gave Manian the task of staying with the thouls in the room to ensure they did not move, and the others went with Ansel to get Marguerite. Marwa cast a spell and when she

seemed satisfied gave him the nod. He proceeded to pick the lock and when there was a satisfying click, he pushed it open. Matheus was first in, and he cautiously approached the terrified woman. Images of himself locked up in the dungeons beneath Freiburg came back as he looked at her. Her long auburn hair was dishevelled, and her arms were tied together with some rope. Her once fine dress was stained and torn. She sat against a rough-hewn wall her legs folded and drawn up beneath her. She said nothing as Matheus drew a knife and began to cut her bonds. He noticed she had an elaborate piece of jewellery around her neck. Thick like the collar for an animal it was engraved with images and spirals. He helped her to her feet and she finally spoke. "Thank you. I'm grateful to you".

She appeared calm and walked with them from the room until Marwa told her that her husband Felspel had sent them and she would soon be back with him. At this she recoiled in horror.

"Husband, him? No, he cast a spell on my husband and then killed him. He imprisoned me and put this...thing on my neck!" She looked uncertain when she was asked what the collar did but after thinking for a moment seemed convinced that it prevented her from casting spells.

The others had looked at each other uncertainly. Was this part of the enchantment Felspel spoke of or was she telling them the truth and the mage had lied to them? A loud sound like flames from a suddenly opened furnace door and the screams of the thouls caused the party to run back to the room Manian was supposed to be guarding.

Sudoska was there with him. He had gone back while they had been distracted with Marguerite. Matheus was confronted by the horrific sight of an inferno which had engulfed the furniture and the thoul women and children. He turned in anger to Sudoska but Rorc was a step ahead and grabbed the mage by the front of the robe and with an anguished roar threw the mage across the room to slam against the wall. He followed up and kicked the prone mage hard in the side, possibly cracking some ribs. He then raised his foot and repeatedly stomped on Sudoska who was raising his arms feebly to ward off the blows.

"They were just women and children", he kept shouting each time his foot connected with a part of Sudoska's head and body.

Marwa was shouting at him to stop but he would not. In the end Manian and Ansel had to step in to prevent him from killing the mage. Matheus had walked over to the charred bodies in the slim chance that someone had survived. He shook his head, his mouth set in a grim line. No, there were no survivors. What was left was barely recognisable as humanoid. This adventuring was not at all what he had signed up for. Lots of killing and danger but as yet no gold and jewels. He turned back to the group. Marwa was tending to a badly dazed Sudoska. Manian had walked out of the room with Rorc, and he could hear him agreeing that the mage should not have done that. Ansel was examining the collar around the neck of Marguerite for a lock of some sort that he could pick but there was none.

Back in the chamber, the group gathered around Marwa to decide on their next course of action. While she was talking, Rorc held out his hand for Manian's crossbow which he handed over without a word. Standing up he walked to the captured thoul who glared at him with pure hatred.

"I'm sorry", said Rorc before firing the crossbow and killing him.

Marwa watched him do it but did not try to stop him. There really was no choice.

They had searched every nook and cranny for treasure and hidden passageways. In the end they had a handful of jewels, some coins of low value but also a wand and an arrow that glowed when Marwa cast a spell.

Sudoska was silent except for the occasional groan of pain. Rorc would shoot him an angry look, dripping with evil intent and he would be silent.

Marguerite Larouche told them that her family was originally from Glantri but had moved to the lands of Traladara when she was young. She had stayed there until she met Rustan, her husband. The Thyatian emperor had given the land of the Traladaran to a Duke Stefan and they had decided it would be safer if they left and journeyed north to Ljóshöll in Norwold. Her brother Jean Pierre had remained behind and they had booked passage on a ship leaving Specularum, the capital of the newly created Duchy of Karamaikos. There were other ex-pats from Traladara in Norwold and they had heard there was a town called Saffir. A town with many Traladaran. A home from home. A place to start over again.

Felspel had joined the ship later on in the journey and befriended them. She realised now that the Alphetian mage had cast a charm spell on Rustan and convinced him to get off at Landfall instead of their intended destination of Ljóshöll. Rustan had eventually managed to fight off the effects of the spell but Felspel had killed him. He had put this collar on her which had some kind of anti-magic effect. They would need to get the spell word from him to deactivate it.

They could tell she did not want anything to do with Felspel and would have preferred to leave there and then but she was keen to have the collar removed, so had decided to trust these people with her future. The two-mile journey back to Felspel's house was uneventful and they were met by the mage who called out as they arrived.

"Oh, my dear wife, it is so good to see you safe and well. I thought you had been lost to me".

Marguerite shouted back at him "You are no husband of mine. You killed him. You murderer".

This outburst did not appear to upset him too much and he walked a couple of paces forward but still kept his distance. He pulled back with a look of surprise when Marwa spoke.

"We have a few things to sort out wizard. This lady tells a story very different to your own. We'll need to satisfy ourselves before we hand her over to you. I'm sure you understand. As you can

see the mission was not an easy one. We lost a man and will have to return another time to collect his remains”.

“Ah you want a bigger reward is that it? You are trying to change the terms of our agreement. Well, that will not happen. You agreed to rescue my wife and return her to me. I told you she had been cursed to believe that I was her enemy. You can see for yourself that this is true”.

“What you say might be true but I won’t be rushed into anything rash. You said she has been enchanted and she says that the collar is the source of this, so go ahead and remove it”.

Matheus could see Rorc handling his axe impatiently. All this talk was wearing on him. Sudoska was leaning on his staff trying to look imposing and not battered and helpless without any combat spells.

The mage Felspel seemed uneasy when he spoke again “Fine, I will remove the collar and we can see the truth of this matter once and for all”. He pointed at Marguerite who shrank back from him and shouted “Uskull”. There was a small click from the collar and it fell to the ground before she could catch it.

Matheus looked to Marguerite and then back to Felspel who was smiling now. This surprised the group. They had begun to doubt Felspel’s story but now that he had removed the collar it seemed that it was Marguerite who was wrong.

That thought lasted about two seconds. Marguerite gasped in shock, the hair on her head appeared to lengthen. She dropped down onto her hunkers and shouted mournfully, “No!”

“What have you done mage?” shouted Marwa drawing her mace. Manian took aim at the mage who did nothing to protect himself. The others were unsure. What was happening here?

Marguerite’s auburn hair now covered her body, the dress hung in tatters from her body which was continuing to grow and expand, a snout, claws. Her scream became a roar of anger. Marguerite was gone, replaced by a massive bear which bellowed aggressively at Matheus and Rorc, who stepped back a few paces. The large head turned to the mage, Felspel and then it began to stomp towards him.

While all of this was happening, Felspel began casting a spell. As the werebear took its first steps towards him, it was completed. A sticky white web engulfed Marguerite, Matheus and Rorc in its strands. Manian fired his crossbow at the mage but the quarrel was deflected by an invisible barrier.

Marwa was running forward to engage as Felspel began casting another spell. The look of triumph on his face turned to shock, a gasp of pain disrupted his magic. He reached down and withdrew a needle like dart from his thigh. He stumbled slightly as Marwa closed the distance with a war cry. She struck him with her mace as Ansel appeared, the invisibility spell, Sudoska’s last piece of magical contribution, ended.

The web was being ripped to shreds by the two men and the werebear which sought to free itself. Felspel quickly took a faltering step back his next spell already on his lips. The werebear barrelled through anyone in her way to reach the mage, knocking Manian and Marwa aside. She rose up on her back legs and was about to come down with all her weight to crush Felspel when he just disappeared. She wheeled about in confusion thinking he had got behind her, snarling in anger. The others rushed forward to help Marwa and Manian out of harm's way.

Marguerite looked at them briefly but was more interested in locating her husband's murderer. She turned away and charged into the house, the wooden structure shuddered and groaned as she tore the place asunder. There were sounds of wood splintering and glass breaking but no screams of a terrified mage. Wherever Felspel had disappeared to it was not inside his house.

"What the hell just happened?" asked Rorc, his large axe gripped in both hands as if anticipating the werebears return at any second.

"I'm not sure. Maybe when she calms down, she might be able to tell us", said Marwa.

It took a while but eventually, the sounds of destruction died down. The snorts and grunts of an aggravated bear issuing from the ruined house, one wall partially collapsed. Then there was silence, followed by the sound of something falling and then Marguerite appeared in the doorway, a blanket from the bed thrown over her shoulders. She was barefoot and walked carefully out avoiding the broken bits of wood and crockery strewn about. She stopped about twenty feet from the party. "Does anyone have any spare clothes?"

Ansel was the first to laugh and the others followed, the tension broken. Marwa had some spare leggings and a tunic. Manian made her a makeshift pair of cloth coverings for her feet and Ansel offered to let her ride on his horse with him. The horse however had different ideas, smelling a dangerous carnivore from the relatively small woman. Manian stepped in and with a soothing voice reassured the horse until it accepted Marguerite. Ansel stooped down beside the fallen collar and then carefully placed it into the small bag on his belt.

Over the next couple of days, the party spent their time healing and gathering themselves. Sudoska found replacement glasses much to his relief and was able to analyse the items they had found. The arrow was indeed magical and the wand ironically enough cast fireballs. Given the recent incident with the fireball Marwa advised him to be discreet with it around Rorc.

It was while they were gathered around eating some food that Marguerite told them some more of her story. She was indeed from Glantri and had moved to the Traladaran lands with her family. She was the only one to be infected with lycanthropy, something that her husband knew about but no other. She suspected that Felspel knew her secret too but she was unsure how. He had wanted her for his experiments but knew he had to control her first using the collar which prevented her from changing form. She still intended on going north to Ljóshöll and then on to Saffir, where Rustan had some family.

Those few months were filled with adventure and more than enough danger. The party took Marguerite under their wing. She was a mage but one with only a little experience. Her spell book had been taken from her when she was captured by Felspel and she had been relieved to find it in the cabin. They had agreed to travel north with her to Saffir seeing as they were headed in that direction anyway.

They had some encounters in the Skaufskogr Hills with foxfolk lupin. Matheus was reminded of the lupin he had fought all those months ago when he was with Anya. These lupin tended to keep to themselves but were happy for them to camp near their villages. He learned that they had a particular animosity towards werewolves and enjoyed hunting them. Thankfully despite the odd curious look in Marguerites direction all went well.

The lupin had a problem with their drinking water from the nearby river that was making them sick. The party investigated this and found the source of the contamination. A large orb like sack of meat was festering and mixing its vile contents with the river. It was badly burned and decomposed and apart from the time spent hauling it out of the river to dispose of, they all tried to keep clear of it. All that is except Sudoska of course. He began cutting away the long stalk like attachments from the creature and placed three of these in a cloth sack he always carried and that never seemed to get full.

Marwa had been walking around the clearing trying to make sense of what had happened here. She turned to Matheus "Something big, maybe a dragon".

He nodded, "It must have been big to take out that thing" and then he did a quick circuit of the area just to be safe.

Rorc and Sudoska had patched up their dispute a little but it would not take much to start them up again. They were like siblings in that they would bicker and argue almost constantly but had each other's back when they were faced with an outside threat.

After that they moved further east into the Rhien Forest as they had been approached by an elf seeking their assistance. These normally reclusive elves had learned of them from the foxfolk.

This time they were joining forces with an elven group of adventurers to push back the incursion of some gnolls. Marwa seemed very keen on having the party help in this fight.

These Rhien-kaph gnolls were similar to ones Matheus had encountered in the Heldann Freeholds but the relationship was very different. These seemed almost berserk in their ferocity and it took the party many weeks to finally break the back of the force and send them back to their territory.

Ansel had been the one on the biggest learning curve. He was totally out of his depth in these hills and forests but he had been a quick study and Matheus was happy to teach him what he could.

There was also increased reminders of the war back in the Heldann Freeholds. Mercenaries answering the call of Halvard Gudmundson were passing through. Word of spies for the Heldannic Order were also common. News of the burning of Heldannic Abbeys displeased Marwa who believed places of worship should be off limits. She was alone in this viewpoint.

They travelled to a place called Thynivar and decided to rest up for a few hours before catching the ferry across the Nordheim river. It had been recently attacked by some Ostland raiders who had been travelling up the river. Rorc had to do a very difficult thing and remain silent in case his accent was recognised. Even though he had nothing to do with the attacks, they were his kinsmen and the locals might have viewed him as a legitimate target for their ire.

The ferry service was run by a retired Thyatian fighter and he took a record of everyone that arrived. It was on a first come first served basis, though if there was room for a lone traveller then that person could skip the queue and would be squeezed on. It was all very efficient. Matheus and the group had been given a coloured slip of paper and would be notified when they could board

A lot of caravans were passing through and there was one, a solid looking home on wheels, which contained a family of four. Manian somehow got involved with the daughter of this family much to everyone's surprise. They had barely known each other and Manian, although an extremely pleasant individual, was better with horses than with people. Nevertheless, he became enamoured with this girl Feltra and she with him. The romance was broken up however, once the family moved on, when their turn came to board the ferry across. Manian had hopes of seeing her again, the others had rolled their eyes but that is exactly what happened. Although not quite as he would have hoped.

When it was their turn, they boarded the ferry and crossed the river. Once there they mounted up and after a few days travel, they arrived at More-Skepti a small village whose residents seemed to make most of their income selling food and services to the passing traffic. Manian had spotted Feltra but had been dismayed when she seemed to want nothing more to do with him. He tried to convince himself that it was because of her parents. Maybe they would not agree to her marrying a wandering fighter. Ansel had tried to console him and that might have been the end of it had they left early that morning, like they intended.

It seemed that overnight some people had gone missing. No one had heard a thing, no sounds of fighting, no screams, nothing. Matheus had look around the area and they were soon following tracks that led to the wheel tracks of a cart. Feltra and her family had left much earlier and Manian had insisted they needed to make sure she was alright. A few others joined them hoping to find their missing loved ones.

They had caught up with the family very late in the day, after they had followed tracks that had left the road and led into the woods. The father and son were sitting around the fire as the party entered the clearing. It was when the sun dropped away however that a startling transformation occurred. The skin of the man and his son became scaly, their hair seemed to

come alive, becoming tangled and wild, the fingers on their hands ended in claws, and fangs protruded from their mouths. They stood and without warning attacked the much larger group bare handed. It took a moment for Matheus to realise that they made absolutely no noise.

It became obvious very soon that they were in trouble. Their weapons were useless against these creatures, whatever they were. Marwa had tried to turn them as they did indeed look like undead creatures but she was unsuccessful. People screamed in agony as they were slashed by the wicked claws. If you survived the bite as Ansel did you became sluggish as if you had been immersed in a freezing cold ice bath and could not move properly, your body numb.

As if the odds were not already stacked against them, two more of the creatures joined the slaughter, the mother and daughter. Recognisable as female only because they still wore the dresses they had when last, they had seen them.

Sudoska could not risk using his wand of fireballs as there were too many allies in the area so he tried a couple of spells. His first did not seem to have any effect but his magic missile got the son's attention. He leapt forward his fangs seeming to gleam in anticipation.

Sudoska was in serious danger until Rorc stepped in front swinging his axe in a murderous arc. The axe blow did not even break the scaly skin and the creature grabbed at the tall fighter with clawed hands. Rorc was far stronger but could do nothing to hurt his foe who slashed and cut with every swipe of his claws, spattering blood everywhere.

Marguerite began to transform, which drew the attention of the 'wife' creature. She was only part way through her transformation when the wife sank her fangs into her shoulder. She screamed in pain and was trying to push her away when Manian came to her aid hammering a blow of his sword across the creature's head with no effect, other than to become the new target. He stepped back and readied himself as Matheus arrived from behind her grabbing the flailing creature by the shoulders and lifting her off the ground, he tossed her away. She flew through the air landing with a crash into the camp fire sending sparks and wood everywhere.

The creatures were leaving dead and paralysed people in their wake, the number of adversaries growing smaller. To their credit no one ran. They were known to be a tough people this far north and they were proving it.

Matheus ran towards the fire, if weapons did not work, he would try fire. It worked against pretty much anything, including vampires. He grabbed up two large pieces of wood and stalked the 'wife' who had regained her feet. She snarled at him but did seem more cautious than before. Ansel shouted a warning and he ducked and rolled instinctively onto his left shoulder and back up onto his feet losing one of the flaming pieces of wood in the process. The daughter had come to her mother's defence her body coiled and ready to spring at the big man.

Sudoska drew his dagger and attacked the back of the 'son' creature as it attacked Rorc, the blade sinking deep. It screamed, such a blood curdling scream that he almost dropped the weapon in fright. It spun on him, slashing wildly opening a nasty cut from collar bone to chin.

Rorc was on his feet again and grabbed the creature by the wrist. He yanked hard, dragging it away from the mage, causing its feet to leave the ground. With the last of his strength, he let it fly, sending it crashing into the side of the horse drawn cart.

Marwa had tried a hold spell to no effect and now she quickly cast a spell this time on her mace. She said a silent prayer to Zirchev the huntsman and charged in to attack the 'father' creature who had a man pinned beneath him. A single blow from her mace, a strangled cough like sound and he fell dead.

As if they were connected in some way, the other creatures turned, their terrifying faces for the first time looked concerned.

Sudoska ran to Rorc, the bloody dagger in his hand, allowing the tall warrior to lean on him.

Ansel now stood beside Matheus, his rapier in his hand.

Manian had run to Marwa's side as she approached the pair of females. The 'mother' hissed in anger and flung herself at the cleric who braced for the impact. The claws sparked uselessly off Marwa's plate armour. When an opening presented itself, the cleric returned a blow with her mace. A look of shock, a strangled cough and she too collapsed dead like her husband.

That was all it took, the remaining two creatures had seen enough. They fled into the night and no one was in any condition to follow them. Marwa did what she could to help the survivors, but loyalty to the group made her start with Rorc. He was sitting now slumped over, Sudoska by his side, barely able to keep him from keeling over. Her healing spells closed the worst of the wounds and his breathing became more regular. Three men had been killed and two others had been wounded.

When they searched the cart belonging to the 'family', they found the grisly remains of the missing people. They wrapped them in sheets and placed the bodies of the fallen alongside them. It would be many hours before the sun rose but a decision to remain where they were was made. Everyone took a turn on watch although it was also true that nobody slept much that night.

Ansel sat with Matheus eating an apple and peering over Sudoska's shoulder as he scrawled in a notebook. He could see a detailed picture of the unnamed creatures, with the wild hair and fangs that they had encountered along with notes regarding their strengths and apparent weaknesses. He became aware that they were looking at him and closed the notebook.

"When I get back to a city with a decent sized library, I plan on doing some research. See if I can find out what those things were". He put the notebook away and gathered his blanket around his shoulders, holding his hands to the fire to warm them.

In the morning they returned to More-Skeпти to the worried family members who had remained behind. There was much despair at the loss of loved ones and fear of the creatures. People had heard of vampires and werewolves but no one knew what it was they had faced.

They would have to be on guard. Marwa told them that her attempts at turning them had failed but when she had blessed her mace it had a devastating effect. The creatures were clearly evil so wards and whatever magical weapons they could muster would also be advantageous.

Manian had been very quiet throughout all this. He accepted the gratitude of people thanking him for risking his life and he had merely nodded. Matheus noticed this and walked up beside him. "Everything alright?"

Manian looked up at him, his scarred face blinking as if he had just woken up. He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, I hope so." He was clearly struggling with something and Matheus waited a while to see if he would put it into words.

A moment before he spoke, Ansel joined them. "Well Manian, I think it's safe to say that family would not have accepted you into the fold. Except for dinner maybe", he joked.

Manian's face paled at the thought. "I had...relations with...that thing."

They gathered around the family's caravan and went through its contents discovering a large sum of wealth and other items no doubt taken from their past victims. A few thousand in gold, electrum, jewellery, a few vials of a rare perfume, two potion bottles and a sword with an ivy leaf pattern engraved in the cross guard. Sudoska was able to analyse the sword and reveal it was a magical weapon of particular use against the undead. The potions were of fortitude and water breathing.

The sword was given to Manian and everything else was divided amongst the group. Matheus had a couple of thousand now in gold and gems but still not enough to repay Jakob. They had passed through Holgbrekkur, a village a bit bigger than More-Skepti and more heavily fortified with palisade walls and gates. They stopped here for a few days to rest.

It was here in Holgbrekkur that the party was approached by a group of dwarves. They were at pains to admit the existence of a mine they were working on but felt they had no choice. A dragon was interfering with their operation and they wanted help in removing it.

"I'm not sure we want to tangle with a dragon", explained Marwa.

The dwarves had reassured her that it was not particularly big but still beyond their capabilities. The others including Matheus seemed to think it was worth taking a look at least. Dragons were known to hoard gold and Matheus was willing to take bigger risks for bigger rewards desperate to get back to Anya.

The mine was almost two days ride northwest from Holgbrekkur. The dwarves were eager to get back to their companions but were not very talkative with the party. It was apparent that they did not trust them and Matheus could not blame them for this.

Rorc took up his usual pastime of trying to goad Matheus. He would make smart remarks now and again trying to get under his skin. It was a psychological game he was undertaking against

Matheus, trying to wear away at his confidence and make him accept the little brother role that Rorc was determined to put him in. Matheus exuded the same patience and calm that had impressed Anya. He and Rorc would have to eventually settle things but not right now. Right now, they had a dragon to drive away or kill. He would not allow the other possibility to enter his mind

Late in the afternoon of the second day the small trail that had been leading them up into the hills opened up into a clearing. There were a number of dwarves straight ahead. As the party drew closer, they could see that there had been trouble. Four of the group of seven dwarves were being attended to by their companions. One was still gripping his stomach and retching even though it was by now empty.

The dwarves with them called out and the others greeted them in return eyeing the newcomers warily.

“Doesn’t look like they’re too happy to see us”, remarked Ansel.

“Stay professional, we’re here to do a job and get out”, said Marwa. “I don’t need them more paranoid than they already are, so keep it civil. Rorc I’m looking at you”.

“I’ll be on my best behaviour”, replied the warrior, easing his mount slowly forward.

Two of the dwarves were dead. They had grown impatient waiting for help to come and had entered the mine again. The dragon, which had set up its lair at the back had unleashed its poisonous breath. Most had managed to make it back out into the fresh air but two had not moved quickly enough and succumbed to the toxic fumes.

“Well, that must be viewed as good news”, whispered Sudoska to Marwa, within earshot of his companions. “Dragons can only muster their breath weapon a few times a day. That’s one less we have to worry about”.

Marwa nodded in understanding. “Ok then, let’s get ready. We move in twenty minutes”.

Ansel and Matheus joined her as she went to speak with the dwarves. They asked for a rough map of what lay ahead and where they suspected the dragon to be. How big it was and if they had managed to wound it?

They were told that the tunnel itself was quite wide and the dragon was at the end of it in a medium sized cave. It was about the size of a warhorse, but to that you had to add the wings and elongated serpentine neck. They had not managed to wound it very much if at all.

Marwa reiterated the deal to ensure everyone was in agreement, one thousand in gold for each party member and whatever treasure the dragon may have in its hoard. The dwarves had conceded this point easily enough not expecting such a relatively small creature to have accumulated much treasure anyway.

As Matheus secured the horses with Manian, he could see Marguerite pacing up and down. She looked very nervous. He offered words of reassurance and reminded her she just needed to use her spells like they had discussed and stay at the back with Manian and Sudoska.

Matheus and Rorc led the way, Marwa and Ansel in the second line, then Marguerite and Sudoska and finally Manian. They kept some distance between them, fully expecting to be hit with some chlorine gas from the dragon. It was a risky approach going in like this in such a confined space but it had been decided they could not waste time trying to lure the dragon out and give it the chance to recover.

There were loose rocks and gravel strewn about the floor, discarded pickaxes and a smashed mine cart. They had tied some cloth around their faces to protect them from the breath weapon in the somewhat delusional hope it might make a difference. Marwa had cast some spells on the group to give them an extra edge.

Matheus hoped it would be enough. He had spent some time with this group and knew they had a fighting chance but they had never faced a dragon before. He had seen some back in the Heldann Freeholds but they were high in the sky. He gripped his sword tightly, lifted his torch high and moved forward alongside Rorc.

Manian brought up the rear, a torch in his hand, his loaded crossbow pointed at the roof of the cave. It began to get darker the further into the cave they went. Matheus strained his ears, listening for any warning signs, the sound of feet crunching on pebbles, a stray stone kicked forward by Rorc, a look of reproach from Marwa.

Despite their readiness they were surprised by the suddenness of the attack. Without warning a roar came from straight ahead, the noise echoing around the tunnel. This was followed by a billowing cloud of toxic gas. It enveloped Matheus and Rorc completely, although Marwa and Ansel managed to pull back quickly and avoid most of it.

Manian attempted a shot into the cloud at where he thought the dragon would be but cursed when his crossbow jammed. Sudoska and Marguerite cast the first of their spells, sending a magic missile each at the beast which was moving towards them through the cloud of poison. It roared again in pain as they hit. Marwa stumbled over a loose rock and fell against the tunnel wall.

The dragon moved forward, its serpentine neck whipping a head full of teeth forward, sharp clawed hands raking Matheus across the shoulder and face tearing the cloth away and Rorc along his left bicep.

Matheus recovered first and struck a blow with his sword, followed by Rorc with his battle axe. Ansel aim his blowgun and fired a dart which although small stung as it hit the dragon in one of its nostrils. Marguerite cast another magic missile and held her position at the back. Manian dropped his crossbow and ran forward to engage, drawing his sword.

The dragon reared back, breathing in deeply and then opening wide let them have another burst of its breath. It was noticeably weaker this time but still caused their eyes to water and the air to burn in their lungs. Everyone, except Marguerite, was caught in the fumes this time. The three fighters stifled back coughing fits and leapt into the fray. Manian's magical sword cleaving through several fingers, Rorc's axe cutting one of the wings almost entirely away from the dragon's body and Matheus jamming his sword, two handed up through the chin into the brain. The roar of pain was cut short and the body collapsed in a heap where it stood.

Now that the dragon was dead, the coughing and spluttering began. Matheus and Rorc who had been hit with most of the gas were vomiting violently. They dragged themselves past the dead body and on into the cave, the air more breathable there. Marwa attended the two fighters, casting a healing spell on Matheus. They would have to wait till tomorrow before she could perform that task again.

Ansel wandered about the cave with Sudoska, taking an inventory of the treasure left behind. It had been a long day so they decided to set up camp there and then. Ansel walked down with Marwa to inform the dwarves that the task had been completed much to their delight. Three of them carried up a small barrel of ale which they opened and shared out, taking a drink themselves to celebrate. Marguerite was a bundle of nervous energy. The battle was over but the adrenaline was still coursing through her body.

The next day Marwa and Sudoska refreshed their spells and set to work. Marwa continued healing Matheus and Rorc who had borne the brunt of the dragon's attacks and Sudoska cast a spell to determine if there was any magic amongst all the assembled trinkets, weapons and miscellaneous items the dragon had gathered over the years. After discussing the matter with Marwa he walked up to Rorc with a rare smile on his face. He peered at the permanently scowling warrior over the rim of his glasses and then held out his hand, palm up, a ring resting there.

Rorc looked at him, his dour mood not improved by the hacking coughs he still experienced from inhaling the poison. "No, Sudoska, I will NOT marry you".

Matheus laughed at this unusual example of wit from his fighting companion and then he too began coughing but no longer as bad. Marwa's magic was doing its job and healing the damaged lungs.

"Rorc Halftroll, it is my pleasure to give to you this here ring. Something I know will go a long way to validating your name" finished Sudoska cryptically, leaning forward with this arm still outstretched.

The Halftroll looked at him sceptically "If I turn into a toad or something, you're dead".

Sudoska ignored the threat and then stood back, hands on hips as Rorc put the ring on.

“Hey, it tingles”, he said looking at the wound on his arm which was already beginning to close up. At this rate it would take an hour or two but that did not prevent Rorc from wiping the blood away and staring in awe as the wound slowly knit itself together.

That morning they divided out the treasure. They had over a thousand each in various coins and gems. Rorc had the ring which was regenerating his body, healing his wounds and Matheus had been given a spear with a moderate enchantment. Added to this was the one thousand in gold to each member of the party as promised by the dwarves. They had half expected them to renege on the deal but they were true to their word.

However, they did remind Marwa that the deal included that the location of the mine not be shared. They parted ways with the dwarves and headed south east to join up with the road that would lead them to Ljóshöll.

It took them several days to reach Ljóshöll. The last section of the trail ran along the coast which was a pleasant change from the hills and forests they had been in these past months. They could see a lighthouse and the yellow lichen that covered the rocks around it looked like flowers from a distance.

They were met by some mounted men when they were within a mile of the fishing village. Earl Eiriksson was the leader here and they were cautious about getting involved in the never-ending conflict between Thyatis and Alphatia. When Marwa and Ansel were able to convince them that they were an adventuring party and merely wanted to rest up for a few days before carrying on to Saffir they were allowed to proceed with an escort. This gave the party the chance to get the lay of the land and updates on what was going on in the world. It also gave Earl Eiriksson’s men the chance to get a better sense of the group they were allowing into their village.

They stayed in The Lookout, a sturdy stone building that catered to traveller's passing through on their way to Oceansend. They paid for rooms expecting to stay for two days. Their time in the saddle after the fight with the dragon had been a slog. The weather had been miserable with strong winds and heavy rain coming in from the western Sea of Dawn a constant, unwelcome companion. Manian had a fever and needed to rest up and Marguerite was happy enough to delay her arrival in Saffir.

That night over drinks, Rorc was his brash and boastful self. Somehow or other he had managed to get into an argument with some fishermen. He had claimed that he could beat any man in the place and they had agreed that although he was a tough man there was a man who was tougher still. A man that could probably beat any man alive. Rorc had laughed loudly at this and said “Well bring him on and we’ll see”.

Matheus had been sitting at the bar while all this was going on. Ansel had been playing cards and regaling the locals with tales of adventure and beautiful women. When the talk between Rorc and the fishermen had started getting loud enough to cause concern he had excused

himself and moved to sit beside Matheus. "I think it's time we got our rowdy friend out of here".

"Or maybe it's time he learned a valuable lesson about making claims he can't back up".

"You really think there's a fisherman that could handle Rorc?"

Matheus cast a sideways glance at Ansel. "You think that highly of him? I know plenty of men that could handle him".

Ansel did not seem convinced and turned around in his chair to watch how things progressed. The next thing the men were shouting and cheering, one or two ran out of the inn. There was definitely something happening. Rorc was knocking back the rest of his drink and stood up. He placed his axe on the bar and shouted over to Matheus who ignored him and Ansel who was now standing. "Keep an eye on my axe. I'll be right back once I've squashed this bottom feeder". He belched one more time and then walked to the door.

Ansel turned again to Matheus, "Are you coming?"

"Nope, I'll keep an eye on the axe".

The Inn emptied quickly as most of the patrons ran down to the boat house, where the contest was to take place. Matheus sat at the bar looking at the Inn keep, a blonde burly man called Karlsson. "Hey, don't let me keep you".

Karlsson just smiled. "I'm alright here. When you've seen Garald beat a man once you've seen it a dozen times. As big as your friend is, I don't think it will take too long".

Matheus was intrigued by the confidence displayed by Karlsson and indeed it was not long at all when the first of the spectators began to return to their seats. He was amused by their disappointment. They had lost money betting on Rorc but seemed more annoyed by the fact that Garald had won.

It was another half an hour before Ansel came in with Rorc. He was nursing a bruised ego and despite the loss was being bought drinks by some of the patrons.

Ansel walked back over to Matheus, who said "Well, that didn't take long".

Ansel sat down beside him, "Rorc never had a chance. That Garald is big like you but moves like a cat, very skilful".

Rorc joined the two, carrying a mug of beer. "Well, that was embarrassing".

"Well full marks for trying", replied Ansel raising his cup in praise.

Matheus grunted and shook his head.

"What? I suppose you think you could do better?"

“No interest in even trying”

“That’s exactly what I’d expect from a coward”.

“Oh, stop Rorc, you’re going to make me cry”.

Rorc paused and Matheus could see he was trying to come up with a different angle of attack. “This woman I always hear you going on about”.

Matheus’s face darkened, causing Rorc to smile broadly. Ansel stiffened unsure where Rorc was going to take this and knowing that the smiling fighter had no idea he was climbing into the dragon’s mouth.

“I’m willing to bet she would not be happy if she knew you were in no hurry to get back to her”. He ignored the clenching fist of Matheus. “If she knew you had a way of making some extra gold and get back to her sooner, I bet she would want you do take it. In fact, I thought you’d be looking for a chance like that”.

“What are you talking about?”

“If you take the fight and win, I’ll give you half my gold. To sweeten the pot, I’ll give you a quarter even if you lose, so long as you mess him up a bit first”.

Ansel was smiling now and looked at Matheus, eyebrows arched high, with a look that said “Well? That sounds fair”.

Matheus thought for a moment, swirling the last of his beer around in the cup before knocking it back. He placed it on the counter and stood up. “You heard him make that bet Ansel. You’re my witness”.

The men in the bar had obviously been listening in on the conversation because as he stood an excited crowd stood up too and began making their way back down to the boat house again.

Karlsson watched them leave. He paused for a moment while wiping the counter, a thoughtful look on his face and then decision made he walked quickly after the crowd.

Ansel was walking alongside Matheus and Rorc. “Ok, listen it’s a wrestling / boxing match. First to be pinned or unable to continue loses. Rorc got sloppy and was pinned”.

Rorc shot him an annoyed look “Hey, he’s a sneaky one. I thought we were having a proper fight”.

Ansel ignored the lame excuse and continued talking “According to some of the men, he likes to talk, distract, that kind of thing but you mustn't take him for granted. He's very skilled and like Rorc found out, he’s tricky”.

They continued on down the path which led to the ocean. To one side was the boat house. A large wooden structure, used to build and repair fishing boats. The doors were open and men

were gathered around waiting for Matheus to arrive, sizing him up and wondering if he was worth a bet.

Upon entering the boat house, Matheus could see more men gathered around. One man in particular stood out. He was about the same height as Matheus at six foot six but with a more stream lined build. He was around the same age too but his hair line was already receding into a widow's peak. He could have been described as handsome except he had a cruel, sadistic kind of smile and a prominent hooked nose.

He spotted Matheus and wiped a trickle of wine from his beard and stood. "Another challenger for the Fisherman already? Let's see what we have here. Is it worth hauling on board or will we throw it back?" he asked, the men gathered round laughing at a joke he had probably told dozens of times before.

Matheus ignored Garald and stripped down to his waist. He began moving his neck and shoulders, getting them loose for the coming bout. He was looking closely at the local champion, trying to gather whatever extra pieces of information he could.

An area about twelve feet by twelve was the obvious place for the contest, so Matheus stepped up to the line and waited. Garald said no more and he took his place opposite his opponent. A short woman stepped into the centre and the talking ceased.

"We have a new challenger for the Fisherman. I'm sure we all know the rules but I'll lay them out again so there's no bitching later on".

"Come on Thjohild, we know they know the rules", complained one impatient man who was immediately accosted and dragged away from his prime spot at the front of the circle.

Satisfied, Thjohild continued "As I was saying. The bout starts with wrestling for as long as it needs to or we get bored and then moves to boxing. If you are pinned or unable to continue you lose. If the boxing goes on too long or we get bored then the bout will go to all in. I must stress however that all in does NOT include, biting, eye gouging or fish hooking. We are not totally uncivilised here".

This last line caused the audience to laugh and cheer.

"Garald, our champion, are you ready?"

Garald nodded.

"Matheus, our challenger, are you ready?"

Matheus nodded.

"Then begin".

Both men stepped forward, arms ready. Hands met in the middle, pushing, parrying and dragging, trying to get a proper hold but also trying to prevent their opponent from doing the same. Everyone was watching the action closely. Every little adjustment, lunge, block brought whispers and mutters of appreciation. To anyone not used to watching a wrestling match it would appear that not much was happening at all.

Ansel's heart was racing as he watched. His body and arms flinching and moving as though he was in there facing off against Garald himself.

Both men had a firm lock, a single hand clasped firmly around the back of their opponent's neck, while the other hand sought to grab the arm or body opposite them. Garald tried to crouch and break Matheus's posture, trying to unbalance him but Matheus surprised him by fending off the attacks. They were breathing heavy and the sweat began to glisten on them.

The crowd was beginning to murmur more loudly. For most this bout had gone on far longer than they expected. Voices began to call out encouragement for whichever fighter they were supporting. "Come on Garald, you've got this. He's not in the same league as you. That's it, more of that". It was obvious who the home town favourite was but there were still two or three voices shouting pretty much the same thing but in support of Matheus.

Rorc tried to appear bored. "This isn't real fighting. If it was real fighting..." but he was cut short with an impatient wave of Ansel's hand.

Garald was a very skilful wrestler but anything he tried, any feint or hold, was foiled. Matheus was always in perfect balance and knew exactly what way to turn and move to escape each attempt. The sweat was also a factor. Holds that may have been locked in when they were both dry were much more difficult now.

Matheus suddenly wrapped a big paw around the back of Garald's neck and yanked hard. Garald pulled back and Matheus released him quickly causing Garald to stumble back. The crowd shouted in distress or delight, wondering if this was it, the beginning of the end. Garald however regained his balance but was immediately under attack again as Matheus stepped in grasping a leg and attempting to turn him over. Garald was grunting with the effort to regain his balance and stay standing. He dropped his hips and twisted hard trying to get a lower centre of gravity but again Matheus was there blocking the effort.

It ended in another stalemate but to Ansel there was a change in momentum occurring. Garald's easy swagger was being replaced by desperation. It was almost imperceptible but Ansel could see it plainly.

Some of Garald's supporters may have seen it too because they began to boo as if they were bored. "Come on, enough of this, boxing now, come on". This continued for perhaps another thirty seconds, more voices adding to the cacophony, until Thjohild stepped in. She placed a hand on each man, commanding them to break, which they did, taking a step back.

Matheus had a gleam in his eyes but his face remained impassive. Garald looked like he was trying to work out a difficult calculation. He turned from Matheus to face the crowd, raising his arms and they roared encouragement to him.

Thjohild spoke again "Alright our audience are a rowdy lot tonight so we'll move on to the boxing. Garald are you ready?"

Garald nodded.

"Matheus, are you ready?"

Matheus nodded.

"Then have at it", shouted the energetic woman before stepping out of the way.

The two men closed the distance to within arm's reach. Garald threw out an immediate probing jab that Matheus was ready for, moving his head slightly out of range. Garald threw another probing jab, but as he was pulling his arm back, Matheus followed in behind it striking hard to his ribs. A grunt and Garald moved to the side using his hands to push Matheus away. Matheus swung a big right but Garald saw it coming and moved away. This continued for a few minutes as the men tested each other's defences, trying to see how the other reacted and planning a strategy to take advantage of this.

Once more Ansel was in the fight, his heart thumping, his arms and shoulders moving, even Rorc was quiet this time, absorbed in the unfolding match.

Garald went on the offensive, jabbing and then coming in with body shots. Matheus moved or blocked the shots on his arms even catching one of the punches in the palm of his hand. Garald wrenched his hand free, annoyed, and snapped a straight punch down the middle as he saw an opening, but it was a set up. Matheus dropped his head and Garald's fist connected with the bony forehead of Matheus. He stifled the grunt of pain but it was obvious by the way he pulled his hand back that it had hurt. Matheus remained expressionless, workmanlike.

Garald ignored the pain in his hurt hand and gritted his teeth. He began moving a little more lightly on his feet, throwing more jabs and punches trying to confuse and overwhelm his opponent. Matheus began to match Garald's output, both men connecting with shots to the head and body of their opponent. It was apparent quite quickly though that as strong as Garald was Matheus was stronger and his punches were landing with greater force. As unquestionably skilled as Garald was, he had met his match. The shouts of encouragement lessened as the home favourite looked to be on the way to his first loss.

Garald however was not done yet, he threw an elbow disguised as a missed punch, catching Matheus across his left eyebrow, with shuddering force. Matheus took the shot and ducked under a follow up left. He feinted his own left but then swung a right to the body, connecting, then drawing the hand back he drove it forward again into an uppercut that caused all the

crowd to call out together “Aaahh”. Some of the men were grabbing and shoving each other, the tension and excitement infectious. Garald staggered back.

Matheus did not press his obvious advantage, allowing Garald to recover. He seemed to be waiting for something. Garald spat blood onto the ground and came back swinging a big haymaker. Matheus met him halfway stepping in with his own elbow disguised as a missed punch. The forward momentum of Garald combined with the elbow coming back at him, multiplied the force of the shot. Matheus’s elbow connected with Garald’s hooked nose, with a bone crunching thud, the blood began to gush over the bottom half of his face almost immediately.

“That’s going to hurt in the morning”, crowed Rorc with enthusiasm.

To his credit Garald displayed an immense amount of heart to remain standing even as blood poured over his mouth, his nose was a mess and his eyes watered freely. By contrast Matheus was practically unblemished, the flat features of his Ethengarian heritage provided no sharp angles of bone that were the cause of many cuts in boxing matches. The only real sign of blood was on the fists he had been pummeling Garald with.

Garald drew a laboured breath and spat out more blood. Matheus stepped forward, once more meeting Garald in the middle of the arena. The smell of smoke began to waft through the air and quickly became stronger. Grunts of annoyance, turned to shouts of alarm when someone shouted “Fire”.

The smell grew stronger and the smoke grew thicker. People began to cough and sputter “Open the doors, let me out. Quickly”. The crowd surged forward, engulfing the combatants and swarming for the doors to escape the smoke and flames which could now be seen.

Ansel and Rorc made their way out, Ansel placed a hand on Matheus’s shoulder letting him know they were there. Once outside the crowd spread out, people were bent over coughing and wheezing. Karlsson walked up to Matheus with his shirt and handed it to him.

“That was a well fought match big man. A real pity that fire broke out when it did”. He cast a glance around at Garald and his crew who were gathered to one side. “Yes, a real pity”.

They made their way back to the Inn. It was dark now but torches had been lit to show the way. The patrons were buzzing with excitement as they discussed what they had seen. Matheus sat at the bar again and was sitting there with a beer when Marwa and Marguerite walked in. The cleric sidled up beside him.

“I thought we were agreed. Nothing but rest and recuperation”, said Marwa, while indicating to Karlsson that she wanted a drink.

“We did and I am”.

“That’s not what I’m hearing”.

“You were fighting”, grinned Marguerite, “We know you were”.

“Fighting? Me? No, that was just some exercise, a friendly match with the locals”.

Marwa shook her head and turned to the others. “Ansel, I expect Rorc to be irresponsible and childish but not you”, she admonished gently.

Ansel put his hands up. “Hey don’t look at me, it was Rorc started all this. Getting us involved in the...friendly match with the locals”.

Marwa turned her attention to Rorc who was smiling happily. “Did you see his face”, he laughed. “By Thor’s hammer Matheus, you did a number on him. What a pounding”. He finally registered that Marwa was looking at him disapprovingly and somewhat sheepishly added “Lucky for him it was only a friendly match with the locals”.

Marguerite burst out laughing almost choking on her drink and spilling some down her chin.

“Marguerite, not you too?” asked Marwa tilting her head but relenting with a laugh knowing it was a losing battle.

There was talk of a rematch to settle things once and for all. Garald’s men had been adamant that their fighter was getting his second wind and was on the verge of staging a comeback. The match had been halted before a definite outcome, and therefore recorded as a draw, but no impartial observer had any doubt about who actually won.

It did not matter to Matheus, he reminded Rorc of their bet. Rorc by his own words earlier that night had admitted that Matheus had done a number on Garald and so had to pay up a quarter of his gold which he did. It was also noticeable that after that night, Rorc no longer needed Matheus, attempting to goad him. He seemed to have accepted his place as the little brother when it came to Matheus.

Manian was feeling better the next morning and was very disappointed to hear that he had missed the “friendly match with the locals” as it became known in the party. Rorc however was more than happy to give him a blow-by-blow account of what had happened. He seemed to especially enjoy the part where Garald’s nose exploded under Matheus’s elbow. “I’ll tell you Manian that is going to leave a mark. That nose will never be the same again”.

Sudoska was not at all sorry he had missed out on the “Fight of the Ages”. He shook his head and nodded gently to Rorc as if patronising a young child. Rorc did not seem to notice and Sudoska went back to his notebook, adding entries on whatever topic had piqued his interest and drawing a picture if appropriate. He was quite the artist.

They left Ljóshöll later that day, most of the locals were sad to see them go. Their brief presence had been a highlight of the year, giving them a great fight and a great story to tell. A story some would rather be forgotten. Thjohild came to see them off. She congratulated Matheus and gave them good directions to Saffir.

“Good farmland, good people. You’ll like it there, if peace and quiet is what you’re after. But something tells me there are no farmers amongst you”.

“It may surprise you Thjohild Eiriksdottir that I am... amongst other things...a farmer”, said Matheus with a smile.

She looked at him a moment “Go away now you joker. Find yourself a nice woman and settle down”. Then she thumped him on the arm and walked back to the village.

It would take them about ten days to reach Saffir. The trail was quite good and the weather was warm at this time of the year. The land and rivers were teeming with life. They passed through some trees at a leisurely pace and even Ansel, the epitome of city slicker, seemed content. Up amongst the hills, miles from any villages were lakes of the clearest water. Matheus and some of the hardier member of the party went swimming in the frigid waters. They met the occasional woodsman or herder but for the most part they had the place to themselves.

Ansel and Matheus walked Marguerite further up into the forests. Thjohild had recommended they take their time and go through the Wolkenberg forest, although she used the locals name for it, Skýfjall. Marguerite said that she wanted to “go for a walk” as she put it. It seemed ridiculous to her that they felt the need to go with her, she was a werebear after all and quite capable of looking after herself.

Matheus had insisted “Well, once you’re safely in your bear form, I’ll leave you too it, but until then you’re stuck with us”.

She smiled with genuine emotion “Thank you Matheus, Ansel. Jean Pierrre would be so happy you are taking care of his little sister. If you are ever passing through Traladaran lands you should pay him a visit. He’s in a small village called Threshold. I’m sure he’d like to meet you and you could tell him I’ve arrived safe and sound in Saffir so he doesn’t have to worry”.

“I’ll tell him that when I know it’s true”, replied Matheus gruffly.

“Ok, big brother” she replied linking arms with both men as they walked through a clearing filled with summer flowers.

She found a place she was happy with and began stripping off. They turned away, giving her some privacy while the transformation began. The sound of a bear growling let them know it was ok to turn around. Marguerite was gone, her human form at least. In its place was a large bear, with fur the same reddish-brown as the colour of her hair. She sniffed the air, looked at them for a moment and then turned away, ambling deeper into the forest.

Ansel stepped forward and gathered up the satchel that held her clothes. They would meet again in a few days on the trail near Saffir. She had wanted a break and a chance to run free in her animal form. Sudoska had wanted to come with them, had wanted to take notes and sketch

her as she transformed but she had politely refused this request. "Another time maybe", she had said.

Matheus was on a ridge overlooking the area. Far to the south was the ocean and, in the distance somewhere was Ljóshöll. When Ansel arrived at his side, his gaze remained fixed straight ahead.

"It's amazing land up here Ansel. Full of opportunity. Can't you feel it?" he asked turning to Ansel.

"Opportunity? For splinters, animal bites, hypothermia, yes plenty of opportunity".

Matheus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I feel at peace here Ansel. You have your sun-baked beaches in Ierendi with that woman you'll find someday. Lying in a hammock tied up between some palm trees, listening to the waves crashing, the seagulls calling. The smell of freshly caught fish on the fire".

"Is this my fantasy or yours?" interrupted Ansel with a laugh.

"Yours, my friend". He turned back to the hills and mountains, the forests and lakes, rivers and streams. "This is my Ierendi. This wilderness, far from civilisation, abundant with food, water, land, everything a man needs".

"A bit too abundant with land if you ask me. And very, very far from civilisation. It's more wilderness than I'm comfortable with", he paused before adding "and remember you don't have just yourself to consider. I don't know Anya at all, except what you and Jakob have told me of her, so forgive me if I am speaking out of line, but I think it might be a bit more wilderness than she's prepared to accept too".

Matheus drew a deep breath, held it a few seconds before letting it go. "Aye, you might be right at that. Oh well that's why they're called fantasies I suppose", he said with a grin. "Come on let's get back to camp. It'll be dark soon".

They had a restful sleep and continued on the next day. Surprisingly, despite the reasonable trail they were on and the slow pace, one of the horses pulled up lame. Manian noticed Marwa's horse limping and called a stop. She dismounted while he checked the hooves, running his hands over the legs and checking for cuts or bruises. He unloaded everything from the horse, saddle bags, saddle, blankets and distributed them to the other mounts. Luckily, they had Marguerite's horse as a spare, even so they were not going to leave the horse behind. It needed to rest and when they found a stable then it would get the chance but until then they carried on.

Rorc began to get impatient again at the slow pace and began to bicker with Manian. The smaller man was not as calm as Matheus and it soon became physical. He got some punches in but was no match for Rorc who threw him to the ground. The fight would have gone on but for

the approach of horsemen. Thjohild had said they might meet some Vrodniki tribesman and it would be best to avoid contact with them if possible.

They had a large herd of cattle some way back up the trail which were wandering around, drinking water from the nearby stream or grazing. They pulled up their horse and observed the two men, laughing and gesturing.

Matheus and the others were tense. "Ok, boys that's enough of that, we have company," said Marwa. Manian wiped his bloodied nose and stared at the gathered tribesmen. They were covered in tattoos and ritual scars and seemed to take an interest in the scars on his face.

Matheus did the talking, his powerful presence earning him their respect, but the same could not be said of Sudoska. He gazed at them over the rim of his spectacles with barely disguised contempt. Ansel brewed up some coffee and they gathered around to drink it, enjoying the taste. There was still a tension in the air, however and everyone was on their guard. There were some muttered conversations amongst some of the tribesmen but all in all the meeting passed peacefully. They explained that they sometimes went into Saffir to trade and buy supplies but were moving on now, following their herd. They also seemed to think it would be a short summer and that the snows would come early this year.

It was not until they had moved off that the party relaxed. "They really could do with a wash", said Sudoska when they were out of earshot.

"They didn't seem to like you either", said Manian.

"Like I should care", he scoffed.

Matheus spoke with Marwa about making their camp inside the forest. He did not like the feeling he was getting from the tribesmen. They seemed the type to go away smiling but return when they thought your guard might be down.

They moved on out of sight and later in the day found a place in the forest. A place that Matheus was satisfied with. It was on a ridge with a good view of the surrounding area. They would never know for sure if their precautions were necessary as the night passed uneventfully and in the morning, they continued on.

By mid-afternoon on the next day, they came to a small farm. Manian was going to arrange to leave the lame horse with them but found no one home. There was no sign of any trouble, they were simply not there. A couple of pigs and some chickens but no people. They continued on passing more houses. Most of them were empty but they encountered some elderly people who had explained that most of the others had gathered to help a neighbour build his barn. It was a common practice to get together and tackle large projects like that and a good chance to strengthen relationships. While the men raised the barn, the children could play and the woman would share recipes and bring dishes of food they had prepared for the occasion.

Coming upon this gathering about an hour later, they rode in slowly and calmly. It was clear from their attire that they were adventurers. A peculiar sort of occupation to these people who preferred to put their efforts in to the land, their families, and their people. Although strangers, they were welcomed and invited to join in the meal. Everyone chipped in where they could, not willing to eat for free.

While they worked, a murmur of disquiet grew. One or two women became a larger crowd. The word finally reached them that some of the children had gone missing in the woods. One of the boys around eight years old, tears still streaming down his face was trying to relay the story between panicked sobs. They finally got him to calm down enough to explain what had happened.

“There was music and Floren had taken the hand of two of the younger children and led them into the woods. Zaida had tried to tell them that they mustn’t do this but Floren would not listen. He told us that they could all go and see the pretty lady but I was scared. Zaida was shouting at Floren and was trying to get him to come back but he is a big boy, much stronger than little Zaida. I went with them to the edge of the woods and watched them walk away. These big hairy creatures, kind of like orcs but not, they jumped out and grabbed the children. Floren just stood there and did nothing but Zaida”, he shook his head, trying to gather himself, as if remembering something so incredible as to be unbelievable. “Little Zaida grabbed a stick and started hitting one of the hairy orcs. He grabbed her too and well I didn’t know what to do so I ran”.

When the adults did a head count, they could tell that Floren, Zaida and two other children were missing. The parents were distraught, the men immediately began to gather what weapons they had to mount a rescue. Marwa quickly gathered her group together and made plans to help.

It was decided that they should not all go charging off into the woods and leave the remaining women and children vulnerable, therefore a handful stayed behind including Sudoska and Manian. The men of the area armed themselves quickly, the dogs were salivating and whining in anticipation. They knew there was something happening and they could not wait to get started.

Matheus had the child show them where the hairy orcs had taken the children. Sudoska had shown him a picture of a hairy orc he had drawn to confirm what he believed. The child nodded his head vigorously and Sudoska looked up at the others. “We are dealing with bugbears”.

“What does that matter”, shouted a man called Hrothgar, straining to hold the leash of two dogs. “We kill them and get the children back. Come on we are wasting time here”. Other men and women obviously worried backed him up, urging the search party to get a move on.

The child, accompanied by his mother and father showed them where the bugbears had taken the children. His father then joined the group in pursuit. Matheus scanned quickly around the

area, taking a note of the patterns he saw. The bugbears, how many, how big, how fast were they moving and the children. The trail of the two small children and Zaida disappeared indicating that they were being carried. The larger child Floren appeared to be running alongside the bugbears.

He ignored the pressure from the others who wanted to move more quickly. The vocal man Hrothgar, was hovering around, saw the tracks and began moving on, the dogs straining on their leashes and pulling him along. Others followed him into the dense undergrowth. Matheus stood and noticed Marwa watching him. "Well?" He nodded and began walking quickly off in the direction the others had already gone.

The noise of dogs barking and men shouting to each other rang out around the forest but Matheus ignored it all. Marwa, Rorc and an invisible Ansel, courtesy once more of Sudoska's magic, were now jogging along a few paces behind Matheus. A handful of villagers accompanied them.

They got to a small clearing that had two obvious ways onwards. One continued more or less straight ahead, the other veering off right and sloping downwards to the left.

Matheus paused again; his brow creased. Marwa watched him her own features tense. She did not want to come across the dead bodies of children and wished that he would move more quickly. She herself was a skilful tracker but nowhere near the big man's talent and she had no trouble admitting this.

The other group joined them, still following Hrothgar. He stood near Matheus and scanned the area for himself. "What are you doing man, it's this way. Come on".

Matheus stood and shook his head "No. These tracks don't make sense".

"What are you talking about? You're taking too much time. The children are in danger. You'd be quicker if they were your children", fumed Hrothgar.

"You rush this and get this wrong you'll lose all chance of finding them", but Hrothgar was not listening. "This is the path. It leads down to the quarry. Their lair must be there. It's a perfect spot".

Matheus shook his head. "We need cool heads. You're dividing our forces, heading off before we are sure".

"Our forces, is it? Who put you in charge? These are our children, not yours". Hrothgar turned away then. "This way, down to the quarry, let's go".

Matheus was annoyed. He could understand that they must be frantic with worry but it really was a case of more speed, less haste. They had to remain cool and calm and stop emotion clouding their judgement. A part of him did wonder if he would be so calm if it was Anya or his

child that were missing. He brought himself quickly back to the present situation. He walked the tracks again trying to make sense of the pattern and then stopped.

“Those damn fools have gone the wrong way”. He walked ahead the others following again. Hrothgar had lost a couple of his followers who had been impressed by the new comer. One of them a young woman called Hardeth, jogged alongside him. Matheus was moving at a brisk pace now, all but Rorc and Hardeth began falling behind. He was forced to slow down a little or risk losing them.

After about an hour they came to a rope bridge over a gorge. Matheus paused here while the others caught up. Marwa was breathing hard as were most of the others, sweat glistening on their brows.

“Ansel”,

“Here”, came the panting reply.

“I need you to cross that bridge ahead of us. Make sure no one cuts it while we’re half way across”.

“I’m on my way”.

“That’s Danahar’s bridge”, offered Hardeth.

Matheus barely grunted in reply, too preoccupied watching the barely imperceptible movement of the bridge, as the invisible rogue crossed. He judged when he thought Ansel should be in place and started across Danahar’s rope bridge. The gorge was about sixty feet deep. A decent sized river flowing underneath, with decent sized rocks protruding from its surface.

When he was almost on the other side, he began again to locate the tracks. There were four bugbears and the child, Floren. Still no tracks for the two little ones and Zaida. The ground was hard around here, tightly packed with more stones and rock. He paused again “Something else here, something big”.

Rorc stepped up beside him, his battle axe hefted on his shoulder. His bottom lip protruding as it did unless he was making a conscious effort to keep his mouth closed. “How big are we talking about?”

“Ogre or hill giant maybe. Stay wide Ansel. I think we’re close”.

They moved on for another fifteen minutes but at a slower pace. The tracks had all but disappeared on the hard ground but the physical characteristics of the land left only one obvious way to go. Up ahead they could see a ledge about six feet high. Beyond this was a cave entrance.

“Danahar’s home” whispered Hardeth. She raised a hand to her freckled face shielding it from the sun.

They crept closer but the ground was open, providing no cover. Two bugbears appeared from behind a bush near the cave entrance and hurled spears. No one was hit but while they were moving and dodging a large form leapt off the ledge and sprinted towards them.

Men shouted curses of panic. Rorc wielded his battle axe in both hands now “That’s a hill giant alright”.

Most of the people ran for cover, Matheus hefted his magic spear waiting for the giant to reach his throwing range. Rorc being Rorc, broke into a sprint and ran forwards to meet the towering humanoid, which was about twice his height. They finally met somewhere in the middle, Rorc swung his axe, the giant its club. The greater reach of the giant proved decisive and it connected with brutal force propelling the lanky fighter through the air. The smile of victory on its face turned to a roar of pain when a spear sprouted from its neck. It staggered back while pulling the weapon free, tossing it aside and looking for the offender. Its gaze resting on Matheus who was holding a sword and an axe. With a determined shout it charged him.

More spears were thrown by the bugbears, Marwa led the group forward to close the distance as quickly as they could. They needed to engage these but first they would have to scale the ledge to reach them. She held back while the others began climbing and cast a hold spell at the two bugbears freezing them on the spot. This allowed the group to scale the ledge safely but the reprieve was short lived as four more ran from the cave brandishing knives and clubs.

Matheus hurled his axe at the giant's left knee. It stuck but the giant ignored this and swung its club hard trying to send Matheus into orbit. He dodged under the club but it was close. The massive swing momentarily threw the giant off balance.

Matheus chopped hard at the same knee, his sword hit, cutting deep. The giant shouted again in pain and attempted to back hand him. It was a glancing blow but never the less it knocked Matheus to the ground. He turned the fall into a roll and was back on his feet again pressing the attack. He feinted left, the giant grunted with the effort of raising the club and slammed it down hard trying to crush him.

Matheus dodged back to the right and once more chopped into the knee causing it to buckle. The giant tried to stand but the leg would not support its weight. Instead it swung the club again. Matheus blocked it but the sheer force sent a stinging pain up both arms, the sword flying from his grasp.

The giant pushed itself to its feet using the club as a crutch. Its face was contorted in pain but also a determination to crush this vicious human. Matheus was armed only with his remaining axe. He feinted and pretended to throw the axe looking for an opening. The giant flinched back several times not wanting to get hit again. Matheus glanced past the giant and then back to the towering brute, making him rotate to the right.

A war cry from Rorc who had re-joined the fight and had closed the distance made the giant turn again. It grunted in pain its wounded leg making this manoeuvre slow and painful. The battle axe slashed into the giant's forearm and it fell backwards as its leg once more buckled. Matheus ran forward again, burying the axe into the back of its skull but still it did not die. It swung an arm around wildly trying to fend the men off, knocking Matheus to one side. Rorc raised his battle axe again and finished the job. At last the giant lay dead. Rorc had to rest his foot on its chest and work the axe back and forth until he could finally get it free.

Matheus could not see his sword or spear so he wrenched his axe free from the giant's skull and ran to the ledge with Rorc right by his side. They climbed up and moved forward joining the others as they fought the bugbears. One man was fighting a bugbear and losing. The almost eight-foot creature dwarfed even Rorc. The addition of the two big men however turned the tide rapidly and the remaining humanoids fell.

They moved slowly into the cave. Matheus whispered "Ansel", but there was no response. Marwa joined them, her right arm was hanging limp by her side, blood dripping from her fingers. Hardeth had retrieved Matheus's spear and handed it to him. He nodded in thanks and hooking his axe onto his belt he held the spear before him.

There were numerous bones scattered around the cave entrance. Some had very obvious teeth marks to show something had been gnawing on them. None of them looked human but it was hard to be sure. They were about twenty feet inside the entrance when they could hear singing. This was not good and Matheus instinctively walked faster, trying to locate the source. He came to a medium sized room of sorts containing the remains of a bed and some shelves. To one side the two small children were cowering, frightened but thankfully still alive. Floren stood beside them looking concerned. He held Zaida by the hand and they were looking at the source of the singing, a strange terrifying mix of a human female and an eagle. She had a malevolent look on her face as she sang her song. She was incredibly ugly with brown and grey feathers but there was a scattering of vibrant blue feathers that formed a kind of crown around her head.

"Be careful, the harpy song will charm you", shouted Marwa.

Rorc rested a hand on Matheus's shoulder "Leave my friend alone and there'll be no trouble".

Matheus was momentarily confused but then the warning made sense. Rorc had fallen under the spell of the harpy. "I'm sorry, my friend", said Matheus before firing a knee into his groin. Rorc folded in two, dropping his axe. "Ansel, the children", he shouted.

Another of the men had been charmed and swung his sword at Matheus who blocked it with spear, before cracking him across the side of the head with the end. The children were screaming in terror when Floren pulled a knife. He turned to face the children but appeared uncertain. It looked like he was contemplating hurting them but did not want to do this. He suddenly crumpled in a heap hit by something invisible. Ansel appeared then and stood between the harpy and the children.

Another man was closing the distance with Matheus, a sword raised to strike, Hardeth was running to intercept. Matheus ignored them both and drawing his arm back flung the spear, hard at the harpy. The grotesque creature tried to evade the weapon but it struck it in the shoulder, knocking some of the feathers loose. The creature stopped singing and flew to the back of the cave, tearing a heavy curtain from the wall and revealing a small opening. It scrambled and clawed its way towards the opening, its wings beating furiously.

Ansel saw his chance and ran forward stabbing at the wings and claws of the creature with his rapier. It screeched in agony but was so determined to escape it did retaliate. Again, he stabbed at it, there was blood and feathers everywhere but finally the abomination disappeared into the darkness. Ansel stabbed his rapier once more inside but hit nothing, the creature was gone.

Matheus went to the children who were sobbing in fright but the girl Zaida was trying hard to be brave. "Is the monster gone?"

"It's gone little one. You're safe now".

"Will it come back?" a single tear rolled down her face, betraying her, and she wiped it angrily away.

"No, it won't be back".

She looked past Matheus, as if she wanted to be sure. Then she walked past him to the drops of blood on the ground and something else. He followed close behind as she stooped to pick something up.

"What have you got there?" he asked gently.

Zaida wiped her nose before turning. In her hand she held a feather, a vibrant blue feather. She was smiling now. "Can I keep it?"

"Of course, you can. That's your souvenir. A reminder of how brave you were".

She nodded and allowed herself to be lifted up into his arms. "I want to go home now", she whispered. The stress of the past few hours had taken its toll and she was falling asleep in his arms, the blue feather held tight in her hand.

Marwa with her own arm in a sling, used her healing spells on the worst of the villagers that had accompanied them. Miraculously, although most had been wounded, no one had been killed.

They walked all the way back to where the others waited, the parents rushing forward with a mixture of fear, anticipation and hope on their faces. Shouts of joy and relief rang out around the place as word got around that all the children had been returned safe and well. The other group led by Hrothgar had returned soon after looking despondent, but this had turned to relief

when they too heard the news. Hrothgar glanced at Matheus, hesitated and then walked straight up to him. "You did good Heldanner" and then offering his hand, they shook.

There had been a priest of Thor with Hrothgar and a priest of Dazbog who had stayed behind. They attended to the remaining wounded, including Marwa herself. Floren had been very upset to learn of his role in the abduction of the children. Some had managed to persuade him that the Harpy had charmed him and he was not at fault. Indeed, some of the men had attacked their comrades during the fight against the harpy such was the potency of her magic. Rorc still had a bruised groin to attest to this fact. He was very smug with the healing ability bestowed upon him by the magic ring he wore, declining any offers of healing from the priests. Most of the injuries he had sustained fighting the hill giant had already disappeared.

The young boy that had alerted the others to the abduction of the children by bugbears was also being fussed over. It had been explained to him that it was not always a good idea to go charging into danger as Zaida found out. Sometimes it was better to go and find someone better suited, more able to handle a bad situation. He had not seemed totally convinced until Zaida had handed him the blue feather. "Here Ethelbert, a souvenir".

After the excitement of the day, the progress on the barn had stalled, in the end they had to put off the completion of the project until the next day. That did not stop them from celebrating their good fortune in having everyone alive and well, with some food and drink.

When the barn was finally erected, the families began to break up and go home. Zaida returned with her family to their home further south. She gave Matheus a final hug and said she wanted to be a brave fighter like him someday.

The others began to make preparations to continue on their way to Saffir, accompanied by some families who were heading that way too. This included Ethelbert and his family. Ethelbert's father owned one of the Inn's in Saffir and had offered them rooms there for as long as they needed them.

After two days of travel across country, they rested up again. They would reach Saffir early the next day and this place seemed like a good place to meet up with Marguerite. The only problem was they had not agreed on an exact time.

The next day when the others continued on into Saffir, Matheus and Ansel remained behind to wait. It was late in the day and they were preparing to settle in again for the night when they heard the breathing, snorting noises of a large bear. It came to the edge of the camp and paused, its large head swaying as it sniffed the air and looked at the two men.

Matheus stood, holding the bag containing her clothes and walked towards the werebear. He placed it against a tree and then returned to Ansel. Marguerite slowly changed back to her human form and then began to dress. When she entered the light from the campfire, and they could see her properly they noticed she looked well fed and happy. They spoke of their

adventures and listened as she told them about what she had been up to. She was tired though so after a relatively short time she curled up beside the fire and drifted off to sleep.

The next day they continued on eager to complete the last leg of their journey. They walked through a fertile valley, dotted with farms and sheep, before arriving at Saffir. They brought Marguerite to the inn where the others were staying and had some food. That was followed by hugs and words of gratitude from Marguerite. She was going to see her late husband's family and hopefully settle down here. She reminded them that her brother Jean-Pierre Stibbons lived in Threshold in Karameikos, and they should call in if they were passing through.

Over the next few days they tried to do as little as possible. It was nice to be back in civilisation for a bit, even for Matheus. Sudoska was greatly interested in the news of a ruined tower that had belonged to a mage. A tower built by Arbadnasion the Learned, the very same tower that the village of Saffir had grown up around many years ago. He was off most days, studying and talking to any of the locals that knew anything of the town or the tower's history.

Matheus had decided to head back to the Heldann Freeholds. He had his belongings packed up and was in the process of saying his goodbyes when a boy came into the Inn. Sudoska had sent him to tell the others they were needed at the mage's tower. Matheus had been prepared to let them head off without him and he would begin the journey back home, back to Anya and the child who would be born around this time. Ansel tried to persuade him to come along one more time and see what Sudoska wanted. Against his better judgement he had allowed himself to be influenced.

They had reached the tower where Sudoska was waiting. He looked very excited and was in a muddle, split between being happy that they had arrived and angry that they had taken so long. He had been examining the legends and the ruins and had found a way in. They had entered the secret passageway he had managed to open and descended into the basement of the tower. It was dark and strangely humid. Torches and light spells enabled them to see they were in a circular chamber with all manner of glyphs and symbols along the walls. If Sudoska had been a child in a sweet shop he could not have been happier. He wandered around peering closely at everything that took his interest. The others were thankful that there had been no traps or undead to deal with and began to relax.

Meanwhile, Sudoska was mumbling to himself, when he was not giggling in joy and scribbling notes in his book.

Then suddenly a blue, white light in the very centre of the room appeared from an unknown source and then enlarged into a small circle about five feet in diameter.

"Eh, Sudoska, what's that?" asked Marwa a note of nervousness in her voice.

The mage turned as he was rubbing his hand along the wall, wiping the dust and grime away, trying to read the engravings there. He turned to face the centre of the room, the blue white light illuminating his features. His smile which was wide at the time, disappeared to be replaced

by a frown as he peered over the rim of his spectacles. "I... I'm not sure", he admitted and began walking towards the centre of the room and the strange light. "Nobody move, just let me have a look here and we'll..."

The circle of light grew from five feet in diameter to ten, with a pulsing throb. Sudoska stopped in his tracks.

"I think we should get out of here", whispered Ansel.

Sudoska held out a hand "Don't move".

It made no difference the light pulsed again, growing rapidly till it had passed harmlessly through the party and formed a perfect circle around the room, right up to the walls.

"Now what?" shouted Rorc. As fearless as he usually was, he was visibly shaken by this mysterious arcane situation.

Manian took a step towards the staircase that had brought them here when the blue white light changed to red. He froze again and looked at Sudoska who had a panicked look on his face.

"What is this Sudoska?" asked Marwa again but this time with a note of anger in her voice. She drew her mace. The others taking their cue from her, drew their weapons too. The red circle around the room rose so that they were surrounded by a red wall, then before anyone else spoke, it pulsed again and began to shrink rapidly.

No one knew what would happen if the red light touched them but instinctively, they ran from it to the centre of the room. They braced themselves as it drew ominously closer before stopping again. They were left with very little room to move, crowded as they were together. Then once more the light changed colour. The red colour darkened until it was black, then it changed to a muddy brown colour. It pulsed again and engulfed the party completely.

## One Big Happy Family - Part 3

The next thing Matheus knew was that he was falling backwards from about six feet in the air. He landed on cold frozen water and broke through the layer of ice into the muddy water below. He surfaced and quickly got his feet under him, the water only knee deep. He saw the others appear like him as if from nowhere about six feet in the air and like him they fell with a cry of surprise before hitting the cold water. He looked around trying to see if they were in danger. They were no longer in the tower. They were now outside in the wild. The land around was an icy hilly tundra, with a smattering of marshy, swampy ground.

They walked to one of the hills and set up camp. Matheus had a look at the skies and was able to work out that they were a lot further north than Saffir. His maps were still on the horse, but he had poured over them enough that he had them burned into this memory. However, he needed something, some point of reference to work out exactly where they were. All he could say for sure right now was that they were very far north and so the obvious thing to do seemed to be to start heading south.

“Well, Sudoska, that’s the last time I follow you anywhere”, grumbled Rorc.

Sudoska was trying without much success to find somewhere dry to stand so he could wring out the excess water from his robes.

The journey was difficult. They were a hardy bunch that was true, but they were unused to travelling on such terrain, without horses. None of them was dressed in furs or had much in the way of food. They had been caught totally off guard. Matheus thankfully took it all in his stride and found them places to take shelter and Marwa was able to cast a spell which prevented them from getting too cold. They would not have lasted long during those days without her help. Sudoska ventured a guess that the deceased mage had left behind a trap of sorts. Luckily for them it had not killed them instantly. This was of little comfort to Matheus and the others. Perhaps this mage was a sadist and preferred to kill slowly through hypothermia or starvation.

A few nights later, they could see far off in the distance, an arc of flames. They were many miles north east of it but it was still visible. Despite their predicament it was an incredible sight. Sudoska turned to Matheus and they spoke in unison “The Arch of Fire”. Matheus was smiling and Sudoska was nodding in agreement. The arch of fire was two volcanoes separated by many miles but the flames erupting from one connected to the mouth of the other.

“So?” asked Manian, shivering and trying to stay warm near their fire.

“So, now we know where we are. Now I can plot a way for us to get home. It’s not going to be easy. The journey alone will take many months. If we can stay warm and get food that will only be the half of it. There's bound to be many humanoid tribes, dragons, giants, all sorts of things that want to kill and eat us”.

“If I ever get out of this. I swear I am NEVER going into so much as a city park again, I promise you that. I have had enough of this”, said Ansel, his face pale, blowing into his hands to warm his fingers.

The journey south was not easy. They walked many miles, often in silence, to conserve their energy. Matheus managed to kill some animals or catch some fish but it was difficult to feed so many mouths. On days when he could not find food, they had to tighten their belts and walk on.

Each night they could see the Arch of Fire, far off ahead and slightly to their right.

Then they came to a nightmare land called the Plain of Skulls. It was a relatively flat, grassland with some rolling hills. The wind was almost constant, the sound it made began to tear at their nerves. Manian appeared close to breaking point, and they had to make camp as best they could until he calmed down. They came across bones too numerous to count. The bones and indeed skulls of man, animal and giant. They were usually half covered in dirt and rocks, but the constant wind had obviously exposed some to the air. It looked like a huge wave of water had washed them all to their doom, drowning them and then depositing their remains over the land.

They tried to hug the edge of the mountains to their right as they moved south. Marwa was on constant watch and several times had to use her magical spells and holy symbol to repel evil spirits that approached them. They lost track of time, but it was estimated that it took four weeks to finally reach the southernmost point of the plains. Manian had not spoken in many days and the others feared that he had lost his mind. Not much that was edible could be found on the plains. They were beaten down and half starved.

The land they travelled gradually changed again. There were more trees, grass and the land more fertile. The amount of game available was a life saver. It took them about two weeks of hunting, fishing and resting to get them some way back to full fitness. Matheus did most of the heavy lifting when it came to feeding the party, but he had taught Marwa and Ansel to fish. Even Rorc became quite good at finding them edible berries to eat. Matheus was able to catch several muskrats, large rat like creatures that were numerous in the rivers of this area. The meat was very tasty, especially when you had not eaten well in weeks. The fur he knew would fetch a good price in the big cities, being advertised there as Great Bay seal fur. This made him smile. If the women only knew they were actually wearing the fur of a giant water rat and paying through the nose for the privilege.

Sudoska sat with the silent Manian most of the time. He seemed to feel the cold more so than the others. He constantly complained of being cold and wet. The others did not let this bother them. They knew he was simply far outside his comfort zone, so they stayed patient. Manian on the other hand was still not speaking. He needed to be watched constantly, to make sure he was warm. On more than one occasion his blanket had fallen from his shoulders, and he had

almost frozen to death. Despite the danger and discomfort, he had just sat there as his body temperature dropped.

They met one or two trappers, from the local tribes and had been able to get some larger furs to make more suitable clothing. The summer was well and truly over, and they were already well into the autumn. They continued on after a few more days and each night the Arch of Fire grew closer and closer.

Soon they came upon the White Bear River and walked along its bank, still heading south. The river was huge and extremely wide. The people here were more numerous, and they were able to get advice on the best way to proceed, what areas were best avoided and also to trade for whatever goods they needed such as boots. Sudoska's boots had worn away almost to nothing. His feet were cut and bruised but he had given up complaining long ago. They even came across some halflings from the Shire of Leeha on the coast of the Great Bay. They were able to stock up on provisions at the semi-permanent trading posts that the halflings had established along the river.

At one of these camps, they paid a tribesman to bring them south on his boat. It was a welcome change to watch the land pass by and all you had to do was lie back and look at it. You did not even have to do that as falling asleep was also an option.

Matheus looked around at his companions, his family. They had been strangers to him but after many months together, many miles covered, and dangers faced they had grown very close. He smiled to himself as he looked at Ansel. His fine clothing had been discarded long ago in favour of the furs they now wore.

Marwa looked tired; her face creased with lines of concentration, lines that had set like stone.

Sudoska like the others had grown a full beard in the many months they had been travelling. He looked more like northern tribesman than an Alphatian mage.

Like Matheus, Rorc had thrived in this environment. The slightly unhealthy look had gone, and his eyes shone healthy and clear.

Matheus looked now at Manian sitting silently against the side of the boat, a warm blanket around his shoulders. Marwa had told him that they had encountered a banshee while they were on the Isle of Dawn and had barely escaped with their lives. Manian had been badly shaken by the event. She guessed that the Plain of Skulls and its abundant undead and spirits had knocked down whatever walls he had built up. She was concerned that he would never recover and hoped to find a powerful enough priest that might be able to restore him.

They beached the boat late in the day at one of the many ruins that dotted the area. It was a well-used campground and there were plenty of signs of previous use. The area was covered in a mist, and this would only get worse according to their boat guide because of their proximity

to the Arch of Fire. The mist gave the place a spectral, dreamlike quality. Sounds of something unseen splashing in the water could be heard and far off a wolf howled.

He stood and walked to the side of the river and looked out across its expanse, the far side lost in the darkness. The boatman, Erik, had told them it was almost years end. He shook his head almost imperceptibly. Incredible as it was to believe, it had been almost a year since he had seen Anya. The child would have been born by now. He hoped that mother and child were safe and well. He turned and walked back to the others just as Rorc exclaimed. "That's it! I knew I recognised the pattern".

Sudoska raised a tired look "What are you talking about?"

"The pattern on Manian's face. Those scars. Terni Lapilli".

Sudoska turned to look more closely at Manian who still seemed locked in his own world. "Well, what do you know? He's right. Terni Lapilli".

Matheus stood by the fire and looked at Manian. The scars on his face did indeed bear an uncanny resemblance to the board used in a game played in Thyatis City, usually by children. The winner was the one who managed to place three of their stones in a row. He sat down next to Ansel who was already fast asleep.

A month passed and they celebrated the New Year with some ducks and rabbits that Matheus caught. They had joined up briefly with some of the tribesmen of the area to drive some ogres away. The people here could be a bit funny about strangers. In their mind, if you were not a friend, then you were a potential enemy. Helping them with the ogres had put the party firmly in the friend camp.

They stood now on the banks of Azure Lake. They had been stuck for two weeks because of a heavy snowstorm and had to hunker down till the worst had passed. There were quite a few boats on the lake, and they had played with the idea of taking one of them back North along the river to the Halfling town of Leeha on the Great Bay. From there they might be able to book passage on a ship back to Oceansend. In the end they had decided to keep to the land route heading south, following the shoreline until they arrived at the town of Stamtral. It was not a particularly pleasant place to stay but after being out in the wilderness for so long they could not be too choosy. There were a fair number of Heldanners here. They had fled north when the Heldannic Knights had invaded their land. They were interested in the news from Matheus, some even vowed to return home and take up the battle alongside Halvard and his Partisans.

The journey from there took them into a pass through the mountains, following the rivers path until it came to Lake Gunaald. At this time of the year, it was partly frozen. Much to their amusement there were children and a lot of adults skating on the ice. For such a serious, hardened people it was good to see that they could smile and laugh too.

It was not all laughter and smiles; they had also come across an old orc woman who had been left behind by her tribe as she had been too old to keep up with them. They had spotted her from the smoke of her fire. It was only upon approaching her crude and badly made shelter they realised she was not human. The first instinct had been to kill her, but cooler heads prevailed. Matheus approached the old orc slowly. She had gazed at him calmly, expecting her death to follow quickly. One of her eyes was completely clouded with cataracts. He stood before her and placed an old knife and some food on the ground. They had made camp further along on the bank of the lake.

In the morning Matheus returned to find that she had gone. The knife and food remained where he had left them, untouched. He found her tracks easily enough. She was walking with the help of a stick and had to drag one of her legs behind her. The tracks led out onto the frozen lake, and he followed them for about five minutes. Up ahead he could see that the ice was cracked and broken revealing a patch of frozen water. The tracks of the old orc female led straight to it. It was obvious what had happened. Unable to keep up with her tribe and unwilling to accept help from the humans she had chosen another option. He stood there for a few more seconds, the wind was beginning to blow stronger, then he walked back to the others.

They also encountered a tribe of centaurs. It was a fortuitous encounter for both groups. The centaurs needed help retrieving a lost tribal relic which had been thrown into a lake. Having a horse body made it all but impossible to swim to the bottom and retrieve it. Matheus had stripped off and entered the frigid waters and remained submerged for a couple of minutes. Marwa was not able to remain close enough for her resist cold spell to benefit Matheus and he had declined the use of the potion of water breathing as it would be wasted, explaining "I won't be able to stay in there much longer than I can hold my breath anyway".

When he finally broke the surface, he had in his hand a sword in a leather scabbard. As he waded back to the shore he held it aloft for all to see. The centaurs had cheered in delight, the others in relief that he had not drowned or frozen to death.

They spent two days with the grateful centaurs, and it was time well spent. Their presence seemed to bring Manian out of his stupor. He was still not back to being his full self, but he cracked a smile and spoke a few whispered words. The notorious horse lover appeared to be reconnecting with the world and there was no doubt in anyone's mind the centaurs had been responsible. It was a start and one they were grateful for.

Their next stop in civilisation was Gunvolod. They did not stay long before taking a ship up through the Ransarn River Valley until they reached the rapids. Beyond them the river veered off up into the mountains away from Saffir. At this point they disembarked and continued on foot for the last leg of the journey.

It had been many months since they had been teleported to the Frozen Moors in the Everwinter Lands. Matheus had discussed the events with many of the tribesmen and trappers

they had encountered and so he was confident that was where their unexpected and very much unwanted journey had begun. In two more weeks, they expected to enter Saffir and from there Matheus planned to return to the Heldann Freeholds. He would find Anya and his child, and they would leave, perhaps even returning to Saffir to settle down.

Upon entering Saffir they walked directly to the Inn. The innkeeper was shocked that they were still alive. They had been gone about one year and he had taken their personal belongings from the rooms and rented them out. Their belongings he had put in one of his storerooms. The horses were stabled nearby but he had sold two of them to help pay for their place in the stables and feed. He was crimson with embarrassment, but Marwa reassured him that he need not be. Rooms were found for them along with food and a hot bath. After spending so long in close proximity to each other they took the opportunity to take a break from each other.

Sudoska shaved the beard from his face and dumped the heavy furs he had been wearing. He was back to wearing his loose-fitting mages robes. Rorc and Ansel drank and ate to their hearts desire. Several bottles of wine were consumed in short order. Marwa brought Manian to a temple and sought some help for him. Matheus visited Marguerite to check in with her and let her know they were back.

Two days later and Matheus was making plans to start his journey back south to the Heldann Freeholds. The party was breaking up. Sudoska and Marwa were going on to Oceansend to book passage on a ship back to the Isle of Dawn. Ansel was returning to Darokin with a promise that the next time he left the city it would be to retire in Ierendi. Manian was staying in Saffir for the time being. He was toying with the idea of heading back to the centaurs around Lake Gunaald. Rorc seemed genuinely torn but decided in the end not to return with the others to the Isle of Dawn. Plans were made to meet up again in Saffir in two years' time.

## One Big Happy Family - Part 4

Having loaded up their horses the three companions rode out the gate of Saffir. Their journey took them along the base of the Lirovka's Alps south into the Skaufskogr hills. They stayed well clear of Landfall, resting in any small villages when they could. Ansel was having a real problem now with sleeping outdoors without a roof over his head. He was never one for living rough and the past year had wiped away any shred of interest he had in doing so. He regaled Rorc with the sights, sounds and opportunities in Darokin. Matheus could see that Rorc was seriously considering the offer to go there. They joined up with a war party to fight hill giants who had come down from the mountains and were raiding the farms for cattle and sheep. Matheus came into possession of some beautifully crafted throwing axes and Ansel obtained a magical bag of holding like the one Sudoska had.

They called into the tribe of foxfolk lupin they had assisted previously and stayed with them for two days before continuing. The closer they came to the Heldann Freeholds the more the news reached them of the attacks against the Heldannic Abbeys that had taken place. There was a definite feel of a gathering storm. The threat from the Haldis Partisans was growing and more men were streaming in from all over to join in. Matheus spoke with the lupin druid about the faerie folk and dryad they had in the Grove. The lupin was pleased to hear about another dryad and gave Matheus a gift for her, a pinecone wrapped in leaves and bound with some dry grass.

When they left the Skaufskogr Hills, they moved from village to village resting and gathering information. Ansel was a little concerned that he was allowing Matheus to travel back. He had been under strict orders that he had to take him to safety and stay low. It had been well over a year now so with a shrug of his shoulders he followed his friends into the villages of Isoður, Theriður, Eikervik and finally Tormannvik. The village was teeming with activity and Matheus was well known here. The news was that Halvard had returned from Wendar without any guarantee of help from their King but had enlisted help from a large number of individual warriors and small clans. That had made the journey somewhat worthwhile. Halvard was now in Helskir trying to secure more help in the coming battle. Matheus was impressed with how well organised things were and how they were progressing. Impressed but not surprised. Halvard was a very head strong individual. He was single minded and relentless in his goal to overthrow the Heldannic Knights and regain his birth right. For the first time however, Matheus had his own goal now and it did not involve The Partisans or the Heldannic Knights.

Matheus, Ansel and Rorc left Tormannvik and headed deep into the forests. They travelled many days, often on foot, sometimes leading the horses to allow them some rest. Rorc enjoyed the journey, but Ansel was getting increasingly jaded. He sometimes complained that he would have been better off getting a ship from Landfall and sailing all the way back home. Matheus just smiled at his long-suffering companion. He had to admit that Ansel was lasting a lot longer in the wilderness than he would cooped up in any city, especially one as hectic and packed to the brim with humanity as Darokin City. How could people live that way?

They were close now to the Grove but rather than be happy, a line of consternation formed on Matheus's brow. Rorc was oblivious to it, but Ansel picked up on it straight away. "Something wrong?"

"Let's take a look around. The Grove isn't far from here".

Once more they were following Matheus who had his sword and an axe drawn. Ansel held the reins of two horses and Rorc was close behind, his axe resting on his shoulder as he led his horse.

They came to the clearing and Matheus paused. He looked around at the fire damaged buildings, remembering the last time he was here. He felt a pang of guilt. He had brought Anya here and when she had left, she had warned him to leave, that it was no longer safe. When he had spoken to some of the Partisans in Tormannvik, they were still talking about the attack on the Grove even though it had happened well over a year ago. There were different stories and theories about what had occurred on that accursed day. One such story involved a woman called "The Harpy" who had betrayed them, revealing the location of the Grove to the Heldannic Knights.

A sudden movement far off to the left, made him tense and he pulled back into the trees, holding up a hand to Ansel and Rorc, warning them to stop and move back.

"What is it?" whispered Ansel, when Matheus was beside them.

"Trolls. There are trolls in the Grove".

They went further back into the forest and Matheus explained that this was a place where women and children could live safely. The trolls had a lair to the north further up the valley and were never able to find this place because the pixies and sprites always led them away.

"So, what do you think happened?" asked Ansel.

"I'm not sure, but we'll start by finding Aralia".

"Who's Aralia?" asked Rorc.

"She's the Hama dryad of the Grove".

"What's a Hama dryad?"

"Think of her as a tree spirit, a powerful nature being".

"Will she help us fight the trolls?"

Matheus nodded in reply.

They walked for about thirty minutes through a painfully still forest. Matheus paused frequently, listening and then letting out a breath he did not realise he was holding. The trees

although evergreen for the most part were showing signs of turning brown. The needles on some fell to the ground whenever man or horse brushed against them.

He put his hand on a tree, his fingers spreading out on the bark. Without any explanation he walked on leading his horse and the others followed him in silence. Eventually though even the others could see there was something terribly wrong. At first it was the growing stench, not the usual smell you would associate with dead people or animals, but no less nauseous. The leaves on the trees and bushes were becoming sparser, the limbs visibly wilting. Matheus stood before the tree of the Hama dryad Aralia, a tall evergreen pine. The “jealous dryad” that Anya had been told about.

The clearing was devastated, the grass blackened, even the insects had been driven away. Matheus was shocked but kept his face impassive. At first, they did not realise what they were seeing but then it became obvious. Dozens and dozens of tiny bodies lay scattered around the clearing, their small wings shrivelled up and brittle. Altogether there must have been about eighty dead sprites and pixies and it appeared that they had died in great agony.

“Times like this, I wish Marwa and Sudoska were here”, said Ansel, his voice cracking after the long silence, his throat dry.

Matheus turned his head to regard Ansel and then returned his gaze to the tree and the axe embedded in the bark of Aralia’s tree. It pulsed with a sickly green light, a soft crackling, like a whispering lightning bolt could be heard emanating from it.

“Touching that would be a very bad idea, I think”, muttered Rorc, lowering his battle axe from his shoulder instinctively.

Matheus looked at his friends, his face stern, calculating the best course of action. “Well, leaving it there is not an option either. I need rope and that bag of holding Ansel”.

Rorc handed him some rope which he tied securely around the haft of the axe. The hair on his arms stood up as he did this. He was careful not to touch the axe and instead used the rope to work it up and down before pulling it free from the tree. The axe hung from the rope which he held out at arm's length. In the bark of the tree was a puss filled, festering wound, that sputtered a cloud of greenish dust particles he was careful not to inhale.

Ansel opened the bag as wide as it would go while Matheus quickly lowered it in. He then pulled the drawstring tight, leaving a length of rope about one-foot-long trailing outside. “Now what?” he asked.

“The tree is still alive, which means she is too. Search the area and find Aralia. She should be close by”.

The three men spread out leaving the horses tied to some branches. Rorc called out “What does she look like?”

Matheus did not answer, pushing through some undergrowth and stepping beneath low hanging branches. He went as far as he thought she was likely to be and then started moving around the edge of an imaginary circle with the tree at the centre. He stopped and knelt down. Aralia was lying on her side, her skin grey and flaking, her hair sparse and falling out of her head.

Her breathing was shallow, and her eyes fluttered open as she sensed someone close beside her. At first her face showed fear but then recognising Matheus she closed her eyes in relief, tears beginning to stream down her cheeks. He moved closer and with great care he slowly lifted her up into his arms. One of her arms moved weakly around his broad shoulders, holding him tightly. "I knew someone would come", she whispered hoarsely. "I am so very glad it was you".

The others saw him carrying the Hama dryad and walked slowly towards him following as he went back to the damaged tree.

"Will she be alright" asked Rorc, visibly concerned.

Matheus lay her down at the base of the tree, her back resting against it. Nothing was said for many minutes while they waited for Aralia to gather her strength. When she did, she told them what she knew.

Someone had come to the forest a few weeks ago and used the axe on her tree. She had not seen who it was and had no idea how they had managed to come so close without her detecting them. The axe was a thing of evil and was connected to several other enchanted iron spikes that had been driven into several other trees. The whole area had become sickly, and the hidden people had been trapped in their fairy rings, the others unable to get to safety had died.

Without the hidden people to lure the trolls away they had taken over the Grove. She thought that there had been some Heldanners still present in the Grove but she did not know what had happened to them. She grew tired again but assured them she would recover. She stood shakily to her feet, allowing Matheus to assist her. She raised a hand to his cheek and gave him a weak smile, her eyes shining with adoration. Then she stepped towards and into the tree, disappearing from sight.

"What happened?" whispered Rorc in awe. "Where did she go?"

"She has merged back with her tree to rest and heal. She'll be ok but she'll need time. I want to find these iron spikes she was talking about. The ones that are embedded in trees. We need to remove them too".

"Needle in a haystack, Matheus", said Ansel. "Is there no other way?"

Matheus shrugged his shoulders "None I know of. We'll break the area out into zones and take them one at a time. Any areas where the trees look fine should be clear".

“Can’t we eat first? I’m starving” whined Rorc. Ansel said nothing but the expression on his face showed he was in full agreement.

Matheus was in a hurry but relented, they would work better if they were fed. They unpacked some rations and heated them along with some coffee. They kept the fire small and well contained. The smallest spark could easily ignite the dry kindling surrounding them. Once they had eaten, the search began.

By the end of day two they had located four iron spikes, each one was about six inches long and as thick as a thumb. They used the edge of their axe blades to pry them free and then one by one they were dropped into Ansel’s bag of holding.

On the morning of day three Rorc encountered a woman washing herself down by a stream. She was an attractive woman, with raven black hair, the fringe cut short and straight above her eyebrows. She was startled when she heard him approach and stood quickly, her hand moving to a pouch by her side. She stopped when Rorc raised his hands to reassure her he meant no harm, but she remained wary. Matheus entered the area but kept his distance not wanting to panic her. She appeared to be unarmed. Perhaps she was a mage, though she did not really look like one and Matheus did not recognise her as a Heldann Freeholder.

She introduced herself as Bronwyn and said that she was just passing through and had been using one of the abandoned cabins for a couple of days. She had been with two others, but they had been attacked by trolls and were separated. Matheus was silent throughout and watched her closely. Something was off about her, that or he had become far too cynical. Someone had stuck a cursed axe in Aralia’s tree and dotted the forest with iron spikes. Was this woman responsible? Rorc offered to walk her back to her cabin, which she warily accepted. Not surprising as she was a lone female, and they were two large unknown males. On the way they met Ansel, leaning against a tree. He looked to Matheus who gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

“My cabin is just down here”, said Bronwyn.

Matheus recognised the cabin as belonging to Hilda and Gunther. It had been partially damaged by fire but was mostly intact.

“We’re moving on as soon as our business here is finished. You should join us” offered Rorc.

Bronwyn smiled “I might just take you up on that”. She entered the cabin, and the three men followed her inside. The cabin was quite spacious and had a lot of shelves along all the walls. Hilda had been very particular about everything being in the right place and she did not like things to be left lying around. The place was a bit of a mess now and Matheus knew Hilda would be livid if she saw it. Wherever she was he hoped she was safe.

Bronwyn walked up to one of the shelves and took down some jars of honey. “I have some bread you are welcome to”.

Rorc took one of the jars, prying off the lid he, stuck a finger in and scooped out a gob of honey which he stuck in his mouth. "Oh, that's nice. Been a while since I had anything like this".

Ansel moved closer but Matheus stayed where he was, the hairs on his arms were standing up, an inner voice screaming at him.

A sound from outside made Rorc pause, Ansel turned to face the door, Matheus glanced to the door and then quickly back to Bronwyn who was moving to the window. She reached in behind the curtain and withdrew a long-handled Scythe, which she handled with great skill. She began muttering some words of magic, just as the large ugly head of a troll poked itself into the room. One troll was halfway into the already crowded cabin, but another could be seen just behind.

"Out, out now", shouted Matheus as he headed for the window beside Bronwyn.

She made no attempt to flee, a small smirk broke out on her face. She completed her spell. Matheus felt the tingling sensation of the spell coursing through his body, but he fought it off and continued to the window, Ansel staggered sideways, falling heavily, his head catching the side of a table as he fell. Rorc fell back against the wall, his hand held to his brow as if he was dizzy.

Matheus dived through the open window and rolled forward onto this shoulder, the momentum brought him back to his feet and he sprinted hard for the forest. It felt wrong to leave his companions, but he knew he had no choice. He would try and make the trolls follow him and if he could, he would circle back. He sent a silent prayer to Frey and Freya that Bronwyn would not kill them outright.

There was a sound of cracking wood and the roar of the trolls as they made the window frame big enough for their long eight-foot-tall bodies to clamber through. He stopped at a tree and turned. The first two had fallen out of the broken window frame and lay sprawled on the ground. A third was laughing, a low rumbling sound like rocks in a metal drum. A fourth, a fifth came running around from the front of the cabin. They paused and looked around while their companions regained their feet. A loud whistle from Matheus and all five sets of eyes leapt to where the human stood. A hideous tooth-filled grin erupted on their faces, a long serpentine tongue lolled from the mouth of one. They ran forward, their long frames covering the ground with frightening speed.

Matheus did not wait a moment longer, he was off into the woods, choosing the most overgrown, tangled path through the forest. If it was open ground he would have been run down in seconds, but his speed, agility and the branches of the forest slowed down his pursuers enough that he managed to stay ahead, but only just. He ran back to where they had set up camp.

When he had first spotted the trolls upon entering the Grove he had made some preparations.

The lead troll spotted the human and ran forward, screaming wildly, his brethren close behind him. The human ran behind a tree, the troll was close behind. His shin hit something, a vine, a branch, it did not matter, he powered forward. A heavy branch whipped around and hit the troll hard, stopping it in its tracks. With a grunt it tried to push the branch away but realised that a massive four-foot spikes had impaled it clean through the chest, lifting it about two feet from the ground. The other trolls slowed but continued after Matheus, leaving the first troll behind.

They entered a small clearing with heavy bushes on either side, the human was just ahead about forty feet. Another roar of excitement from the trolls and they ran forward, the first two shouted in surprise as the ground beneath their feet disappeared. The small branches, scattered with leaves and moss, covering the deep slit in the ground, snapped under their weight and down they fell. The bottom of the twenty-foot hole was littered with spikes. A third troll fell in after them unable to stop but managed to grab the side and not fall completely in. The remaining troll looked down at them and then back at Matheus, its face creased with annoyance. It was bending down to grasp the hand of the troll who clung to the side when a rock hit it in the head. "Aargh" it shouted, touching its temple where the rock had struck. It looked around but the human was gone.

Matheus left the safety of the forest and jogged out onto open, rocky ground, heading up the valley towards the hot springs. After five minutes he stopped and looked back the way he had come. Trolls had an incredible ability to heal, and he had no way to permanently hurt them. Given enough time they would free themselves from his traps and continue the chase. He waited a minute and as he expected the first of the trolls came into view.

He could just make out its large head as it swung around trying to locate him. Three more trolls came into view and milled around, uncertain where their quarry had gone. He had left the occasional sign of his passing but once on the harder, rockier ground they had lost his trail.

He raised both hands to his mouth and shouted down the valley at them. "Hey, up here".

He did not wait a moment longer than to be sure that they had spotted him, and he ran as fast as he could to his destination. He had about a five-minute head start but they would eat that up in no time, and him too if they caught him, he thought grimly.

He ran in between rocks and into dry gullies, trying to keep out of sight as much as possible. He passed the hot spring that he had shared with Anya and despite the incredible danger he was in, smiled at the memory. He scaled the moderately steep slope to the top where he stood, taking a moment to look around. He saw the four trolls in the distance about three hundred metres away. He raised an arm and shouted to them. Their heads shot up at the noise and swung to face him. Once their black, dead eyes focused on him they came loping towards him, their long frames ideal for this environment. They grasped rocky ledges, vaulting themselves forward as they ran and closed the distance rapidly. He turned back to the hot spring and with one last look around dove straight in.

He swam for a few seconds in the darkness of the underwater tunnel, his hands groping for handholds and pulling himself along. It had been well over a year since he was last here, but he had done it often enough not to panic. He had more than enough air in his lungs. He began to ascend slowly and broke the surface of the water into the small cave. He pulled himself out the water, his eyes closed. Despite the total darkness, he found it easier to picture the cave in his mind's eye with his eyes closed. He sat on the edge, his legs dangling in the water and listened. Nothing. He pulled his legs from the water and rolled onto this side and then into a crouch. His hands felt the side of the wall, seeking the lantern he knew was there. He found it and then the flint and steel beside it. He wiped his hands as best as he could trying to dry them and then set about making a flame for the lantern. He thought back to the ambush against the Heldannic Knights and the stones with a light spell cast on them. A good idea, he knew a few of those would be preferable to a smoky lantern in a confined space. The light flickered causing shadows to jump and stretch around the uneven surface of the walls.

He was in a secret place that had been set aside to hide people should the Grove ever be compromised. It was also a place to keep supplies such as weapons and equipment. His stomach rumbled, but unfortunately food was not something they stored here.

He had his sword and axes but had left his enchanted spear back at their camp. He needed something that would be useful against the trolls. He felt confident he could take on one, chopping it into smaller pieces and burning it, but not two and certainly not five. They would overwhelm him and whatever wounds he managed to inflict would be healed in no time. The only answer was fire or acid. He had no access to acid, but there were quite a few flasks of oil which he could use. He planned to inflict some damage and then make his way back down to the Grove, hopefully to his friends.

He placed seven flasks into medium sized sack and made his way to the back of the cave. There was a narrow fissure that he had some trouble squeezing his large frame through. Once or twice, he got stuck but managed to force his way through, tearing his tunic and scratching his back and hips. It widened slightly and he was in another small cave with a small pool of water about three feet by four. He tied the sack to his belt and then lowered himself into the pool. When he was totally submerged, he began to swim through, once more grasping the sides of the tunnel and pulling himself along. With his eyes open he could see the light from the outside and moved slowly towards it. He had to be careful when he broke the surface. He would be extremely vulnerable to attack if a troll was waiting for him. His head broke the surface silently, his eyes looking left and right. He moved slowly forward to the edge and as quietly as he could, climbed out. He could hear the trolls nearby, just over the ledge. It sounded like they were at the entrance pool. He took out three of the flasks and some linen which he had managed to keep dry by putting it in a small clay pot with a stopper.

He prepared his firebombs as quickly as he dared. If they came over the ledge now it was over. He pushed that thought away and focused on his task. He soaked a strip of linen in lantern oil and stuffed one end in the neck of the flask. He lit a short, fat candle and placed it on the

ground. Then he lit two of the soaked linen strips and peered over the ledge. The four trolls were there. Three sat on their haunches, while one paced up and down beside the pool trailing a clawed hand through the water.

Matheus studied them a moment. Their lank black hair, their pure black, lifeless eyes, the mottled green skin. A truly monstrous creation he would have been very happy if they had never existed. Them and vampires.

He hurled the first flask aiming for maximum coverage. The flask broke easily splashing oil everywhere, but the flame did not catch. His heart thumped in his chest, this was not good. The trolls roared in surprise. They jumped to their feet and all four looked around for him. He gritted his teeth and threw the second flask, muttering "Don't fail me now".

The second flask smashed in front of them, the liquid flowing forward, followed by a 'whoosh' as it burst into flames. Panicked shrieks came from the trolls, while Matheus quickly grabbed two more flasks. With a fire already raging he did not need to light them. He quickly picked out targets and the best spots to hit and hurled the flasks. They erupted on the trolls who were flapping wildly trying to beat the flames out. Two fled back down to the Grove, screaming in pain and fear. He hurled another flask at the two that remained, hitting one square in the back. It gave an inhuman blood curdling wail as it was engulfed in flames. It staggered around blindly, beating uselessly at the fire consuming its body. The other troll leapt into the pool that Matheus had used to enter the cave.

Matheus quickly slid down the ledge to the side of the pool and pulled the stopper from the flask. He poured the oil onto the pool and a small drizzle to the oil that was burning on the ground. The oil burst into flames and then set the oil that floated on the surface of the pool on fire. He was not sure if a troll could drown but hoped the flames would at least keep it from coming back to the surface. He stuffed the last flask of oil into the bag and ran forward to the still struggling troll that was slowly losing the fight of its life. He drew his sword and chopped at the creature's body to speed up the process of it dying, cleaving through skull and neck. The flames still burned, and the troll had finally ceased to move. He made his way back down to the Grove, watching out for the two trolls that had fled ahead of him.

He felt very exposed as he crept down past the hot springs and across the rocky ground. The amount of cover here was relatively sparse. He paused every now and again in a crouched position scanning the tree line and the damaged Partisan cabins for signs of an ambush. Once within the confines of the Altenwald forest he felt more at ease, although the strange stillness still pervaded the area. Aralia had not shown herself since she had merged with her tree. He had underestimated how badly she had been hurt and the time it would take for her to recover her strength.

He entered his old cabin, the door hung loose on one hinge. Two of the walls were badly fire damaged. If he ever hoped to return here it would be better to raze the whole structure and start again. He was not a sentimental person by nature but he was angered that the place was

no longer how he had left it. No longer the place he had spent time with Anya. He crouched down beside the fireplace and pried loose a stone at the back of the hearth. He removed a small item wrapped carefully in a piece of cloth. He discarded the cloth and looked at the black ring with a white spider web pattern. He had removed the ring before the Heldannic Warbird had come to the Grove. Despite his confidence, he knew it was a distinct possibility he would be killed or captured. He had very few items of magic and it was a prized possession he did not want to end up in the hands of his enemies.

He left the cabin and made his way back to their campground. It would not be of very much use against the trolls, but he would feel better with his enchanted spear in his hands. A snap of twigs and branches before he was halfway there, alerted him and he moved behind a tree to wait. To his surprise and relief Rorc came into view headed in the same direction. He was accompanied by a slim man in chainmail armour, his hands bound. The man's face was bloodied, and it looked like all the fight was gone from him.

"Hello little brother", whispered Matheus, causing Rorc to flinch. He held Ansel's bag of holding in his hand and seemed ready to pull the cursed axe out if necessary to defend himself.

He hissed in relief "You scared the crap out of me, creeping around like that".

"Where's Ansel?"

Rorc shook his head. "That bitch cast a spell that took him out. He's ok though" he quickly added when he saw the look of concern on Matheus's face. "When all those trolls started pouring into the cabin and you shouting at us to get out. Ansel went down hard and I almost blacked out myself. Luckily for me you caused such a ruckus that you drew them to you. I was never so glad to be ignored in my life. It was like a pack of terriers chasing after a rat" he laughed.

"A rat? Really? I thought it was more like wolves chasing a majestic stag, no?" smiled Matheus.

Rorc grinned "Aye, a stag. They were so eager to get through that window after you I just had time to grab Ansel and run out the door. I stashed him close by, when I spotted the clerics, but I couldn't carry him and keep an eye on this weasel here" he said indicating his captive.

"What's his story?"

"Cleric of Thanatos. There was two of them, but I killed one and this one decided he'd rather co-operate and live" he growled.

"What's your name?" asked Matheus.

"Taywen" replied the young man, looking extremely nervous, as though he would wet himself at any moment.

Taywen explained that they were clerics of Thanatos with Bronwyn as their leader. They had been sent here by their church to kill the fairy folk and lead the trolls into the Grove. He revealed that Bronwyn had a magical stone, a black stone made from obsidian which she called the Basilisk's eye. With it she could control the trolls and turn them to stone if they disobeyed. It was connected to the trolls, and she could communicate with them even over great distances. He spoke of the cursed axe and its potency against fairy folk. A small smile of delight and cruelty crept into his features as he spoke of it. Then realising where he was it quickly disappeared, and the nervous look returned. Matheus and Rorc were looking at him closely, their faces hostile.

They pushed him ahead as they walked to their camp and kept him talking. He told them that there were nine iron spikes. They looked at each other, they had found four. "Five more" muttered Rorc. The priest told them they helped to increase the radius of the axe enchantment.

Arriving at their camp they grabbed whatever gear they needed, including more lantern oil and a torch that Rorc lit. Matheus had his magic spear and they went back to get Ansel. Rorc had pushed him under the bank of a dry riverbed and then grabbed some branches to shield him from view. He was still unconscious and began to stir when Matheus shook him. He lifted a water skin to his lips and helped him drink. He had a nasty lump on the corner of his forehead where it had struck the table back in the cabin.

"What's the plan?" asked Rorc.

"Exchange this one for assurances that this Bronwyn leaves the Grove and takes her trolls with her".

"Really?"

Matheus smiled, that feral smile that scared Anya but brought a look of glee to Rorc's face. Taymen glanced back and forth at the two, the feeling of dread growing visible.

They passed the place where Matheus had set the snare that had pinned the troll up against a tree. The branch was broken, the wooden spikes stained with dark blood, but the troll was gone. A quick look at the tracks told Matheus it had gone back to the priestess. They had probably three trolls to face. One had been killed, the other was trapped in the cave but may have escaped so they had to be careful.

Rorc pushed Taymen ahead of him. He had his own battle axe in his hand but still had Ansel's bag of holding tied to his belt. Matheus was just behind him, his spear in his hand. Ansel had disappeared into the undergrowth to carry out his part of the plan.

When they were close to the cabin, Matheus called out. There was no movement or response but as he was about to call out again she appeared. The long scythe was in her hands and she looked annoyed. "What's this Taymen?"

“An exchange. They let me go free and we leave the Grove”.

She only smiled in response, a scornful smile with no warmth or humour. Her hand moved to the pouch by her waist and reached inside removing the black stone – the basilisk's eye. “Leave the Grove? But we just got here”.

Matheus knew she was communicating with the trolls. She must have sent them out again to search for them but they would soon be back. A rustle of movement betrayed the first troll to arrive back at the scene. It looked to the men and then to the priestess as if awaiting orders. She turned to the creature and then back to them her smile had broadened. Still with no warmth but which seemed to invoke a feverish, insane look in her eyes.

“If you want to leave Taymen, you go right ahead. See how far you get”.

The troll stepped forward into the clearing, now totally focused on the men. It looked ravenously hungry. Then it dashed forward, covering the ground with frightening swiftness. Rorc grabbed Taymen by the collar of his tunic and pushed him into the path of the troll. He yelped in fright and fell heavily. The troll almost slid to a stop reaching down to grab the stricken man.

A shout of pain came from Bronwyn. Ansel had crept up behind her and clubbed her soundly with his blackjack across the back of the head. The troll paused with Taymen held firmly in both hands as two more trolls arrived. Ansel grabbed the black obsidian rock from her hand and stepped away from her. She groaned and collapsed slowly into a sitting position on the ground unable to speak. Her hand touched the lump forming, the skin of her scalp split and bleeding.

The trolls were moving slowly closer but looked very unsure. Rorc and Matheus circled around the troll still holding Taymen moving towards Ansel. He held the stone up so the trolls could see it. “I now hold your lives in my hand. Stop moving or I will turn you to stone”.

A faint wispy black finger of smoke became visible from the obsidian stone. One black finger of smoke for each of the trolls it was connected to.

The trolls stopped, their ugly faces showing great uncertainty and a glimmer of fear. The troll holding Taymen moved slowly away towards his brothers. Taymen was whimpering in fear as the troll even now still held him tight in its clawed hand.

“Go and do not come back here,” shouted Matheus. He stood calmly without drawing his sword and held his spear more like a walking stick than a weapon.

One troll, a large female with a defiant look on her face took a step forward. “We go. You not use stone?”

“You go and we not use stone”, agreed Matheus.

She looked to the others, gauging their reactions. A few seconds passed and it looked like they were getting ready to charge them in the hopes of killing them first, but then the troll female appeared to come to a decision. "We go then...but we take this one", she said indicating Taymen by pointing at him. The other trolls grinned evilly at this.

Matheus nodded and Taymen screamed in despair "No, please". The rest of his words were indecipherable. The trolls turned cautiously away and walked towards the treeline but always keeping an eye on the humans, expecting treachery. Taymen whimpered loudly as he was slung over the shoulder of a troll. After a few steps they moved more swiftly, disappearing into the forest. They could tell the trolls were moving away because the sound of Taymen calling out for help, was receding with them.

Ansel walked over to the scythe on the ground near the concussed priestess.

Rorc stood over her, his axe in a ready position a look of menace on his troll like features.

Ansel looked around until he found a flat rock and placed the basilisk's eye on it and then he turned to Matheus who nodded in agreement. Raising the black scythe, he turned it around pointing the long-wicked blade away and used the blunt back of the weapon to smash the stone. He had expected it would need several blows but the first was all that was required. The stone shattered into several pieces, a black smoke smouldered into the air but quickly dissipated in the light wind.

Ansel looked relieved "Is it over?"

Matheus looked thoughtful "Rorc, help this one walk. We're going to see Aralia. I'm sure she'd like a word".

Rorc smiled wickedly and grabbed the woman, forcing her to her feet despite her wounded protests. Ansel dropped the scythe and wiped his hands on his trousers. They followed Matheus back to the Hama Dryad's tree, locating another of the iron spikes by chance. Rorc pried it free and dropped it into the bag of holding.

They walked into the clearing and stood before the tree. Aralia was aware of their presence, her face and shoulder appeared from the tree trunk as if she was peering out from a pool of water. Then her whole body came into view and she joined them in the clearing. Her appearance was much improved, her green hair more vibrant and her skin healthier. She said nothing to the men but nodded to Matheus in acknowledgment. The priestess had recovered somewhat from her injury and lifted her head as the Hama dryad stood before her.

"You who would slay our hidden people, defile this forest, defile my tree, deserve to be punished".

The priestess sagged once more to the ground. She did not reply but had an intense look on her face as she awaited her fate.

Aralia began to mutter some words, in a language unintelligible to Ansel and Rorc. She reached out with a long slender arm and when she finished, she looked at Rorc. "You can let her go. She is free for as long as she lives".

Rorc looked at Matheus who nodded. The priestess looked around uncertain and then got slowly to her feet. She was breathing through her nose her eyes narrowed. Then she gripped her stomach in discomfort as it grumbled in hunger. She looked at Aralia who merely returned the look with no emotion. Her stomach grumbled again as she backed away. Her face seemed tight, dark circles had appeared, faint but visible beneath her eyes. Without another word she staggered from the clearing, and they let her go.

Rorc turned to Matheus "What just happened?"

"Erysihton's Curse. She'll starve to death in a couple of weeks. No matter how much she eats, it will never be enough to satisfy her hunger" answered Matheus watching her leave.

Rorc looked at the Hama dryad and then at his companions, his look grim.

The Hama dryad walked to Matheus and raised her hand to his cheek, once more smiling. He returned the gesture, and she closed her eyes momentarily before speaking again. "I need you to remove the rest of those cursed spikes. I have asked the sprites and pixies to help you locate the remaining ones. Thank you, Matheus," She turned to Ansel and Rorc "Thank you all. You have done a very special thing and I will always be grateful. Should you wish, you may stay here with me and be safe".

"You don't need to thank us, Aralia. We are glad we could to help. We thank you for your offer and maybe someday we will accept but after we find the rest of the spikes we need to go".

She looked at Matheus closely, the smile faded and became somewhat sad. "The human woman?"

He replied "Anya, yes...and my child".

She raised a hand to touch him again but stopped. She nodded in understanding. "I will always be here Ironclad, if you change your mind". She turned once more to the men, and they bowed their heads to her in respect. Then she turned and walked back into her tree, disappearing once more from sight.

With the cursed axe removed the sprites and pixies trapped in the fairy rings were able to return and with their help they quickly located the remaining spikes. The sidhe could not still not approach too closely. The magic although much less powerful without the focusing power of the axe was none the less potent enough to induce nausea. The men placed all the spikes into Ansel's bag of holding and sealed it tight. Matheus walked to Aralia's tree and gently placed the pine cone gift, the lupin druid had given him for her, on the ground.

As they were leaving the Grove, Matheus led them along the trail the trolls had taken. They had not gone far. When Ansel had struck the basilisk's eye, shattering it, the trolls had been turned to stone. They were in various poses, mid stride or climbing over a tree trunk. The female was looking backwards at where they had come from still expecting treachery and she had been right. The enchantment had spread to Taymen, still slung over the troll's shoulder his face forever contorted in fear.

They returned to their camp and gathered the rest of their gear and saddled the horses. Rorc who had been silent all this time finally spoke.

"Remind me never to cross a Hama dryad. What a way to die. I almost feel sorry for that bitch...almost".

## One Big Happy Family - Part 5

They rode on leaving the Altenwald Forest after a few hours and took their time across the hilly ground until they reached Matheus's homestead. They brought the horses to the barn and got them settled in before moving on to the main building. He stood before the front door and touched it with the flat of his hand briefly before pushing it open. He stopped for a moment in the doorway and took a long breath in through his nose. He walked in and threw his saddle bags to one side. "Come on in gentlemen. Make yourselves at home".

They stayed there for most of the week. Ansel and Rorc were tired and in no hurry to hit the open road again. Matheus moved around the homestead, checking over things, repairing fences and some wooden panels that had come loose on the back of the barn. It was while he was mending a chair that he found the letter that Anya had left for him. Somehow it had ended up on the floor. He picked it up and unfolded the page, walking to the window and the light it provided to better read the words.

It started with her recounting their meeting in the dungeons of Freiburg. How upset she had been to see him like that but so happy that he had managed to escape. She had hoped he would be here despite what her father had said. She had wanted to have the child here and told him what great and loyal friends she had in Dura, Hallveig, Gunnar and yes, Mokcheera. The birth had gone smoothly, and they were both well. She looked forward to the day when he could meet his son, Druss. She hoped it would not be too long to wait. Dura had invited her back to Nordenham and she would stay there for a week or two but after that she would go back to her father in Freiburg. She reminded him not to do anything stupid like get arrested again. He had to be careful, he had to remember that he was a father now and that he had a family to look after. She finished the letter with "Love always, Anya".

Ansel saw him smiling and guessed right away what he held in his hand. "Good news I'm guessing?"

"It's from Anya. She was here and she had the baby. My son".

"Well, now that calls for a celebration. I take it you have some drinks stored around here somewhere".

While they were sitting around the fire that night and drinking, Rorc asked about the weapons and shields on the wall. Each one had a story, and Matheus enjoyed telling it. Each one until it came to the leather bag with the wooden and silver tipped stakes. Matheus looked into the fire, the wood crackling, the silence stretching out until Rorc thought that perhaps he had not heard him or more likely was not going to answer, but then he spoke, his voice low.

"They were my fathers. He was a hunter of vampires and nosferatu". Once more he was silent.

Rorc looked to Ansel who flicked his gaze from Matheus to Rorc and then back again before lifting his cup to his mouth and taking a sip.

“My father travelled these lands with my mother. And me when I was born. We never stayed too long in one place. The land was infested with these creatures, and he sought them out. He never thought it was unwise or dangerous to be hunting these things with his family in tow. Finally, I must have been around fourteen years old, we settled down here. We had some troubles with the local gnoll tribe, and they’d send a lone warrior to challenge my father. It was their land by birth right and they wanted us to leave. I’ve seen a lot of gnoll tribes and it’s only now I realise how very unusual our gnolls are. Honour?” he laughed. “Amongst any of the gnolls I’ve met since, no, there’s no honour but with ours, there was...is”. He stopped talking again. His companions sat in silence, holding their cups but not drinking, waiting for him to continue.

“I don’t know how many he killed. It got so my mother expected them to get angry at their losses and just attack en masse, but they never did. Then the vampires came back. Word had gotten out about my father amongst their number, and they had banded together to end this danger. To end my father. As mighty a man as my father was, there were so many of them we would have had no chance, but then the gnolls came and the tide was turned. As much as they hated having humans on their ancestral land, they would not rest till the vampires had been slain or driven away. My father and a handful of gnolls chased the fleeing undead. I was told to stay home and protect my mother”. He laughed at the memory, but the smile did not reach his eyes. He looked quickly at Ansel and Rorc and, spotting the quizzical look on their faces, explained “If you met my mother, you’d know she needed no protection”. He paused again, he took a long drink from his cup and wiped his bearded face. “Anyway, my father returned late the next day, just as it was getting dark. He was alone, the gnolls had gone home he said. Only he was no longer my father. We don’t know exactly what happened, but we guess they were ambushed or something. It doesn’t matter. The man I knew as my father was gone and this vile creature was in his place. He had returned to take his wife and son. It was a shock to my mother. She was usually so strong and confident, but she just froze”. He shook his head at the memory. “My mother had powerful magic but wouldn’t use it even when my father” he paused again before continuing “...the creature came after me. It didn’t take me long to get over the fact that my father was gone, and I fought back with everything I had, but I was only fourteen, not a full grown man. Even full grown I’m not sure I could match the strength of the undead. I was pinned and I knew the end was near, but I spat in his face”. His voice croaked and his eyes glistened with tears but he was not ashamed. “A man I looked up to, a man who could do no wrong in my eyes, a hero....and I spat in his face”. He took another drink from his cup, draining the last drop. He turned and picked up another bottle and took his time pouring it into the cup. He regained his composure “and then she finally snapped out of it. She finally came to grips with the fact that her husband was dead and if she didn’t do something fast, her son would be too. So, she grabbed a wooden stake”. A nod of his head towards the stakes hanging by the fire “and drove it through his back into his heart. I was screaming trying to push him away and suddenly he was screaming in agony, his blood spilling on me. It was a nightmare, let me tell you. But she did it, she killed him and saved me. She did some other things to make sure he would not come back, holy water, garlic but to be sure we burned the body, scattered the ashes

and buried what remained. The next morning the gnolls returned to our homestead. I guess after all we'd been through, they must have decided they didn't mind us being on their land after all. We stayed and they left us alone. My mother placed spells and wards about the homestead, and we've had no trouble with undead or evil spirits since then, but there are some things that wards can't keep away. I'd wake sometimes at night because she was having bad dreams. She would always deny it and get angry when I asked her about it, so I just stopped asking. Eventually she wanted to leave, go back home to Ethengar but I didn't want to go. She got angry and told me I was not yet a man and I had to go with her. We spoke words that I would prefer not to share, and she left. I had just turned fifteen and she left. I stayed there another few months and then went to see her. You only have one mother, so it's best not to let arguments and bad feeling rob you of that. She seemed happier, but not much. She asked me to come and live with her, but I refused, and I've been here pretty much ever since. I see her sometimes, maybe once or twice a year, but my life is here now". He took another sip of his drink and turned to Rorc and Ansel "Any more questions?"

Neither spoke, they both just shook their heads, no.

"On to more pleasant conversation. Tomorrow, we go see some friends of mine near Nordenham. See if they have any news about Anya and my son". He smiled at this, but the sombre mood did not completely leave the room.

The next day Matheus scraped together some breakfast from food he had preserved and stored. It had been a long while since anyone had stayed at the homestead and it most definitely needed to be restocked. After they had been fed, they secured the cabin, mounted up on their horses and followed Matheus. The sombre mood of last night had been forgotten and they laughed, joked and spoke of their plans. The day was warm and sunny with a gentle breeze coming up along the river they were about to cross.

It was Yarthmont, late spring and they spotted some cattle and sheep accompanied by their young. After a few hours of following the river they veered off and rode towards Bjorn's farm. "They have dogs so just stay calm and keep the horses from getting spooked", said Matheus, pulling on the reins of the horse and steering it around a pool of water.

As they drew closer to the homestead, they saw a man walk out of the building. He stood by the door and waited for them to draw closer. It was Gunnar, Bjorn's son, he waved in greeting and took the reins of Matheus's horse when they arrived, before leading it into the stables followed by Ansel and Rorc. He explained that Bjorn, Hallveig and Mokcheera were away fighting with the Partisans. They had hit numerous Abbeys and put them to the torch. Rumours of a substantial amount of loot were widespread. Halvard was making allies where he could, buying them if necessary. They would need all the help they could get if they wanted to finally overthrow the Heldannic Knights and drive them from this land forever. The momentum was certainly in their favour and Gunnar was in high spirits. He had been away doing his part and had only returned two days ago to keep an eye on the homestead and the family's livestock.

After the destruction of the Grove they had found newer places in the Altenwald forest and elsewhere to regroup and plan their next targets.

They stayed at the homestead that night and in the morning, Gunnar rode in to the village of Nordenham to speak with Dura and Olson. He had advised Matheus to stay clear for now as there were a lot of people coming and going these days. It was not quite the sleepy little village he remembered. There were a lot of strangers and no doubt that amongst them were spies for the Heldannic Knights. "Somethings never change, huh Matheus?" He returned later that day with Dura, who was mounted on a small grey pony. She smiled broadly when Matheus walked out to meet them.

"Now there's a sight for sore eyes. How are you Matheus?"

"I'm good Dura. It feels like a lifetime since I've seen you. A lot has changed".

"A lot has changed", she agreed "and you a father now too. You should see him Matheus. He's a fine healthy-looking child".

She climbed from the horse, and he embraced her warmly before leading her into the house. They had a long talk about all that had happened.

Before she left for Nordenham, he sat down and tried to write a letter for Anya. When it became clear he was not going to start, Dura laughed. "Give it here". She smoothed out the paper on the table, the pen held ready and looked at him expectantly. He began speaking and Dura began writing. When it was done she read over it again and once she was satisfied she slipped it inside the folds of her tunic.

"Pflenzen? Are you sure you want to go there? Why not go further south, somewhere outside the reach of the Knights?" asked Dura.

"What are the chances that Anya will leave this land? From what you told me she seems determined to fulfil her promise and join the Order". He shook his head at that, an unhappy look on his broad features.

Dura looked at him with her lips pursed in a thin line. "I'll make sure she gets the letter. But it'll be a few weeks before the next caravan is heading back to Freiburg".

"It's been over a year since I've seen her Dura. I think I can hang on for a few more weeks".

"When do you leave?"

"In the morning. Should be there in about three weeks".

"When this is all over, come and see us Matheus, Ok? Olson will be happy to see you".

"I will, Dura, I will".

Gunnar rode with her back to Nordenham and in the morning Matheus and the others started their journey to Pflenzen.

They started early but not too early as Ansel was enjoying the lie in. Bjorn had given them some horses and they had paid in full despite his protests. Bjorn had told them that there were stories about Konrad Blutfelden. That he had been incensed by the escape of Matheus from the dungeons of Freiburg. He had been scouring the land looking for Matheus and the ones responsible for aiding him. This all seemed a little unlikely to Matheus. As embarrassing for the knights as an escape from the dungeons of their capital city was, surely it fell down the list of priorities when compared to the attacks on the Heldannic abbeys?

There had been plenty of games of cat and mouse, but the Partisans always managed to escape. In the end the Knights had begun retaliating by destroying the churches or temples of other Immortals. It was unsafe to declare your loyalty to any particular Immortal patron. If it was the Knights patron, Vanya there were plenty to take offence in the present circumstances. On the other hand if it was Thor, Frey, Freya, the Spooming Nooga or any other, you could face questioning or worse at the hands of the Heldannic Knights.

There were no roads to speak of as they were heading across country to Pflenzen, so the route was predominantly across untamed wilderness. It was nothing any of the companions was unused to by this time but it did mean that the journey would take about three weeks. They entered the hills hugging the southern edge of the Mengul Mountains and made camp that night in a place where they could light a fire and it would not be seen. The days and nights were pleasant now that they were into the summer months, still a little cool for Ansel's tastes but still pleasant. They had packed some rations with the intention of supplementing these meals with any game they could catch, correction, any game that Matheus could catch. They need not have worried, as there were plenty of fish and wild sheep available.

The village of Pflenzen itself was small, quiet and out of the way on the banks of the lower Lorelei Lake and nothing of the outside world seemed to touch it. Quiet once you got used to the goat bells. The goats themselves seemed to be everywhere, standing in fields, atop hillocks, watching the humans pass by. Clothes had to be hung well out of reach to dry or they would be included in the dietary fibre of the goats.

Pflenzen was a place of calm, but it was also very well-known, unsurprisingly, for its goat's cheese. Fish like the Arctic char, or Bleikja as the locals called it was found in the lakes and they fetched a good price. They spoke with the village elder, for permission to build a new cabin. He shrugged but seemed pleased that they had at least asked first. They had it more or less completed later in the week, Matheus had been surprised at Ansel's carpentry skills. "A man of many talents".

Rorc had peered over his shoulder to look at the source of the compliment. He snorted and joked, "Doesn't look too straight to me".

One day Matheus with not much to do decided to buy some goats of his own. The man selling them gave him a dubious look. "You don't look like a goat herder".

"I'm not, but I am a farmer".

The man thought about that for a moment "No, I don't think you look like a farmer either".

"I get that a lot" replied Matheus with a rueful sigh.

In the end, despite his reservations the deal was done. Matheus was now the proud owner of four goats. He walked back to the house with the goats in tow.

Rorc was sitting at the door, on a chair Ansel had made. He looked confused. "Settling down are we Matheus? Hanging up the sword and going to spend your days chewing grass and milking goats? Can't see how that's going to win Anya over".

"It's not about winning Anya over. It's about passing the time, trying something different. You should try it sometime".

Rorc did not appear convinced. He shrugged "Hey, you want to sell goats cheese who am I to stand in your way. Funny thing is I don't know anyone who even likes goat's cheese. Cow yes. Goat, no. Who in the nine hells buys this stuff?"

"Rorc you need to go for a walk. See if you can find something to keep you occupied".

"Funny you should say that. Ansel and me are going into Hockstein. You should come".

Matheus led the goats into the pen he had prepared for them. "I can't. Anya will know I'm here".

"Yeah, and if you're not here, she can wait until you come back. Leave a note or something. You two seem to love doing that".

Matheus looked at him grinning "Thanks for the invite little brother but I'm going to say no. You go off now and have a good time. I'll see you two in a few days".

"I can't twist your arm?"

Matheus shook his head.

"Ok, then, but if we come back and she still hasn't got here, you'll be kicking yourself".

"Probably. Keep an eye on Ansel. He can't drink as much as you and he'll get himself in trouble".

Rorc looked like he had been given an unexpected responsibility. Matheus knew that Rorc was the one most likely to get into trouble but by telling him he needed to keep a lid on it to look after Ansel, there was a chance he would stay out of trouble. A small chance admittedly but still a chance.

They left the next day and for the first time in many months, Matheus was alone. He spent his time walking the banks of the lower Lorelei fishing, letting the goats out to graze, although he still kept them tied up otherwise. One afternoon while he was sitting on a milking stool beside a goat he heard a cart approach. He turned his head slightly, blowing the fringe of his hair away as it was obscuring his vision. "You're early Mika. I'll be with you in a bit, just let me finish up here".

"Matheus?"

He stopped the milking process and released the goat. He stood up slowly and turned. He recognised the voice. It had been well over a year now, but he would never forget that voice. He turned and saw her there and she was smiling. "...and those dimples" he said out loud.

Wiping his hands on his trousers he walked to her. She carried a child, his child. A man sat on the cart, watching them both but trying to not look like he was watching. Trying to give them some privacy. It was her father, Jakob. Matheus closed the distance and stood before her, drinking her in. He took a deep breath, hardly believing the moment had finally come. He was here again with her and now there was the child. The young boy, about one year old, blinking in the sun, looked at the huge man. He was entirely unaware of the gravity of the situation. He seemed bored and a little tired. He turned away from the man, his father and lay his head against his mother's chest. They stepped closer and embraced, burying the child, baby Druss, with their bodies. He held her tightly until the baby's struggling made Anya laugh and they pulled apart.

"Now, Druss, this is your papa. Your father. Say hello". She held him out and Matheus took the child in his hands. He held him under the armpits at arm's length and cast his eyes over the little person. Druss hung there, looking intently at the bearded giant. Then he was pulled closer, a kiss planted on his forehead. He grabbed Matheus by the beard and pulled.

Anya laughed again, "He does that a lot".

He held the child in the crook of his arm and put the other around Anya. Then he turned and faced Jakob. "Thank you for this Jakob. For getting me out of there and for bringing Anya to me".

Jakob shifted on the seat of the cart, still holding the reins of the horse. "You can thank me by looking after them. Nothing else matters".

"I won't leave her side. We'll be a family and I'll keep them safe".

Anya interrupted appearing a little uneasy "Now, now let's not start that conversation. It's been a long journey" she said smiling again. "If you have food here, I'd like to eat and sleep for Druss if you have a bed".

Jakob led the horse into the pen with the goats and then joined them in the house. Matheus was already laying the table with bread, meat and some wine. He pulled out a chair for Anya

and placed Jakob at the head of the table. Druss had a fist full of bread and was chewing on it contentedly. Matheus poured some wine into each glass and then handed it to them.

The noise of horses arriving outside the cabin heralded the return of Ansel and Rorc. A moment later and they walked in the door.

“Two more over here”, said Rorc with a smile.

Matheus was happy to see them and filled two more, handing them to his friends.

“What are we drinking to?” asked Ansel raising his glass with the others.

“To family”, said Matheus.

“To family”, they all repeated, their glasses clinking together.