

The Way of the Beast

Book #1

by Gavin Green,

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Author's note:

This story is set in a fictional world, specifically in the land of Kaldevarr. In many respects, this world is similar to Earth. One of the exceptions, however, is time. For the sake of detail, let's just say that this fictional world has a slightly slower orbital speed and rotation. Days and seasons are a bit longer, and so a person's aging pattern is affected as well. Basically, multiply any given number of a Kaldevarran's age by 1.3 to find the human equivalent. For example, a Kalde who is ten years (or "cycles") old would be equal to a human thirteen-year-old (10

x 1.3 = 13). As this simple formula affects all units of time, this fictional world's full days and solar years are obviously longer than ours. Feel free to do your own math.

The only significant role this alteration plays in the story is simply to remind the reader that „You're not in Kansas anymore.“

"We enter solitude, in which also we lose loneliness. True solitude is found in the wild places, where one is without human obligation. One's inner voices become audible. One feels the attraction of one's most intimate sources. In consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives. The more coherent one becomes within oneself as a creature, the more fully one enters into the communion of all creatures."

—Wendell Berry

"If you hold a cat by the tail, you learn things you cannot learn any other way."

—Mark Twain

Unexpected howls of nearby predators echoed through the sparsely wooded dell, shattering the hushed serenity of the foggy autumn dawn.

Startled, Halivik scanned the morning mist with sharp eyes, looking for any movement. He remained crouched next to his hauling sled, tensed in a wary stance with nervous expectation on the damp, colorful leaves that carpeted the ground.

Gripping a short-hafted spear in his left hand, he glanced over to his right where his young son had frozen in his movement of pushing dirt back into a dug hole. Their dark eyes locked. Halivik saw in young Stenhelt's gaze only a touch of fear; the boy was otherwise alert, waiting to follow his father's orders.

Halivik felt the quick surge of pride in his second son, an unspoken feeling he'd had on many small occasions. There was no time to muse over the emotion, however; unforeseen danger was upon them.

Another short howl, followed by a harsh bark, came from somewhere nearer and to the left of Halivik's position in the temporary camp. He spotted silhouetted movements then—five, maybe six sleek shapes weaving through the low fog. If he could see them, Stenhelt was sure to.

Even at only eight summers old, the boy was as aware as any seasoned hunter. And with eyes as sharp as a hawk's, almost nothing escaped his attention. Other village children sometimes played a game of trying to sneak up on little Sten; he was yet to be bested.

The pack of beasts continued to issue growls and low yips as they prowled slowly into view, apparently assessing the danger of their prey. Knee-high or so to a man, they were lean with long snouts and large ears. Wood curs, Halivik was sure.

The animals were so called for the brown and grey stripes that ran from below their ribs up into the short mane that ran from neck to hip. The coloring was good for forest camouflage, but ruined by the fact that they were vocal beasts. Wood curs were smaller than their cousins, Kaldevarran wolves, although more tenacious and rarely gave up on a potential meal.

The pack may have been drawn by the scent of the fresh kill, namely the boar that Halivik and his son had slain just before the dreary dawn. The gutted carcass currently hung from a branch to drain while its scraped hide dangled next to it in a stretching frame.

Stenhelt had just finished burying most of the innards, along with the remaining corn mash that had initially lured the bachelor boar. They had planned to travel the half-day's journey back home once the sun had burnt the morning fog off. If Halivik had any luck, he could make light of this new encounter to Baraide while she served a late meal.

He had only a moment to wonder why a pack of wood curs would be trekking so far north into the Cragwood. He'd never known them to venture much beyond the heavily forested lower slopes of the Skean Peaks, days to the south and east. Something possibly drove them out.

All that Halivik *was* sure of just then was that Baraide would drive *him* out if he let anything happen to Sten. It was only the boy's third time out on a gathering trip, and the first this far from their property. Had it been known that wood curs were roaming this close to the village, then his son would currently be safe near home checking the small game traps and helping his mother and siblings with chores.

The pack of curs paused, milling and nipping at each other while keeping malevolent glares on the camp. Halivik had seen the tactic before; they were strengthening their resolve to charge. There was no time to retrieve the bow and string it.

Keeping low, Halivik quickly scrambled over to the trunk of the tree that held their kill. Stenhelt met him there, anxious and alert. The boy's breath came out in panting, foggy plumes from the chilly morning air. Fear was having its effect on him, but he denied panic to set in. Again, a father's pride welled.

Halivik looked his son in the eyes and then glanced up at the tree. Stenhelt understood the silent order instantly, if reluctantly. The boy reached up as his father lifted him to the nearest branch. It was not a time for words; neither of them spoke more than necessary to begin with.

Both father and son hesitated when they sensed movement behind them. The wood curs had just launched into a growling charge. Hastily shoving Stenhelt up into the branches with his free hand, Halivik had to trust in his son's agility to reach a safe perch. Without sparing a moment to look up, he spun with his spear to face the pack.

The snarling wood curs were faster than expected. By the time Halivik had turned to face them, two of the animals were in mid-leap and slammed into him. He was knocked back and to his left, missing the tree that his son watched from. Strong jaws locked onto the hunter's boot at the ankle. Another set of sharp teeth snapped at the forearm that held it back.

The first cur to attack had leapt again, a few of its sharp nails finding purchase in Halivik's fur coat and flesh underneath as it strove for his neck. He pried that vicious animal off him with the spear shaft. The wrenching action set him off-balance. Slipping on wet leaves, he stumbled toward the sled and fell.

At least three of the ferocious animals pounced on Halivik before he could even sit up. His ears were filled with snarling, dark intent. His eyes saw only dull fur and flashing teeth. He kicked his legs to avoid a clenching bite. He kept the spear shaft in front of him, swinging frantically when he could, hoping the stone spearhead would rip flesh.

As one of the curs pulled back to renew its attack, Halivik made a desperate backhand swing at it. The flat of the spearhead clouted the animal behind the ear, but the momentum of the strike came to an immediate stop and caused the spear to fly out of his grip. Another cur had caught his wrist in a vice grip of piercing teeth.

More teeth stabbed into Halivik's leg just below his left knee, causing him to cry out in pain. With his other leg, he kicked blindly at the cur that was trying to rip his calf apart. His numbing left hand was at the mercy of the teeth that held it, twisting and tugging. His right arm was barely fending off two large, hungry mouths filled with long teeth. His fur sleeve was quickly in tatters, dripping with blood and slaver.

Halivik's body was being yanked and pulled. His left leg and arm were in screaming pain, and his free limbs were heavy and slow. He wouldn't go without a fight, but there wasn't much fight left in him. At that moment, he feared only for little Sten.

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A booming roar of wild rage suddenly erupted in the camp, a sound unlike anything Halivik had ever heard. It was immediately followed by a pained yelp of a cur. Surprised, the hungry beasts on him ceased their attacks and turned to the unexpected noises. The two curs formerly at his throat were slammed into by a third. All were sent sprawling, kicking up leaves as their bodies tumbled.

Weak and confused, Halivik turned his head to the beasts. Two of the wood curs were shakily rising, their feet unsure. The third cur lay unmoving near the front of the sled, its head twisted backwards.

The torn and bloody hunter was trying to make sense of the new situation. Propping himself on his right elbow, he looked out in front of him. A small man was just receiving the leaping charge of another cur. With surprising speed, the short newcomer swatted the animal out of the air. It smashed into the ground with a grunt and tumbled away.

Halivik looked at the man; his eyes widened as his mouth fell open. Was that... *Stenhelt?*

The person he saw couldn't be his boy. It was Sten, and yet it wasn't. He looked bigger, fully filling out the second-hand rabbit vest that his older brother had outgrown. His arms were thicker, and dark with coarse body hair. Normally deep brown eyes looked a lighter color. With strands of his shaggy black hair hanging over, Sten's face looked distorted with feral wrath.

Taking a wide stance, Stenhelt held his arms wide in defiance of the four curs warily circling him. He then let loose another bellow of rage, louder than his body seemed capable of making. All but one of the predators instinctively shied back a few steps. The last was too brave—or more likely too hungry—for its own good.

The lone wood cur feigned a charge at Sten's flank, but came too close. Halivik watched his son-turned-savage whip out a hand and clamped it on the animal's long snout with an iron grip. Before the cur could attempt to wiggle free or bite at the fingers holding it, Sten grabbed a fistful of its mane with his other hand and lifted it off the ground as he spun.

With a growl from deep in his chest, the wild boy displayed strength that belied even his new size and propelled the helpless animal into the tree behind him. The bone-crunching impact made Halivik flinch. The animal slumped lifelessly against the trunk.

Stenhelt whirled back to face the remaining wood curs, but their morale was broken; they had already begun to hastily retreat from the encounter and their superior opponent. Unable to move, Halivik could only watch as his son set off with a burst of amazing speed to chase after the remaining pack. He tried to call out for Sten, but only produced a scratchy groan.

The pain of many wounds started to come in waves of growing intensity. The bloodstained hunter cradled his mauled left arm to his chest with his right arm, which was bloody as well, and laid his head back onto the cold, leaf-strewn ground. Wet heat pumped from his left knee and calf, the sensation mingling with the searing agony of ripped flesh.

The morning clouds above had begun to part, revealing a brilliant blue. Halivik stared up, hazily wondering if it would be the last sky he would see.

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It seemed only a moment later—or maybe an eternity—that Stenhelt's youthful face came into view above Halivik. No longer some seething savage, just his boy again, kneeling near with a look of dread and helplessness.

Halivik once again noticed Stenhelt's strong resemblance to the boy's mother, more so than his siblings Tullgar or Irisella. Baraide's fine features, mixed with a few of his own, created a fetching child. He hated to see that face distorted with such worry.

Glancing at the small, warm hand that settled on his, Halivik lifted his gaze once more and saw his son's dark eyes brimming with unspent tears. "Father," Stenhelt said with a voice choked by emotion, "what do I do? I don't know what to do."

"The water skin," Halivik whispered through gritted teeth. "Then go fetch the poultices your mother made. Front pack on the sled. Make bandages. Start a fire after."

Stenhelt was quick with the supplies. While Halivik's trembling hand poured water into his deeper wounds to flush them, his son used a skinning blade to cut a spare linen shirt into strips as he was told. Grimacing, the wounded man gauged the damage done to him.

"Sten," he groaned, "I don't think there's time to heat the poultices. I might... get too weak before you g—get a proper fire."

He saw the boy's eyes widen with concern, but then nodded his head. He handed Halivik a rawhide strap to bite on before placing the gauzy packets firmly onto his father's mauled calf. He wrapped it with the linen, and then cinched it tight. Halivik's resulting muffled yell of agony caused Stenhelt to hesitate for a moment before he moved to the next grave wound for the same treatment. His son then wiped a bit of leftover herb paste onto gashes on his father's neck and cheek, cuts that Halivik wasn't aware he had.

Laying his head back onto the cold, damp leaves to calm his breath from the spikes of pain, he asked, "How does it look, boy?"

"You're a mess, father," Sten replied honestly, with a better grip on his emotions.

Halivik lifted his head to look at Sten's handiwork. His open coat was ruined; he'd never hear the end of that from Baraide. His buckskin leggings were likewise tattered, but Sten was careful to make minimal cuts to get to wounds so that the leather could be sewn or patched. The linen was used sparingly to bind all of the injuries. Given the circumstances, not much better could have been expected from Jonigar, the old village healer.

It was then that Halivik noticed that another dead cur had been dragged back to camp, and also that his son's hands and arms were spattered and smeared with blood. "Stenhelt, are you injured, son?" he asked with sudden alarm.

The boy gave a quick shake of his head. "I think this is all yours, father." After a moment's hesitation, he asked, "Are you able to stand up? It scares me to see you all hurt and bloody and laying there."

Halivik laid his head back once more, his eyes staring absently up at the clearing sky through bare branches. "Just a bit longer to settle my nerves, then we'll give it a go." He let out a long sigh that fluttered his thick mustache, trying to acclimate to the pain from all over his body. "Sten, what happened here? How did you... What did I see?"

"I—I don't know, father."

Upon hearing the tremble in his son's voice, Halivik painfully propped himself onto an elbow to see Sten's face. His young boy was kneeling near his feet, facing half away, using water from another skin to clean his blood-stained arms. "It's alright, son. Just tell me."

"I saw the wood curs on you," Stenhelt replied quietly, "and I was scared. Even more scared than when Tull fell off the roof." Halivik recalled that day; Tullgar was clumsy at times, but thankfully sturdy. "I saw you fighting them," Sten continued, "and you were yelling. And then I saw blood, saw you hurt, and I—and I got mad. I wanted to hurt the curs back, so I did."

Despite the sharp pain it caused, Halivik chuckled. "That you did, son. So why are you acting like you deserve a swat?"

"Because you always tell us not to lose our tempers, and letting that happen makes us fools." Stenhelt's head hung lower as he finished his father's oft-repeated words, "And a fool loses respect." He couldn't quite manage to look at Halivik when he asked, "Did I do that, father?"

"Look at me, boy." When Sten complied and turned his head, Halivik answered. "You followed your heart with no thought, but you had noble intentions. I still say that anything to be done should be with heart and thought. Still," he went on with a labored grin, "I'm not sure what I saw here... but I know that you saved me. Thank you."

Stenhelt reflected his father's crooked grin with his own. "I'm glad you're not mad at me."

At that moment, Halivik wished he had the strength to embrace his boy. "Mad? I'm—I'm... so *proud* of you, son. Few men would have such courage. And the things you did... By the Triad, Sten, you fought like Vidun reborn!"

The boy's grin grew wider with the praise, but then he suddenly spun his head toward the dense woods on the far side of the dell and jumped to his feet.

"What—"

"Something comes, father," Stenhelt said in a harsh whisper as he grabbed up the spear. After a few seconds of peering in that direction, he added, "A man, alone, I think. What do I do?"

Halivik began maneuvering to get up. "No man should be met lying down," he grunted, "unless it's the last time you'll ever see him. Give me a hand and the spear."

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While Stenhelt helped his father struggle to stand on one relatively good leg, a male voice called out, "Hello in camp!" Except that the newcomer used Locan, the high speech of Kaldevarr.

Halivik and his son glanced at each other; they both found it highly curious that someone like a cleric, a noble, or a Maker would be out alone in the remote Cragwood. It was a language of formal functions, and the tongue that Makers used for their mystic workings. Halivik had never heard it used in casual conversation. He had a basic knowledge of it, and suspected Sten to know at least a few phrases and sentences of it from his lessons.

Using the spear as a crutch to steady himself, Halivik barked out, "Welcome," in answer, but used Kalde, the common tongue of the country. If the stranger was some high functionary who was foolishly wandering alone out in those woods, Halivik wanted no misconceptions about whom he met in them. The hunter felt no need to appear above his station; he was content with his place in the world.

The man could quickly be seen as he approached through the thinning morning mist. Of average height and build, he wore a simple burlap poncho over worn leather leggings and supple boots. His deeply tanned skin indicated that he was an outdoorsman of some sort. He walked with a thick traveler's stick in one hand; the other casually gripped the long strap of the large bag hung over his shoulder. While clean-shaven, his dark hair was long and straight. There were strands of silver in that hair, although less than what Halivik had.

Coming upon the camp, the man gazed about it before settling his eyes on the hunter and his son. With a pleasant expression, he nodded his head in thanks.

"I am Halivik, huntsman of Bruvaal village. This is my son Stenhelt. There's not much of a camp to welcome you to, I'm afraid."

The stranger glanced around again and smiled. "Far from it, Halivik," the man responded easily in the commoner's tongue. "A hanging boar carcass, three dead wood curs, a man bandaged to the sky and a blood-stained boy. What else do you need?" They both grinned at the sarcasm. "I go by Chohla."

Halivik frowned despite his pain. "A strange name in these parts; it sounds like the high speech word for friend - 'chula', I believe. But then, I may be wrong; my Locan is weak from lack of practice or care."

Chohla shrugged. "Then my name is well-chosen, I hope." He handed his travel stick to the boy and stepped toward the hauling sled. "You're wavering, huntsman. You need the weight off your legs." He pulled the sled to the side of Halivik. "Here, sit. Your son and I will fashion a better camp. You're in no current shape for travel, anyway."

"My thanks," Halivik groaned as he gingerly, awkwardly sat on the sled. "Not very inviting, I know. A cold camp was best for our hunt. We've kept to jerky and vegetables; you're welcome to some if you're in need."

Chohla shook his head as he crouched and unslung his large bag. "You look much more in need than I." He looked over to the boy. "Stenhelt, is it? Dig out a shallow pit over here for the fire, if you would."

"Do as he says, boy," Halivik said encouragingly to Sten.

Turning back to Halivik, Chohla said, "You'll need your strength, so keep your food at hand. I have enough." He began pulling out stoppered, squat wooden flasks from his bag. "So," he said to fill in the ensuing silence as he rummaged through his vials, "I gather that wood curs can be poor company, yes?"

Halivik grinned through his pain. "True enough; we had a bit of an adventure here just before you came our way." To his son, he said, "Sten, that's a fine pit for our needs. Go find some dry wood, but don't venture far."

Both men watched the boy move off before Chohla commented, "It was the echoes of a struggle that caught my ear. You did well to keep most of your skin and your son safe."

"Huh," Halivik grunted wryly. "All I did well was to blunt some sharp teeth with my skin. I owe my life to my Sten." When Chohla turned to him with brows raised, he added, "I tell you true. That boy fought like a wolverine." After Chohla nodded appreciably, Halivik asked, "You're not Kaldevarran, are you?"

"Not so much, no," Chohla answered casually while he uncorked a small, plain flask and sniffed its contents. He nodded to himself at the choice.

"I daresay you're not a Ferren," Halivik said. There was little chance of that; the sentries in the northern pass through the Skyreach Mountains have guarded against raiders from Ferrenis for hundreds of years. "But you spoke Locan as you came... Maybe some folk in Seotan know it, maybe not; doubtful that anyone from Ormyra speaks our high tongue. Are you an outcast?"

Chohla glanced at Halivik, and then returned to sorting his wooden flasks. "No, huntsman, I am no exile, nor am I a spy or an enemy. What I mainly am is a traveler. I have walked the white shores of Ormyra, and trekked across vast Seotan. I have even visited Ferrenis for a time, and other lands beyond your knowing. I hold no allegiance to any claimed territory, but I can speak the languages of most for my own sake."

"A good skill to have, for whatever trade that allows a man to roam so far and wide."

"Lucky for you, I am in the trade of herbalism, amongst other things. The Cragwood is home to a few special plants that have proven lucrative. I have some mixtures here that will help you."

Halivik grimaced, more from his predicament than his discomfort that time. "I have little to barter with, unless you prize boar meat or dead curs."

Selecting a few flasks and setting them aside, Chohla said, "In my travels, I've come to find that good company—at least for a meal or a story—is payment enough for my skills." He pulled out two stone bowls from within his large bag and then turned to look past Halivik. "Ah, the brave young man returns."

Stenhelt strode back into camp with a bundle of dead wood and dumped it near the pit. He immediately turned to his father and asked, "How are your wounds?"

"The same as when you left. Now stop fretting, boy. Get the fire started." Halivik worried after Sten's reaction to the attack more so than of his own wounds. Keeping his son's mind busy on needed chores would deny any dark thoughts to linger.

His son looked curiously at Chohla's wares as he stacked the wood, but said nothing.

When the fire caught the thicker limbs, Chohla knelt next to Stenhelt with his flasks and bowls. "Your father will need to remove the poultices for a time so that I can apply a salve. Go give him a hand, little Khoveyo."

"Khoveyo?" the boy asked.

"I was told how brave you were, how fierce. The word 'Khoveyo' means 'savage spirit' in your high speech. Perhaps it is no longer used?"

Stenhelt shrugged and stopped tending the fire to go untie his father's dressings. Chohla stepped next to them a short time later, holding a bowl in either hand. One held a tan paste and the other a murky white liquid. As Halivik watched, Chohla made a point to taste both to ensure his good intent and the medicine's purity.

"What is the broth for?" Halivik asked.

"It will give strength and kill infection from within." Chohla answered, and then said, "If you have broken bones, you'll have to see a healer for it; I'm only an herbalist."

"None that I can tell," he replied with a grimace, "but I worry that my leg is ruined. Will your salve do much for it?"

"Not as much as you might hope, but it will knit the wounds quickly and save the leg. If you prefer, we can leave the wounds uncovered and let maggots feast on the dead skin instead. I understand it is a common practice among your healers."

"No," Halivik shook his head adamantly, "I've never liked that idea."

"Good; I have much more faith in my mixtures than in a bug. Perhaps the best reaction of this salve," Chohla said calmly while he gently applied the paste with his fingers, "is its numbing effect, if only for half a day. As long as you keep the wounds tightly bound, you should be able to make your trek back home with no pain or further damage. I'd wager you'll be at your door before all the stars come out."

"Honestly?" Stenhelt asked. "We won't have to remain until father has healed?"

"It wouldn't come to that, Sten," Halivik said through gritted teeth as the paste sank into the open wounds. "With how strong you are, I'd just—" he paused with an involuntary flinch—"sit back on the sled and let you pull me home." His boy smiled at the comment, a welcome sight.

A short time later Halivik was on his feet, tenderly testing his tingling calf for the long walk ahead. Meanwhile, Stenhelt dragged the dead wood curs near a small brook where he skinned them and scrubbed the hides in the cold water. He was taught to let little go to waste, so he came back to camp with anything useful he could harvest from them.

Halivik saw in his son's face an unspoken pride of his actions and of his first wild kills, however odd and violent the method. As long as Sten didn't become a boaster—which was doubtful from the quiet boy—then he was due some self-indulgence.

Chohla helped them pack the sled, receiving thanks many times over in the process. He declined an offer to trek back with them to their village, where as their guest he would want for little. "I prefer the wild," he said, and then looked down at Stenhelt, "as I'm sure you understand, don't you, little Khoveyo?"

Halivik frowned at the cryptic words, but saw his son nodding to the strange herbalist.

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With one last wave from a short distance, father and son headed back north through the forest. Chohla sat at the campfire, smiling to himself. It had been a long time since one of his ancient bloodline had shown signs of power, and so prominently at that.

He'd watched the boy battle the wood curs from afar, letting young Stenhelt get a sample of his own potential. Chohla wasn't sure how strong the boy might get, or in what way. But he had a fair guess of the latter.

Chohla was initially of two minds in choosing to help Halivik or not when the wood curs came upon the boy and his father. Letting nature run its course was the cycle of life, after all. It would also most likely mean the father's slow death. Stenhelt was still in need of guidance, stern but nurturing. His father provided that.

And so Chohla chose to alter destiny by use of his practiced guise as an herbalist. In giving the huntsman a simple surge of his healing power, Halivik would live. That would give more time for the boy to learn needed lessons.

Along with that, the father's lessened ability to provide because of his maimed leg and weak grip would force more independence and responsibility on young Stenhelt. Chohla felt that those qualities shape a man as much as guidance.

The use of herbs was an old skill, some of which he'd passed on to different peoples long ago. Chohla had long since surpassed the need for them; a touch was all that was needed now. Still, it gave the short-lived races something to focus on, something they could understand.

He and the few others of his kind learned long ago that to display any power beyond simple understanding had them being seen as deific. Some of the resulting worshipping practices in their honor became warped and unwholesome. It was

best to avoid the chance of that occurring again, although the interaction was missed.

Chohla enjoyed visiting Kaldevarr in the realm of Ethion. Days and seasons were longer there than in other faraway places, and its small moons spun faster through the sky. The wanderer still found the concept of time curious, or at least how the short-lived races felt the need to track it to some degree. There in Kaldevarr, for example, children came of age sooner than in most of the other realms. Chohla presumed the young races worried about time because they had so little of it. Even with their intellect and ambition, he still pitied them.

There wasn't any pity for young Stenhelt, though - he showed the potential for a strong life. Chohla was mainly curious about the future for him. Soon would come the time when the boy would be confused about things he could do; things no one else could, things that might frighten him... and others. What kind of 'Chohla' would he be if he did not linger for a time to offer wisdom when needed? He wanted little Khoveyo to grow to be healthy of mind, heart, and body, as he would any other of his descendants.

Chohla smiled as he stoked the small fire. Yes, he would cross paths with the boy again.

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Baraide watched her husband limp to his chair near the hearth, waiting until he was settled before she offered him a warm mug of acorn tea. Despite his injuries that she'd redressed the night before, Halivik made no complaints. He never did, being self-reliant and proud.

The wounds, while healing quite well, would stay with him. He would not again be able to hunt as he pleased. She knew it was one of the things he wanted to talk to her about. As for the other subject on his mind, she had no idea.

"Where are the children?" Halivik asked after taking a sip of his drink.

"Tull is out back of the property, gathering sap and firewood," Baraide answered airily as she sat on a footstool near him. "Sten is curing the boar hide. He'll be thinning the rabbit hutch right after; I reminded him to keep the lye bucket further out near the tanning shed this time." She picked up her husband's recently cleaned caribou coat, holding it up to appraise the holes and rips. "And Iri is pulling some vegetables from the garden and gathering apples after."

"Ah, good," he grunted.

Baraide looked around the coat at her husband. "By the Sky, the Vale, and the Deep, Hal - look at this coat! I might need the scraps of deer skin to patch this."

"I told you the wood curs were unexpected," he said defensively. "They rarely roam that far north. I'd wager a wolf pack pushed them out."

"And your leggings aren't much better off." Checking the torn and stained garment, Baraide shivered at the evidence of what Halivik endured. In the past, she'd made various repairs to her husband's clothing—and sometimes flesh—but she'd never seen such damage before.

"This isn't what I wanted to talk with you about," he grumbled.

"I know your concerns already," she said nonchalantly to counter his stern manner. "We can get along easily with bartering rabbit and beaver goods. I heard

from Myalla that a trader out of Troven told her that rabbit will be back in winter fashion with ladies of court. Imagine that—one of your coats or stoles being worn by some noble's wife in Vallo."

"I'm sure Vallo has its own share of huntsmen to gather furs for its ladies," Halivik replied with a frown. "And I'd doubt nobles from the capital will want goods from a village they've most likely never even heard of."

"One never knows," Baraide mused while turning the coat inside out. "It could be novel." She glanced over to her husband. "And don't forget, fang or claw jewelry is always in some demand. You have sacks of it out in the gut shack. I daresay you could have every soldier in Kaldevarr proudly donning some sort of bone necklace with the supply you've gathered over the years."

Halivik gently set his mug on a small table next to his chair with his right hand—his off-hand. After straightening with a flinch, he looked at his wife and said, "Thank you for seeing the best in things, my flower. But on the other hand..." He looked down at his left hand, trying to make a fist with it. "Hah," he chuckled ruefully, "on the other hand." He turned his eyes back to her. "You look for the good in any event, but what good is there in me now? I am—I was—a hunter. That is how I've provided for you, for all of us. When the worth of rabbit fur drops, when people tire of bone trinkets, what will I do then?"

"We can easily get along selling those for at least eight or nine seasons, probably more." She could immediately tell that those words didn't ease his worry. "Hal, your best skills have always been tanning, stitching and tooling. You're a good hunter, but what you can make with hides is truly impressive and much better than my skill in it. Even folks from both Huuvik and Raudeen come here when they want quality. You know that."

One side of Halivik's mouth curled into a grin at her compliment, even with his dour mood. "Oh, I don't know," he drawled. "I think the men come rather to gaze at your shiny black hair and big blue eyes. Buying leather and fur is just an excuse to linger."

"You're probably right," Baraide said as she met his gaze. They held their stares until both smiled wide and chuckled. She then noticed that his good mood faded as quickly as it came.

"I doubt I can hunt again," he said softly, shifting his dark eyes toward the unlit fireplace. "Not like I could a few days ago, not like how I hoped to keep doing. I could keep teaching the boys what I know, I suppose, but I suspect I can't make long hunts alone anymore. I'm nearly thirty cycles along now, Bara... not that I keep close track. Half of my life is gone, and now this." He paused with a sigh. "Old Dorbik no longer hunts; he just tends to his crops now because of his wounds, which were less than mine are. He always looks so sad."

Baraide held the garments on her lap and looked at her husband with a sour expression. "Old Dorbik is foolish. You've said so yourself. He was drunk and fell off his hauling ox. Dorbik is sad because his wife only allows him to visit the inn sparingly now." She leaned forward to rest a hand on his knee. "I can see the question in your eyes, my love. The answer is no; I will never think less of you for your injuries. I will never doubt your manhood because you can no longer spear a deer. You will always be my fetching, rugged man and the best father to our children I could hope for."

Halivik placed his hand over hers. "I think you know me too well."

"After all this time, I should hope so. But you need to face some facts. Tullgar will not follow in your footsteps. He is a sweet boy and already as strong as an ox, but he isn't a clever one. His thoughts aren't quick enough, nor are his senses sharp enough, to be out in the Cragwood. It is Stenhelt who takes after you. Didn't you say not long ago that he already has better instincts and skill than anyone else in these parts who thinks himself a woodsman?"

Halivik nodded. "The boy is a natural in the wild. I know Sten isn't as quick with his lessons as some of the other children, but he can spot a faint trail at dusk, and more often than not can spear a rabbit on the run. And the way he went after those wood curs..." He gave his wife's small hand a squeeze. "Baraide, they would have been the end of me, if not for Stenhelt."

"And whichever gods blessed us with Sten, I'm thankful," she replied with a soft smile. "But don't you go expecting too much of him now. He's only a boy, however great his heart is. He still needs your guidance, Hal. There is still so much he needs to learn from you."

Halivik nodded. "At least for the things I know of my trade, Sten is an eager student."

"You can't give him all of your time, though, or hold him in higher regard than Iri or Tull. You may have more in common with Sten, but be fair; your other children need their father as well."

"Of course I will. I know Tull isn't all too bright, although he has a talent with carving respectable woodworks. His hands and eyes aren't trained enough yet for a good bow, but Sten and I use spears he made. I don't have the skill to show him more... I was thinking I could barter with Luddsel from the other end of the village. He used to be a soldier—worked in an armory, I think. He could give Tull more lessons."

"A fine idea," Baraide agreed.

"And little Irisella," Halivik went on with a warm grin. "She's not quite six winters old yet - who knows what she'll aim for later on. But for now, what a bundle of joy and energy, no?" Baraide nodded with her own grin. "And she looks so much like her mother," he added with a playful wink, "the whole village cheers up when they see her on market days. I'm always surprised with all the small cuts of food she's been handed after a morning in the square."

"She is a charmer, to be sure."

"In less than eight summers," he said with a sigh, "she'll have suitors lining up."

Baraide's smile fell a bit with another thought. "It'd be nice if the boys were as outgoing and talkative as Iri. I suppose because Tull is... well, simple, he tends to watch more and talk less. Do you think that because Sten is so often alone—checking traps or fishing or the like—that he has become shy? Or maybe the shyness was there first?"

"I think perhaps being shy and unnoticed might be good for the boy."

Baraide's shock left her momentarily speechless, although her mouth hung open as if waiting for words to fall out. As her brows furrowed, she hissed, "How could you hope for such a thing?"

She saw her husband's head lower, his eyes unfocused. "We should go speak to your friend Tovira Krin," he stated without emotion. "I think Stenhelt is a Maker."

* * * * *

Clear, cool water gushed out of the spigot of the wooden hand pump, splashing into the large trough below it. Potatoes, just pulled from the expansive gardens, were dumped from a field basket into the water.

The hands holding that basket were small and tanned with dirt under the long nails. Kneeling in front of the trough, Tovira gazed at the back of her hands in the late morning sun and sighed. Age was beginning to show in them, evidenced by thin wrinkles and a few dark freckles. She wondered if by a miracle some other Maker had conquered the kenning of time; she'd pay well to reverse some of its effects.

She leaned over the trough, resting her elbows on its rounded edge. Tovira gave a moment's concentration while she whispered a well-practiced sentence in Locan. Her hands faced each other over the submerged potatoes, each making mirrored gestures of fingertips gripping and then pulling away. The water immediately clouded brown.

When the stopper in the back of the trough was pulled, the dirty water drained into the small flower bed behind it. All that was left was wet potatoes with pristinely clean skins. As an afterthought, Tovira whispered the words again and drew the dirt out from under her nails.

Just as Tovira, the Lady of Oma-Krin manor, was refilling the trough to let the potatoes soak, a voice called to her from the shaded back door of her estate home. "Your guests have just turned onto the lane," one of her workers—actually, her uncle—announced.

Years ago, when Tovira had acquired enough wealth for acreage, she offered to employ those of her extended family who chose to work her land at a good wage. Being family, she trusted them; they had supported her choices when many did not, and defended her when questioned. The same couldn't be said for her parents, not even on their respective deathbeds.

There were a number of cozy cabins further out on the large property that those faithful relatives were allowed to call home. Aunts, uncles, cousins and more extended family seemed quite content; after all, they shared in the bounty of her fields and orchards.

Tovira, never having a husband or young one of her own, took particular joy in the children that were usually found playing somewhere on her large lawn. Through them, she was able to forget her own strict upbringing, and enjoyed the peace she'd finally found.

She thanked her uncle, letting him return to his chores within her stately two-story home. While she walked to the full wraparound porch, she tucked loose hairs back into her chestnut and gray bun. Dusting the front of her long, faded yellow dress, the former Maker—now a merchant prosperous enough to hold an estate—came around to the front of her north-facing home.

With hands clasped loosely in front of her, Tovira stood at the wide entrance to her front porch with the anticipation of good company.

A shaggy ox pulled the open wagon that carried Baraide and her family up the long, tree-lined lane to the sunny front lawn. Tovira noticed that the boys wore their finer undyed linen or wool clothes, while Baraide and her daughter wore

similar, simple dresses of pale blue cut from the same bolt of cloth. Of course, the best huntsman of nearby Bruvaal wore comfortable leather, although bandages could be seen under his left sleeve. In his line of work, danger and injuries were common concerns.

Baraide, Tovira's friend of many years, helped herself down from the bench seat. Halivik, always sporting a thick mustache and longish brown hair, descended gingerly from his side of the wagon; he used a cane to take the weight off his left leg. Tovira's smile faded a bit at the sight.

Little Irisella, who sat between her parents for the relatively short journey, stood on the toe board and paused. Stenhelt, with black hair like his mother, hopped athletically over the wagon's side rail and helped his little sister off the wagon. Tullgar, their eldest child at ten years or so, was already a tall boy. From the back of the wagon, he stared around in wonder even though he had visited only the day before to deliver his mother's note. Tovira thought they were a handsome family, respectful and kind. She was happy to have invited them.

Light, cool breezes casually rippled their clothes except for Halivik's sturdy leather. He stood in place for a long moment, gazing up at Tovira's impressive house. Probably admiring all of the windows again, she thought; even small panes of sheet glass were costly. Tullgar had fixed his attention on the large pond that was back toward the front of her property. While Irisella clung to Stenhelt's arm, he obediently waited next to his father.

Baraide was first to approach with a warm smile that brightened her attractive features. Tovira met her at the base of the porch stairs with a brief hug. Halivik greeted her from a respectful distance; he was always proper and slightly deferential to her, even with the informal friendship that she and his wife shared.

The huntsman knew of her past—it was no great secret—but seemed just as reserved with her, now being a wealthy merchant as well. Tovira knew that the other commoners in Bruvaal felt the same. She wished it wasn't so. She always made a personal trip into the village to sell her spare harvests; only foods that no other farmer in the area grew, and always at low cost.

Those attempts to diminish the daunting pigeonholes of Tovira's title, both former and current, were always met with courteous yet consistently wary smiles.

The children of Halivik and Baraide were gently prompted to thank the Lady of Oma-Krin for the invitation to visit her estate. Attempting to put the modest children at ease, Tovira sat on the lowest step of the stairs and spoke briefly with each one. The boys remained quiet and shy, but Irisella quickly became her normally chatty and entertaining self.

Remembering that Baraide's note vaguely mentioned Stenhelt, she offered Tull and Iri a few copper coins each if they would go pick berries from her bush garden. The two were thrilled with the chance to earn coins. Halivik eventually, reluctantly conceded. Sten was offered the same to go feed her horse. The boy was stunned - she actually owned a horse! He countered with the offer to do it for free.

Two field workers escorted big Tull and little Iri out to the east, just beyond the orchards. A livestock handler likewise led Sten to the huge barn that sat in a wood-fenced meadow bordering the west edge of the lawn.

Tovira invited Baraide and her husband up onto the deep porch. In padded chairs surrounding a small table, they reclined and were served refreshments by one of the Lady's nieces.

After thanking the young woman, Baraide turned to Tovira. "It was so nice of you to have us out, Tovi. My letter only asked to see my friend and a word of counsel on a matter. I didn't expect Tull to bring back an invitation as the reply. I thought you might just stop in on your next market day. You know you're always welcome at our home."

"However tiny and humble in comparison," Halivik added. "But as Bara says, thank you; I hope we've caused no inconvenience, Tovira." It took nearly two years before Halivik stopped calling her 'Lady', even in his own home.

"None at all; I'm glad you're here. It gives me a chance to catch up with Bara and see how tall your children keep getting. I also get to hear first-hand of how you hobbled yourself, Hal, instead of hearing overblown gossip a few days from now." Tovira didn't get the amused reaction she was expecting.

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Stenhelt stood in the center aisle of the huge barn, gawking at the size of it. Light filtered in from the big, open doors at either end of the building, leaving the high loft in shadow. The mixed smell of hay and manure was strong but inoffensive—especially compared to the rabbit hutch at home—and the breeze through the barn doors kept the air moving.

There were only a few animals inside at the time; most of the livestock was out grazing. A noisy stud bull was at one end in a gated stall, two dairy cows in open stalls near him, and one horse at the far end. Wasting no more time, Stenhelt walked toward the horse's stall where the handler stood.

Looking through and over the slats of the stall gate, he was awestruck with the size of the animal. Its pelt was the color of cut wood, but smooth and shiny. Its flowing mane and short tail were lighter, like churned butter. The only other horses he'd seen before belonged to Maker Winter-hand and his guards when they came to the village every spring. Still, Stenhelt could immediately tell that this animal was unhappy. It kept twitching and circling with ears lain flat, swishing its thick tail and occasionally stomping the ground. Its unease stirred a feeling in Stenhelt that he couldn't understand.

The handler's words interrupted his study of the beautiful animal. "Keep your hands clear, young sir. He tends to nip, that one. Still, a grand beast, no?"

Stenhelt had no plan to answer, but wasn't given the chance to even nod; a young girl's voice came from near the barn doors. "Father, one of the sheep is stuck in the pond mud again. I couldn't - oh, sorry," she stopped short, seeing they had a guest.

Stenhelt turned to see a girl about his age standing there with her hands behind her back. Her brown hair was pulled away from her freckled face, tied into a long braid. She wore the oversized garb of a field worker. He envied the girl her comfortable clothes. Turning back to admire the horse, Stenhelt all but ignored the short chat between the father and daughter.

A short time later, he felt the presence of the girl near his side and back a step, but he kept his eyes on the horse. The handler mentioned something about returning quickly and to keep away from the horse stall before hurrying off. Stenhelt had never seen the handler's daughter at summer lessons and rarely anywhere else in the small village, so he didn't know her name. He was a guest on the estate, so it wasn't his place to offer a greeting. Besides, some muddy girl didn't compare to the horse.

She stepped up next to Stenhelt and said, "His name is Temper. Auntie Vira named him after he was brought here yesterday." He only nodded, so she continued to inform him. "She's not really my Auntie; my mother is Lady Krin's cousin. She says to just call her that. Auntie paid two full bags for Temper at an auction in Troven. He and two other horses were caught in the Squall Plains, if you know where that is. It's somewhere north and east of here, I think. Temper was calm when they walked him in, but he got jumpy and mad when they tried to saddle him."

Any further words from the rambling girl were lost on Stenhelt. He'd noticed that the horse had calmed a bit after the handler left, but was still jittery and wary.

And then Sten's eyes met the horse's wild stare. A strange energy tethered his core to the grand animal's own, and all of his senses instantly converged on that mutual connection. Stenhelt inhaled deeply from a sudden surge in his chest; his heart felt larger, stronger. His pattern of breath changed to reflect the horse's own deep but quick huffs. A dull ache warmed his left thigh, and a sharp throbbing shot through his right hand.

A calm realization quickly washed over him; the pains weren't his. They belonged to Temper.

* * * * *

"Explain what you mean when you said, 'he changed'," Tovira asked Halivik.

He took a sip of cider before trying to describe it. "Sten looked bigger, stronger." He shifted in his chair and glanced at his wife, who gestured for him to continue. Halivik then stared off, remembering. "He roared like a beast and fought like one, too. He tossed those curs around like they were pups." He looked back at Tovira. "My boy is eight—only eight summers along, and for a moment I was... afraid of him."

There was a short time of thoughtful silence between the three of them. Then Tovira said, "Hal, perhaps it only appeared that way. Your mind was racked with worry for Sten while you fought the wood curs. They got the better of you, almost fatally. You were ravaged and quickly going cold from blood loss. As you said, you were on the ground, watching from an odd angle. I've no doubt your son acted with a hero's heart, but it might be that your thoughts were addled and it let your eyes be deceived."

His lips pressed together as he took a deep breath through his nose. Tovira wasn't sure how she offended Halivik until he let the breath out and calmly replied, "As a huntsman, I hold worth only by my wits and senses. I may go

without other good traits, but I will never lose grip of those two things. I saw what I saw, Tovira; there was no mistake."

"I was not trying to wound your pride. I'm simply trying to think of a sensible explanation for the strange scene you described."

"But Tovi," Baraide interjected as she leaned forward, "haven't you come across odd sights in your years as a named Maker?"

"A few times, yes."

"Then why is what happened to my Sten so out of reach for you?"

Tovira sighed. "Because I've never—" She stopped herself, set her drink on the table, and then sat back with legs crossed in ladylike fashion. "Something remarkable happened to your Sten out in the woods, and you take them as signs of him being a potential Maker, yes?"

"Yes," Halivik answered. "That's why we need your wisdom and advice. I'm told that before you left their ranks, you were a Maker for many years. I don't know of what sort, but it doesn't matter to us. We just need some answers. Please, Tovira, he's a good boy."

She saw the worry in his and Baraide's eyes, and suddenly noticed how tired they both looked. "Hal, Bara," she began, "I'm not holding back from you. I've simply never heard of the power manifesting so boldly before, and Sten is between the ages of signs."

Baraide glanced at her husband and then back to her friend. "We don't understand, Tovi."

"I'll start fresh, then. In whatever form," she explained, "the art of Making is simply a different way of thinking. The years-long training is called the Road of Clarity; it helps to map and define a new pattern of thought up to a point. If someone with enough understanding makes it through the training, they continue to follow the path of their own making. It usually takes the form of what shaped early memories." She stopped when Halivik lowered his head and slowly shook it. "What? I'm trying to explain."

He lifted his head enough to look at her. "Not to be blunt, Tovira, but it sounds like you're reading from a book. I'm a simple man."

"If it's not too much to ask," Baraide said, "maybe you could just tell us what it was like for you, what you did when you first thought you were a Maker."

"Ha! I didn't think I was!" Tovira replied with a grin. "I thought I was a normal girl, growing up on the family farm outside of Raudeen - just a short walk down the wagon path from your father's land, Bara. I didn't think my curiosities were out of the ordinary, just a child's. I suppose most young ones would wonder why the sky is blue, or where all the snow comes from. I, on the other hand, thought of the land that I helped plow and sow. I remember my mind being filled with a child's wild wanderings almost constantly, but only things like what the moons are made of or how deep I could dig a hole. Sounds odd, doesn't it?"

"I don't remember anything odd being said about you," Baraide said. "I know it was long ago, and I wasn't even born yet when you were chosen. But I remember my parents mentioning your name a time or two; from their tone, they never thought you were a strange girl."

"I didn't either, not until my mother noticed my eyes." Tovira paused to let them quickly inspect her seemingly normal brown eyes, as she expected they would

after those words. "After a day outside, thinking my earthen thoughts, I would be called in for a meal. Depending on what part of the property I was on, my eyes would reflect it. I was told that after a day in the field, my eyes would be nearly black. And if I was digging in the harder clay up near the house, they'd change to a dull orange. It didn't take long for my mother to spot the sign that I was different."

"I saw a change in Sten's eyes as well," Halivik muttered miserably. "It was part of the change I took note of when he fought the curs. They looked a different color than normal. I'm not sure which, but they were lighter, like the sun was in them. It was a cloudy morning."

"But those other changes you mentioned," Tovira commented, "they're beyond the signs that are to be watched for; far beyond, truth be told. With most children, it is a subtle thing: a small outward change or trick, a quick understanding of any common lesson, or a different view on matters that most folk don't see. Those are the hints a Maker would expect to find, but only one of those might be enough for the child to be chosen."

"You mean taken," Halivik retorted venomously.

Tovira reluctantly nodded her agreement. "I was younger than your Iri when I was chosen. My parents, like many of those whose child has the rare calling, were so proud. I suppose many parents will make sacrifices so their child can have a better life. Mine knew I would be well looked after, given the best education, and to one day have wealth, respect, and a Maker's title. It's the law anyway; I think they just looked for the best in it."

Baraide woefully shook her head. "To be torn from your family when so young... I remember being told that one day you were just gone. You must have been so scared and confused."

"I was, and for a long while after. But I think that it was easier at my age than for those few who were accepted later. The signs are usually noticed somewhere around the time when lessons begin - between four or five years old, when a child's mind is open to any possibility. A few of the chosen's signs aren't evident until their adult changes begin, around eleven or twelve. For them, it can be a tougher transition."

"Sten is between those ages, though," Baraide pointed out.

"Yes, I mentioned that a moment ago. I've never heard of that happening." Tovira's thin brows furrowed in deeper thought. "What's more, your story makes it sound as if he impulsively reacted to live stimulus." She saw Baraide's frown and so explained in simpler terms, "Stenhelt acted like an animal, began to take the traits of an animal. I've never come across that before. Every Maker I know—myself included—draws from the inanimate. For me, it's earth; others manipulate the essence of water or fire or some such. Quite an intriguing mystery..."

Halivik leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and gripping his hands tightly together in front of him. "Tovira," he began with restrained emotion, "tell us what to do. I know my Sten, and he won't want to go. And we don't want him to, either. I know he's young but he doesn't care about book learning or titles, and that's fine with Bara and me—we couldn't be more proud of him than as he is. The boy loves to explore, to hunt, to be out in the wild with nothing but his wits and his freedom. He dreams of it; he's told us so."

Tovira smiled at the thought. "Taking after his father, I see."

Ignoring the compliment, Halivik continued. "If he has a Maker's ability, so be it, but forcing him to sit in some cold stone room and read dusty books for years would be torture. And torture for us, too. Please, there must be another way."

"Well, it's not all study, but I take your meaning." Tovira took in Bara's tired, worried eyes and Hal's haunted expression. She had no good answers for them. For their friendship, though, she had to be honest. "I see three options, and you won't like any of them."

"Go on," Baraide said hesitantly, and then took a deep breath.

"The first is that you tell the village bailiff that Sten has shown signs of Clarity and you wish him to be tested. Another choice is to do nothing; sooner or later, someone else will see the signs in him. Word will get back to the bailiff. Sten will be chosen and you'll both more than likely be thrown in the dungeons of Troven tower, or to the west in the pits of the Breskallin fortress."

Baraide looked at her husband despairingly; he gazed back at her with the same expression. She turned back to Tovira and quietly asked, "What is the third choice?"

Letting out a deep breath, she answered, "Again, you could do nothing, except to keep Stenhelt away from Bruvaal—or any other place—as much as you can. There is a small chance that he'll live out his life normally. The much greater chance is that the signs—the physical changes, the dreams—will eat away at his stability. I've heard a few stories of those who eluded being chosen, avoided the Road of Clarity. One eventually stole a fishing boat out of Derralin harbor, sailed out of Falcon Bay into the ocean and was never heard from again. He may have been unhinged, but no one can say for sure. All of the others ended in evident madness."

Halivik looked over to his wife, whose face was buried in her hands. He rested his right hand on Baraide's knee, if only to let her know that she wasn't alone. The huntsman couldn't look at Tovira just then, but managed to say, "Thank you for making it plain."

"It may be no consolation," she said to them, "but there are benefits. The parents are given a sizeable sum of coin every year on the day they're allowed to visit their child."

"We don't care about coin, Tovira," Halivik muttered.

"I understand," she replied, "but the chosen also receives a full education. And, should the child become a Maker, their social rank would equal a noble's. Of course, that Maker could become quite skilled in a form and earn a comfortable living while honing those skills. I, for example, was an earthen Maker. I have wrought the soils of this estate to grow what crops I wanted. My vineyard is unmatched because I give the grapes the best soil; Oma-Krin wine is served at the King's banquet tables." She paused, reflecting on her own experiences. "Your Sten could have a very prosperous life."

"But not the life he would choose," Baraide said through her fingers. She sat back, wiping the tears from her red-rimmed eyes. "There's little choice, Hal." She gripped the hand on her knee, knowing her husband was just as crushed as she was, if not more so. They looked into each other's eyes, both hoping to find strength and solace.

And then Tovira said one little word. "Or..."

They slowly turned their eyes to her. "Or—or what?" Halivik asked.

An idea had suddenly come to her. "Or I could train him," Tovira answered nonchalantly, and then picked up her cup of cider for another sip to hide her subtle smile.

"You could? You would?" Halivik asked in a rush, his words hurried together by renewed hope.

"Wait, Tovi," Baraide said hesitantly, "is it allowed for you to do that? I know after you turned away from the Order of Makers, there were some lines you couldn't cross anymore, yes?"

"Oh yes, and 'lines not to be crossed' is putting it mildly," she answered, still with a mellow composure. "In over two hundred years since the Order was formed, only four Makers have chosen to renounce their title. The first two were a husband and wife nearly seventy years ago who wanted to travel beyond our borders freely. That resulted in the battle of Scarlet Falls."

"We've heard the telling of it from entertainers visiting the inn," Baraide said.

"The other two were a talented Maker named Gann Fog-caller, and me. We disagreed with the indulgence of certain teaching methods by some unscrupulous Makers, and of questionable political maneuverings. The ruling council of the Order didn't want another mess like Scarlet Falls, so laws were set in place. Gann and I blemish their reputation, as they see it."

"Surely not all Makers are such hard brutes as you describe," Halivik commented. "The older, bald man who is titled 'Winter-hand'—the Maker who refreezes our meat cellar for a fair price in the early summers, you know the one? He always seemed a friendly sort."

Tovira nodded. "Frimgar, you mean. Yes, he is affable and generous, and always has been. There are others of the same temperament. There are also some within the small number of Makers who have ambition or common greed. And a handful of them are fanatics. They may say their passionate devotion is for the kingdom's strength, or for the glory of the Order of Makers, or even for the selfless enlightenment of the common man... whether he wants it or not. What they really want is power, and an excuse to unleash their abilities with impunity."

Easily noticing that Tovira's words were becoming heated, Baraide wanted to change the subject. She was going to ask why her friend walked away from such prestige, but she now had enough of an answer without bringing it up herself. "Tovi, your offer humbles us, and we would forever be in your debt, but... We can't ask you to break laws. What's worse, you'd be putting yourself in real danger."

"Not if everyone was cautious and discreet," she answered casually. "If I was to train Stenhelt, it wouldn't be in the pressured manner of the Road of Clarity. I would give just enough instruction to keep his sanity intact. However, he most likely will never be a true Maker."

"We don't care about that!" Halivik exclaimed. "By the Triad, that's the least of our worries!"

"Tovi, why would you put yourself in harm's way?" Baraide asked.

"I have a number of reasons, Bara, and all of them are worthy in their own right. One of those is that I get the chance to potentially save a child's life. Another is that I'm able to perform a rare service for friends in dire need." She smiled then

with warmth that deepened the wrinkles around her eyes. "I get to do something nobler with my ability than to turn dirt into clay for my potters, or into fine sand for my glass-blowers. And I get the personal satisfaction of snubbing the Order out of warping another student into a tool for their machinations."

Allowing a moment to let her words of conviction sink in, Halivik then hesitantly said, "We—we don't have much to offer you for this."

"Hal, doing this is its own reward. I don't see a debt."

"But I do. You're saving our son, and putting yourself at some risk in the doing. What we own is paltry compared to all of your fineries, but our belongings are yours for the asking." Seeing that Tovira was about to decline, however kindly, Halivik added, "And I know that you have no huntsman for your estate. Why else would your workers continue to buy wild meats and leather from us? While I will still offer my goods to the public, I will ensure that your pantry will never be bare nor your people cold in the winters. You offer your abilities, so I offer my skill." He glanced at his wounded hand and leg. "For all that it's worth now."

Rather than argue with the proud man, Tovira diverted the topic. "I'm sure we can come to some arrangement when the time arises. For now, we all need to agree on a simple alibi to begin with. Stenhelt's training will be sporadic, and therefore will continue for a number of years until I'm satisfied of his mental safety. If ever questioned of any odd circumstance, I'd rather we base our explanations in truths. I'll not lie if I can avoid it, although the only people I wouldn't mind deceiving are those who would take your boy away from you."

* * * * *

"Auntie Vira!" shouted a child from nearby. Tovira, Halivik and Baraide all turned in their chairs to see a young girl pulling the field gate open. She began to run up the path toward the porch, calling out excitedly once more. Coming along further behind her at a casual pace was Stenhelt walking alongside the livestock handler. "Auntie Vira," the girl yelled once more as she hopped up the stairs, "you'll never guess what happened!"

Before Tovira could respond, the herdsman barked his daughter's name—Silga—from just beyond the porch railing. The little girl lowered her head and took small, timid steps back to the porch stairs. Her father met her there and sternly said, "You know better. Now apologize to everyone for being rude."

Silga turned with pouting lips. She kept her head down and muttered, "Sorry."

"Now get your untamed mouth back to the fields unless you want a swat right here in front of everyone." She wasted no time in leaping off the porch and running out of sight. The herdsman absently stroked his beard and looked up at Tovira. "My apologies," he said. "Silga has too much energy for her own good." His eyes flicked over to the huntsman and his wife, who both looked tired but in good spirits. He nodded to them. "Halivik, Baraide, good to see you again."

They nodded in return. "And you as well, Nildur," Halivik replied.

"What was your girl in such a whirl over?" Baraide asked.

"Ah, that," Nildur said with a grin. He put his hand kindly on Stenhelt's head, rustling his shaggy black hair. "It appears your boy has quite a talent! I expect he'll take after you and become a huntsman one day, Halivik, but he could just as

easily run a noble's ranch. Your young man here has a special way with animals, it seems."

"What happened?" Halivik cautiously asked.

Nildur shifted his eyes to Tovira and said, "I had to leave Sten with Silga in the barn to go save a lamb. I warned the boy of Temper's spirit, and my girl already knew to keep clear."

When Hal and Bara looked Tovira's way questioningly, she explained, "I purchased another horse; it was delivered yesterday afternoon. It is a large young stallion full of fire. He didn't take kindly to the first attempts to be broken, so I named him Temper."

"And rightly so," Nildur agreed. "So, when I hurried back to the barn, imagine my surprise to see Stenhelt feeding oats to big Temper... by hand! Not wanting to spook the horse, I moved up slowly. Your boy seemed to know I was there, and pointed out that Temper was favoring a front hoof. And, I'll be snowed, he was spot on. Sten here seemed to have the horse's full attention, so I managed to slip in, lift the hoof, and dig out a sharp rock. Temper never even looked my way. It was caught in time; he won't come up lame. This young man is to be thanked for it."

Halivik and Baraide glanced at each other for a long moment, their fears apparently confirmed.

"Is that so?" Tovira calmly said. "It would appear that young Stenhelt is quite the champion of late, no?" She looked at the boy for a reaction to her words, but he kept his eyes lowered as he stepped toward his parents. "Nildur," she asked her herdsman, "would you keep the sheep clear of that muddy bank until I get out there and make it safe?"

"Of course—I'll see to it." He nodded to Halivik and Baraide. "My best to you both; I'll see you soon in the village." The couple replied with a customary farewell before Nildur made his way back toward the grazing fields.

"Well then," Tovira said, turning to face the boy who stood reservedly between his parents, "why don't you come closer, my talented young man, and we can discuss your reward."

"Tovi, that isn't needed," Baraide said.

"Of course it is. Your son did me a great service. You'd be stunned at what that horse cost." She put her hand out toward Stenhelt invitingly. "Let's have a quick chat," Tovira said with a warm smile, "before your brother and sister return, alright?"

Stenhelt shuffled his feet but didn't leave his place. "Go on," his father said with a quick wink and a nudge of his cane. "She's no stranger to us, now is she? Tovira is a friend."

After the boy slowly came around his father's chair, he gently took Tovira's proffered hand. "Let's see now," she said, sitting forward in her chair and placing her other hand over his. "This feels like a strong young hand, already callused. Is that from skinning or from hunting?"

"Um, both, I guess, Lady Krin," he answered without meeting her eyes.

Tovira cocked her head to the side, curious. "Sten, why are you nervous? I've visited with your mother at your home before. I chat with your family when we meet in the village. Does my big house scare you, is that it?"

"No, Lady Krin." His head sunk to his chest. "The man told me to keep clear of Temper, and I disobeyed."

"Oh, I see." Tovira gave his hand a pat. "My horse was in pain and he was jumpy, is that right?" Sten nodded his lowered head. "And you wanted to make him feel better, feel calm, yes?" The boy gave another short nod. She lifted his chin with her finger to look him in the eye. "Your parents have told you to respect your elders, and as well you should. This time, though, you knew something Nildur didn't. It worked out for the best because you followed your instincts. So, on this occasion, I'll let it pass."

Stenhelt frowned. "What are... in-stinks, Lady?"

The three adults grinned, all sharing an amused glance. "It's the proper word for a gut feeling," Halivik answered, "like knowing which tracks to follow, or when to shoot or throw."

"I'll wager," Tovira said softly as she leaned lower, as if she and Sten were trading secrets, "that your gut feeling told you about the rock in Temper's hoof, yes?"

Stenhelt turned his head to his mother; she merely smiled back. It was enough for him to know that Lady Krin had her trust. "Go on," she said with a whisper.

He looked back at Tovira and said, "I had the notion to calm him down, so I just met his eyes and started breathing deep like him. I felt where he hurt, but in my own hand. Like when Eberhelt the miller had gut aches the day his wife had a baby." Surprised by the explanation, Tovira spared a glimpse over to Hal and Bara. They were looking at each other with the same stunned expression she probably had. "Temper's rump is sore, too," Sten went on. "I think someone was mean to him, maybe someone with a beard..."

They all looked at each other again, now confused as well. "You said, 'a beard'?" Baraide asked him. "Sten, why would you think that?"

He looked over to her once more. "It's what my gut tells me, mother. Temper kept shying from Nildur the herdsman, but not so much from two other shaved men who came through the barn, or from Silga. I think a man with a beard hurt the horse," he put a hand on his left hip, "here. I don't think it was the herdsman; he's a good sort, I'd wager."

"And how would you know that?" Halivik asked with a smirk. "You've only ever seen him in the village on market days, selling the Lady's crops." He caught Tovira's eye and added, "Not that I doubt the honor of your kin."

"I saw the way you looked at him, father," his son answered. When Halivik frowned at the vague statement, Stenhelt clarified. "You always put hard eyes on those you don't think much of, like old Dorbik the farmer. You didn't give master Nildur that look."

Tovira chuckled, bringing the boy's attention back to her. "My, aren't you full of surprises," she said with a wide smile. "I'll be wondering what you'll notice next."

"As will I," Baraide said with a more serious tone than her friend.

"Stenhelt, I do believe you have a reward due," Tovira told the boy. "Did you happen to see the two other horses I own?" He shook his head, but seemed excited by the idea that she had more of the rare animals. "Yes, I have a filly and a mare." The boy's expression changed to one of slight confusion. "That just means that

they're both females, but different ages. At the next chance, why don't you and your parents come back out to visit... and you can ride one."

Sten's dark eyes widened with delight. "Honestly?" he asked.

"Honestly," Tovira repeated with a nod. A smile began to grow on his pleasant young face, so she quickly reminded him, "But not Temper, not yet; he needs to heal and be broken first. But my other two are fine and gentle horses. We can walk with them in the fields for a while, and perhaps you can tell me what you notice about them as well. And, while you're here the next time, I'd like to talk with you some more, alright?"

"Yes, alright," he replied, still grinning.

"And what do you say?" Halivik prompted him.

"Thank you, Lady Krin. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome, Sten. You know, your parents and I have some ideas brewing with you in mind, and I think they'll work out well. Would you like to spend more time out here?"

Stenhelt's smile immediately drooped. "Will I have to stop hunting?" The question confirmed everything Halivik had said about him.

"Oh no, not at all," Tovira said, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder. "In fact, I encourage it. People need what your family provides and your father could use your help now more than ever. Come to the estate when you can, or when you're allowed; your family is always welcome. And, who knows, you might even learn a few useful ... tricks."

* * * * *

Four years later...

Two bowstrings thrummed almost simultaneously. One of the arrows missed its target by a narrow margin and sailed overhead, while the other unerringly pierced the center of a duck's colorful breast. It fluttered in the shallow water for a moment and then was still. The few other ducks that had just landed immediately took to the air again.

Squinting up through the lightly falling snow that fell from a leaden mid-morning sky, Tullgar hesitantly reached back over his broad shoulder to pull another arrow.

"Please don't try it, Tull," Stenhelt said quietly from two short paces away.

His older and much larger brother relaxed his brawny arm, slumping against the rough-barked pine he was taking cover behind. "I might have gotten it, Sten."

Stenhelt stepped away from his own tree cover, reaching up to brush accumulated snow out of his brother's wavy brown hair. "Not to be mean, but you can't hit them while they sit in the pond. If you were very lucky you might have winged one in flight, and that's not good." He saw a few flakes catching in Tull's thickening beard. "Put your hood back up," he reminded him yet again. "Mother will be upset if you catch a chill."

"Why is that not good? We could just run it down and finish it," Tull said while he pulled the hood of his beaver coat back over his head.

"Do you want the duck to suffer until we find it?" Stenhelt asked rhetorically as he moved away from the low, dense scrub between the two trees. "It's easy enough to get them in the pond."

"Says you," Tullgar grumbled.

Standing in the tall yellow grass that was beginning to bend under the snow's gathering weight, Stenhelt turned back to look at his gloomy brother. "I'm sorry you didn't get one, Tull, but this isn't a rivalry. We did this together. Now we can have some nice duck meals and barter the rest for loaves of the baker's bread you like so much."

"I do like that bread," Tull said dreamily, "sliced thick... and with goat butter, and syrup..."

"Yes, yes," Stenhelt cut him off with a grin as he unstrung his bow, "the whole village knows how much you love any kind of food, you hungry ox."

Tullgar smiled at the teasing, but the placid expression turned into a slight frown when he recalled something his little brother just said. "How did we do this together, Sten? You got six ducks and I haven't hit one. I haven't helped at all."

Stenhelt didn't want to remind his sullen brother that the last kill actually brought the count to eight for the morning. "Tull, are you baiting me?"

"No..."

"Did you already forget that you made these bows? They're great."

Losing some of his sour mood, Tullgar asked, "The draw isn't too hard for you, is it?"

"No, it's alright. I can just make the pull; it'll be perfect as I get stronger. And look," he added, hoping to bring Tull back to better cheer, "you also carved those good decoys, and these duck callers you spent so much time on sure bring them in. So without you, we wouldn't have a full sack of game to bring home."

"I suppose so..."

Stenhelt walked over to the pond's edge, near the wide Scroll Creek that flowed lazily next to it. Knowing that his brother followed, he didn't need to turn away from the water to be heard. "We're just better at different things, Tull. I can't make chairs or neat designs on staff heads or even spears like you can, and everyone in Bruvaal knows how good of a fletcher you are now."

He wasn't irritated that his older brother needed to be reminded of simple things from time to time. It had been that way since Sten could remember, and was now simply expected.

Stenhelt had heard the whispers of villagers referring to his older brother as being "soft in the head" - and he silently agreed - but that was the only thing about Tull that was weak. Just at fourteen cycles now, or what the church would call years, Tullgar was taller than their father and with much thicker muscle. He was easily the strongest person in the village, and one of the biggest. It was a good thing that the hulking young man had a gentle soul.

"But not many people want to buy or barter for those things, Sten," Tull complained, moving to stand next to him. "All that most folk want is just for me to haul wood or stones for them."

"Lady Krin trades for some of your wares, remember? Don't worry, others will come around and need your skill sooner or later."

"Sooner is always better, I think," Tull said as he stared off into the distance.

Stenhelt had been using thick twine tied to a hook-shaped stone to pull in kills off the water, as his father had once shown him. Unlike the other ducks he shot that morning, though, the last one was too far out from any angle to use the hook. He set down the bow and unstrapped his quiver. "I have a better idea," he said as he pulled off his wood cur poncho, still in good shape after four full cycles.

"You don't mean more archery practice, do you?" Tull asked with a sullen tone.

"No, but father may order it of you when we get back." He looked up at his unhappy brother and said in a cheerful voice, "I'm getting tired of hunting ducks, too. We have plenty anyway. You go get the fishing gear from the pack and we can test your new stonewood hooks in the creek. I'll wager the inn will buy any trout we catch. It'll take too long to toss hooks for my last kill and your decoys and that last arrow you shot. I'll just wade in and gather them."

"You saw where my arrow went?"

Stenhelt nodded while pulling off his boar skin boots. "It hit the water closer to the far bank. Good thing you made the arrowheads out of bone so everything floats."

"Aren't you going to get cold? The water is near to freezing."

"Cold doesn't bother me much, remember? Just like carrying a log across your shoulders doesn't bother you." Stenhelt stepped into the pond, only getting calf-deep before he turned around and said, "There's a small skin of worms in my pack; I dug them out of the compost last night. And get my spare trousers out, would you?"

It was only a short while later that Stenhelt was pulling on his clothing after he dried his legs with an old cut of wool. Tullgar sat patiently on a nearby outcrop of rock that overlooked Scroll Creek - so named for the curling pattern it made through the Cragwood and beyond. The elder brother had pulled their packs over near the creek and was inspecting one of Stenhelt's kills. "Are you going to gut them now, or wait?"

Pulling his head through the poncho's neckline and shaking his head to tug his shoulder-length black hair free, Stenhelt replied, "I'll wait." He looked around at the dense line of bare trees and snow-dusted evergreens that surrounded the small pocket of open land. "If I did it here, the breeze would carry the smell. It's not yet full into winter, so some animals will be on the hunt. Father told me ducks don't spoil too quickly, and he'll help us clean them when we get back. I don't want to tempt anything with big teeth and an appetite to spoil our fishing."

"Wolves or bears this close to home?" Tullgar asked as he turned to look at his brother.

Sten shrugged. "As winter comes on, they're drawn to the rabbits and chickens and goats we have penned up. That's why father always tells us to keep marking our territory."

"Marking territory," Tull repeated. "You mean peeing on trees and squatting in bushes. I don't remember the last time I used the outhouse."

Sten ignored that bit of information. "Even with our scent scattered around out here, an animal might be hungry enough to come closer for an easy meal."

"Too close for my liking," Tull commented, glancing back to the north. "If it wasn't for the forest, we could see our land from here. Well, you could. Did you see some tracks or something?"

"No..." Stenhelt answered, still scanning the trees. He sensed something out of the ordinary was nearby, but didn't want to alarm his brother. He thought it might be something as simple as the changing winter winds and put it in the back of his mind.

"I want to see you do your trick again," Tull commented as Sten sat down next to him. "I like to watch when you do that."

The trick, Stenhelt thought; one of the few successes he'd had after four cycles of Tovira Krin's lessons so far. "It doesn't work on ducks," he reminded Tull while taking the fishing pole that his brother offered him. "We have to pull the feathers and down just like always."

"Alright," Tull mumbled, and then fell silent.

They sat in a spot they'd visited many times before, listening to the winter birds, watching the water of Scroll Creek flow on, and enjoying a shared time of unspoken serenity. Stenhelt knew that Tull wasn't bright, although he always knew when to hold his tongue. The appreciation of solitude and quiet was one of the very few things that the brothers had in common.

Tull was only talkative in spurts at home or when he and Sten were out hunting or exploring. The big young man was usually reserved when visiting shops in the village. Not that Sten had been in Bruvaal lately to witness that behavior; his mother always had him on the move. Whether doing chores on their well-worn plot of land—which was isolated out on the eastern outskirts of the village—or helping his parents with their work, Sten was never bored. Irisella was always following along, providing friendly company.

Those everyday activities were broken up with hunting trips—sometimes for days at a time—and with lessons at the Oma-Krin estate. It had been many seasons full of activity and learning for Sten since the Lady Krin had begun giving him his lessons.

* * * * *

While Sten may have sometimes missed the other village children who took lessons over at the church during the summers, Lady Krin made it fun. She also normally taught outdoors unless there was a heavy rain or snow on. Sten never failed to be awed at the size of the Lady's home on those days when the weather was bad. Who needed that many rooms?

Silga, the herdsman's daughter, and her cousin Dauksel, a boy near their age, sometimes shared lessons time with Stenhelt. Otherwise, he and the Lady would visit different areas of her vast estate while she quizzed him on numbers or spelling, and occasionally told stories of Kaldevarr's history. Sten thought that he was learning more with Lady Krin than he would have from boring old cleric Mundur in the village church.

Unfortunately, the lessons of Clarity hadn't been going as well as Lady Krin hoped. Sten was content with what he'd managed to figure out thus far, but he felt as if he was somehow disappointing her. That whole Clarity idea sometimes gave Sten a headache, thinking about where and why things are and are not. Oh, and how "kenning alternative paths of logic"—one of Lady Tovira's phrases—led to enlightenment.

Sten came to the belief that too much time in that strange way of inward effort might make someone go mad. Besides, it took time to get his brain focused—too much time for his liking. He had better things to do.

It wasn't as if Sten hadn't made some mental strides into Clarity, however minor. As Lady Krin put it, she was trying to help him find 'pavestones' in his head. These pavestones would be cleared and cleaned and inspected, and that practice of their handling and shaping would lend to the stone's usefulness. These pavestones would then, in her words, make it easier to move forward on this mental journey she called the Road of Clarity.

To Sten, most of that line of reasoning seemed strange and useless; he preferred places where there were no roads.

For the Lady's sake, though, Sten truly gave an effort to learn. Makers called those mental pavestones 'tricks'. Commoners called them magic or mystic workings. To him, they were very useful tools. He knew that using them in front of other villagers would only make them nervous.

Those who had mystical abilities were viewed with wary eyes; respectful, and sometimes even fearful. Stenhelt didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable or look at him differently, so he used his newly-learned tools privately.

There were only two tricks that Sten's brain had managed to grasp thus far—cleaning and shedding. Both were used for the treatment of animal hides, and greatly lessened the time and labor of making durable yet supple skins.

The cleaning trick allowed the flesh and fat on a skin to be removed with a swipe of a hand, as well as curing them better than salt would—a useful trick indeed, since salt was expensive. This mystic cleaning did not stretch the skin, although it did make drying it all but unnecessary.

The shedding trick was originally intended to easily remove beards or other unwanted hair, but Sten tried using it to remove hair from pelts instead of the long process of soaking and scraping. There were no tricks to avoid the steps of braining or smoking a skin to finish the tanning, but those were comparatively short and easy labors.

The tricks he learned worked well and gave Sten much more time to gather for his family and assist with other chores. Lady Krin told of many other types of tricks he could search for in his head that might be of further benefit at home. There were tricks for cloth mending or dyeing, tricks for warming or spicing food, even tricks for bathing and hygiene. The choices were many.

Sten just didn't think the effort of learning any of those other tricks was worth their limited use. He was quite satisfied with what he'd acquired—not that he could understand much more—and happily put his known tricks to good use. More often than not, they worked; he'd otherwise go through a short mental exercise and then try again. For the time and toil those tricks saved, he couldn't complain.

The remainder of the time spent at the Oma-Krin estate was helping Sten's father keep his word. They built a large rabbit hutch and stocked it. A duck enclosure was next, although it took longer to gather a decent flock for that.

Because of the tricks, more time was available for him and his father to go hunting, which in turn meant more wild game to be given to Lady Tovira. Not long

ago she said that the self-imposed debt must stop, that she was feeling guilty for accepting all that they brought her. Sten's father grudgingly accepted her request.

Stenhelt continued to visit the estate, either by the winding South trail or more often by cutting east through the northern reaches of the Cragwood. Every third day or so for over four cycles had him nearly wearing down a path through that part of the woods.

The scent of gardens and crops sometimes brought deer or smaller game to the Lady's estate. If supplies were thinning either at the estate or at home, Sten would take advantage of the prospect. Exiting the woods near the cabins at the back of the estate grounds, he'd drop off the fresh and cleaned kill as way of greeting the Lady's friendly family of workers.

Stenhelt's final common lessons had more or less concluded at the end of summer, although there was always more to learn. He was allowed to ride one of the horses on occasion, always under the casual eye of Lady Krin. He played games with Silga and Dauksel. He and Tull would earn coppers by gathering wood from the rear of the estate where it met the Cragwood. And, of course, he would practice his tricks when Tovira asked. She urged Sten on because she saw potential in him, and told him so. She had hopes for him that he didn't share.

During all of those events, Stenhelt was able to spend a good amount of time with his father. On occasions of long journeys deep into the Cragwood and onto the lower slopes of the Skean Peaks, Tullgar would be asked to come along. More than just hunting and survival tips, Sten learned other things from his father. Most of all was fortitude, inside and out; family gives strength - have strength for the family.

His father's old injuries may have denied taking the actual shot or throw, but even with a limp he set a pace that kept Sten and Tull moving. Winters had become difficult for the proud man; the cold would cause his wrist and knee to cramp. During deep freezes, he would move around the cottage with the help of his cane. None of the children made mention of it, and neither did he. The best huntsman of Bruvaal never complained when his aches set in, and he never relented from setting an example.

After long trips, Sten and his brother would unload furs, meat, and other harvested goods from their hauling sled. It was mostly deer, but sometimes a few heavyhorn sheep, wild boar, or Kaldevarr bear. Just the winter before, Sten speared a large elk from thirty paces. He wasn't sure how he was able to get so close, but the granite blade drove through the heavy bones that protected the big animal's spine. While not a heart or lung shot as his father taught him to aim for, the elk still went down immediately.

Sten remembered looking back at his father and brother for approval. The two stood a fair distance away with looks of obvious fear and surprise, like they'd both just awoken from a bad dream. Sten was too confused and hurt to ask about their scared reactions, and neither his father nor Tull offered to explain.

That sour memory bothered Stenhelt for some time, every so often ruining his sleep. But then something else happened that helped to explain his father's reaction when he brought down the elk. It also raised questions that no one could answer, not even Lady Krin...

Not too long ago, during last summer's peak, Stenhelt went with his little sister just beyond their property to gather plants and berries for dyes. Irisella always had knack for finding whatever flower or herb was called for. Sten's keen sense of smell might have had the same success, but he'd have to search around first.

And so, at their mother's—and Iri's—request, Sten accompanied her. While the young girl hummed to herself and moved from one bush to another filling her basket, Sten used his spear as a walking stick and kept her in sight.

When Irisella approached a thick nightberry bush, a red fox jumped out of its dense foliage. Iri yelped, the fox ran, and Sten impulsively took chase after it. Fox fur was a rare find and highly prized; it would buy the family enough bread for a season and plenty of linen or wool.

The fox zipped this way and that before sprinting deeper into the forest. Sten gave up the chase when he heard Iri calling for him. Jogging back to her with his heart still thumping wildly in his chest, he realized the spear wasn't in his grasp. That's when he noticed his hands, as did his little sister when she came running up to him.

Stenhelt's palms were elongated. His fingernails were thick and dark, and had grown into sharp points. Turning his hands over, he saw coarse hair receding back into the skin. His hands slowly drew back to normal size. He looked down at Iri, who was staring up into his eyes. She said that they were very big, the color of lakeshore water. She watched with wonder as those wild eyes changed back to his normal brown.

Walking back to her basket and his dropped spear, Iri said she watched Sten running after the fox and was keeping pace with it. She'd never seen anyone run so fast. She only yelled because he ran out of sight, and she got scared.

What Sten saw of himself that day didn't match anything of what Lady Krin described as 'signs of a Maker'. The next day, his mother walked with him and Irisella to the estate. After the story was told again to the Lady, she admitted being as confused as they were.

As a matter of safety, Lady Krin couldn't contact any Makers she still knew to get their opinions about Sten's 'changes'. The only idea that the Lady had at the time was to urge Sten to concentrate and relive those feelings of the chase, hoping she would see those changes for herself. A full and lengthy effort was given, but nothing happened.

* * * * *

"I'm getting cold," Tull said with a sniff, interrupting Stenhelt's reminiscent thoughts.

The light snow had dwindled away, but was being replaced with a harsher wind. "Maybe you should go back home and get the hearth blazing," Sten said to his shivering brother. "I think more snow will come tonight."

Tullgar stood, grabbing up his pack and the sack of ducks. He noticed that Sten remained seated on the flat rock with a line cast out into an eddy of the stream. "Aren't you coming?"

Stenhelt half-turned back to his brother and shook his head. "I think I'll try to catch a few. Tell father I'll check the trap lines before I get back. Tell mother I'll be in before evening meal. Oh, and tell Iri not to come out looking for me."

They shared a quick smile before Tull turned and walked off without another word.

It was a short while later, after a respectable trout was pulled ashore, that Sten was once again lost in thought. Sensing movement, he looked across the wide, shallow stream. Almost directly across on the far bank was a large, lone fir tree whose branches were being disturbed. Sten could tell that something of good size was brushing against the back side of the fir, catching a glimpse of light brown fur. Stenhelt wasn't prepared for what soon stepped into view.

It was a bear, but not like any bear he'd ever seen before. Kaldevarran bears were dark brown, their length sometimes matching a man's height, and their weight equaling two or three men. What Stenhelt was breathlessly staring at—and what was staring directly back at him—was no Kaldevarran bear. It was easily twice the bulk of one, half again the length, and had a golden brown coat. The huge animal came to the creek bank and stood, taking in scents.

Stenhelt felt a surge of vitality, a feeling he had become familiar with. The first time was four cycles back, when he fought the wood curs. He'd feel it whenever he'd be close to Temper or the other horses at the estate, or that time deep in the Cragwood where he stalked and killed the elk. Less than two seasons ago when he chased the fox, even then Sten felt the invigorating energy flowing through him. It offered him a well of strength, agility and endurance. And, because he'd seen the change in himself when he gave in to that power, it also terrified him.

The giant bear went back down onto four paws, turned, and began walking away toward the far tree line. For reasons he couldn't explain, Stenhelt wanted to track the bear. Not to hunt—just to learn more about the beast. It was a rash idea. His father would probably give him swats for even having such a foolish notion.

He hurried across the knee-deep creek as soon as the bear moved into the forest.

Quickly across the open land, Stenhelt paused at the tree line. The wind moved from his right to left, carrying only scents of evergreens. There was no movement in the trees except where the breeze pushed at bare or green-needled branches. There was no sound of old leaves rustling, or of twigs crunching underfoot.

Taking a few cautious steps into the trees, Stenhelt searched and found... nothing. Not one sign, not one print, of the bear's passing. He wondered how any creature that big could simply disappear into snow-dusted woods.

Determined not to be bested or fooled, Stenhelt ventured a little further into the dense patch of trees. He was halfway up a low-sloped hill when the smell of wood smoke and wintergreen tea filled his nose. Sten hesitated, confused and cautious, wondering who the camper could be.

The other men in Bruvaal who hunted usually kept to the west, or north beyond the trail; they weren't known to venture into the southern depths of the Cragwood. Even if they did, those men knew better than to look for game so near his father's property. Halivik would see it as intruding on his domain and take issue.

Stenhelt moved up and to the right where the terrain was rockier. Fewer trees found purchase in the jutting bedrock, which left him less cover for defense or

stealth. A thin trail of white smoke rose from over an expansive outcrop just ahead. Whoever was camping was doing so openly on the far side of the prominent stony hillock. Keeping alert in case the stealthy giant bear returned, Sten circled slowly around the rock formation to get a view of the camp.

The bedrock sloped back where it met the ground, creating a natural concave shelter from wind and weather. From a side angle, Sten could see the profile of a figure sitting cross-legged in front of a small fire below that overhang.

Just by the posture, he guessed the camper to be a man. A blanket or maybe a thick wool cloak of faded blue was draped over the man's head and shoulders, and tucked under his backside. Sten was only able to see the tip of the man's nose from his current position, so he scanned the rest of the small clearing for clues.

There was no ground snow anywhere near the fire, so it had been lit for some time. There was no hauling sled or pull-wagon for gathered furs, nor any other trappings of a skinner in sight. Except for a stout walking stick that was propped against the overhanging stone, the man had no weapons set out within reach to mark him as a hunter or soldier.

A small tin pot sat on one of the stones that surrounded the campfire, letting the heat reach its contents. That dented pot, like the old blanket over the stranger, was too plain to be owned by a man of means. Unless the stranger was a wayward hermit, Sten had no idea why he was there.

It then occurred to Sten that his pack—and his weapons, damn his fool brain—were back on the north bank of Scroll Creek. His thoughts raced quickly, deciding to quietly backtrack and then race home to tell his father what he'd seen. Before he took a step, the camper turned his shadowed face directly at Sten and held steady.

* * * * *

Sighing, the young hunter kept to the etiquette he was taught when coming upon an occupied campsite. "Hello in camp," he called clearly as he took a few steps forward.

The camper pulled the blanket away from his head to reveal long brown hair, a pleasant smile and a vaguely familiar face. "Ah, little Khoveyo," he said warmly. "Come, sit."

Stenhelt paused at hearing that name and then stepped into the small clearing. "I remember someone ca—" He pointed at the man excitedly. "You're the herbalist who helped my father long ago! You're Chu—um, Chula, yes?"

"Chohla," the man corrected him with an easy smile. "Your people have been saying that word wrong for generations."

"What?" Stenhelt asked, not quite paying attention. He was studying the outfit Chohla wore under the blanket; a matching set of tan leather jerkin, leggings and soft shoes. Dabbed in random places on the clothes was a deep blue paint. The herbalist had gotten a bit messy in his decoration—three spots of the same color were on his forehead. Sten didn't want to point it out and embarrass the man who was so kind when they'd first met.

Chohla reached into the folds of the blanket around him and pulled out two tin cups. "Want some tea?" he asked. "It's almost ready."

Stenhelt suddenly remembered the bear. "No, wait," he blurted, "you need to kill the fire and cover that pot! There's a huge bear nearby! I've never seen anything like it!"

"I'd wager I have," Chohla responded calmly. He used an edge of the blanket to grab the pot handle. Pouring slowly into both cups, he said, "I've seen many odd things in my travels. Don't worry, the bear is gone."

"So you saw it! Are you sure it moved on? It evaded me so easily."

"Slow your heart, Khoveyo - we're safe here," Chohla replied as he set the pot down.

"That animal was no Kalde bear," Sten said in a calmer tone. "I've never seen its like."

Chohla smiled pleasantly. "It has no name here," he said, "although people from other places know it well. There are many more languages out there than you might expect, and all of them have a different word for bears. Nahqui, whoth, daxpitse, grizzly, nonookuneseet... I could go on. Even your people's high tongue has a word for bear: weda. You may have been taught that, but I'll wager none of your teachers know of the breed you saw. Why would they, eh?"

"I doubt they'd ever seen one, not even my father."

"I agree—doubtful. Maybe you'll see another such bear again someday." He offered Stenhelt a steaming cup of the aromatic tea. "Careful, it's still near to bubbling."

"Thank you." He held the cup and sat on the cold ground across the fire from Chohla. Despite the herbalist's calming demeanor and words, Sten was still obviously nervous as he eyed the forest around them. "Truth be told, I'm not sure I want to see a bear like that again."

Chohla grinned, staring into the fire while he stoked it. "That rush of life, it can be a scary feeling sometimes, at least in the beginning. You might change your mind later."

Stenhelt was unnerved by the herbalists' simple but exact description, 'rush of life'. Besides the cryptic last words, Sten was alarmed that the strange man seemingly knew something private about him. No, Sten thought, he probably meant the pure thrill that anyone would feel if they saw a... weda... grizzly... whatever it was called. Either way, thinking on it was distracting, so he moved on. "I'm glad to see you again, master Chohla, but what are you doing here?"

Glancing around at his campsite, he said, "I like this spot. I don't think I've ever camped here before." He looked back over to Sten. "It looks like I picked wisely; we've managed to cross paths again. Sometimes I'm lucky that way. How fares your father?"

"He gets along well enough, thanks to you. Sometimes the cold gives him pain where the curs tore at him, though." Sten glanced around at the small, simple camp. "Would you rather visit my parent's home, or maybe the village? We're only a short walk away."

"We are?" Chohla asked, mildly amused. He put his finger into his steamy cup to test the heat of it. "I was guessing I was further south, but it doesn't much matter."

Stenhelt frowned. "You don't know where you are?"

Chohla shrugged and picked up his cup. "In a way, I always know where I'm at. I know I've made camp in the Cragwood forest, which is in the mid-south of the kingdom called Kaldevarr. Your country sits on the northeastern reaches of the vast land most people call Ethion. It's just the little details that sometimes elude me." He nodded, perhaps in appreciation. "Now it's plain where I'm sitting."

"I'm—I'm glad I could help," Sten stumbled through the words, disconcerted by the herbalist's oddly casual manner and speech. "Does that mean Kaldevarr isn't your home?"

Chohla took a long sip of his tea before answering. "That's a good question. My people are travelers, some more than others. That could mean we have no home. But I've been to many places over and over, so it feels like I have more than one."

Stenhelt paused from blowing into his cup to frown at Chohla. "I don't understand."

"You were born in the village nearby. What if, from an age younger than you are now, you and some of your people kept moving from place to place? Some would say that your village isn't your home; they'd say that all of the land you move around on is your home. I think part of me is Kaldevarran, but only one part of many. I'm not so different from you, Khoveyo; Kaldevarr is much of who you are, but not all."

Eyebrows furrowing, Stenhelt said, "That can't be right, master Chohla. I haven't traveled far, only to the Skean Peaks a handful of times with my father and brother. I haven't even been to one of the other villages along the South trail. And I was born in this country, the same as my parents and their parents. I can't be anything else but Kaldevarran, so how are we alike?"

Chohla stared into the fire for a few long moments, and then asked, "Do you know the history of your country?"

Stenhelt shrugged, slightly embarrassed. "Maybe not as well as I should."

"That's alright," Chohla said with a warm smile. "Tell me what you can recall."

After a moment of thought, Stenhelt began. "Lady Krin—oh, that's Lady Tovira of the Oma-Krin estate—she's been my teacher for the last of my normal lessons. She taught me that Kaldevarr is in the Age of the Triad, cycle 255. Our—um, my people, they came from Ferrenis through the northern pass long ago. Lady Krin said that Ferrenis was a land of clans that always fought. People from many of the clans were tired of the wars; they gathered and decided to come here. That was the start of Kaldevarr and the Age of Pioneers; it lasted 72 cycles, I think. Then, after some King died, we started the Triad Age."

"Hmm," Chohla grunted, as if he'd learned something new. He took a small gulp of tea and then asked, "Did your teacher tell of what a few of those early pioneers found when they first came to this land?"

Stenhelt looked puzzled. "I suppose they were the first to find the rivers and high plains and mountains and such..."

Chohla smiled, wide and genuine. "I'm sure your Lady Krin is a smart woman, but no teacher knows everything. Some truths are small and subtle. You don't find them without knowing where and how to look. One of those little truths is my people. A few of my kind were here before your pioneers came, and stayed for a while after your Kaldevarrans began to settle."

"They were? They did?" Stenhelt asked, surprised.

"Oh yes, but they laid no claim; they were travelers, as we still are. The only evidence my people left behind were little decorations made in remote places, like deep forests or in caves."

"Decorations... I think I've seen one!" Sten interjected excitedly. "Out between Pike Hill and Cliff Lake - that's about a full day south of here, back where the trees grow dizzy big. My father and I found river stones, all stacked one on the other, straight up on top of a boulder. Both of us wondered how it stayed up at all, not even counting wind or rain." Awe was evident on his young face recalling the memory. "We thought it bad luck to disturb it, so we moved off. You mean that one of your people from long ago made that?"

"Something close to that," Chohla replied with a shrug. "The etchings or little sculptures meant nothing, just a sign that one of my people was there. They mostly avoided your explorers, content with solitary activities. Once in a while, though, there would be reason or interest to meet with some of your early people. It was usually with good intent, and on rare occasion it turned into very friendly encounters." He said the last words with a quick grin and a wink.

"Your people and mine married?"

"Ah, no; my people don't share your custom to wed. It was more like... mingling. And here is the heart of it. I have gathered many skills over time and travel, and through one of them I can sense lineage. You, young Stenhelt, carry some of the blood of my people."

Sten cast a doubtful frown and asked, "Are you sure, master Chohla? It sounds of a fine tale, but I leave the whims of fancy to my little sister."

"You don't have to believe me, Khoveyo. It's your choice," Chohla said without a hint of offense. "But when the beast within you rages again, think of this talk after."

Stenhelt couldn't conceal his surprise. "I don't... How - how did you know?"

Chohla ignored the question. "I am sure that your Lady Krin is wise and full of good intent, but her source of power isn't the same as yours. She and every other of those 'Makers' use their strong minds to warp common thought to create their magic. But you, Stenhelt, son of Halivik, do not need books and headaches and years of study; your strength is instinctual. It has been in you, with you—part of who you are—since birth. You have just begun to drink from the well that my people dug. Your teacher, or anyone else you know, will not have the answers you seek."

His cup of aromatic tea forgotten, Stenhelt stared into the crackling fire.

"Did my words somehow hurt you?"

"No," Stenhelt slowly replied with a subtle shake of his head. "It's just..." He finally looked at Chohla and quietly asked, "The Lady's efforts are wasted on me?"

"Not at all," Chohla answered as he refilled his cup. "Well, mostly not. Learning is always a good thing, even if you're not able to wield magic as she does. I sense that her efforts have taught you a few useful lessons, no?"

"Only one or two," Stenhelt replied self-consciously. "Lady Krin calls them tricks. It's been near to four cycles now, master Chohla, and I'm barely past where I started. I'm letting her down."

After another sip of hot wintergreen tea, Chohla said, "Teachers can only be happy if the student wants to learn. If there are more lessons—tricks, as you say—

that you want to learn, then keep on with it if you like. She'll be happy, which will make you happy. Just remember that your true power doesn't come from bending your mind; it comes from much deeper within." He gulped down the last of his tea and then reached out for the other cup.

Stenhelt handed his tea back. "So, you have answers for the things that are happening to me?" he asked tentatively.

Chohla set Sten's half-full cup next to the fire and said, "I'll wager I'm not as good of a teacher as your Lady Krin. I'm more of a guide. Through your blood and heredity, the abilities you'll learn will come naturally. Since your power comes from my people, I know a lot about it. You act on instinct, and your body changes to meet your needs. It was the same for me, long ago." There was a pause, as if Chohla was about to say more. Instead, he pursed his lips and adjusted the tin cup closer to the flames.

"Is there a way to stop it? I don't want to accidentally hurt anyone, or even scare them."

"I think I heard your father once say to go about something with both mind and heart, yes?" Sten nodded. "Follow his wise words, Khoveyo. You might not be able to stop your impulses, but adding thought will help control them."

Stenhelt let out a relieved sigh. While he wasn't comfortable with the changes he'd felt within himself and seen with his own eyes, he realized not to fear them if he kept his wits. He watched as Chohla gulped down the last swallow of tea and then pulled the blanket closer around himself. "Master Chohla," he wondered, "do you feel the bite of cold as most people do?"

"No, I can ignore hot and cold for a while, just as you probably can. I just like this blanket."

"Oh," Sten nodded, trying to suppress a grin. "Could I maybe get some guidance on this instinct ability I have? I think I should get some control over it."

Chohla set the tin cups aside and tucked his arms back into his blanket. "You should go soon; I'll wager your family will be expecting you. But I think I can give you a small hint before you go."

"Yes?" Sten asked eagerly.

"Think on how animals heal their wounds."

There was an awkward pause until it was clear that Chohla wasn't going to say any more about it. Stenhelt didn't think it was much of a lesson. He was never one with a surly word, especially for an elder, so he merely nodded his thanks. Chohla was correct; he would have to get home soon. He stood and rubbed some heat back into his legs, then stood straight and asked, "Can I come back here in a day or so to ask more questions?"

"I doubt I'll be in this spot, Khoveyo." Chohla then grinned and added, "I'm a traveler, remember? You go about your chores. I'll make sure we cross paths again soon... Maybe later in the spring." He scooted further back under the rock shelf and reclined against his large bag.

"Yes, um..." Stenhelt hesitated, not sure if that was Chohla's way of ending a talk. Nonetheless, he felt the need to offer thanks as he was taught to do. "I appreciate everything you've told me today; I have much to think about. Oh, and the tea was very good." Chohla looked up at him with a pleasant expression but

said nothing. "Are—are you sure that you don't want to come back to my family's house? I'm sure my father would be happy to see you again."

Chohla shook his head. "Not this time; I'm going to enjoy this camp for a while. It will be snowing soon, and I feel like taking a nap. It must be the old bear in me," he said with a wink.

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Once Stenhelt made it back to his gear on the north bank of the creek, he was relieved to find everything intact and undisturbed. While pulling the quiver strap over his head, he thought of Chohla's words.

On a whim, he pulled out an arrow and pressed the sharp bone tip to his bare forearm. With a quick motion, Sten made a shallow cut. Just as a thin trickle of blood began to seep out, he licked the wound. He pulled his arm away for a moment and then licked twice more. The spit and blood seemed to gel in the thin slice.

Stenhelt stood and stared at his arm, waiting for some magic to happen. All he noticed was a few small snowflakes landing on it. He looked at the gray sky and sighed, wondering how much of Chohla's words to believe. With a lingering frown, he gathered up his pack and bow and began the short trek back home.

Later that same day, just after evening meal, the family sat around the large fire blazing in the hearth. The wind rattled the shutters, blowing down a thick blanket of snow outside. Each member of the family was involved in their own minor chores while Stenhelt's parents talked to each other about merchant wagons that were due to pass through the village soon.

Not paying much attention, Sten looked over at Tull, who was using a stone blade to carve details into a wooden songbird. It reminded him of the shallow slice he'd made on his arm earlier that day.

Setting aside his re-stitched boots, Stenhelt pulled back the sleeve of his wool night coat. Barely perceptible in the firelight was a thin pink line where the cut had been. In less than half a day's time it was already past scabbing and at the end of mending, not even sensitive to the touch.

Sten smiled to himself and made a mental note for the next time he saw Chohla, making sure to apologize for doubting the wise herbalist.

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A late snow did not deter the villagers of Bruvaal from planning for Vale Fest, the annual spring holiday. It was a celebration of surviving yet another winter, as well as a time of community prayer to the god of the Vale (or privately to the old gods) for fair weather, good harvests and healthy livestock. With everyone attending, it was also a day to pursue or announce consenting courtships with anyone of age.

Wares were bartered cheaply at the outdoor Fest. Games were played by young and old alike. A feast was held on long tables in the afternoon; roasted lambs, early-growth vegetables, cheeses and dark breads were always the traditional fare.

All of the supplies needed for the Fest were given or made freely. Every villager contributed something, as their morals and religion decreed.

Because Tullgar was well of the age to pay court to any willing women, Halivik and Baraide spoke of the possibilities as they lay in bed on the morning of the Vale Fest. "I worry for him," Baraide said. "Tull is so shy and slow of thought. What girl would choose him?"

"The kind who wants a pure heart, a gentle hand and the strength of a bison, I'd hope," Halivik replied as he wiped the sleep from his eyes. "Don't fret, Bara. Tull has a kind face to go along with all his brawn. Some women like that, I hear. And if he doesn't get the attention of any locals this time, I'll bring him with me when I travel to Huuvik later in the season. I was going to have him along, anyway. Perhaps he'll catch a woman's eye there." He turned and looked at his wife. "That was how it worked for me, after all, when I travelled with my father to Raudeen."

Baraide licked her thumb and smoothed a rebellious hair in her husband's thick mustache. "You were lucky I'd just come of age to be courted."

"I'd also begun to build my own home. That helped you to accept my offer, didn't it?" he asked with a knowing grin.

"Only when you added onto it to make room for children; a man with fine furs and good looks wasn't enough," she answered with a playful nudge. "Which reminds me... Has Tull chosen a spot for his own home yet?"

Halivik nodded. "It'll be just to the northwest, next to that cluster of tall gold pines nearer to the trail. Once the chimney is up, you may be able to see it from our front door. Tull won't be far from home, if that's what worries you."

After only a moment's hesitation - because that was exactly what Baraide was concerned about of her simple son - she said, "My only worry is that you'll soon be too lazy to get out of bed any longer, you old boar." She pulled out of his frisky grip with a laugh and stood. "Come on, then. We've a big day ahead. Check on the children. I'll have morning-meal ready when you come in."

Halivik found his daughter Irisella out in the herb garden, rather than cleaning winterberries as she was supposed to be doing. She sat between two sage bushes (which were surprisingly coming into bloom) while playing with a wooden doll Tull had carved for her. Curiously, the little girl had two colorful butterflies resting on top of her head. Halivik wanted to be stern with his reminder of Iri's chores, but his words came out gently; he couldn't gather a temper for his chestnut-haired gem.

Tullgar sat on a stump not far from Iri, making final trimmings on a number of staves intended for one of the contests later that day. He told his father he'd already seen to his early chores. Tull went on to say that Sten had finished his own chores as well, and had gone to catch some fish for the feast. Neither of the boys was overly fond of roasted lamb, he remembered.

A short walk later, Halivik caught sight of Stenhelt. The boy sat on a large rock along the winding waterline of Scroll Creek, lazily holding a fishing pole while its line stretched out into the heavy spring current. On one side of Sten was a fish basket and a hoop net; on the other was an adult otter eating a fish. Halivik was unprepared for the sight. He had only seen his son's strange abilities used in combat and hunting, not in a calm setting with a wild animal by his side.

The otter slipped into the water when Halivik came closer. Sten looked over his shoulder, smiled in greeting at his father, and then turned his attention back to his pole when the line went taut. Halivik hurried over, grabbed the net, and helped his son haul in a large sky-fin trout. There wasn't much room left in the basket; Sten had some luck that morning. "Were you planning to feed the whole village today?" he asked his boy with a grin.

"I'd have to catch every fish from here to Cliff Lake for that," Sten said while baiting his hook.

There were a few long moments of silence after the line was cast back into the water. "So, the otter..." Halivik finally said. "Is it a friend of yours?" He meant the question as a joke, but suddenly wondered if that was the truth of it.

Sten shrugged while watching his line. "I cleared the snow from this rock. He chose to bring his own food up here. I didn't mind."

"Ah," Halivik replied with a nod, unsure of what to say about the strange occurrence. Solitary otters did not stay in the company of men, let alone sitting down next to one for a meal. "Is that a new trick Tovira taught you? I noticed you've been in better spirits when you've returned from Oma-Krin manor lately..."

"I did learn a new trick, but nothing to do with otters."

"Then do your cheerful moods have something to do with Nildur's daughter?"

Sten glanced over at his father with a frown. "You mean Silga? She's a friend, but the girl can't even stand the sight of blood. I'd never take her hunting."

Halivik held back a chuckle, thinking that hunting would be young Stenhelt's idea of courtship. He would soon learn what girls wanted; Sten wasn't the biggest boy, but he was strong and had his mother's fetching looks. In a cycle, perhaps less, hunting wouldn't be as important. "If it's not the herdsman's daughter, then what is it?"

"I think Lady Krin was sad I wasn't learning much anymore, so I've been trying harder with the lessons that make me curious. She smiles more now."

Pride swelled in Halivik's chest once again. He gripped Sten's shoulder and said, "You're a good boy. As long as you come away from the effort with a warm heart, pleasing others is a fine thing. And you've learned a new trick? I haven't seen it yet."

With another shrug, Sten said, "It's not much, but it may come in handy. I can draw water."

Halivik slowly groomed his mustache with his fingers while he pondered the vague statement. "Perhaps you could show me what you mean."

Stenhelt stood and pulled his line from the water. He led his father over to a patch of ground where the snow had melted. They both squatted; Halivik watched his son dig out some dirt and then cupped his hands facing up over the small hole. He watched those hands for a moment, then glanced at Sten's face and saw the boy's scowl of concentration. Halivik looked back down and saw his son's hands miraculously filling with clear water.

Sitting back stunned, he began to ask, "How... How did..."

"It took a while to learn, but Lady Krin showed me how to pull water from the ground. I thought it'd be helpful if I ever ran dry on a hunt, or if our well went low."

"Helpful indeed," Halivik muttered, finally finding his tongue again. "Well, I'll give you a bit more time out here, but your mother will have food ready soon." After striding off a short distance, he stopped and thought about what he'd just witnessed. Those abilities—some that even a former Maker couldn't explain—were beyond the acceptance of common folk. It soured Halivik to think it, but he wished that Sten could've simply been a normal boy. Forcing a smile, he turned back to his son and called out, "Aim well at the archery games today! You might best me yet!"

Sten smiled as well, although his was genuine. "I'll try," he called back, "but I make no wagers against the best hunter in Kaldevarr."

* * * * *

The trading square of Bruvaal village was framed by various shops, including the inn, a bakery, the meeting hall, the bailiff's compound, and a few other stores selling general goods. Between some of the shops were huge majestic pines. Their needled boughs dappled over half of the open ground with shade, giving the center of the village an inviting, rustic charm.

For the Vale Fest, low branches and storefronts were decorated with simple triangles. The small ornaments were turned to one side so that there was a high, mid, and low point. It was the symbol of the Church of the Triad, representing the Sky, the Vale, and the Deep. Some of the people of Bruvaal still secretly prayed to the old gods, but went along with the Triad rituals to keep peace in the community. The effort also kept the old Triad cleric from whining.

The fest was underway when Stenhelt and his family arrived before midday with their cart. The long tables were already out, children ran and yelled in the gathering crowd, and the aroma of various foods wafted through the cool air. On a bench outside of the meeting hall, two villagers sat and played lively tunes with flute and fiddle. A long, banked fire near the center water well was set to warm the pots of donated food. The square was much busier than any market day.

Baraide stayed near their wagon, chatting with other village women while she sold leather goods and bone necklaces. Halivik and his eldest son sampled some food and cups of ale before they joined in the simple game of stone-throw. Wise villagers didn't wager against Tull, and laughed at those who did after the young man sent the large river rock sailing through the air.

Stenhelt, never an especially social boy, milled through the happy crowd on his own to keep an eye out for his sister. There was little need; every adult was protective of the village children. Sten nonetheless kept track while Iri played with others near her own age. His meandering also allowed him to sidle closer to the innkeeper's daughter, Annori. That he could remember, Sten always had trouble turning away from the sight of the girl.

Lady Tovira arrived with six wagons full of extended family and baskets of food. Space had been reserved for Bruvaal's most prestigious resident; the Lady's ox-pulled wagons lined up as her relatives handed out loads of vegetables and barrels of cider. Tovira herself handed out casks of wine, a drink that was usually only served at the tables of nobles and royalty.

After helping set out baskets of strawberries and mushrooms, Silga jogged back the short road past the inn to one of her Aunt Tovi's wagons. Stashed under a gunnysack was a pouch of sun-dried apple chips she hoped to share with Sten, whom she'd become increasingly intrigued with. She liked how he'd grown more confident and independent, with an alluring air of mystery.

Silga often wondered why Sten continued to visit Oma-Krin manor as often as he did. Their common lessons had been completed over a cycle ago, so there was another reason why he stopped by every few days or so. Only occasionally did Sten show up with a deer or a few rabbits, and never bartered for them, so he wasn't hired as the manor's hunter. He was too young for that, anyway. Silga often saw Sten and her Aunt Tovi speaking at length as they strolled through a field or sat on the front porch. Their topics remained a secret.

Just as Silga was whimsically hoping that Sten made his visits to see her but was too shy to say so, her daydream was interrupted by voices behind her. Two young men, both a few cycles past the age of courting, came quickly upon her and asked what was in the pouch. She vaguely recognized them; sons of one of the shepherders, and so they didn't visit the village often.

Trouble was in their eyes and leering smiles, Silga was sure. They moved close, looming over her. One of the men was asking what she had for them; the other touched her hair and complimented her dress. The brothers were aggressive, making them even uglier than they normally would have been. They both spoke to her at the same time, adding confusion to the girl's fear. They appeared to enjoy her increasing anxiety.

A clipped growl interrupted the two men. As they turned their heads, a figure violently slammed into them. One of the brothers was knocked hard to the snowy ground. The other stumbled away and steadied himself against the back wall of the fabric shop. The defender crouched in front of Silga, facing the two men with a lingering rumble in his throat.

Silga initially thought the village baker had come to her rescue; he was a bulky man with hairy arms. A quick glance told her she was wrong. The baker had a pot belly and was balding; her rescuer looked fit and powerful with a wild mane of black hair. The baker also didn't have long nails sharpened to points like an animal, as the man in front of her had. Despite his ill-fitting clothes, her rescuer seemed very familiar. There was no time to be sure of anything, though. It all happened so quickly in front of her.

Without warning, Silga's defender pounced on the nearest man and began battering him with fists and claws. The other brother hurried back over and began kicking at the black-haired man. Silga was crying and yelling, unsure of her own words. Her defender finally sat up, caught the next kick, and bit deeply into the attacker's calf with a snarl.

Howling in pain, the man stumbled back. His thin cotton leggings were stained with blood. He began to fall, but a strong hand suddenly grabbed the nape of his neck. It was big Tullgar. He held the man nearly off the ground in a vice grip, tossed him away without effort, and then stepped forward. He pulled Silga's defender off of the other man with ease.

Standing in front of Silga, Tull held the black-haired man around the chest with one powerful arm and murmured a few words in his ear. He then said to the

downed brothers, "You're bad people. Go away, or I'll let my brother loose." Heeding the threat, the limping man helped his beaten and bloody brother to his feet and they hobbled away.

Silga was shocked, unable to believe her defender was Sten. He seemed so big, so wild—nothing like the respectful, quiet, handsome boy she knew. Her Aunt Tovi suddenly called from nearby, viewing the scene with curious eyes. "Silga, are you safe, child?" she asked. The girl nodded, wiped her eyes, and hurried over to the woman's side. "Tull," Tovira then called out, "is there a problem here?"

Flustered by the situation, he couldn't think of how to respond. When his mother appeared next to Lady Tovira with a concerned look, his mind only muddled further. With an arm still clamped around his brother, Tull tried to think of the words to explain. None came.

Sten tapped his brother's thick arm and whispered, "You're squeezing, Tull." Once his brother's grip went slack, he turned and put a hand up on his shoulder. "I'm calm now. Thank you." Then, looking over to his mother, Silga and Lady Tovira, Sten said, "It was just a scuffle. Tull came and made the men leave. Are you alright, Silga?"

Still shaken, the girl stayed pressed to her Aunt's side and simply nodded. She saw Sten as she remembered him, not as the powerful savage from a few moments before. Silga couldn't make sense of the trick her eyes played on her. As fear faded, confusion took its place.

Tovira and Baraide shared a quick glance just as the bailiff's guard approached. To avoid his meddling, Baraide gave orders to her sons. Sten was to sit in the inn for a time; Tull was told to go keep an eye on Iri. The guard sauntered off. Tovira promised Baraide that later in the day she would explain to her and Halivik what she saw.

Silga began to smile as she walked with her Aunt back to the lively village square. Sten had come to her rescue, fighting like a wild warrior against two older boys—men, really. To her, it could have only meant that his feelings for her were strong. He wasn't the kind to show much emotion, but her hero's brave actions were proof enough. She was giddy for the rest of the day.

Tovira rejoined the villagers in their revelry, but was preoccupied with what she'd seen Stenhelt become for a short time. Attacking one of the sheepherder's sons, the young man had changed into something akin to a beast. His body had expanded to near Tull's size, and his features were warped. In a few blinks of an eye, though, he was young Sten again. Tovira recalled Halivik's words from years back, and they matched what she'd seen. It was no Maker's trick, nor even a higher power of a master's path. Sten showed something new... and dangerous.

* * * * *

The tracks were fresh; the lone bull elk was close. It was the animal's pre-dawn bugle that woke Sten in his treed hammock. He wanted to bring a large kill back home; the few squirrels from the day before were only enough for camp meals and a pair of mittens for Iri when winter came again. Something more substantial was needed to add to his father's meat cellar.

Being early summer, the bachelor elk somewhere to the south had just begun calling to gather females. By the single set of tracks, it hadn't had any luck yet.

Sten was hoping to return home earlier than expected, if only to impress his father. He would otherwise have preferred to stay out in the Cragwood as long as he could. Three days were all that was allowed, though. Sten couldn't complain; his father could have held him back from lone hunting trips for another two cycles. That was the custom. However, his father said that he trusted Sten's ability and judgment. He was determined to validate his father's faith in him.

Perceptions had changed a season before at the Vale Fest. Sten began to see his father in a different light on that day. He'd always revered his father, and found that many of the villagers had high esteem for him as well. Not so much in spoken words, Sten realized, but in their reactions to him. Even the bailiff and Luddsel the retired soldier gave nods of respect when Halivik strolled by.

Countering that was the looks on a few faces nearing the end of the archery game. There were sad, understanding expressions when Sten didn't best his father's aim in the last number of shots. A few folks, including his mother, seemed to know that Sten faltered on purpose. He could have won, but didn't want to take any of the respect his father had earned over so many cycles of helping to feed the village. Sten took no pride in knowing he could best his hero.

The elk tracks led around a large patch of underbrush and toward a clearing that lay ahead. Sten's sharp hearing caught a number of sounds from that open space as he moved; birdsong, the burble of a rocky creek, and a snort of his prey in the distance.

Reaching the clearing, Sten took in the panorama of the small valley. Enclosed by heavy woods, it was an oasis of sunshine and blue sky. The hazy heights of the distant Skean Peaks could be seen over the forest canopy. Patches of the lush grasses were cropped by recent grazing on either side of a narrow brook. On the far end of the roughly oval valley, water flowed through a gap in low boulders.

Two figures were immediately noticed. Out near the boulders but still within bow range was the elk. Much closer to Sten was the herbalist, Chohla, who sat in a patch of wildflowers next to the brook. Sten was torn; he wanted to meet with the wise wanderer, but the elk would provide meals and good leather. Going after the kill first might have disrespected the herbalist. Greeting him first would most likely spook the animal.

Chohla, who noticed Sten in return, made the decision for him. The young hunter watched as the herbalist grabbed at a nearby tuft of grass, held up his deeply tanned arm and released the blades. It was a clear signal to take the shot and adjust his aim for the breeze. Sten stood at the tree line and waited for a broadside shot. Soon enough, he let an arrow fly. A heart shot - the elk didn't run far before it dropped.

"A fine kill, Khoveyo," Chohla called out. "Bring your prize back to my camp when you can."

Sten nodded and gave a wave of thanks before he jogged out to the downed elk. A short time later, the large gutted animal was hung by its antlers under a tripod of dead branches near Chohla's camp. Sten didn't see a camp, though—it looked to him like a spot where the herbalist simply decided to stop and sit near the high

banks of the rambling brook. There was no fire, only a number of wooden bowls and gathered plants.

Sitting back down among his many bowls after helping Sten hang the carcass, Chohla said, "You've gotten taller. How have you fared since we met last?"

"Well enough," Sten answered simply as he sat in the soft grass near the herbalist.

Chohla smiled. "Still the chatty one, eh, Khoveyo? Perhaps a slow tongue hides a quick mind. It is our wits that we live by, no? Many words are simply for entertainment."

"Some are for teaching," Sten offered with a shrug.

"So they are," Chohla agreed. "Other than to commend you on your aim, I won't waste more words on idle chat. You probably want to return home soon."

Sten glanced at the elk off to his right. "My hunt was met. I'm in no hurry now."

"Ah, that is good. I hoped we might trade." Chohla saw Sten's scowl of confusion. "I have no interest in the elk. A trade of ideas and skills is what I mean. You show me those tricks your Lady Krin taught you, and I will show you a new skill that might benefit you in many small ways."

"What new skill?"

Chohla lifted a bowl and replied, "Paint and symbols, Khoveyo. Colors are made from what nature provides, and the shapes drawn with them direct their intent. For example, a wavy green stripe across your chest will keep most insects off you while you sleep. It works best when the paint is made from arrowleaf and stormberries. Green dots along your cheeks will help you sleep, and awake refreshed. A red circle around your eye will better your aim with a bow, not that you need much help there. Red down the nose and arms helps aim with a spear."

"That will help—paint?" Sten asked doubtfully.

Chohla nodded. "In a small way, but yes; you are more attuned to nature because of your blood and heritage. There are many variations of symbol and color to master, should you choose to learn them. If you painted a line on your chest in blue instead of green, it would cause a very different effect. There are symbols for war, peace, survival, travel, and other matters in life."

Sten was nodding his head before he realized he was doing so. "Yes," he said softly, "I would like to learn about such things, master Chohla."

"That pleases me, and I am glad to share my knowledge with you. We will begin with making paints and drawing simple symbols. After a time, you can show me your tricks on your fine elk."

Sten nodded his agreement of the suggestion, but with a frown. Chohla leaned forward and waited for the boy to speak of his concern. "Master Chohla," he finally said, "you say there are many things to learn about paint and symbols. I can't learn them all in one day, and there is no guessing when we'll cross paths again."

Chohla leaned back and casually responded. "I have a feeling we'll cross paths more frequently, at least for a good while. Each time, I'll show you a few new symbols and how different colors affect them. The basics will come first. Perhaps in time you may learn the high sigils."

"The high sigils..." Sten couldn't help but wonder. "What are those?"

"All in good time, Khoveyo," Chohla answered with a grin. He set a mortar and pestle in front of him and then grabbed a small pile of blue orchids. "We will begin

with this," he said as he began to grind the flower petals. "Blue is the color of intellect and wisdom. It may well help you learn and remember. Belief in the power of painted symbols is up to you, although I see its benefits with every use."

It was enough assurance for Sten. He handed Chohla a bowl of water and waited eagerly.

* * * * *

Holding a fresh apple pastry in her hand, Silga chewed absently while she leaned against one of the exterior walls of the baker's shop. One of her uncles was inside, haggling with the owner. She watched some villagers scurrying about in preparation for the arrival of the friendly old Maker, Frimgar Winter-hand. His annual visit was due.

Silga remembered the Maker well and fondly. Bald and fatter than any man she'd ever seen, he was always smiling, chuckled often, and handed out flavored ice to all the children. In trade for drinks, a meal and a soft bed at the inn, Maker Frimgar would roll out an updated Kaldevarran map and tell stories of different places. Many came to listen and ask questions before the Maker got on with his business of refreezing meat cellars and then moving on to the next village.

Silga could just as easily have seen the old Maker when he stopped at the Oma-Krin estate, as he did every year after leaving Bruvaal on his way to Huuvik. He and her Auntie Vira were friends from long ago. Silga begged to go with her uncle in the wagon to go see the jovial Maker, feigning interest in hearing stories that might not be told in her Aunt's grand parlor.

Her true reason for visiting the village was to hopefully meet with Sten and finally express her feelings in full. There was a good chance that the young hunter would attend with his parents and siblings; Silga was determined to find a time and place for her and him to talk and move their relationship forward. While she thought Sten's casual air and reserved moments were charming, she had become impatient for the shy boy to make a romantic approach.

At nearly fourteen years old then, by the following spring Sten would easily be of age to request a formal courtship with Silga at the Vale Fest. Being only a season younger than him, she would be of age as well. Her daydreams were of that day—of him asking her to be his, of accepting to be courted by the next great hunter of the village.

Standing where she was, Silga was reminded of other events. The side road between the inn and the bakery... She stared at it with mixed emotions. It was over a year earlier when Sten saved her from those men down that path. Although the incident remained blurry, the feelings that resulted from it were still strong. Perceptions changed on that day for her—perceptions of Stenhelt, and of herself.

Over a year, and she hadn't seen as much of her would-be courter since then. Sten's visits to the estate had become less frequent, although he always seemed happy upon his returns. Silga hoped she was part of the reason for that. Those sporadic visits came with a subtle change over the last few seasons. A small thing, but Silga noticed. Stenhelt began arriving with his face, hands and arms freshly washed, most likely from the pond south of the estate grounds. She had come to think Sten was trying to appear more presentable to her without being blatant.

As the last bite of pastry disappeared, Silga saw Sten and his family arrive in their wagon. His father tied their ox to a post on the far side of the open square, and they walked as a group toward the inn. As they waited for another family to file in before them, Silga had the chance to catch Sten's attention with a wave. He saw her, raised his own hand with a slight smile, and then stepped inside. She imagined curing the cute boy of his bashfulness one day.

Silga's Uncle still haggled with the baker; she was becoming restless, hoping they would finish soon so she could somehow find a seat near Sten in the inn. She looked to the west and saw a grand sight. Flanked by armored guards—on horses, no less—was an ornate carriage pulled by two more large steeds. They were just coming over the bridge, passing the fishery and grain mill. Frimgar Winter-hand the Maker had come once again to Bruvaal.

The big guards had no cause to worry; the villagers waiting outside the inn respectfully gave the round, old Maker plenty of room when he stepped out of the beautiful carriage. The remainder of the crowd followed him in after he warmly greeted them. Silga fretted that the inn was too full for her and her Uncle to see the visiting Maker, let alone find a place near Sten.

Just as Silga was about to step back inside the baker's shop to somehow speed up the haggling, she saw Sten step out of the inn's front doors. Her heart leapt for a moment until he turned and hurried off in the opposite direction, not even looking at her. Miffed yet curious, Silga watched him turn past the far corner of the inn, heading back toward the inn stables.

Ignoring the order by her father and uncle to stay near the wagon, Silga jogged across the side road and past the front of the inn. She paused at the corner of the building and peeked around. Sten wasn't in sight, meaning he must have gone into the stables for some reason. She moved quietly toward the open barn doors, stopping suddenly when she heard murmured voices.

Peeking inside, Silga saw two of the innkeeper's oxen in stalls near the door. She then caught movement at the back of the stables, and heard a woman's soft giggle. Unable to stop herself, Silga crept inside a few steps. Back in the feed stall, she saw Sten and the innkeeper's daughter standing close together as they whispered and smiled and kissed.

Silga's young heart was crushed. In a dizzy mix of painful emotions, she turned and walked back out to the village square. Wandering over to the wagon just as her Uncle emerged from the baker's shop, Silga tried to hold back her tears. She wondered what she'd done wrong, how she could've misjudged their relationship.

On the bumpy ride back to the estate Silga initially decided to embrace the only optimistic conclusion, mostly because she couldn't bear any other possibility. Stenhelt, being naïve and ignorant in the ways of love, was not to blame. He was seduced, led into temptation by the large breasts and bright eyes of Annori. That trollop would eventually tire of Sten and open her legs for someone else. Then he would know what he truly needed, and Silga would be waiting.

By nightfall, though, the pedestal that Silga placed Stenhelt on began to crumble. Doubts and dark ideas slowly crept into her mind; perhaps his increasing absence from visiting the estate was for other reasons. Sten wasn't altogether bright, but nor was he anyone's fool. He may not have been another woman's pawn, but rather the one who initiated this betrayal. Silga's fitful sleep

brought painful dreams of a crafty Sten slipping through Bruvaal at night, plundering the chastity of all the village maidens. She woke teary-eyed and sick with vengeance.

The old Maker Frimgar Winter-hand came to visit Tovira at the estate that morning. As with prior years, the old friends chatted over brunch and told stories to the Lady's relatives about other times and places. Silga, with a cloud of venomous malice hanging over head, wasn't present; she waited near the main gate for the revered guest to depart.

Frimgar's carriage and guards had finally gotten back on the South trail, heading east to Huuvik. He wasn't thinking of that village, though; his mind was pondering the words of the young woman waiting for him at the edge of Oma-Krin estate. According to her, a village boy named Stenhelt had some disturbing abilities.

The girl swore to accounts of the boy keeping pace on foot with Tovira's galloping stallion, of ignoring all but the coldest of winter winds, and of turning into some sort of half-beast and attacking two boys. The village bailiff wasn't told for fear of putting him or his guards in danger of confronting the wild young man. The young lady, Silga, ended by saying how strange Stenhelt was, and that she was afraid of him.

Whether the account was true or not, Frimgar was obligated to give a report when he returned to Vallo. The Inquisitor of Mysteries might investigate. For Tovira's sake, he hoped the girl was a liar. If there was a hint of truth, an Inquisitor would find it. And, depending on who that was, they might be indiscriminate and merciless with their enforcement of laws.

Loathe as he was to admit it, some of Frimgar's fellow Order members were aggressive. Some were zealots, bent toward sadism. And a few were simply murderers with a cause.

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"Do you have everything you need?" Halivik asked.

"Yes, father," Stenhelt replied, "but the point was not to bring much." He stood patiently in place while his mother once again fussed with his pouches and the knapsack on his back. There was no stopping her fretting, so he didn't try.

The family stood in front of their home under the shade of colorful autumn leaves. Sten was anxious to be on his way, but farewells had to be said. Soon, though, he would meet with Chohla and finally learn a high sigil. The wise herbalist said it involved a journey, and that they'd be gone for some time. Sten never spoke of Chohla to his family; he felt that the wanderer preferred not to have his name or activities passed around.

"We tested the new bow and stonewood arrows yesterday," Tullgar said. "The balance was good. Right, Sten?"

"Yes, Tull," he answered with a light smile and a pat on his brother's thick arm. "The pull is perfect, and the new spear is your best yet. I'm proud to have them, thank you."

"Will you be back by spring?" Irisella asked as she helped pull his wood cur poncho back into place while their mother continued to adjust pouch straps.

"If only for you, Iri," he said with a wink, causing her to grin.

"I still don't understand this," Baraide grumbled as she tightened the knots on the gear. "Why do you have to venture out for so long? You're often gone on hunting trips for days at a time; why isn't that enough? We don't even know where you're going!"

"Calm yourself, Bara," Halivik said evenly. "We knew days like this would come. Tull has his own home now, Sten is becoming a man, and Iri is sprouting like a spring flower. Our children are growing up."

"I'm well aware, Hal," Baraide said with an annoyed tone. "I simply don't see how wandering off for moons—or nigh on a season or more—equals some rite of passage into manhood!" She turned to her husband. "You felt no need to run off into the wild as far as I know, nor did Tull."

"Truth be told, Bara," Halivik gently countered, "I did that very thing. Before I came back to Raudeen to marry you, my father let me trek off deep into the Cragwood. He and my uncle finished building our home as their gift."

She glared at him, and then asked with a dangerously calm voice, "You ventured off alone into the Cragwood? And you saw fit to never once mention it to me?"

Halivik stared back into his wife's angry blue eyes. "I had no cause to speak of it until now. It was a fine journey. I followed Scroll Creek to the southwestern Skean Peaks, and up into them. From a crest, I saw the Hungry Sea in the distance—a sight that few have beheld. I returned healthy and glad for the trek. I wish the same for Stenhelt, wherever he chooses to go. And don't try to pull Tull into this, Bara; he has little interest to hike and hunt."

Knowing the battle was lost on that front, Baraide looked back at her second son. "The winter will arrive soon, Sten," she said with a different tactic in mind. "If you must venture off, wait a while. Didn't Annori ask the same of you?"

Sten frowned and shook his head. Annori understood less than his mother did. Two days before, the young couple went to a place next to Scroll Creek where Sten intended to build a home of his own. He and Annori ate a meal and had energetic sex. Afterwards, he again brought up the topic of taking an extended trip, and confirmed he was going. She eventually accused him of not caring for her, storming off before he could deny that claim.

"I'm leaving this morning, mother," he gently said. "I have some supplies gathered for my home, and plan on building it when I return. Tull promised to gather more rocks while I'm gone. At the Vale Fest in the spring, I'll offer to share my home with Annori... If she'll still have me."

"Don't you worry, son," Halivik said with a light tone. "She'll be waiting for you."

"How can you know that?" Baraide sternly asked. An angry scowl was her husband's reply.

"I—I have to go cut back my roof sod," Tull said timidly in the ensuing silence. "Iri, would you come help me?" Both of Stenhelt's siblings embraced him and then walked off.

"If you must go, then return safely and soon," Baraide said to her son. "Use what your father and Lady Krin taught you." She kissed him on cheek before hurrying back inside.

Halivik stepped up to Sten with a grin. “Women worry,” he said. “Sometimes all you can do is strap yourself to a tree and wait out the storm.” Without another word, he shook his son’s hand and then went back to chopping wood.

* * * * *

Sten began his trek into the Cragwood, excited for whatever lay ahead. When he and Chohla last met not long ago, Sten was told to go to a place they both knew of when both pale moons were near to full again. Caribou Lake was just over a day to the southwest, close to the low slopes of the western Skean Peaks. Provisioned with furs, food, and other simple essentials, the young hunter had no need to stop along the way.

The next morning was chilly, gray, wet and windy. Sten was not deterred. He came upon Caribou Lake before midday and spotted Chohla’s simple camp on the near bank. As he came closer, he saw that Chohla’s blue blanket was propped up as a lean-to. There was just enough room under it for the herbalist and a small fire.

“Hello, Khoveyo,” Chohla called out. He remained squatted under his blanket and tied his long hair back into a tail while Sten walked toward the camp. “I caught a fish. Have you eaten?”

“Only an apple,” Sten said as he unslung his pack. Keeping his hood pulled over his face to keep the drizzle off his face, he sat on a large rock near his mentor.

Chohla leaned out and handed him a wooden bowl filled with chunks of trout, local nuts, and a few types of edible wild greens. “How are things at your home?” he asked amiably.

Sten shrugged and ate a bite of fish before he answered, “Except for my sister, none of the women I know are happy with me...”

Chohla thought the young man was going to say more, but he simply resumed eating his meal. After a few moments of listening to the wind while chewing a nut, the wanderer said, “I cannot advise you on women, Khoveyo. Each one is her own mystery, one more confusing than the next. Let’s not be distracted with them right now.”

“Good,” Sten agreed around a mouthful of chicory.

“I know you’ve practiced with making paint and drawing symbols for a while now, and you’ve done well. The symbols you’ve learned so far are helpful, but not needed. Agreed?”

Sten grunted and nodded while he chewed the quickly-cooling fish. He recalled many of the plants needed for the paints, and which symbols seemed more beneficial than others.

“For high sigils,” Chohla explained, “the correct paint and proper symbol is necessary to empower the ability. Without those things, it won’t work. They are called high sigils because they are keys that unlock powerful creations.”

“Is there a plainer way to say it, master Chohla?” Sten asked without much embarrassment.

“I’ll just explain what will happen. See the hill on the far side of the lake? On the back side of it is a cave—a special cave, made sacred by my ancestors. You may

ask how they did it another day. Back into the cave, there is a drop-off that falls away into darkness. We will leap into it.”

“We’re going to jump into a black pit in the far end of a cave?”

“Have some trust in me, Khoveyo,” Chohla said with a smile to counter the young man’s frown. “We will make a purple paint, a color you haven’t made before. It must be purple, made from poisonous skyberries. With it, we will draw symbols on our faces or chests. The truly important part of the symbol is the top half of a circle, like a rising sun, and it must be drawn correctly. Used in a hallowed cave, you are allowed to travel great distances. From one hallowed cave to another; that is how it works.”

Sten thought for a moment and then asked, “Will skyberries hurt my skin? What happens if I don’t draw the symbol correctly? What about the rest of the symbol? Where are –“

“Slowly, Khoveyo,” Chohla said, interrupting the barrage of questions. “You won’t digest well if you’re too jumpy. Skyberries will burn the skin if the symbol is left on longer than a day. What else did you ask? Oh yes, the symbol. If you leap with a poorly drawn symbol, I imagine you’ll die down in a cave. There is more to the symbol; it indicates which other hallowed cave you wish to travel to. That last part is tricky, I’ll admit,” Chohla commented lightheartedly. “Without exact placement next to the main symbol, you may end up far from your intended location.”

“That sounds more worrisome than how you say it...”

Chohla shrugged. “Perhaps it is for you, Khoveyo. Keep in mind that my people are more intent on the journey than the destination.”

Sten nodded, and then asked, “Where are these other sacred—uh, hallowed—caves?”

“Besides the one over that wooded hill, I can recall at least four others here in Kaldevarr alone. We’ll be travelling to one of them after my meal has settled.”

Frowning, Sten couldn’t help but ask, “Is – is that all there is to it, master Chohla? Skyberries, paint, correct symbols, and I simply pass from one cave to another? For such an amazing thing, it seems so... simple. I’ve never heard tale of a Maker having such ability, and their way is very tangled. In the head, I mean.”

“There are other considerations,” Chohla replied casually while he held his bowl out to catch some of the soft rain. “It’s nothing to be too concerned with. We can talk about it on the long walk back, or to another hallowed cave.”

Sten nodded, but then had a thought. “Master Chohla, if we are travelling from one cave to another, why can’t we take the same way back and use that cave to return here?”

“Ah, good question,” he said as he began to fold up his blanket. “That would be one of those considerations I mentioned. We’ll have plenty of time on the return trek, so remind me to explain it on the way.”

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With his feet hanging down into the dark unknown, Stenhelt sat on a smooth rock ledge in the cave. It was cooler in the plain, slightly descending stone cavity than outside. He could see the vapor of his rapid breath from the hazy light that

filtered in from the mouth of the cave, and tried to calm his nerves. Next to him on the small ledge sat Chohla, waiting patiently. Sten's mind had become increasingly rife with doubt, silently debating the sanity of the wise herbalist.

A short time before, they sat in Chohla's camp and made the purple paste. While Sten grinded Skyberries, Chohla explained that only natural items could pass through the hallowed caves. Forged metal ruined the attempt. That was of little concern to Sten; metal was expensive, and he could make do without it anyway. His knife was stone, and the blade tips of his short spear and arrows were carved from bone by his brother.

Using still water that had gathered in the recess of a small boulder as a mirror, the two applied the symbols onto their faces. Sten fussed with the paint on his own face as he listened to another detail that Chohla offered. Within each hallowed cave was a mark of its own location, whether painted or carved into the rock. It was up to the traveler to remember them for the purposes of returning to that specific place. The hallowed cave they were about to use was closest to Sten's home, so he was determined to memorize its mark.

Casually satisfied with their matching painted symbols, Chohla led Stenhelt up through the thin pines and into the cave. The mark carved into the cave wall was pointed out to Sten, who studied it for some time and ran his finger through the grooves. Afterward, they easily found a rough hole in the side of the cave tunnel, and sat together facing the darkness.

After a short while of sitting there quietly, Chohla softly said, "I'll go first. Remember, I won't be able to encourage you after I hop off this ledge because I won't be here anymore. As proof, you won't hear me land on anything below. It will feel like a short fall, not enough to get hurt." When Sten didn't reply, Chohla added, "It's alright if you don't want to do this. Sometimes trust isn't enough. What's before you, it's a scary thing. I'll understand, Khoveyo."

There were another few moments of silence before Sten replied, "I'm just waiting for you to go ahead and jump, master Chohla."

The traveler smiled at his distant relative and then hopped off the rock ledge. Stenhelt listened intently, but only heard the wind whistling through the trees outside. He slowed his breathing, made sure his weapons were secure, and finally pushed himself off the rock lip and into the mouth of darkness.

The drop did indeed feel short, although Sten felt dizzy when he landed on hard, gritty earth. Pain thrummed behind his right eye, and his upper lip felt wet. He was in complete darkness, but saw a dim light off to his left. "Master Chohla?" he inquired nervously.

"Let your eyes adjust," the traveler said from somewhere nearby. "I remember this cave. It's been a long time since I've used it. The last time I was here, a bear lived in it."

"Do you think it still does?" Sten asked, unstrapping his spear.

"Ah, no, Khoveyo; it was most likely before your father was born that I came here last, so I'd wager she and her cubs are long gone. Let's move on and get our bearings."

Surprised by what Chohla said, Sten said, "Before my father was born? How old are you?"

"Does that matter? No, it's what we do while we're here that matters. Sometimes, Khoveyo, I worry about your people's obsession with time."

Sten followed Chohla up a slow incline toward an opening that offered light, moving slowly to ensure his footing on the uneven floor. "Master Chohla," he wondered aloud but with a muted tone, "I thought we would have to climb out. I mean, we jumped into a hole. Don't we have to do that with every hallowed cave?"

"No, some are like this. To others, it remains a cave people can explore with torches or other supplies. For travelers like us, though—and you are one now—we can just paint our symbols, rely on the power in our blood, and wander into the darkness of a sacred place until we feel the sensation of shifting, of movement."

"You call it a sensation?" Sten asked dryly as the throbbing in his head persisted.

"It pained you?" Chohla asked as they reached the breach in the rock. "I suppose it makes sense, that traveling for you wouldn't be as easy. Your lineage is mixed." They stepped into the next chamber, a small bowl-shaped cavern with a wide opening on the far side. "On the good side," he commented as they moved forward, "you're the first of your people to travel in this way."

As the pain abated, Stenhelt realized that he had in fact somehow changed locations. Stunned at first as he followed numbly along, the realization that he'd taken part in some sort of magical journey quickly thrilled and energized him. Despite the new surroundings, he had to be sure. Rushing to the cave mouth, Sten looked out at the unfamiliar vista.

The view was from a high elevation with blue skies and soft clouds overhead. Sten looked down over a barren, rocky slope that gave way further below to expansive woods of autumn-touched oaks and firs. Having a strong sense of direction, he felt the cave faced northwest. The woods thinned to the north, roots unable to find purchase on the low heath plateau that stretched away toward a distant mountain range.

Sten then gazed left, off to the west. The colorful woods continued, but his strong sight caught the signs of a wide stream or river far out in the treed distance.

He had never seen that land before, he was sure. By some mystical means, Sten had traveled in the way of his ancestors. Barely keeping his heart in his chest, the hunter's mind whirled with wonder and questions.

* * * * *

"Master Chohla," Sten said excitedly as he turned around to face him, "I would ask many things. I don't—I don't know where to begin."

"Take your time," he replied calmly. "Before those questions come spilling out of your mouth, I should make a few things plain. First, your nose is bleeding freely; you should pinch it off and plug it. Secondly, have a look at the wall next to me." Beside him, on a fairly smooth section of natural stone, was a familiar painted symbol. "It matches the symbols we painted on ourselves, yes? This is the power of a high sigil for one of proper lineage."

While Sten stuffed cloth cut from an unused pouch into his nostrils, he studied the symbol. He mentally noted its subtle differences from the other that marked

the hallowed cave in the Cragwood. Believing he had it correctly in his mind, he turned once more to Chohla and said, "This is amazing magic! Lady Tovira says her magic is manipulating accepted laws of reality; is this high sigil of traveling something like that?"

Chohla shook his head. "My people do not manipulate," he said as if offended at the concept. "Our workings are more akin to agreements with nature and the elements. In return for given respect, my people were allowed to uncover some secrets."

Sten was unsure how to respond to Chohla's strange but serious statement, so instead he said, "No Maker could come close to this, I'd wager. I'm sorry I doubted you."

"But your trust in me overcame that. I'm honored, Khoveyo. I know it was no easy thing."

"So," Sten began, hardly knowing what to ask first, "you know this cave. That means you know where we are?"

"Oh, of course," Chohla said airily as he stepped to the mouth of the cave and peered out. "We are in northern Kaldevarr."

"And...?" he asked, waiting for more information.

"And what? I was never too concerned beyond that."

Taught never to be rude to an elder, Sten choked back the angry words that almost came out. Instead, he said, "I suppose we can go to that stream far out in the woods and follow its current. Water leads to people. Sooner or later, we'll come across someone." Putting that dilemma in the back of his mind, he then asked, "Is it the same time as when we, uh, traveled?"

Chohla half-turned to him with a frown. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, it seemed only moments passed from when we left the Cragwood cave and arrived here. Has any more time than that passed? Wherever we are, the autumn season is still upon us. So, have only moments passed, or is it possibly days?" He hoped not more than that, and didn't dare to voice the worry.

"Hmm," the traveler mused. "I never gave it much thought. Not long, I'd say, but I'm not sure. Again, time is much more of a concern to your people than to mine."

Fighting back his growing frustration, Sten turned away and spit out blood that had seeped into his mouth. He wiped his chin and upper lip with his forearm, and thought of his predicament. He was somewhere far north—for all intents, lost—and there was no telling just then how long it took to get there. "It seems, master Chohla," he finally stated with a bitter tone, "that there is a price for hallowed travel after all."

"Ah, don't be troubled, Khoveyo," he said reassuringly. "We'll find your answers soon enough. If I'd traveled here more often, I'd remember more. You'll know much better what to do if you decide to return here someday."

"True enough," Sten mumbled, but thought that it didn't help his current situation.

"You wanted to hunt and explore, yes?" Chohla went on. "That is what you should focus on. You now have a tool to begin great journeys, great adventures. There are so many strange and remarkable places for you to discover."

The words inspired Sten and rallied his spirit. "Yes... adventures." He turned to Chohla once again. "I could travel this land, perhaps setting foot on parts of it that

none of my people have seen before..." A sudden thought struck him. "Can I travel to other lands? Are there other hallowed caves beyond Kaldevarr? Places in Ormyra, perhaps, or even Seotan?"

"Yes, of course. Those lands and others, some of which you've never even heard of."

Sten stared absently out of the cave to the midday sky, thinking of the possibilities. After a few long moments, he asked, "What would happen if I used a different paint color and tried to travel through a hallowed cave?"

"Not much," Chohla answered with a shrug. "However, using different colors with the proper symbol is how places are made sacred to begin with. Don't dwell on that." He looked at Sten for a silent moment, and then continued. "You've reminded me of another thing worth saying."

"I have?"

Chohla pointed at his face. "Yes, the blood smeared on your cheek... Your own blood can be used in place of skyberry paint. Be warned, though; you will not travel to the place you intended. Blood of our lineage—even mixed, like yours—is very powerful, and will create unexpected results. Don't use it unless you are prepared for distant journeys to strange lands."

Sten nodded while reminding himself to clean his face before going into the woods; the scent might draw unwanted attention. "And will you show me the symbols to other places?"

"Only Kaldevarran places for now. Explore more of your homeland first, Khoveyo. Then I'll show you more. Now, one last thing before we go. An important thing you must know." He put his hand on Sten's shoulder and led him to the mouth of the cave. "Steady your emotions. Calm your thoughts. Use your instincts. Close your eyes if it helps." He watched Sten take a few deep breaths and then asked, "The closest hallowed place... Where is it?"

Sten's eyes swiveled over the landscape, unsure of what to do. Staring out at the sky above and forest below only distracted him, so he closed his eyes. He focused on Chohla's words, and then thought of finding another hallowed place, wanting to go there. Hesitantly at first, and then with steady conviction, Sten pointed out to the southwest. He opened his eyes, slightly surprised that his arm and hand had acted of their own accord.

"Very good, Khoveyo, very good," Chohla warmly complimented him. "After traveling from one hallowed place to another, our inner selves learn of the agreement with nature and understand it, even if our minds do not. It is called the attunement. It came to you quickly."

"Thank you, master Chohla," Sten replied humbly.

"There is a reason besides the obvious that you must be attuned to hallowed places. I will explain soon enough, but I'm tired of talking for now. Let's leave this cave and walk a while."

* * * * *

Stenhelt and Chohla began making their way down the rough grade toward the forest. Before they reached the trees, Sten turned around to see where they'd come from. The cave entrance, all but hidden on the craggy slope, was set low into the

side of a stunted mountain. Behind it to the east was another peak, slightly taller and just as barren. Sten studied the view to memorize it before moving on.

The trek through the forest was slowed by uneven ground and patches of thick undergrowth. Nonetheless, the two travelers found the water well before sunset. The stream was wider and deeper than expected, although there was a series of drop-offs and low waterfalls nearby that suggested good fishing spots. After setting up a basic camp, Chohla ventured off to forage and fish. Sten, not wanting to deplete his dried foods when there were signs of game in the area, set off for fresh meat.

Later that evening the two men sat next to the warm glow of a campfire, with a vast sky of stars and the two moons overhead. Sten was repeatedly rolling and stretching two oiled hare pelts to soften them. Chohla, while washing out the wooden bowls after their stew meal, remarked, "Those Maker crafts you've learned sure seem useful. Tricks, you called them?"

"Yes, they save me a lot of time. Proper curing normally takes days. Even better, I have no need for a smelly tanning barrel anymore." The statement was the most Sten had spoken since they left the cave. There was a freedom to speak his mind with Chohla of things he could do, things that only his family and Lady Tovira knew of. Even with that freedom, Sten never cared to ramble. Just as with hunting, he thought making excessive noise would come to no good.

There was a period of comfortable silence before Chohla offered, "Perhaps tomorrow we'll try to learn what instinctual gifts you might have. Other than taking on animal traits, I'd wager there's more in your blood to discover."

Sten was intrigued by the notion, but didn't speak of it. His first thought was that Chohla might want him to hunt to bring out any unknown skills. Gathering more just for them wasn't needed at that time; they had enough food for a few days, and more furs wouldn't be needed until winter set in. Opposed to that, he thought that gathering hides to barter with on his long trek home was sensible.

"I suppose I should explain the main consideration of hallowed travel," Chohla said, interrupting Sten's thoughts. "It may interest you all the more, for it deals with time... in a way."

Frowning, Sten politely countered, "I thought you said that you didn't know how long hallowed travel took, master Chohla."

"Oh, I don't. I was speaking of something else—access."

"Access... You mean to a hallowed place?"

"Yes, exactly," Chohla nodded while he pulled his blanket over his shoulders. "There are some guidelines to abide, although they are far simpler than trying to learn one of your Maker's tricks. Keep in mind that the agreement with nature includes everything - the ground below and the sky above."

"I think I understand."

"Good, then I'll make this as simple as I can. The hallowed cave in the Cragwood, where we departed from... You cannot use that place again to depart from until after the moons and stars have found the same position in the sky as the day we left."

"The same position—that would be next autumn. I can't use it again for a whole cycle?"

"You'll notice I said 'to depart from'. You can use it to arrive back in your woods at any time from another hallowed place."

"So, then," Sten said hesitantly, pointing back toward the mountain, "we could use -"

"No," Chohla gently cut him off, shaking his head. "It would be too easy, an abuse of the privilege. Hallowed travel never allows only two locations unless you're willing to wait for one of your cycles to pass. Three or more places are needed. That has always been the way. This is why attunement is important; you can trek to the next nearest hallowed place and travel back to where you began. I suppose it is nature's way of making travelers pay their respects, one way or the other."

Sten thought on it for long moments. "Departing," he finally said, "is the firm rule, yes? I can only depart from a hallowed place once per cycle?"

"Or more," Chohla added. "Once the stars have realigned—or at any time past then—you may depart from that place again. See? I told you time is involved."

"But arriving at a place from hallowed travel doesn't have the same rule?"

"Not so much. I'll try to make it plain. We traveled from your woods to the mountain there. We are not allowed to go back the same way. If we wish to go back home as quickly as possible, we use our attunement to find another hallowed place and use it to travel again. The place you pointed to earlier, I call it the white woods. I'm sure your people have a different name for it. We can go there and travel back to the Cragwood."

"So," Sten started out slowly, making sure he understood, "I arrive back near home, and can't use that place until next autumn. The same is true of the place in your white woods because we will use it to depart as well, correct?"

Chohla merely nodded while prodding the fire with a stick.

"And the hallowed place in the mountain... Because I haven't departed from it, I can trek from my home to there at any time and use it. Is that right?"

"Yes; you can arrive anywhere as often as you like, but the rule of departing is the key."

"Then can't we use the mountain cave to depart? We could use it to travel to your white woods, and then depart from there as well."

Chohla shook his head. "It won't work, Khoveyo," he said. "Just as air or water constantly flows, so does the gift of travel. To use that mountain cave again would be trying to halt the flow since we just came from it. In this instance, the place in the Cragwood and the mountain cave share the connection of our travel. A third hallowed place must be used to continue, to flow on."

"So the only way to depart from the mountain cave is to trek on foot to it?"

"Unless you arrive in it and then wait a full cycle or more, yes."

Sten thought for another moment and then said, "I think I have it right in my mind."

"Good, because I was going to give up soon and try again later. Let me use one of those rabbit furs—I need a pillow." Chohla then lay on his side, pulled his blanket over him, and settled in on the matted grass. "Think on this more if you like," he said sleepily. "Tomorrow, I don't want you to do much thinking at all. Rest well, Khoveyo."

* * * * *

Stenhelt woke to a brisk, foggy dawn, roused by a dream of Annori. He liked the girl, but wasn't sure if he loved her. He wasn't even sure what the word 'love' really meant. His heart would lift when he saw her, and the girl's looks certainly kept his lust at the ready. Was that love? The question might've been for naught if he finally returned home and found that Annori had changed her mind about him. With the newly formed plans Sten had for traveling, he doubted she would have the patience to wait for him anyway.

"Good morning, Khoveyo," Chohla said sleepily, interrupting Sten's thoughts. The traveler was still curled in his blanket and kept his eyes closed, but continued to speak. "See to your needs. We'll have a cold breakfast; fire won't serve our purpose this morning."

After returning from the stream, Sten came back to camp and sat back down. "Are we not trekking today, master Chohla?" he asked before biting into a pear.

"Later, perhaps," Chohla answered as he sat up. "For now, I want you to get comfortable and finish your fruit." When the pear core was thrown into the ashes of the fire pit, Chohla continued. "Now close your eyes, Khoveyo. Ignore the sound of the water. Listen past the ducks flying overhead. Listen to the forest. Fill your mind with only that."

While Sten did as he was told, Chohla moved off to the stream. He spoke to the water, giving it a message to any of his ancient people who might notice. He could have sent a message through a pond - it would still reach all the waters of Ethion and beyond. The message was that there was a new traveler among them, and to receive him well if they crossed paths. When Chohla finished, he returned to camp and found Sten as he was before. "What do you hear?" he softly asked.

"There is a squirrel on the ground near the large oak behind me," Sten responded simply. He could hear it scamper occasionally through fallen leaves, imagining it to be foraging for nuts in preparation for the winter.

"Hmm... a squirrel," Chohla said with a hint of disappointment. "I was hoping for something bigger. Ah well, it'll do. Now, Khoveyo, focus only on that squirrel. Listen to its movements, its breathing. There is nothing else. Let your mind be one with it."

Chohla sat back down and watched with interest as Sten concentrated. His breathing, slow and deep at first, soon became rapid. His body slowly, almost imperceptibly, made slight alterations. His nails grew and curved as they thickened. His nose broadened and twitched. He absently kicked out of his leather boots and deerskin pants, leaving only his poncho to cover him as his thighs and calves swelled with muscle.

As the young man transformed, the squirrel he was attuned to scurried into camp next to him. It hopped onto Sten's lap for a moment, and then bound away to grab up an acorn. Sten's eyes opened; the whites were nearly gone, replaced with huge irises of a murky green color.

In one of the ancient languages of his people—Locan, as known by Sten's—Chohla whispered the question, "What do your senses tell you?"

Sten turned his head about with sudden, jerky movements. "There is food on the ground. A hawk soars further upstream. Rain is coming."

The words satisfied Chohla. Sten was using the animal's senses along with a man's reasoning; a squirrel wouldn't know the predator in the distance was a hawk, or what 'upstream' was. He would not lose his sense of self while following a lesser creature's instincts. Chohla whispered again in the ancient tongue, "Run, Khoveyo. Join the squirrel for a while."

Sten rose and stepped away from camp, and then abruptly ran off into the foggy woods with amazing speed. He was chasing the squirrel, matching its movements. He sprang over the leafy ground and scrambled up tall oaks. During his play, Chohla noticed a finely-furred wide tail that grew from under the back of Sten's poncho. It was used for balance when the young traveler began to make breathtaking leaps from one tree to another.

A short while later, Sten walked back to the camp. He had returned to normal, excepting his nails and eyes. With an arm across his stomach, he sat back down across from Chohla.

"Did you hurt yourself, Khoveyo?"

Sten shook his head. "I ate too many nuts, I think. They aren't sitting well." He looked at Chohla and added, "If I ever bond with an elk or deer, remind me not to graze."

Chohla couldn't help but grin. "I think you'll remember on your own." With a more serious tone, he said, "You've taken a long stride forward here this morning. Instead of letting your inner beast be influenced by nearby animals, you sought out that rush of life and took it in. You've learned some control." As he spoke, he saw Sten had fully returned to his normal self.

"Not as much control as I wanted," Sten lamented, "or else I wouldn't have a sour stomach."

"I said *some* control. It will take practice. As we travel, attune yourself to the land around you. As you did with the squirrel, let your senses tell you of what lives there. Your hunting skills will strengthen from it. Soon it will become easy." Chohla then began to rummage through his large bag. As he did, he asked Sten, "What else did you learn while running through the woods?"

"There was a bush with small yellow berries that I think would cause sickness; my nose was stronger and caught a bitter scent. Also, there were no tracks of any sort near to it."

"Ah, good," Chohla said as he continued to dig through his bag. "What else?"

Sten thought for a moment. "I learned how to be lighter on my feet, and maybe a way to send out a feeling... Does that sound right? Send out a feeling to tell an animal it can trust me?"

"Creating an aura," Chohla casually replied without looking up. "But that cannot be done with deception in your heart, to lure an animal close. They'll sense the truth of it." Sten nodded his agreement. Chohla finally set his bag aside. "I don't have anything for your sour stomach. I'm sure there's some mint mixed in with the clover and moss around some of these trees; just pick some leaves and chew on them. That should help. If you feel well enough to move along soon, we might yet escape the rain you predicted."

* * * * *

Unable to ignore his protesting back any longer, he set his tools down and stretched with a groan. The boards were smoothed to his satisfaction anyway. Despite the cool air, the sun was out and he'd worked up a sweat. Wiping his brow into his thinning gray hair, he heard a familiar noise. Turning, he saw his wife hanging clothes on a line strung from their home to his work shed. A smile touched his creased features. Even without ever having children, he and Linvika were happy.

Then he heard another noise—voices, somewhere north through the trees, close to the stream. Straining his aging eyes, he caught sight of two men in conversation as they walked casually along. From the few moments of listening to them, it was plain that one was instructing the other in the Locan tongue. He'd long since forgotten any of that language, but remembered what it sounded like.

The two men stopped not far off, talked a moment more, and then turned toward his home. Part of him wished they'd move on; he was too old for trouble. Then again, they might be lost, and he was willing to offer a simple hand. All the same, it was best to be safe. Keeping an eye on the strangers, he spoke in a raspy whisper to his wife, "Lin, go back inside for now."

She hesitated but then obeyed, shutting the door behind her just as the two men started their approach. As he was in plain sight, they walked through the side lawn directly to him. He tensed and waited, stroking his long beard as a matter of habit.

One of the men was of average height and build, and had very long, straight dark brown hair shot with silver strands. There were no weapons on him, only a walking stick and a big bag. His leather clothes were simple and loose for travel. He was clean-shaven and had a deep tan, meaning he was either from along the sunny eastern shores or he was a rare foreigner far from home. Guessing his age was difficult, although he was surely the elder of the two.

The other was a young man with shaggy shoulder-length black hair and a few days growth of a beard. He was shorter than the tanned one, but broad shouldered and quite fit. He wore a few straps over his weathered poncho, along with a fine bow and quiver full of arrows. The younger man also had a short-hafted spear, although it was cinched to his backpack. His pouches were full, and a number of small furs were strapped behind them. A hunter, the old man surmised, not a warrior of any sort. Moreover, his bearing carried no sense of aggression.

"Greetings," the elder of the two said with a smile as they approached. "We hope not to intrude, only to get our bearings. We ventured away from trails some time ago."

"Bearings, is it?" the older man said with a hint of skepticism. "And you come from the north? There's naught up that way but digger bears, frost spiders, wolf packs and a bad death. Came away empty handed, did you?"

The younger man glanced at the stacks of barrels next to the work shed and addressed the older man properly. "We are simply exploring the land, master cooper."

"Foul place for that, up north," the cooper replied. "Digger fur is hard to come by, and gathering frost silk is dangerous at best. Hardly anyone tries anymore,

and few come back. I say that any venture north past the Sisters isn't worth the trip."

"And who are the Sisters?" the elder of the two asked.

The cooper pointed out to the east, where two mountain peaks could be seen over and far beyond the woods. "If you've got a place in mind to go, I suggest you waste little time. Winter will come quickly this cycle, and here in the northern Den is no place to be caught unprepared." As he gave his advice, the cooper noticed that the younger man lifted his head and took a deep breath in through his nose.

"Ah, we are without a map," the elder one said, continuing to speak for them. "We are in the northern... Den, you said?"

"Yes, the northern reaches of the Den Forest," the cooper said slowly, realizing how lost the two men were. They seemed like good sorts, but foolhardy. "If you follow the stream, you'll reach Duuvihal village on foot in less than a day. My wagon has made a trail of sorts over time."

"Thank you for the information, good cooper. I go by Chohla, and this is Stenhelt."

Not caring to comment on Chohla's strange name, the cooper replied, "I am Drovik. Seeing how it's near to midday, you won't reach Duuvihal by nightfall. I don't have much food to spare, but you're welcome to camp in my shed and out of the elements for the night."

"A gracious offer, master Drovik," Chohla replied. "I think we'll carry on all the same. We travel quickly and, truth be told, we've become fond of the elements in any form. As thanks for your kindness, may I offer you a balm to relieve your aches? I'm an herbalist by trade."

"Appreciated, good herbalist, but aches are part of age. I'd soon run out of your medicine and the pains would return with a vengeance." Drovik lived away from any settlement for a reason: excepting his wife, he didn't care much for company. If the two men were moving on, then better sooner than later. "If your minds are set, then I wish you safe travel."

The two men nodded politely to the abrupt farewell. They turned to leave and had gone a few steps when the hunter, Stenhelt, turned and hurried back. He unslung a large pouch bulging with cuts of dried meat and held it out to Drovik. "You may need this more than us, master cooper," he said.

"How's that, then?" Drovik replied with a scowl, taking offense at the offer. "You think me unable to provide for my own? We're not without, boy."

"I didn't mean to insult you, elder," the young hunter said respectfully, "but all your wife has over the fire in your hearth is a thin carrot soup and a loaf of bread. You keep no fields, so you buy or trade for grain, yes? You store it there in the shed. Mice have found their way into it. Likewise, rabbits come to your garden at night. I'm sure you're capable, but I would still rest easier if you accepted this. We have more than enough to share."

Surprised at the hunter's true words and assumptions, Drovik had no reply. The heavy pouch was gently but firmly placed in his hands. Without another word, the one called Stenhelt turned and hurried away to catch up with his friend.

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The weather remained warm enough that the next passing shower didn't turn to ice, although the cold rain met little resistance from the thinning autumn canopy of the forest. Nonetheless, Stenhelt and Chohla decided the conditions were fair enough to explore for a few days before they made their way into Duuvinhal.

Out in the northeastern Den Forest, the two travelers kept themselves occupied. In the evenings around a campfire, Chohla helped Sten become more fluent in Locan. When Sten was told that the formal language was actually one of the ancient tongues of Chohla's people, mastering it had more appeal. From just before dawn into mid-morning, Sten hunted so that he'd have furs and meat to barter with; his old snowshoes were in poor condition, and his small wood ax was dull.

Strolling into Duuvinhal on a brisk and muddy but sunny morning, they paused at the low peak of the arcing stone bridge from the east to view the bustling place. Sten realized how much more structured the village was than his own. Carved out of the woods as Bruvaal was, the slightly larger Duuvinhal felt more insular and bordered.

There were many small fields along the northern side of the village with another muddy road dividing them. The larger meadows were for crops of corn and winter wheat, while the smaller were sheep paddocks enclosed by stacks of river rock. "I'm not overly fond of lamb," Chohla commented with a frown.

"There is a fishery just over there," Sten pointed out, "and I can smell a pig pen in the distance. If you'd rather, though, we can make camp along the trail and cook some of the bear meat."

Chohla was quiet for a moment before replying, "You should sell it while it's fresh. Not to wound your pride, Khoveyo, but your meals can be bland. More than that, I haven't had pork in a while. Snow is coming; it might do us well to dry off before then."

The two travelers continued to study the village. A squat guard tower stood at the end of the bridge, and a large stone garrison sat further off in the village hub. Along the rear of many of the outlying buildings were high walls or spiked pickets. Sten and Chohla shared a curious glance at the wary atmosphere of the village, and then continued forward.

Duuvinhal's outer décor and namesakes were influenced by wild animals, mainly wolf-themed. One shop had a wolf skull over its entrance. Wolf jaws or fur pieces hung on various doors. The double doors of the village hall had a wolf's head carved into them. The lumber mill stamp was a wolf's paw. Of the two inns, one was named The Dancing Bear, and the other The Grinning Wolf. Both Chohla and Stenhelt surmised that the village had an issue with those beasts, and that the Den Forest was aptly named.

Their suspicions were confirmed by the barkeep in The Grinning Wolf. Food in the Den - mostly caribou and rabbit - was usually thinned by predators as winters came. Den wolves were said to have been bigger than normal, crafty, fearless, and ran in large packs. At least once a cycle, usually more, one pack or another came from the south to test the village defenses and feast on penned livestock. Any villagers outside their homes were targets as well.

When asked why the people of Duuvinhal stayed, the barkeep said he and his fellow villagers had a stubborn pride to fight for the place they prospered in. Sten

understood the feeling. He then asked if any hunter ventured out to thin pack ranks. It was explained that lone hunters who went out never returned, and that groups of men had a stronger scent and became the prey. Most everyone was content to stay and defend if need be.

Out in the village commons, a circular area surrounding the garrison, Chohla stood by while Sten attempted to barter his goods for supplies. There seemed to be a fair need for furs, but Sten was poor at haggling and received low offers for his goods. The only exception to counter Sten's frustration came from a traveling trader from the capital city, Vallo. He saw that the young hunter had a rare sun-fox fur and offered a handsome exchange of coins for it.

Soon after Sten secured his money, he heard the unfamiliar clang of hammer and anvil - a metal smith had begun his day's work. Iron was uncommon, and there was no crafter of it in Bruvaal. Intrigued, Sten made his way over to the smith's open shop. He watched for a time as a burly, thick-bearded smith pounded and tapped on yellow-hot spearheads, and then was approached by another smith who'd been tending to the forge.

Sten hoped to purchase iron supplies to replace his tin or stone items. Bronze was stronger than iron and would fare better outdoors, but he assumed it would be more expensive. It was, and all of it was much more than he expected. The coins he made from the fox fur would only afford him a metal knife and whetstone.

Disappointed, Sten was about to walk away when the second metal smith leaned closer and said, "A hunter, then?" Sten nodded. "Mayhap, if you trust your skill, the village elder would see you. He might offer good trade. I'd wager it'll be risky work, knowing him."

Showing no sign of his confidence, Sten calmly asked, "How can I meet him?"

The smith pointed to the large village hall across the way. "Speak to the guard out front. Good luck, young hunter."

* * * * *

Stenhelt and Chohla stood in the oval interior of Duuvihal's large village hall, illuminated by opened shutters and numerous torches. They stood in the center of the room facing the big, white-haired village elder that went by the name of Berik. Elder Berik was dressed in thick furs and sat in a large fur-lined chair; Sten had trouble separating coat from seat.

Directly in front of Sten was a rough wooden table holding all of his trade-worthy goods. Furs of bear, lynx and hare; bones used for their marrow, and claws for trinkets; cleaned innards filled with animal fat, used for cooking or to make soap; large chunks and slices of dried meats—all laid out for the elder and his two advisors to inspect.

Facing forward, Sten whispered to Chohla at his side, "Will you speak for us?"

The ancient traveler sensed the young hunter's discomfort, but nonetheless replied, "It was not me who brought us here, Khoveyo. Besides, I'm most likely worse at haggling than you are."

"What is your name, hunter?" Elder Berik asked with a scratchy baritone voice.

"I am Stenhelt, second son of Halivik, elder."

"And you hail from... ?" he asked, as if the hunter should have explained that along with his name. Sten was unfamiliar with the custom. It may have been proper etiquette, but his senile elder back home rarely followed formality.

"Oh, um, Bruvaal, elder; It's a village far to the south, in the Cragwood."

"Far, indeed," Berik commented. He leaned back in his chair and put a hand on his chin. "You come to me for trade, and you offer those goods. Well enough—the furs are clean, the fat is soft, and the meat is fresh enough. What do you wish for in return for your fine offering?"

"I seek metal, elder. Uh, I mean metal goods and supplies, hopefully bronze." Berik raised his shaggy eyebrows and waited for Stenhelt to be specific. "I'd wish to have a new griddle, wood ax, knife, spearhead and arrowheads."

Elder Berik shared a glance with his advisors, and then fixed his gaze on Sten once more. "For what you offer, hunter Stenhelt, you ask for many forged items. Too many, I think. The trade would be too far in your favor. However, I have another way for you to earn at least part of the goods you seek. Would you hear my proposal?"

"Yes, of course, elder," Sten replied. He didn't know what Berik had in mind, although from what the smith implied he suspected that some peril would be involved. He was resolved that if the proposal involved Chohla, then it would be refused. Sten would not place his friend in danger.

"The goods you wish for are ones that a highly regarded woodsman would carry. Are you that?" Berik asked rhetorically with a shrug. "Perhaps, or perhaps not; I've not heard of you before. And, truth be told, you look young to be a seasoned hunter. Then again, you've laid proof of your skills on my table. Whether it is luck or talent, you've managed well enough. Your current supplies and weapons have served you well thus far, have they not?"

"Yes, elder - my brother Tullgar made this," Sten answered, gripping his bow. "I've not yet seen its equal. My spear and arrows are sturdy and true, but tips other than bone or stone would be better served for a hunt and swift kill."

Elder Berik nodded his head in agreement, and then said, "Then I put an offer to you, hunter Stenhelt of Bruvaal. Prove to me your courage and skill. Use the weapons and gear you've done well with so far. Go out south into the Den and gather wolf furs for me. In doing so, you'll make your name worthy of mention."

Sten knew the offer was more than simply a test of skill and some furs. From what he'd learned about Duuvihal, he would be doing a great service for the safety of the village. The elder didn't mention that, but rather challenged his pride in smooth fashion. Sten would have responded better to a plain request, but he supposed the elder had his own dignity to uphold. "How many furs will satisfy you, elder?" he asked.

After listening to the whisper of an advisor—of which Sten heard every word—Berik said, "One dozen wolf furs; do you know that number?" The young hunter nodded, so the elder continued. "One dozen furs and your current offerings will earn you what you ask for. As of the morn, I give you five days to return. Do you accept my proposal, hunter?"

Knowing at least some proper etiquette, Sten stepped around the table and walked over the elder. When Berik stood, they gripped each other's right forearms to signify a bargain struck. "I accept," Sten answered, confirming the pact.

As the two travelers walked back to The Grinning Wolf, Chohla said, "You could have asked for more, Khoveyo. Counting on what this place has to lose if a hungry pack raids unchecked, that man Berik would have most likely agreed to it."

"But he wouldn't admit that, master Chohla. Elder Berik leads by respect and cunning, so he knew accepting a higher demand would've shown his desperation. I don't wish to test his pride, and I don't want any more than what I asked for."

"Good," Chohla said while they walked along the muddy road, weaving around ox-pulled carts and groups of villagers. "Greed casts a shadow over the heart."

"Then Berik is in a dark place. Twelve wolf furs..."

"Is that greed, or is it for the good of his people to know a threat is being removed?"

"Half as many killed, and a pack would know it didn't have the numbers to attack this place," Sten replied with a surly tone. "Not that it matters. I had the sense that Berik and his advisors don't expect me to return."

* * * * *

The villagers and traders who'd begun early for another market day briefly paused in their work to notice a trio of men heading toward the west gate. At the lead was one of the big garrison guards, followed by two strangers. Word had spread from the day before that a hunter had made a deal with Elder Berik to cull a wolf pack. The shorter stranger—carrying a bow, wooden spear and light supply—must have been the one. The young man was brave, and also a fool. Their gazes lingered on him as he passed by, all of them believing they'd never see him again.

The guard stopped at the open road gate, next to a low sentry tower. He turned to Stenhelt and said, "This is where I see you off, hunter. I will report to the village elder that you have begun your part of the bargain. Triad willing, you'll return. Good luck."

When the guard stepped away to speak with the man on duty in the tower, Sten turned to Chohla. "I'd ask you along," he said solemnly, "but... but I..."

"But you would be distracted with concern for me, no matter how much more capable I am than you in the wild," he said with an easy grin, making light of the fact. "I understand, Khoveyo—this is something you must do alone."

Sten nodded, looking out to the forest and the gray morning sky. "It is," he said quietly.

Chohla reached into his bag, pulled out a few small pouches and handed them to Sten. "Here are some paints that might prove useful. Until you return, I may spend some of the coins you gave me. The inn serves a good potato and duck egg breakfast, I'm told." His tanned face creased with a wide smile when he added, "While you're out in the coming storm with naught but jerky and melted snow, I'll be spending another night resting on a soft feather bed and sipping mead. Perhaps that's inspiration enough to be quick about it."

Sten's frown turned into a smile. "And perhaps there'll be a few coins left after you've grown lazy and fat." With nothing more to say, he turned and walked through the open gate.

As Chohla watched his young friend stride off into the forest, the garrison guard stepped up next to him. "No lone hunter has fared well in the Den Forest," he

commented. "For whatever skill he may possess, I do not share your faith in his return."

Chohla looked up at the guard with a slight grin. "Would you care to wager on it?" he asked.

Sten's sensitive ears caught the chat between Chohla and the guard even from a distance, but he wasn't interested in their conversation. He'd given his full attention to finding a wolf pack. In that regard, he relied on his father's teachings and his own experiences. From those, he knew that a large pack would claim a vast territory, and that it tended to move along a basic course through it. Of the nearest pack, Sten assumed that Duuvinhall was within its territory.

Sitting on a rock next to a lazy brook, Sten made symbols on his skin with detached skill borne of repetition. As he drew lines of green paint with his fingers down his cheeks into his short beard, he thought of the best tactics to use with the harsh weather predicted by Chohla. Especially as winter came, a hungry pack would normally charge full on toward a deer's bleat or elk's bugle. The scent of blood in the air had the same effect. Sten imagined the scenario before setting off.

By midday, he had covered respectable ground moving south into the Den Forest. The terrain was uneven and hilly, keeping his field of vision fairly short. The many oaks that were unwilling to give up their brown leaves further obstructed the full view of his surroundings.

Considering that a large wolf pack could've either been just beyond the next ridge or a day's march away, Sten had to find tracks or signs soon. He hadn't seen any, though. The only notable thing he'd come across thus far was a bear ripping into a rotten log. Calming himself, he created an aura - as Chohla put it - to let the bear know all was well. The large animal curiously stared at him for a few moments before returning to its labor of finding a meal, and paid no attention when the unexpected company moved on.

Sten sat on a rocky perch set into an ascending hill. He sat cross-legged and removed his wood cur poncho and buckskin vest, and then applied more simple symbols of blue and green on his torso. Afterwards, he closed his eyes and cleared his mind to seek the answer that his normal senses couldn't find. He pictured his own location in the forest, and then visualized wolves in a vague wooded setting—moving, searching... hunting.

A vision struck Sten's mind with a sudden jolt. He stared into the amber eyes of a big black wolf, the alpha of a pack. Panting, Sten opened his eyes wide. West, less than a day away and moving methodically—the alpha and his pack were coming.

Unaffected by the cold gusts against his back, Sten turned and looked up the steep rock-strewn hillock to its precipice. Infused with energy, he jumped to his feet and sprung up the craggy incline like a sure-footed ram. The ascent stopped at a wide ridge line, dotted with slim pines. He looked to the west and studied the wide landscape before him.

Under a darkening iron grey sky was a wide, wooded valley of needled pines and husky firs. Far down in the basin was an expansive lake, murky blue and choppy. The land formed a crude bowl around the lake except to the south, where the circling crest gradually dropped away. A strong wind swirled and moaned through the trees of the horseshoe valley, lending it a somber mood.

Sten sensed slight movement along the distant ridge to the southwest. Of a span where most men's eyes couldn't reach—even his father—Sten squinted and could just make out the tiny figures of wolves weaving through the trees. The pack was moving north, and would eventually circle around to him if they kept to the crest. He planned to make sure they did.

The gloomy light of day dwindled as Sten made hasty preparations. Snow began to fall in gusts as the evening turned pitch black, forcing the young hunter to accept the work he'd completed as good enough. Up on the ridge, he cut away some of the lower branches of a dense fir and crawled in under its protective boughs. A short rest, and then he would begin anew.

While the wind howled and the snow gathered just beyond his shelter, Sten contemplated his course of action. With the weather, he guessed that the wolves had bedded down; he'd wake them near dawn. As for culling the pack, he had to bring the aggressive wolves in close. If he brought down one or two with arrows, the rest would most likely scatter. He didn't have time to hunt them one by one. He then realized that his plan was actually for *them* to hunt *him*.

Sten awoke alert and peered out from under the fir tree's branches. The storm had blown over; ankle-deep powdery snow was left in its wake. The stars that riddled the night sky had begun to fade as the soft violet light of dawn expanded along the eastern horizon. The day that would truly test his ancestral blood had come.

With a sense of urgency, Sten gazed around for any signs of woodland life. He spotted a squirrel on the branch of a knotty pine. As Chohla once mused for a different purpose, it would have to do. Holding small stones that he'd gathered the day before, he moved in as close as possible without startling the target. Throwing with a practiced aim normally used for downing quail, he let a stone fly. His luck held; the squirrel was hit in the head, and it fell lifelessly from the tree.

After the small animal was retrieved, Sten turned toward the lake valley and blew into the elk caller Tull had carved for him not long ago. He let the sound echo, and then blew again to make sure he'd gotten the pack's attention.

The emerging dawn gave enough light for Sten to scan the far ridge of the valley again. It took him a few moments, but he finally caught sight of the wolf pack. They were to the north, further along the ridge than he expected. A howl echoed through the valley - most likely the alpha calling the others together. If they moved quickly, as Sten expected, the wolves would be on him before he could cook the squirrel. It was just as well; food was the least of his concerns.

Sten then tested the breeze. He was upwind of the oncoming pack, as he wanted. Except for a few items, he put his gear back under the fir tree. He also removed his poncho and vest, wanting no restrictions of his movement. Bare-chested, he stepped out to his planned spot on the snowy ridge and faced north. The looming pack could be clearly seen, moving with a sense of purpose and hunger. Hot breath left Sten's expanding lungs with growling huffs of hostile expectation.

Rather than reaching for the flint skinning knife in his boot, Sten used one of the newly-formed claws on his fingers to slice open the squirrel's underbelly. He tugged the long wound open; warm guts met cold air, causing steam to rise. He pressed the carcass against his hairy chest, smearing blood and innards down his

torso. Thinking him wounded, the wolves would be even more inclined to bring down their potential meal.

Catching the scent of blood, the wolf pack quickened their pace. With his enhanced eyesight, Sten could see their lolling tongues and the plumes of their hot exhales. They would be at the small clearing soon. He spent a moment to concentrate and send out another aura, but not a calming one as he'd exuded in the past. It was to inflame the pack's aggression, so that none of them would shy from the battle to come.

While keeping his gaze on the sprinting pack, Sten reached for the pouches of paint at his belt. He wiped crimson paste across his mouth and chin with his palm, absently noting his elongated jaw and enlarged canine teeth. He then used the pads of his fingers to gather black paint from another pouch, closed his eyes, and drew a line from temple to temple. The symbol gave him a slightly deeper well of power, and fortified his courage to face death if need be.

And then the pack was there—well over a dozen large wolves. Cunning creatures, they spread their numbers to come at their prey from different angles. Some crept forward, others milled behind them. Less wary and more assertive than they normally would be, the wolves quickly advanced. Hoping to goad them from using careful tactics, Sten retreated two short steps.

His plan worked. Seeing the movement as a sign of weakness and fear, the nearest wolves rushed at their prey with open-mouthed growls. Stenhelt, son of Halivik and kin to the ancient traveler Chohla, was ready for them. His body suddenly surged with a primal urge to commence battle. The wolves did not disappoint.

* * * * *

Through a light snowfall, an ornate white and blue carriage ambled toward the north gate of the capital city of Vallo. The view out of the carriage window to the right showed dormant fields and a large manor house belonging to one of the King's cousins. To the left was a huge windmill on a snowy hillock out near the icy lakeshore. Further up ahead, the rising smoke of a thousand or more chimneys—pale in comparison to the darker clouds looming above—wafted over the high walls of the bustling city.

The aging Maker known as Frimgar Winter-hand sighed. He was finally home.

Over two seasons was a long time to be away, but he considered the annual journey along the South trail to be worthwhile. Being born and spending his young days in Kaald, a village more remote than most, Frimgar could appreciate how challenging life could be for the rural folk. He believed he had a basic understanding of their struggles, and felt a continuing obligation to help in the only way he knew how. The considerable profits for his work were merely a bonus.

Recognizing the emblem on the sides of the approaching carriage, visitors and guards at the gate respectfully stepped aside and pulled carts out of the way to let it pass. Frimgar took notice of their deferential actions and nodded his thanks to them all as he and his own guards rode by.

Many of the Makers took the veneration by the masses for granted, while a few haughty others of his enlightened society demanded cowering submission. Frimgar was not fond of arrogance.

The carriage had to pass through the north quarter, part of the second—and foulest—addition to Vallo. New battlements had twice been constructed to expand the city. The first expansion was in the 72nd year of the Triad, while the second took three years to build starting in 187; history was one of the subjects Frimgar taught. The thick walls were no longer necessary—there hadn't been a threat from distant Ferrens or raiding bandits in decades.

The north quarter and other neighborhoods between the second and outer walls were where the more pungent trades—tanneries, slaughterhouses and the like—were seen to. The odors Frimgar had to endure while rolling through that area gave him the urge to have the carriage turn around and go back out to the rural lands.

It was Frimgar's view that villages had fresher air and fewer rats, and rural folks tended to be cleaner and friendlier. Then again, villages had no chefs, hardly any salt, no gambling or bath houses, and the walls of their inns were thin. City or country—both had their nuisances.

The Maker's guards led his driver down Market Road, the widest route in Vallo. Nearing the castle, which butted against the cliffs overlooking Pioneer Lake, the carriage turned off toward the guarded iron gates of the expansive and imposing Maker's domain. Hooves clopped and wheels clattered over the snow-dusted cobblestone path that led to the inner courtyard.

The horses were reined in front of the Grand Hall, where a group of young student attendants and one of the domain's refined butlers stood waiting. Maker Frimgar forced his rotund body through the carriage door and took a deep breath for the effort it took. Oblivious to the snowflakes landing and melting on his bald head, he stretched his back with a groan.

"Welcome home, Maker Winter-hand," The butler said as he stepped forward. "How was your trip this year?"

"Well enough, Tennvik, thank you." Frimgar smoothed his pale blue robes and pulled his black Maker's sash up from under his round belly. "If we could, my good man, let us dispense with the formalities of announcing my return to those who still remember my name, eh? Please have my lockbox brought to my apartment, and have someone from the kitchens bring me wine and a proper ham meal. The closest thing to pork down south is gamey wild boar!"

Tennvik grinned along with the gregarious Maker, and then asked, "Is that all you require, sir?"

"If only it were," Frimgar sighed. "I need to meet with Maker Kauldur before I retire for the day. He still holds the post of Inquisitor of Mysteries, yes?"

At the mention of the other Maker's name, the butler's pleasant expression quickly faded. "That he does, sir, and makes full use of the title."

"Yes, I'm sure he does," Frimgar agreed with a frown. "Unfortunately, I need to pass along some reports. Otherwise, that obsessed man will be pounding down my door before I can get a wink of sleep. Where can I find him?"

"To my last knowledge, sir, Maker Night-heart was out on the training field between the guard barracks and the library, practicing his martial skills. I can send a student out to verify his whereabouts if you like."

"Not necessary, good Tennvik. I'd be surprised if he were elsewhere," Frimgar replied, and then added in a much softer tone, "That sadist always did enjoy using our guards to test his gruesome arts on. Remind me to petition the council for a raise of their wages."

"Of course, Maker; I will have papers drawn up by the morn."

"Oh, and is there any luck that Kauldur's demented apprentice no longer shadows him? Perhaps during my absence she was hopefully sent to a Maker's domain in one of the fortress towns?"

Tennvik shook his head. "There's no luck for you, Maker. Oradna still resides here, and continues to be in her mentor's company on most occasions. What's more, her chosen Road of Clarity is said to be clear and worthy. Her bid to become a Maker is at hand."

Frimgar's frown returned. "I am ashamed to admit it, but I'd always hoped that unnerving girl would never attain the mental prowess to earn a name. Ah well," he went on with a brighter tone, blocking out the thought of Oradna's dead stare, "the truth of it can't be helped. Let us move on with the matters at hand, eh?"

The butler nodded, bowed to the Maker, and then began directing the young students to their tasks. Frimgar stepped over to his trusted guards and handed an extra pouch of coins to each. When thanked for his generosity, he merely smiled and shook each man's hand. Walking away with a twinge in his hip, the weary Maker wondered how many more long journeys his old, heavy body could endure. And then he thought of food, drink, and a glutton's slumber.

Through the shadows of dry alcoves and under pillar supports of an upper walkway, Frimgar came to the training field. Out on the snowy grass ahead of him were three domain guards and Maker Kauldur Night-heart. Apparently, the martial practice had just concluded. One guard was wrapping cloth around his hand, another was sitting on the cold ground with a dark-stained rag pressed to his face, and the third guard was on hands and knees vomiting blood.

Kauldur was gripping his own muscular upper arm from a wound, and had just turned away to leave the field. "Impudence was your folly. See that it does not reoccur," he said over his shoulder to the still-heaving guard. Frimgar watched the Maker stride over toward a woman who stood near the dark stone walls of the barracks wing.

Adjusting the scrolls in his hands, Frimgar reluctantly approached the two. He saw that Kauldur was dressed only in boots, breeches and a vest for his training session. Half the age of himself, the younger Maker was as trim and strong as always. His dark hair was kept short, and shorn to the scalp on the sides. Kauldur was a tall man—not overly so, but often used it to his advantage. More coercive than Kauldur's height was the quality sword he always wore, and his infamously unpredictable mood swings. Throughout the years, Maker Night-heart had seen to all of his duties with ruthless efficiency, and was on the list for a council seat despite his intensity.

The woman Kauldur stood with was the student called Oradna. At well over ten years younger than Kauldur, there was speculation as to whether he viewed her as

a favored pupil or as a lover. She was attractive enough, although her pale gray eyes had an unsettling effect. Even under the hood of her thick fur coat, Frimgar could see those eyes. Oradna's long auburn hair and pale skin were other features that marked her at a distance, which was where most men chose to admire her alluring figure from. Her frequent, wicked smirk and thinly veiled contempt for anyone but Kauldur made most folks shy away from her presence.

"Good day, Kauldur," Frimgar said with false cheer as he neared. "Still in fine form, I see."

Initially thinking he was being mocked for being wounded by a mere guard, Kauldur turned with an angry scowl. He relaxed when he saw who it was - Frimgar Winter-hand, the obese old Maker with the ever-present benign smile. Kauldur had a childhood memory of the fat Maker teaching him his first trick, the mental servant; the ability to move small objects from a short distance. That small kindness had since softened his judgment of Frimgar's timidity. "Ah, Winter-hand, back once again from cavorting with the peasantry," he said with little emotion.

Frimgar glanced out to the training field and saw that Kauldur's last combatant was still on the ground with snow beginning to settle on him. "Should he be seen to?" he asked.

Kauldur cast a derisive glare out to the guard. "I caused no lasting damage. His ambition to best me drove his bellicosity to attempt a rash endeavor. Considering his bold transgression against a Maker, I was lenient."

Frimgar held his response when Kauldur began to create a Maker's art, drawing a symbol in the air while murmuring a short chant in the Locan tongue. The wound on his arm immediately stopped bleeding and began to scab over.

In the moments of the uncomfortable pause, Frimgar looked past Kauldur and met Oradna's odd stare as he offered her a warm greeting. Her response was a barely perceptible bow of her head as she softly muttered, "Maker" with a hint of a smile.

"Those scrolls relate to the duties of my office, I take it?" Kauldur asked as he slipped on a wool robe that Oradna had handed to him. "Tell me the gist of them, if you would."

"Ah, yes; I have three reports for your scribe to copy. None are so serious that you need to rush out and investigate, I'd say."

"With all due respect," Kauldur said as he cinched his robe, "I will be the judge of that."

"Yes, of course," Frimgar replied with an affable grin. He was tired, his hip ached, and he did not want to suffer any more of Night-heart's posturing than was necessary. "One report is from a farmer and his wife near the village of Sleeva who hoped their child was exhibiting a Maker's sign. As it turned out, the poor boy was merely blind in one eye."

"Witless peasants," Oradna giggled.

Ignoring her, Frimgar continued with his overviews. "Another is from Bruvaal; a girl made claims that a boy she knew had some uncommon abilities. I estimate that the boy in question was past the latter age to show any signs, so I don't give the story much credit."

"Given that your assumption is correct, false accusation of this sort is a crime."

"True," Frimgar said with a shrug, "I although I wonder if the offense is worth riding down to a small village and arresting a girl for a case of unrequited love, or, more likely, a jilted heart. We are both aware that foolish things are said and done on those occasions, eh?"

"Very well," Kauldur reluctantly agreed. "What is the last report?"

"A young boy from Romiir actually did show a Maker's sign. He could accurately predict the weather. I stayed in that village a few extra days to verify it, and then brought the boy to Guldra Steel-horn at the Maker's domain in Derralin. She will administer further tests; if the boy shows promise, he'll be sent here."

Kauldur nodded, took the offered scrolls, and then handed them to Oradna. "That will do. If there is nothing else, I will remove myself from these frigid conditions. While I'm sure you are accustomed to them and most likely prefer the cold, you also appear frail and ashen. Gather some warmth and get some rest, my good Maker."

Frimgar only smiled before he nodded and turned to leave. Eager to be away from Kauldur's imperious tones, he found the energy to move quickly.

* * * * *

The big black alpha led the charge through the soft snow; three other wolves followed just behind it. Sten swatted the alpha away with a hard clout, not wanting to break the pack's morale by killing their leader first. Then two of the three wolves in the alpha's wake crashed into him; he spun his body with the attack, but still stumbled. The third charger ripped teeth along his thigh, tearing leather and flesh.

Sten raked thick claws through the neck of the wolf at his chest. The second wolf clamped onto his hand while the one that drew first blood leapt for his neck. He gripped the bottom jaw of the wolf on his hand, and then twisted; the attacker fell away with a yelp. The third wolf snapped at the side of his neck while its claws dug into him for purchase. Sten reached up, grabbed the snarling animal by the scruff of its neck, and flung it out over the steep rocky slope.

The day before, he had cut a number of short wooden spikes and wedged them into crevices of the plentiful rocks and boulders on the steep slope. He'd hoped that he could toss some wolves out of the fray to quickly lessen their numbers; if being thrown down onto rocks didn't kill them, the spikes would.

Before Sten could turn, the rest of the pack swarmed him. Knocked on his back, he still managed to reach out and gut a young wolf. Claws slashed Sten's face; his own blood blurred his vision in one eye. He kicked an unseen wolf at his feet, sending it tumbling through the snow. Fangs sank into his arm. Another wolf went for his throat; he bit down on its snout and yanked until a large chunk tore away. Hungry mouths bit and snapped at him. He ripped a wolf's throat open, and broke the front leg of another. Strong jaws bit his off-hand, severing part of his pinky finger.

Fueled by pain and rage, Sten let loose a deafening roar. The power of the primal bellow swayed trees and blew soft snow away from him. The wolves were likewise driven back as if struck, all of them momentarily stunned and stumbling

to keep their feet under them. The roar thundered away as a wave of fury, echoing across the valley and through the forest.

With the urge of battle still boiling within him, Sten ignored the pain of his many wounds and got up into a crouch. Warily, the remaining wolves regrouped, still intent on their prize. Then the alpha and another came again. While he fended off the black wolf with a forearm, the other pack member came in from the side. Bracing himself, Sten grabbed the flanking wolf by one of its forelegs and spun. The animal was flung away and down the deadly slope.

The rest of the pack came again, joining their alpha. Sten was driven down to one knee from the ferocious onslaught, growling and attacking as much as the wolves around him. Teeth found the side of his neck. Something tore his scalp. A wolf went down, its ribcage torn open. Another yelped in pain when Sten's own fangs tore into its neck. Claws raked down his arm, opening a gushing wound. He continued to swing and grapple, splattering the wolves with his blood and their own. Snow turned to pink slush as the frenzied carnage continued.

Even with battle lust still upon him, Sten knew the blood loss from all of his wounds would quickly weaken him. It had to end soon. Ignoring the other sharp teeth and claws that came at him, he lunged out and clamped his hands on both sides of the snarling alpha's head. As it began to struggle, he wrenched the wolf's skull with a sudden, powerful twist. Sten heard and felt a grisly, satisfying pop. Neck broken, the big black wolf's body collapsed.

Still holding on to the dead alpha, Sten recklessly swung its body to and fro. Brushed back, the four remaining wolves hesitated. Courage shaken, one young wounded wolf fled down the valley's slope toward the lake. The other three reluctantly edged away and then turned to leave the way they came, back north along the open ridge.

Sten's ravaged legs gave out, and he slumped to the bloodstained snow. With a groan, he pushed himself up to rest on his hands and knees. Gasping for breath, he looked up and saw that one of the wolves had returned. Sten assumed it had seen or heard him fall, and came back to see if its would-be prey was weak enough to be finished after all. It was most likely correct; he couldn't get to his feet, and his arms were a trembling, bloody mess of gashes and punctures. He felt weak and chilly. His mind scrambled in vain for a way to force the hungry animal away.

As the wolf crept carefully closer, Sten's mind was a maelstrom of frustration, anger and panic. He'd prepared himself to face death, but didn't want it to be like this - prone, waiting for the end. Stronger than all of those emotions, though, was determination; the survival instinct that drove him. He swore to himself that, somehow, death would have to wait.

Suddenly aware of a vague swell of power somewhere deep inside himself, Sten willed it to the fore of his senses. He let the urge of his ancestral blood take control, making his heart pound even faster as the power surged. Unsure of his own actions, he reached out a bloody hand as if grasping for the wolf.

The hungry animal was less than three paces away and ready to pounce when the power of Sten's ancestral blood revealed its vague intent. Fingertips tingling with a rush of unseen energy, he felt his hand send out a nearly invisible, coiling tether that struck like a sword thrust into the wolf's chest. The tether did not retract as a stab would, though. It began siphoning, pulling out the life force of the

wolf and feeding it to Sten. The stricken animal panicked and writhed, but could not pull away. In a few quick and intense moments, it was over. The wolf was dead.

Confused, Sten sat up on his knees and looked at his arms and hands. The terrible gash down a forearm that formerly gushed blood was closed. Likewise, his stumped pinky finger was healed over with a dark scab. He was still exhausted, weak, and in pain, but the essence of life he'd somehow taken from the wolf had ensured his survival.

Not wasting the small amount of renewed vigor, Sten hastily crawled over to his gear under the fir tree. Bow and full quiver in hand, he hurried back out to the scene of the battle and looked along the ridge for the wolves that had retreated and fled. The two were seen moving away along the ridge in an area free of foliage. They were injured, their gaits awkward and slow. On his knees, Sten released a carefully aimed arrow. A moment later, his bowstring thrummed again. Both targets were hit, and didn't stumble far before they collapsed.

Sten then turned toward the slope of the lake valley where the first lone wolf had run off. The evergreens were thick and shielded any movement from view. Not having the strength or inclination to track and give chase, he was content to let one wolf escape out of so many.

The tranquility of the early morning sun and the quiet winter forest belied the savage battle that had just taken place. No birds sang, no wind whispered through the trees. The only movement was the frosty plumes of Sten's labored breath.

Sitting on his heels and wiping the blood out of his eye, he looked at the bloody carnage around him. Eleven wolves lay dead or injured with serious wounds. The trampled snow was stained red between the bodies. Two more of the pack lay somewhere down the steep rocky hillside to the east, and the last two along the ridge to the north. At that moment, Sten felt heartsick for what he'd done, and for the death, pain and terror the pack might have inflicted on Duuvihal again if he hadn't.

Pulling his flint knife, Sten went to each suffering wolf and finished them quickly. Completely spent and gritting his teeth in pain, he then crawled sluggishly back under the fir tree's boughs. He wiped what spittle he could muster onto his more painful wounds, and then curled into a ball and blacked out.

* * * * *

It took only two days for Chohla to tire of village life. The people who lived in Duuvihal were pleasant enough, but he found himself frowning at their chosen environment. The place was cramped, noisy, smelly, and unhygienic; the sewer trenches in particular were offensive to every sense. He therefore decided to save the remainder of Khoveyo's coins and find solace outside the village until the young hunter returned.

Not far from the western gates of Duuvihal, Chohla found a shallow cave set into a low cliff. The cave was occupied by a pregnant wolverine, but the ancient traveler wasn't concerned. He put the defensive animal's mind at ease with a simple nod and settled in.

When snow came on the first night of Khoveyo's quest, Chohla thought nothing of it. But when a larger storm moved in the next evening, he began to wonder how his descendant was faring. At dawn of the third day, heavy snow had piled up nearly to his knees. Trudging out a few steps into the pristine white forested landscape, he looked up to the grey sky as wind-whipped flurries continued to fall. With the deep snow, Chohla's wondering about Khoveyo had grown into slight concern. He decided to check on the young man's progress.

Chohla cleared an area in the snow and transformed into a golden eagle. He wasn't sure if that breed of bird actually existed in Kaldevarr, but decided it didn't matter. He took off, made his way above the forest, and attuned himself to the young hunter. He soared for a time, heading southwest, and eventually came to a valley around a lake.

It was there, on the eastern rim of that valley, that Chohla spotted Khoveyo from high above. The young hunter was indeed alive, skinning one of many dead wolves. What the traveler saw eased his worries, so he circled away. On the return flight back to his shared den, Chohla took note of the distance and thought that Khoveyo had covered a good amount of ground, all things considered. The young hunter had also met his goal in a short time, meaning he used more than common skills to achieve it.

Just after midday meal on the fourth day of the hunter's quest, the west tower sentry saw someone on the trail to Ikaali walking through the thick snow toward the gate. The sun glaring off the snow made the sentry squint, unable to make out the lone man until he got closer. A few moments later, he could tell who it was: the strange wanderer that had seen the young hunter off a number of days before. Gathering his heavy cloak around him, he stepped out and hailed the man. "Good day, sir. Come back to the village to warm your bones?"

"I always enjoy a warming fire," Chohla responded as he reached the open gate, "but it'll have to keep for a short while longer. Have you seen any sign of my friend yet?"

The sentry's expression of unease showed under his shaggy beard. "Eh, no, I'm sorry to say. Truth be told, I was more worried about you camping out after the second storm hit. I was about to go out and check on you yesterday morn, but I didn't have the gear to go trekking out in that."

"Oh, I get by well enough. Thank you for the worry, though. Do you mind if I find a spot while I wait for my friend to return? I'll stay clear of the path, although I wouldn't expect wagon drivers to try their luck until some of this melts away, no?"

"Eh, no, I expect not, sir," the sentry said hesitantly. "It's just, eh... To be plain, sir, none of the hunters that have gone out to bring down Den wolves have fared well. Not well at all."

"I see," Chohla said simply as he cleared snow from the side of the squat tower. "You have my sympathies for the losses of who I'm sure were good men." He sat with his blanket under and around him, began looking through his bag, and casually added, "Rest easy; Stenhelt of Bruvaal will not add to the ranks of your fallen. Care for some winterberries?"

"I've just had a meal, thanks all the same," the sentry said distractedly. "Eh, I think... I think you might be... I'm—I'm sure the hearths in the taverns are stoked..."

Chohla looked up with a pleasant smile and asked, "Something on your mind?"

"I think you may as well stay warm. It could—" He looked off into the village and breathed a small sigh of relief. "Ah, Nadvik comes. He's the garrison guard who first saw your friend off. He visits the towers daily and gathers reports for Elder Berik." The sentry waited as Nadvik stomped his way through the snow until he reached them, and then said to him, "Nadvik, do you remember this man?" gesturing at Chohla. "The friend of the hunter from some days back?"

"That I do," Nadvik replied, sparing a glance down at the odd wanderer who was busy eating berries. "We have a wager, he and I. Is there an issue, Rysel?"

"No, it's just..." Rysel leaned closer and whispered, "He's expecting his friend to return."

Nadvik nodded, and then turned to Chohla. "Odds were nearly nil for your friend's survival to begin with," he said bluntly. "Then add the snow and the brutal cold of the past two nights while he was out in the wild." He shook his head with a grim expression. "Your friend is dead."

"Oh, don't be sad for me," Chohla said with an easy tone as he stood. "You should only be sad for the coins you've lost. Here comes my friend now."

* * * * *

The men turned quickly and looked beyond the gate. Eyes wide, mouths slightly agape, they saw the hunter Stenhelt out in the woods trudging toward them. Even with snowshoes, his steps were labored from the crude sled he was dragging behind him. It was piled with furs and wolf heads, strapped down with strips of tree bark.

"I'll be snowed," Nadvik said. "Come, Rysel, let's give the hunter a hand." Chohla leaned against a gate post while the two men respectfully took the sled and hauled it next to the tower.

As the sled was pulled past him, the ancient wanderer noted that Khoveyo hadn't used his Maker's tricks on the wolf furs. A wise move, he thought; the guards or other village folk would wonder how the hunter had prepared them with neither supplies nor time.

Limping in tow of the sled and catching his breath, Sten stopped in front of Chohla. Only the young man's face was uncovered while the rest of him was layered in leather and wool. Still, signs of combat were evident by the scabbed wounds on his face and neck, as well as his recently stitched buckskin pants. "I thought you were going to hunt the wolves, Khoveyo, not fight them," Chohla said with a grin.

"I—I only had five days," Sten replied as he let out a deep, frosty breath. "I didn't know if I had enough time to -"

"It's alright," Chohla interrupted, still grinning. "I'll wager you learned a thing or two out there, no matter how it was done." Sten only nodded. "So, did you get the thrill of battle out of your system, or has it made you hungry for more?"

Sten looked down and muttered, "I've had my fill, master Chohla. It soured my heart."

"But the cause was good, yes?"

Sten shrugged. "In the heat of battle, I had no mind of the greater good."

"I understand; your only purpose at that moment was survival. You'll find that sometimes bad things come with the good, Khoveyo. It is part of life's cycle. You've done well by these people; let that thought heal your heart." He placed a hand on Sten's shoulder, causing the young man to lift his head. "Despite your own doubts—or perhaps because of them—I'm proud to see the man you've become."

Sten placed his mitten-clad hand on Chohla's shoulder in return. "I'm honored."

"By the Triad, master hunter," Rysel the tower sentry said, "I didn't think we'd see you again, let alone see you keep your end of the bargain. Even better, there's more than twelve heads here!"

"Fifteen," Nadvik interjected as he looked through the stack of well-cut furs.

Sten said to Nadvik, "Under the furs you'll find some cuts of meat and two pouches of claws. I also stuffed a few cleaned stomachs with wolf hearts, if folks eat such things here."

"That they do, when there's a chance," Rysel answered for the big guard. "I'll wager that Elder Berik will want them. Once he hears of this, he may hold a banquet in your honor!"

"I'd rather he didn't," Sten replied somberly. "I only want what was promised."

Undaunted, Rysel went on. "Still, a joyous event, no? Songs will be sung of you!"

Nadvik frowned at Rysel and said, "Stop lathering the man with praise. It's plain that he doesn't want it, and your fawning like a girl sickens me. Go fetch two villagers and a proper cart."

Soon enough, Nadvik walked along with Sten and Chohla next to the fur-laden cart as they made the short walk to the trampled snow of the village commons. After posting another guard to watch the cart, Nadvik escorted the two travelers into the large village hall. There they met with Elder Berik and his advisors again, who were told of Sten's unlikely success. The furs, wolf heads, and other goods were brought in as proof.

Surprised and delighted, Berik said, "Well done, master Stenhelt! Well done indeed! Bards will tell the tale of this for cycles to come! You have done us a great service, and killed more of those damn beasts than I'd dared to hope for. Go and collect your winnings from the smiths. Tonight, we shall feast on roasted hearts and toast your name with my best ale!"

Sten only nodded, not committing to the offered meal. Nadvik led him and Chohla out through the commons, where many villagers were talking about the "great wolf hunter". A number of them smiled at Sten and uttered thanks, while others patted him on the back as he made his way to the smith's shop.

One man, the trader from Vallo who'd bought the sun-fox fur, shook his hand, asked his name, and then gave long-winded thanks. Sten was glad that what he'd done had also made the trail to Ikaali safe again for traders, but he didn't want to listen to the man blather on about it.

Sten was given all the quality metal goods he'd asked for, much of it in bronze. He then visited other vendors for any other needed supplies and gear. Chohla paid for those items with the coins he'd won from the guard, and then beckoned Sten to

follow closely as he began to meander through the crowd. Sten asked no questions, but saw that less and less people took notice of him as they moved along until no one was paying any mind at all. Virtually ignored, the two travelers strolled away from the commons and toward the west gate.

Nearing the gate tower, Sten voiced his curiosity. "Master Chohla, what just happened?"

"You didn't want to stay any longer, did you?" he asked knowingly. "Receive more well wishes from a gaggle of strangers? Sit through a meal with so many eyes upon you? Having to recount your terrible battle over and over?"

"No, but..."

"Neither did I, truth be told. I know you didn't want the attention, and I didn't want to sit through the tedious affair. I simply found the right moment to walk away, and thought we should take advantage of it."

After a long moment, Sten commented, "I was taught a thing or two by a Maker, but I don't think I'm the only one of us who knows a few tricks."

"Perhaps," Chohla said with a grin.

"Ah, wait," Sten said as they approached the guard tower. "The sentry will come out, and may insist that we not insult the village elder and his feast by leaving. Your trick was for naught."

"It's possible," Chohla casually said, "but... can you not hear that?"

Sten craned his head, waited a moment, and then smiled. He and Chohla walked past the gate tower unimpeded and continued down the snowy, sunlit trail.

A few moments earlier, sentry Rysel sat eating biscuits at a small desk in the tower. Hearing a noise, he looked up, and then suddenly slumped over in a deep sleep, snoring loudly.

"Did you cause that as well?" Sten asked with a smile when he and Chohla paused a short time later to tie their new snowshoes on.

Pulling a leather strap taut, Chohla replied, "Perhaps he was just tired. Don't blame me for everything, Khoveyo." They stood straight, shared a grin, and then resumed their trek.

* * * * *

By nightfall, the Den Forest had thinned away behind Sten and Chohla. They moved snow, made camp and settled in. Chohla woke at dawn and let Sten sleep a while longer. When the hunter finally opened his eyes, Chohla asked, "How are your wounds?"

Sten sat up, rubbing his scalp with one hand and his neck with the other. "Healing quickly, I'd say, and not too tender."

"No infections to worry after?"

Sten shook his head. "I used the trick of drawing water and cleaned them; a few cuts I had to burn shut," he explained as he gingerly bent his knees, warming his muscles while trying to avoid opening any of the scabs under his pants. He then looked at the stumped pinky finger on his left hand. "I'll never hear the end of this from my mother," he said with a sigh.

"Better to lose part of a finger than your throat. Here, have some jerky."

After a while of chewing in silence, Sten asked, "Do you know if there is a trail that passes near your white woods?"

Chohla grunted and gulped down his bite. "I looked at a trader's map while you were on your quest. Your people have named the white woods the 'Birch Groves'. We could keep to trails and come near that place after a time, or we could trek across the wide Thunder Plains straight to it. While a longer route, a trail would still normally be the quicker way. With this deep snow, however—and more to come—I'd favor the wilds."

"As would I," Sten agreed. "I've had enough of villages and their troubles for a time."

"But you've only been to one other besides your own," Chohla said, smirking.

"Yes, and look what happened."

"I take your meaning, but there's something else to consider. Your new forged supplies can't travel with you from a hallowed place, remember? We could stay on the trail to the village called Ikaali. There, you could sell those items and then..." He stopped when Sten slowly shook his head. "No? Then what did you have in mind?"

Sten sat up straighter, took a deep breath and said, "I want to see the hallowed place in the Birch Groves, but I won't use it to travel this time. I want to trek, to explore the land between here and home. There's obvious magic in hallowed travel, but there's also a sort of magic in finding new places. I don't care that winter has come early and strong; it's still worth doing."

Chohla nodded. "I understand that yearning."

"Besides," Sten added, "I did too much to earn all this forged gear just to sell it. I want my father to have it."

"Those are wise and commendable words, Khoveyo, although you may want to bring gifts for your worrisome mother as well."

The good advice made Sten grin. "She'd wear me down with guilt otherwise, as would Annori."

"Perhaps you may visit another village after all, but in your own time," Chohla said, standing. "Gather your things, and let us go visit these plains of thunder."

The two travelers set out to the southwest, intent on skirting the Den Forest and then crossing the wide stretch of open ground. To Sten, the Thunder Plains seemed like an endless landscape of wild fields and low plateaus, all covered in a blanket of snow. The vast plains held many narrow brooks and shallow, frozen ponds. Only small, infrequent patches of trees stuck out of the snow, most of them needled pines. Sten saw the land as both austere and invigorating.

Three days into their trek, a blizzard blew in from the north. Sten and Chohla were at a place where the forest line curved back to the southeast—the general location of where they would commence their southwestern march across the windswept plains. They saw the storm coming and retreated back into the cover of the forest to wait it out. Under a hastily built lean-to of fir boughs, the two travelers watched the driving snow come down and held short conversations when the howling winds would lessen to a dull moan.

Doubting there'd be much wood for fires out on the snowy plains, Sten and Chohla gathered bundles of dead branches from the forest before setting out

again. The storm had left behind a layer of wet, heavy snow, which made their trek somewhat easier in snowshoes.

After two days out in the Thunder Plains, the travelers saw a herd of caribou in the distance. With Sten leading, they moved closer and studied the animals. Dried rations did not equal the appeal of fresh meat, and an extra pelt would help to keep the bitterly cold winds at bay.

Sten's arrow brought down a weak member of the herd that was lagging behind. That evening, while camped against a low outcrop of rock, they sat around a small fire and feasted. During the meal, Chohla talked of distant lands and Sten listened with fascination.

A day later, another snowstorm rushed in. Without any obvious protection in sight from the oncoming weather, the two men hurried over to a high snow drift up against a trio of stunted pines. Sten, having never camped in open ground, relied on Chohla to show him how to dig out a proper snow cave and smooth the interior walls so that it wouldn't drip on them.

They finished just as the strength of the storm came upon them. Once inside, Chohla asked, "How are your fingers and toes?"

"My mittens and boots are stitched tight," Sten answered. "Even scooping and kicking snow, they served me well. Thankfully, too; I've never felt such a frigid wind."

Chohla nodded. "The woods you grew up in took the brunt of the elements. Weather strikes harder out in open places like here, and this season is a proving to be a harsh one. Even ones of our blood can feel the cold if it bites hard enough. Do you still keep to what you said - that you didn't care if winter was upon us?"

Sten smiled at Chohla's light mockery. "I can think of better seasons to trek in, but yes, I would have wanted to venture out no matter the weather."

"Then enjoy it; snow doesn't leave this land too willingly," Chohla said while he pushed his blanket under himself to lie down on. "You may as well get comfortable if you're able; I expect the storm to carry on into the night."

Sten was about to ask how he knew, but thought better of it. He'd most likely get another vague answer, just like any other time he'd questioned the secretive traveler about strange events that sometimes happened around him.

The two travelers emerged from their cave in the morning to find that the storm had been more wind than snow. Indeed, some stretches of ground had been swept by the howling gale, letting sparse blades of wild grass arise from their cover of thin snow.

Days of sunny skies and vast barren flatlands followed. Sten and Chohla had to be careful of snow blindness as they kept true to their course. The caribou haunch they carried had frozen solid, and they'd run out of wood for a fire to thaw it. The dried food in reserve was stiff, and tested their teeth.

At the crest of a long, gently sloping rise, the men came upon an intriguing vista. Along the horizon was a forest. Between them and those distant woods was a wide snow-packed prairie with an enormous herd of huge Kaldevarr bison meandering through it.

Sten had seen a bison pelt once, but not the big animal it came from. He gazed on with awe, wondering at their size. An adult male's humped back was easily taller than him, and the girth of its rib cage could hold two squatted people. The

smaller two of a bison's four horns could equal his forearm in length, and were considered rare prizes. Sten's chest heaved with the sense of a bull bison's power, feeling that exhilarating rush of life.

"Those grand beasts won't simply hand their hides over, Khoveyo," Chohla said, interrupting his thoughts. "You're in need of a new coat, and my stomach is tired of stale bread and jerky. So go, hunter—bring one down if you can."

It wasn't long until Chohla was watching Sten stealthily moving out into the snowy plain, getting close enough to touch one of the nearest animals. The young hunter then skillfully separated one from the herd, matching speed with the bolting bison while he shot arrows into it. The temporary curving horns that had grown out of either side of Sten's head as he hunted were never mentioned.

Together, the two travelers skinned and butchered the giant carcass, then moved on with what they could carry. They reached the wide swath of mixed evergreens soon after midday, and went into the forest proper. The interior of the Birch Groves was not what Sten expected.

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As Sten followed Chohla further into the Birch Groves, he saw that there was surprisingly little snow on the ground. Most of the area they came into was free of underbrush; the shrubbery he did see looked almost tidy. The air felt conspicuously warmer than out on the plains, only a stone's throw away. The difference in climate was unexpected, yet seemed somehow natural.

As the given name of the forest implied, there were scattered groves of white birch trees in dense clusters throughout the woods. In the open, leaf-strewn spaces between those clusters were stout oaks that loomed over all; their barks were coated with rime, as if they drew any cold away from the birches.

The air was calm with a mild scent of moss, and the usual sounds of a forest were muted there. Sten felt like he'd stepped into a church. A sense of peace emanated from the trees around him. It was mixed with a faint feeling of stoic admittance, as if the forest accepted his presence. "We do not hunt here," he said in a near-whisper of reverence as they moved slowly deeper into the woods, more of a statement of unfounded truth than a question.

"No, we do not," Chohla said ahead of him. "The elements will be offended if any life is taken here. Even those with hard hearts or dark intent find it difficult to be in these white woods for long. The land provides, if you know where to look. My people consider most of this forest to be a refuge of sorts. Some of us have gathered here a few times..."

"Gathered to do what?"

"To visit, mostly; there were never many of us, and we meet so rarely. At the last occasion, we built a bonfire in a clearing. We sat around that big, warming flame, telling stories and trading information for many nights. It was memorable."

They walked a while further before Sten asked, "Why does it feel so different here?"

"Hmm, good question. Perhaps my people practiced our crafts and high sigils here so often that we altered this forest. Then again," he went on with a shrug, "perhaps nature chose this piece of land to be a special place, and that's why we

were drawn here. I've found only a few other areas like this in all my travels, none of them as extensive as these woods."

Sten mulled the information over in his head, but asked nothing further. Chohla stopped a short while later and had him take the lead. Finding attunement easier to attain, he carried on to the west until dusk settled in. The two men made camp near the outstretched roots of a towering oak, and gathered just enough dead wood for a fire to cook some of their bison meat.

Their meal was eaten quietly, without need of conversation. Still chewing the last large bite of his steak, Sten broke the silence when he asked, "What are some of the other high sigils, master Chohla?" The question had been on his mind for some time, and the chat from earlier in the day refreshed his curiosity.

"I'd rather not talk of things that are beyond your reach, Khoveyo. If I think you're ready and able to learn a new skill, I'll show you the secret of it."

"Is there a way to make myself ready? Something I can practice?"

Chohla frowned and took a deep breath before he answered. "Your heritage is mixed, although both your mother and father must carry the blood of my people. It is the same for some others of your kind, but most of them did not have the natural tendency to learn any skills beyond what they were taught. You did. It came to you naturally long ago, but only in one way—the way of the beast. That is the focus of your abilities, Khoveyo. With other ways, other skills... It is simply not within you to master them."

"I see," Sten mumbled as he stared at the campfire, obviously disheartened.

"Take pride in what you can do," Chohla said, trying to brighten the young man's sullen mood. "You are strong in many skills, perhaps stronger than you might know." Seeing his words had little effect, he spoke further. "Before the time of your parents, there was a Kaldevarran man who showed some of the natural skills of my people. He was a great warrior. His name was Vidun. Do you know this name?"

Sten's eyes widened. "Vidun... Do you mean the greatest soldier of the northern guard, the champion of Kaldevarr for many cycles? Of course I know that name! Tales of his battles and feats are still told today! He carried the blood of your people like I do?"

Chohla nodded. "And I can tell you this," he said. "Vidun had fewer skills and was not as strong with them as you are with yours." He let those words take effect before he asked, "Then you know of Vidun's end?"

"Yes; he went out into the northern pass alone to face another approaching group of Ferrens, and was ambushed by archers."

"That was the way of his end, but not the cause. Vidun's vanity was his downfall. True, he slew many enemies of Kaldevarr and saved many lives with his heroic deeds. But, he also reveled in praise and used his skills for personal gain. I used the words 'ready' and 'able' a moment ago. Vidun was able, but not ready. He did not have the proper respect of the power he wielded, and so fate took it from him."

Alarmed, Sten asked, "Are you saying that I'm... Have I been disrespectful?"

"No, Khoveyo, not at all. You do not have the hunger for glory as Vidun did. I'm saying that a powerful tool needs a wise hand to use it for the best result. You are

a young man, and have just begun to learn about the deeper meanings of things. Wisdom will come. Be patient."

"I'll try," Sten gloomily replied while he poked the campfire with a stick. "Can I at least know if I have it within me to learn other high sigils?"

"Oh, quite so," Chohla answered with a smile. "I planned to show you a new sigil once we reach the hallowed place. Now the surprise is ruined, and you'll have to wait."

Sten didn't plead, knowing that Chohla wouldn't change his mind. He drifted off to sleep to the sound of an owl hooting, wondering what secret was going to be shared.

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A thick fog had settled in the quiet forest by morning. Sten woke to find Chohla gone, but heard him moving around on dead leaves somewhere out in the fog. The traveler came back to camp carrying a small bundle of wood in one arm, and cradling a live rabbit with the other. Sten had questions about the captured animal, but kept them to himself.

When the beige and white rabbit was set down near Sten, it kept its place. Chohla sat on the far side of it, pulling his big bag onto his lap. "I thought you might need our little friend," he said as he began rummaging through his bag.

"Why do I need a rabbit?"

Chohla pulled out a few harkenberries and put them down in front of their small guest. "For focusing on," he answered as he began digging through his bag again. "You haven't had much chance to practice, and taking on some of this little fellow's abilities will be useful soon."

"How is me becoming furry and fearful going to help us?" Sten asked with a grin.

Chohla glanced over to him with a smile. "It wouldn't; I meant its abilities of speed and leaping. I didn't think you were yet able to focus on the idea of a rabbit and take in its abilities without one being nearby. If you can, please take no offense."

Slightly embarrassed, Sten softly said, "No, you have the truth of it - I have more to learn. Why am I going to be running and jumping?"

"You'll see soon enough." He pulled another item out of his bag and tossed it to Sten. "Here, eat this." It was a cone-shaped root, twice as thick as a carrot and pale yellow in color. "My people call it 'vekeeho'. It tastes something like a radish, only softer and sweet. It should stop that stomach of yours from complaining until I get more bison over a fire."

Sten found vekeeho to be delicious, but his mouth still watered for the sizzling meat. During the morning meal, Chohla explained where to find the vekeeho root and other types. He said that the heska root needed a firm grip and strong pull to free it from the ground. Those words made Sten think of something else entirely. He waited until Chohla had stopped talking about berries, and then asked, "Do you think my brother Tull is like me, only in a different way?"

Confused, Chohla said, "Your brother? I was expecting you to ask why harkenberries are so bland, not a random question about your brother. Why do you ask?"

"Because you said that I knew by instinct one way of the skills of your people, and that there were other ways. I think my brother Tullgar has a natural tendency as well. Not in a way like mine, but I can think of nothing else to explain it."

"Well, I've not met this brother of yours, so I couldn't say. But, as he's kin, it's possible. Tell me why you think so, Khoveyo."

Sten sat forward, absently petting the rabbit. "I've mentioned Tull to you before, but only that my elder brother is big and simple. I don't think I've ever talked about things I've seen him do. He's lifted the end of an oak log that two normal men couldn't budge. This last autumn, he pulled up a rock the size of a cauldron and carried it as far as I can shoot an arrow."

Chohla's eyebrows knitted together in confusion. "Why was your brother walking around with a small boulder?"

"Ah, well, he was helping me by gathering rocks and timber for the cabin I plan to build. I didn't have the heart to tell him that the rock was far too big to use."

"Hmm, a simple man with uncommon strength—an impressive quality. Is he a warrior?"

"No, far from it; Tull has a soft heart."

"I'd still have to see him to know for certain, but I'd wager you're right. Come," Chohla said as he stood up and began kicking dirt on the fire, "let's gather our things and move along."

While Sten was packing his gear, he saw Chohla take some of the bison cuts and throw them randomly out into the woods. The traveler turned and saw Sten's eyebrows arched high with surprise and unspoken curiosity. "We've taken from animals, so it's only fair to give some back. Especially here, it is wise to respect the circle of life. Don't forget to bring the rabbit."

By well after midday, Sten and Chohla came to a river. Its waterline was low, revealing rounded stones that were usually submerged. Mud and silt formed both the near and far shorelines, dirtying the steady current. There were occasional chunks of ice flowing down the river, proving that winter still kept on beyond the strange Birch Groves.

Chohla led them to a place just upstream where more stones jutted out near both shores. "This is where we cross," he said. "We jump to this rock, then to that bigger one further out, and then the long leap to that flat one across the way. After that, a few more short jumps and we're past it. We have a clear area behind us to build up speed."

Sten gauged the distances. The first jump was more of a hop - less than three paces. The jump to the second stone was about twice the first. Then came the daunting leap; a distance across the water of over a dozen paces. Sten doubted his chances. "The water can't be too cold," he said, holding the rabbit close. "Can't we wade to the other side?"

"No, Khoveyo," Chohla said as he backed up into the woods, preparing to run forward. "The water dips deep out in the middle, and the current is deceptively strong. We would most likely lose our feet and be swept off. There are more rocky drops and a stretch of rapids further downstream, but hopefully we'd drown before

our bodies were smashed there. Now, if you please, let me show you that this isn't so difficult."

And he did. With a burst of amazing speed, Chohla charged. He used the first river rock to propel himself to the second, and then launched out over the flowing water. He landed with both feet on the flat boulder near the far shore, quickly halting his momentum. Sten was awestruck; he'd never seen the leisurely traveler be so energetic, let alone performing a stunning feat.

Chohla turned back to Sten and yelled, "You see - easy. Now focus on the rabbit, Khoveyo. Only this time, try to take in only what you need of it. If you come bounding across the rocks with large furry ears bouncing on your head, I'll mock you for cycles!"

Sten didn't laugh with Chohla, but instead closed his eyes and concentrated. He didn't think of the small animal's senses, only its agility and the strength in its legs. Unaware that his thickening thighs stretched the stitches in his pants, he set the rabbit down and backed up for running room. He saw that Chohla had made the last short jumps to the far shore and waited for him. Sten tensed, took a deep breath, and then shot forward with a grunt.

Before he knew it, he'd sprung with all his strength up and out toward the far boulder. He flailed a bit in mid-air, afraid of missing it altogether. Coming down fast, he decided not to stop. Having room for one step, he let his momentum carry him out with another leap. He sailed over the smaller rocks beyond the boulder and landed hard on the shoreline. His feet sunk in the sticky mud, causing him to stumble, fall forward in a rush, and land face first with a wet slap.

Chohla roared with laughter. Sten didn't want to raise his head out of the mud to see the smile that accompanied the traveler's mirth, but did anyway. Humiliated and filthy, he pulled himself out of the mud and began removing his clothes to rinse them in the river. Chohla was still laughing. "I still made it across," Sten mumbled, wiping muck out of his eye.

"Oh, you surely did! I see no floppy ears, but this is just as good!"

The two men had continued west a short distance when Chohla suggested they stop to make camp. The hallowed place was near, he explained, but not easy to find in the dark. A cold drizzle began to fall, enough to make lighting a fire difficult. They instead ate roots and berries and tossed a few more scraps of raw meat out into the woods around them.

While Chohla scooted under an evergreen bush to sleep, Sten sat under a bare tree and thought about his blunder at the river. Sitting in the soft night rain with a sour mood, he realized he'd overreached himself and paid a price for it. Just like the hero Vidun had.

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Puffy clouds were sliding across the early morning sky when the two men woke. Refreshed from a comfortable night's rest, Chohla was eager to reach the end of their trek. Conversely, Sten was sullen and groggy; he was still upset with himself, and had slept poorly because of it.

They walked for a short while and reached a small, rocky creek meandering through more white birches. Hardy plants had somehow kept their blooms in

places along the weaving waterline, adding to the picturesque location. They followed downstream until they eventually came to a gentle slope with bedrock jutting out in places. The creek pooled and splashed over those mossy rocks, creating a further sense of calm in the serene woods.

"Can you sense it?" Chohla asked as they both looked down the small, wooded hill.

Certain he was referring to the hallowed place, Sten replied, "I feel like we're standing on it, or perhaps in it." He looked around them. "Is this it - at the top of this rise?"

"You had it right at the first; it's under us. Follow me." Chohla led Sten down the slope, stopping just before the land leveled out. "Here we are," the traveler announced, gesturing to a large slab of rock. Water washed over its surface before cascading over the smoothed edge, dropping an arm's length to another rock below it.

"Do you mean that rock?" Sten asked, confused.

"No, I mean under that rock. It's a shelf, or a roof of sorts. There's a cave entrance under it."

"So... we have to lie in the creek, and crawl through that little waterfall?"

"As there's no other way in," Chohla replied with a hint of exasperation, "then yes, that's what we have to do. Since you've let yourself get soaked twice since we've entered these woods, I thought you'd be used to it."

"Very funny; I'll follow you in."

Pushing their gear ahead of them, the two men slithered under the waterfall. Beyond it was dry rock and utter darkness; their bodies blocked daylight filtering through the falling water. They had to stay on their stomachs because of the low ceiling, which made Sten begin to feel edgy from being hemmed in. Their scuffling movements soon made echoes out into a space ahead of them, relieving Sten to know that the cave widened soon.

The rough stone walls began to slope downward, allowing the two men to quickly go from lying flat to standing. "Today, Khoveyo," Chohla said with a contented sigh, "you will learn a great many things. More than most hallowed places, this one is special. My people have left some of what we've discovered on the walls here. Perhaps we may both learn something new."

"Should I start a fire?" Sten asked.

"There's no need. The high sigil I planned to show you can—among its many other uses—create light." The sound of Chohla rummaging through his large bag went on for a moment before he said, "Ah, here it is." There was more of the same noise, followed by him sniffing in the scent of something. "Yes, that's it. Now let me prepare."

Sten sniffed as well and caught the sickly sweet aroma of poisonous skyberries, meaning that Chohla had opened his container of purple paint. A few short moments later, something in front of him began to radiate a soft yellowish light. It was a stick or rod of some type being rolled in the palms of Chohla's hands, steadily glowing without heat or spark. Ignoring the illuminated cave around him, Sten continued to stare in wonder at the object. Chohla stopped rolling the sturdy cylinder in his hands and held it up by one end. It was a bone - a glowing bone.

"This," Chohla said, "is a bone totem. While the sigil for hallowed travel is powerful, it is for only one purpose. On the other hand, a bone totem is a tool for simpler purposes, but it has many of them. One of those uses is to give off light like a dimming torch, as you can see. Before I go on, there are three simple rules to be followed in order for the totem to work."

"Three rules?" Sten asked hesitantly. He'd had trouble with the mandates of hallowed travel, and was worried that another set of complex instructions would only confuse him.

"Yes, only three rules, and very simple. The first is this." Chohla held the glowing bone totem under his chin with one hand, and held open the top of his leather vest with the other. A purple symbol was drawn on his upper chest—a circle in the center with a long line through it. "This is the symbol for the totem. Next, you can only have one bone totem at a time. And the bone must come from the same breed of animal that you first killed with your inherent skills."

"With my inherent skills... It must be a wood cur."

"Hmm, too bad," Chohla said. "There are no curs in these woods that I know of. You'll have to wait to get your own totem."

Sten nodded, and then asked, "So that's it? Those are the three rules?"

"I said they were simple, Khoveyo. For a bone totem, the rules are few and the uses are many. It can give off light, obviously, but it dims away after a short while. The totem can also draw out poison or infection from an open wound, and sear the cut without burning. If you're searching for a certain person or animal, it will act as a divining rod and point the way."

"I did something akin to that when I began my search for the wolf pack," Sten pointed out.

"What you did is what my people call far-sight. It will tell you the basic direction of the type of animal you seek, but not a certain one. I should also point out that, for you, far-sight will only find lesser animals, not people. It is a useful skill, but you had to concentrate for a time, didn't you? With the totem, you only need to have that person or animal in mind and then wave the bone in a pattern."

"I see the difference, although far-sight is better suited for a hunter."

"True, but the bone totem has other uses that are quite helpful to a hunter or traveler... or anyone else, now that I think on it. Placed with other goods or gear, the totem assists them in a way. It will keep meat chilled for a time, and pull moisture from, say, a wet blanket much faster than letting the sun dry it. Fruits and vegetables will stay fresh longer as well, and it keeps my paints from drying out. One of my people put her bone totem in her quiver; it made the shafts straighter and the arrowheads sharper. This assistance is why I carry this bag with all my things in it, so that the totem may help in many ways at once."

"Helpful indeed," Sten commented with admiration.

"There is one use I came upon that I quite enjoy. If I stir any sort of stew or soup with the bone totem, flavor to my liking is added. Spicy, salty—whatever fits your tastes. For your bland cooking alone, I suggest you find your own bone totem as soon as possible."

"My cooking is not that bad," Sten retorted with mock indignation, knowing for a fact that he had no talent for it.

"Oh, and one more thing," Chohla said. "Here, take the totem." When Sten put his fingers on it, the bone instantly lost its glow and left them in the dark once more. Chohla rubbed it again until the glow returned. "Once you've set your totem to a task, you may set it down," he explained. "If anyone other than you touches it, though... Well, you saw what happens."

"I never thought I'd say it, but I can't wait to find a pack of curs. Do I need a certain bone?"

Chohla shrugged. "Not really, but I don't suggest anything too thin or curved. Mine is a leg bone from a bear. Sadly, it wasn't a big bear. Then again, I was proud of it as my first kill."

Sten looked around the small, barrel-shaped cave. There was nothing of interest except to the rear of it, where there was a crack in the bedrock wide enough to be called a passage. Chohla gestured to it, saying there was more to see. They both had to maneuver sideways in order to slip through, and finally stepped out into a wide natural tunnel that curved off to the left.

Sten first studied where the cave led to, wondering if using hallowed travel required jumping into a hole or simply walking off into the dark. His attention was diverted when he noticed paint on the walls of the tunnel. Asking Chohla to move his glowing bone totem around, he saw that the walls on both sides were covered in drawings and symbols.

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A number of large and irregular shapes had been drawn on the walls. Within each shape were apparently random dots of paint, and next to each of them was a symbol. Staring at the first drawing he came to, Sten asked, "What is all of this, master Chohla?"

"Well, the map in front of you is the country of Seotan. The fingertip dots are hallowed places, with their travel symbols beside them. Ah," he pointed to one. "I haven't been there before."

"This is a map?" Sten asked, surprised. "There are no markings for rivers or mountain ranges. And I'd wager Seotan has cities, but none of them are shown here, either."

"My people were never concerned about such things, Khoveyo. We've always been much more interested in exploring than reaching a journey's end. We'd remember a sight if it was thought to be worthwhile, and pass it along when we gathered from time to time. My people have a talent for recalling such things. What we've marked here are the important places to us." Chohla walked a few paces, held his glowing totem to the wall again and said, "Here we are."

Sten joined him and looked at the outline. He'd never seen a full map of his country, and so couldn't verify that the shape he was looking at was it. "This is Kaldevarr?" he asked. Chohla nodded. Sten studied the map for a long moment and then commented, "There are seven hallowed places marked on this map. You once told me you knew of the place in the Cragwood plus four others... A talent for recalling, eh?"

"The others must have been boring," Chohla replied lightly. "Here," he pointed, "this is the cave in your Cragwood where we first departed from. The first symbol I showed you is up near the top, where we arrived. Over here is where we are now."

"All of these symbols have a half-circle in the center, so that must be the common mark for Kaldevarr, yes?"

"Yes, just as Seotan has three wavy lines, and over here," Chohla moved to the map drawn next to Kaldevarr's, "you see that the main symbol for Ferrenis is an X. Every area of land has its own core symbol, or else hallowed travel would become very confusing."

Excited to learn about distant lands, Sten asked about all of the maps and what was known of each place. Chohla began by pointing out that only the countries of Ethion were drawn there, and that maps of other lands even further away were in a different hallowed place. Still, there were many things to be learned about Ethion alone.

The nearest countries to Kaldevarr - Ormyra to the south, Seotan to the southwest, and Ferrenis to the west - were spoken of first. Ormyra was a land of long beaches, rich farming land and pleasant folk. Seotan was vast with mostly barren regions, and high plains that took over a season to trek across. The educated folk there were aloof, while the nomadic plains people were friendlier. As for Ferrenis, Chohla said it was still a barbaric, clannish land with crude customs—as Sten had most likely been taught—but nonetheless had places of great natural beauty.

Other lands were mentioned, although without much detail. Nivall and Lubrea, countries divided by a great forest, often warred against each other. Calagano, far to the south and west, was a land of seafaring folk and exotic fauna. Grenlor was a powerful kingdom of iron, fortresses and clashing nobles. Utvanza was actually a large island with only two hallowed places, made near to each other as a way to depart quickly; Untvanzans were a superstitious and volatile people who didn't like strangers.

As they moved from map to map, Chohla also mentioned a significant cultural event for each land. Standing at the last map, Utvanza, he said, "Warriors of this land test their courage by throwing spears at each other. Then the people have a celebration for the bravest one, who happens to be dead."

Shocked by the outlandish custom, Sten asked, "Honestly?"

"Oh, quite so—some folks are strange. Remember that when you go to a new place; you are the visitor, and should not tamper with their traditions." Chohla then stepped back into the center of the cave tunnel. "I've said enough about other lands. You can learn more about them on your own. Step closer so I can show you how to handle a bone totem for each of its purposes."

Sten mirrored Chohla's gestures for each totem use; as there were only a few to learn, he did not need much correcting. "I'm surprised that such simple movements can create magic," Sten said while practicing a motion in the air.

"Having the blood of my people is the key. While many of the bone totem's uses have been discovered, you should try other movements and grips besides what I've shown you. Something new might be found, and I'd wager no harm will come from it. That's how my people learned to begin with."

"I will, master Chohla. Thank you."

"I'll be traveling on now," he said with a casual air, "but not back to your Cragwood forest. I'm of a mood to visit warmer places for a change. I suppose that means you and I won't cross paths again for a while."

"I suppose not," Sten agreed with a sigh, his tone melancholy.

"Rather than sitting in this damp cave for days trying to learn all of these symbols, I have a better idea." Chohla dug into his bag and pulled out a stoppered wooden flask and a thin scroll case. "Here's some paint and a roll of parchment. The paint is black; I haven't used that color in a long while. On one side of the parchment is an old map I drew long ago that I don't need anymore. Write down what you'd like and take it with you."

"Thank you, but... Is it safe to do so?"

"Safe? You mean if your parchment was lost or stolen?" Chohla said as he began painting purple symbols on his face, starting with three wavy lines. "Who else could make heads or tails of country names and strange symbols, Khoveyo?"

"I see your point, but I—I also meant... Am I allowed?"

"Oh, I understand. You wonder if creating proof of my people's gathered knowledge—no matter how vague—would cause anger in us or the fates." He shook his head. "You are not desecrating this place or insulting the elements by doing so. I'd wager some of my people have made notes to help their memories before. This place is sacred, but what's on these walls is not. I wouldn't offer you the choice to do this otherwise."

"I know you'd never mean to lead me into trouble, master Chohla," Sten said hesitantly, "but this knowledge is important. I just - I just want to be sure..."

"Khoveyo, listen to me. Every single thing has a story to tell. If I brought a fallen birch leaf with me when I traveled from here, it does no harm. If I took a river rock and brought it to an arid land, then what? Its story will either remain a mystery, or be explained away with a logical guess by those who cannot let questions go unanswered. The same is true for a scroll with paint on it. The collected knowledge on these walls is for travelers, and you are one."

Unsure of how to respond, Sten only mumbled another "Thank you". With Chohla as his only comparison, he felt unworthy of the title.

Chohla smiled and said, "I'm going now, and you should go gather some firewood. Take care drawing your symbols, but be quick about it or the cave will fill with smoke and run you out." Glowing totem still in hand, he turned and began walking back into the curving tunnel. Just before stepping out of sight, the traveler looked back at Sten. "I never thanked you for the snowshoes. And our trek was memorable."

"That it was," Sten agreed with a small smile.

With a simple touch, Chohla caused the glow of his totem to die. In the inky darkness, he spoke his echoed words of parting. "Leaving is not forgetting, Khoveyo. I will remember our times and travels together until we cross paths again. Be well and do well, kinsman."

Sten listened to the sound of Chohla's soft footsteps until only silence remained. He sighed with sadness for his friend's departure, but at the same time was enthused for the journey home.

Feeling his way out of the cave, Sten's mind whirled with ideas and hopes of the future. He would build his cabin, if only as a place to return to between travels. He

wished that Annori could fit into his plans somehow, but that was a fool's dream. He knew she'd be unhappy with him gone more often than at home. She was impatient, and would move on. Who wouldn't?

Ultimately, taking a wife didn't matter much to him; thoughts of that pretty girl were quickly replaced with visions of exploring and hunting and being truly alive.

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On a cold night at the end of a long winter season, the household staff of the Oma-Vaust manor was busy. A small gathering was underway, and the lord of the manor had demanded that his guests from nearby Vallo be treated like royalty. More candles than could be counted were lit, all of the fireplaces were stoked, the steeds and carriages of the guests were cared for, and a trio of musicians played soft tunes in a cramped space adjoining the occupied banquet room.

Lord Nollinhelt Vaust was satisfied, both with the service and the company he kept that evening. He sat at the head of his long dining table, which was crowded with aromatic platters of food and etched glass goblets filled and refilled with the best Vallo wines. Seated around the table, enjoying the variety of foods and conversations, were some important people to keep on good terms with. The gathering was called as a celebration for Nollinhelt's niece, but, as a clever merchant, Lord Vaust knew to make the most of any situation.

Seated along the table to Nollinhelt's left were two dignitaries and an advisor of the King's court. Beyond them at the far left end sat Eggar, the chief trade emissary of the Vaust transport enterprise and the most respected employee of the manor.

Sitting opposite Nollinhelt at the far end of the table was his young, blissfully ignorant wife. He married Lyani for her beauty, her breasts, and her submissive nature. She was naively unaware that her life was in danger from not yet giving him a son and heir.

Whereas the left side of the dining table was lined with influential men, the guests to the right would've best been described as dangerous. They were representatives of powers soon to be reckoned with in Kaldevarr, Nollinhelt was sure.

Furthest to the right was senior Triad cleric Vonngar Pokk, second to the high priest of Vallo and appointed scribe to the religion's inner circle. The outspoken zealot had been preaching words of caution as of late while gathering a fanatical militia for some heathen agenda. Nollinhelt was aware that some of the boatmen in his employ were superstitious and still prayed to the old gods, so he wondered how far Pokk was going to push the so-called holy endeavor.

Then sat three Makers—Rhone Shade-smith, Kauldur Night-heart, and of course Nollinhelt's only and beloved niece, Oradna. The party was for her being named and recognized by the Maker's council just the day before. 'Hammer-touch' was the moniker given to his niece—Maker Oradna Hammer-touch. Considering her specific arcane abilities, the name was apt.

Maker Shade-smith, a slender and sly man with a long chin beard, was well known by the Kalde royalty and the King's guards. He was a Maker of vivid illusions, and used his phantom creations as needed or as a lark. He was at one

time the entertainer of the King's grand feasts, but no longer. Rumors began that Rhone was using his arts to impersonate various officials and nobility to beguile and bed ladies of the castle, including the King's daughter.

Next to Maker Shade-smith was his longtime friend, Kauldur. Maker Night-heart had visited the Oma-Vaust estate a number of times while accompanying Oradna. His chiseled face and intense predator's gaze were alarming at first, but he and Nollinhelt soon found they shared the same opinions on many topics. He was delighted that the ambitious Maker had taken interest in his niece, the only family he had left.

To many folks, Oradna may have seemed arrogant and aloof. Nollinhelt, however, saw her from the eyes of a proud uncle. She was unique and willful, decisive in her choices. True, she was an acquired taste, and her destructive arts did not have much practical use—other than sinking his competitor's boats for him—but Makers were a rare breed and held in high esteem simply by title. She now had reason to be feared, which, in his opinion, was just as good as respect.

Nollinhelt's brother would've been honored by what his daughter had ascended to, if only he was alive to see it. Then again, he sometimes wondered, what would've become of Oradna if her greedy, conniving parents still lived? Even after so many years, Nollinhelt never once felt remorse for killing them.

His reverie ended when Oradna spoke to him. "I never gave proper thanks for the fine gelding, Uncle," she said loud enough to be heard through the chatter at the table.

He patted her hand. "I wanted to ensure that your riding lessons weren't wasted."

"I'll see to it, Noll," Kauldur interjected. "At the next opportunity, we will -"

Rhone tapped Kauldur's arm and softly said, "Sorry to interrupt, but I thought you might take interest in the story that emissary Eggar is telling to Lady Vaust."

Noll overheard and peered down the table. "A story, is it? Then if you please, good Eggar, regale us all," he requested.

"Ah, yes, of course, milord. As I was telling your wife, it seems there was quite the dramatic and amazing instance up north in the village of Duuvihal not long ago..."

Eggar went on to tell a story relayed by one of the travelling traders who worked for Lord Vaust under the emissary's direction. The trader swore his tale to be the truth, for however much weight the word of a haggler carried. Eggar first described the village's constant trouble with wolves, although not the common variety. Den wolves were larger than the norm. Packs were cunning, aggressive, and did not fear men. Duuvihal continued to lose livestock and the occasional villager to them.

Then a young hunter came along, barely of age to court for marriage. He hoped to replace his meager gear and weapons with metal ones, and so struck a bargain with the village elder. Given five days, the hunter had to bring back proof of one dozen dead wolves.

Eggar reminded the other guests that the setting was in deep cold and heavy snows, and that the young hunter ventured out alone with a few stone-tipped arrows and a bone knife. None of the villagers expected to see him again,

especially since groups of seasoned woodsmen had trekked out in the past for the same attempt. All of them failed, some horribly.

Only three days after the bargain was struck, the hunter returned from the dangerous Den Forest. Deep gashes had nearly blinded one of his eyes, teeth and broken claws were still lodged in his flesh, and two of his fingers had been bitten off. He merely smiled through the blood and the pain. The young man strode into Duuvihal village with a full score of wolf heads and pelts, dragging them through the snow by ropes fashioned from the beast's own guts.

The elder was elated, and the villagers were awed. They wanted to celebrate the hunter's deed for saving them from further attacks, but he wanted no accolades. He collected his winnings and drifted off into the market crowd. The trader lost sight of him soon after.

"That was quite the incredible account, to say the least!" Noll exclaimed. Other opinions around the table differed. Noll's wife was giddy with the idea of a fearless battle-torn hero defying improbable odds. The court dignitaries murmured that such a feat was hardly believable. Cleric Pokk added that the story must have been exaggerated, and the trader had therefore lied to his superiors. Oradna rolled her eyes.

"All lies have a basis of truth," Kauldur said thoughtfully. "But as you stated, Noll, the tale was indeed incredible. And suspicious," he added somberly.

"Suspicious?" Noll asked, confused.

Kauldur nodded. "The implication of deeds performed that are beyond the capabilities of most men is the providence of my office, and accounts such as this deserve my attention." Turning his gaze to emissary Eggar, he asked, "Where is this trader now? I would have a word with him."

Suddenly the focus of the Maker's intense and unwavering stare, Eggar fumbled his response. "He is, uh... That is, I—I've sent him out to Palonin, as I normally do this time of year."

"Hmm," Kauldur grumbled. "And where is this Duuvihal located?"

"It is up on the North trail, less than two days west of a pair of low peaks they call the Sisters."

Kauldur turned once more to Noll and said, "Plans have changed. I will depart for Duuvihal in the morn with a retinue of men-at-arms. Your inimitable niece may rejuvenate her equestrian lessons sooner than scheduled, should she choose to accompany me."

"Of course I will, Inquisitor," Oradna answered with a suggestive smirk.

Ignoring her demurely wanton expression, Kauldur looked to his right. "And you, of course, Rhone," he said. "Your guile and perception may prove invaluable in my questioning of the northern peasants." Maker Shade-smith smiled at the offer and nodded his head in assent.

Returning his attention to the feast with a renewed appetite, Kauldur thought of the journey ahead while he piled a variety of foods onto his plate. His voracious hunger reflected his eagerness to begin; to satisfy his cravings and find the truth behind the story of the uncanny hunter. And then conquer him.

* * * * *

Halivik took a deep breath of the crisp midday air that early spring offered. He was glad to be home from the village, back to the quiet comfort of his family and the solitude of the forest around them. After a cold season of hardship, he hoped the blue sky and melting snow were promises of better days to come.

Less than ten days earlier, Baraide had taken a hard fall on the snow-packed path out to their goat shed. There was no one with trained hands to help since old Jonigar the healer sadly went to the sky early in the winter. Irisella became sick again, as she did every winter. Tullgar tripped while loading stones at the Oma-Krin estate and broke some teeth; chances were slim he'd ever attract a woman. The bitter winter caused Halivik's aches to flare more than normal, forcing him to simplify his activities. Some trapping and a few spear hunts were all he could manage.

Beyond the family misfortunes, Halivik was beset with other troubles. Parts of his sod roof had sagged and leaked from snow weight. Two of his syrup trees dried up. His ox had started limping from age and hoof-rot. A few of the penned rabbits froze to death. One of the goats died while birthing her kid. No, the past season had not been kind.

What gnawed at Halivik the most was that his son Stenhelt had not yet returned home. He had no idea where the young man was or how he fared, and could do nothing but fret. He saw the same worry in Baraide's eyes, and was barely able to keep her consoled with encouraging words and a brave face. His son had skills beyond most men, and knew a few Makers' tricks as well, but those facts didn't stop Halivik from pacing the floor some nights.

Luck had turned for the better that morning, however. A large trading caravan had come to Bruvaal late the night before. It attracted most of the local folks and their wares... and their children, and their sellable livestock. Halivik had never been fond of crowds, but he grudgingly admitted that the opportunity—no matter how hectic and crowded—couldn't be missed. The caravan was seven wagons long, and all manner of things were bought or bartered. Despite all of the noise and activity that grated Halivik's nerves, he'd made some good trades.

During the morning's chaos, Baraide kept to the wagon because of her injured ankle. She had smiles for everyone despite her pain, bargained well with the visiting traders, and sold many more bone trinkets than expected. Caravan tradesmen praised Halivik for his quality leather goods, especially his intricate tooling designs. He used those compliments to haggle for a higher value. Even Tull had done well selling his bows and sturdy furniture. On the short ride home, the family shared smiles that had lately been hard to find.

While Iri helped her mother inside the cabin and Tull brought the ox and wagon to the barn, Halivik stood in front of his home and took another deep, cleansing breath. That was when he noticed an ox-pulled wagon through the trees. It moved at a leisurely pace out on the South trail, coming from the village. He regarded it with casual interest.

The wagon was a fair size, but the team of two large oxen hauled it with ease. The sideboards were unpainted, so it didn't belong to the caravan. Nor was it one of Lady Tovira's; all of hers were marked with a large brand. A pair of goats was tied to the wagon, walking along behind it. The driver was unrecognizable -

someone wearing a thick fur with a horned hood. Formerly casual interest spiked when the wagon turned off the trail and came up the path.

Halivik kept a wary gaze as the wagon pulled near and the driver nimbly hopped to the ground. The man was near average size, but the long and bulky bison coat he wore made him appear larger. The deep hood was pulled over and shadowed his face, although a trimmed black beard could be seen. The four stout bison horns attached to the hood gave the man a daunting presence. He walked toward Halivik with a broad smile... A familiar smile.

Grinning even wider at the bewildered stare he was receiving, Sten held his arms out and said, "Father, did you forget me already?"

Halivik's eyes shot open in shock. "Stenhelt!" he yelled, and rushed forward to lock arms with his son. He hadn't yet formed words to express his joy when Tullgar bellowed his brother's name as well. They turned and saw the big man running toward them, and both tensed for the impact. Tull gleefully grabbed up his brother from the side and spun in a circle, making Sten's hood fall back. "Tull, don't break him!" Halivik admonished with a laugh.

"Let me down, you great ox," Sten ordered with a grin. Tull released the crushing hug, but held him at arm's length. He allowed a moment for his older brother to speak, but Tull always had trouble arranging his thoughts on short notice. "By the gods, brother," Sten said to fill the void, "I think you've gotten bigger in my short time away! A herd of bison may mistake you as one of their own." He saw Tull's chipped-tooth grin and added, "What happened? Did you bite down on one of Iri's biscuits?"

Still fumbling with words, Tull managed, "I tripped." He hesitated as his wide grin faltered. "Sten, your face..."

"It's called a beard, Tull," Sten teased. "Not as long as yours, but it—"

With a stern grip, Halivik turned Sten to him. He frowned at the faded slash scars on his son's face, especially the one near his eye that left a gap in his bushy eyebrow. "I suppose there's a good story for that. There better be, or your mother will have your hide."

Sten saw the lingering concern etched on that weathered face. He put a hand on his father's shoulder and said with a warm smile, "I'm well, honestly." He waited until his assurance eased those deep frown lines before continuing. "I'm sorry if I my leaving caused a burden."

"I don't give an ox pie about that any more, son," Halivik said, his smile returning. "You're home now. It was a long time away for a trek."

"I was only gone the winter, father."

"Your mother won't see it that way. You left in late autumn and came back in early spring. She'll count that as two seasons."

Their shared smile was interrupted when Baraide called out from the front door of the cottage. "Stenhelt, you come here this instant!" she demanded with tears welling in her eyes. When he approached, she pulled him into an embrace that threatened to squeeze the air out of him.

Just as Baraide released Sten, Irisella slipped between them and latched onto him. Her arms constricted around his neck and she buried her face in the shoulder of his coat, sobbing words he couldn't quite understand.

Sten hugged his sister and then peeled her off of him with a smile. He then asked his father and brother to help him unload the pelts, furs and burlap sacks of goods from the wagon. Once inside, Baraide rested her ankle while Iri fetched mugs of acorn tea for them all. Before Sten could set the last of his supplies down, each member of the family was asking about his trek.

Putting off the vague version Sten planned to tell of his experiences during the winter, he first began handing out gifts. His father was given all of the metal and forged items he'd earned up north in Duuvihal, although Sten never mentioned exactly where they came from. Halivik was stunned into silence for a few long moments, but then asked how he acquired such fine items. Sten simply told him that he hunted a pack of wolves that was causing a rich man some trouble, and he paid well for them.

Baraide was shocked to receive an iron cooking pot, four bolts of cloth and wool—all in various colors, and a silver necklace set with a sapphire gem. Sten mentioned that he purchased the necklace in Leuven; impressive news, as none of them had ever been to a large town.

Tull was thankful for the wood axe, but marveled at the set of metal woodworking tools given to him. Iri was excited to go plant the packet of rare autumnberry bush seeds, danced as she held her new green dress, and gave Sten another hug for the emerald necklace that resembled her mother's. The cottage was full of smiles and laughter.

Sten then told his father that one of the hitched oxen outside was now his; it was plain that the health of the old family ox had begun to fail since the autumn before. The other ox and the wagon were given to Tull. He'd no longer have to borrow their father's cart—and pull it himself—to haul his wares. The goats were for the family, although Sten placed them in Iri's care.

Knowing he had a few more items in one of his bags, Sten casually said, "I also have some things here for Annori as well." He let the words linger, waiting to hear how quickly a response would come. When no one spoke immediately, he knew what it meant. Annori—beautiful, impatient, and a touch shallow—decided not to wait for him.

"I'm sorry, son," Halivik said. "I was wrong about her."

"Annori accepted the courtship of a young man whose father is the Elder of Huuvik," Baraide explained sympathetically. "The fineries he can offer won't keep her happy. And, besides still being upset with you for trekking off," she continued with a firmer tone as she cast a scowling glare at her daughter, "she now has a hard eye for the rest of us as well."

"Stupid girl," Irisella muttered.

Sten turned to his sister. "What did you do, Iri?"

"Nothing compared to what she deserves," Irisella growled. She sat slumped in a chair with her arms crossed and her thin brows drawn together in anger, unwilling to elaborate.

Sten, being the only one there who didn't know the story, leaned forward and looked at her with an expectant stare. He knew she'd tell; Iri never held anything back from him.

"Vendik the innkeeper should be ashamed, having a fool for a daughter," Irisella finally replied with venom in her voice. "I went to the village with mother and Tull,

back before the snow got high. The baker's wife told us what Annori did - taking the hand of some visiting boy. And an ugly one at that! She's a schemer. Pride be snowed, she accepted the courtship of a rich man's stupid son while you were away. And not a care if it hurt you, no less! I wasn't going to let that girl betray you and do nothing."

Sten admired Irisella's fire, but he still hadn't been told the story. "Thank you for guarding my honor, Iri. It means more than you know," he said kindly. "Now what did you do?"

When she didn't answer immediately, Baraide prompted with a surly tone, "Go on, my gentle young daughter - tell your brother what you did."

"I will," she huffed. "I went right over to the inn and poured a mug of mead over her head."

"And then?" Baraide pressed.

"... And then," Iri mumbled, all the fire in her voice gone, "I punched her face."

Tull snorted through his nose, then turned away to suppress his laughter. Halivik didn't know if his grin was showing, so he put a hand over his mouth to appear as if he disapproved.

Sten was surprised. Even though Iri was turning twelve cycles that spring and no longer a little girl, he still thought of her as one. Her features and form may have become a young woman's, but she would always be his little sister. "You did what?" he asked, not sure how to react.

"When my friend Myalla told us," Baraide said, taking over the story for her reluctant daughter, "your sweet little sister turned without a word and marched over to the inn. Tull followed a few steps behind her, and I was a few steps behind him. I arrived just in time to see my normally carefree daughter hit Annori in the nose, and most likely broke it! The few villagers there at the time all stared in shock, just as I did! Annori was knocked to the floor. She sat there, hair wet with mead and her nose leaking blood, and began to cry. What a mess."

"It was a good punch," Tull softly added between his own chuckles.

Sten looked at Iri again and saw that she was trying to suppress her own grin, and completely failing. "And what was your punishment?" he asked her.

"I have to muck the stalls until the Triad calls my name, as mother put it."

Sten couldn't hide his smile. "Well, it's all for the best," he announced. "It always bothered me that Annori was... selfish, in certain ways. No husband would put up with that for long." The family shared a laugh with him. Sten silently admitted to himself that while Annori's impulsive decision hurt him, he'd expected it, and the loss wasn't as painful as he once feared it might be.

The family decided to step outside and take a better look at their newly-gifted animals. Halivik helped Baraide along, with Tull following behind them. Sten waited for Iri at the front door. She stopped next to him and whispered, "I need to talk to you."

"Don't worry; I'm not angry about what you did."

"No, not that—I'm glad I hit her. It's... something else I did. It worries me, Sten."

* * * * *

For nearly two full days after his return, Stenhelt was unable to escape the attention of his family for any good length of time. What Irisella wanted to share with him would've apparently taken longer than a few moments to tell, so she had to be patient. Their mother kept a vigilant eye on Sten, as if he might trek off again without notice. Beyond her worry, she and the family were filled with questions about where he went and the sights he'd seen.

Necessary chores awaited each member of the family, though, and they weren't shirkers. Halivik resumed his stitching of leather boots and gloves to sell at the upcoming Vale Fest. Baraide and Irisella busied themselves in the garden, and tended to the livestock. Tull stayed near his own nearby cabin to work on a carriage for Lady Tovira, but spent meal times with the family. They were lucky to enjoy their labors.

Sten wanted to begin the construction of his own cabin, and asked his mother if he could steal Iri away now and again to assist him. It was the only excuse he could think of to let his fretting sister speak her mind. Iri pleaded for the opportunity, promising to render all of the animal fats in the meat cellar and expand the pen fences. Baraide reluctantly agreed, but demanded all of the assurances that most mothers would.

Out near Scroll Creek, the siblings came to the location for Sten's future home. He previously chose a large patch of exposed and roughly level bedrock up on a slight rise for the site. Some rock and timber had already been gathered before he left for his trek. But, coming to the area again after two seasons gone, he saw a mound of loose rock and a tall triangle of debarked, cut logs. Tull said he'd gathered more while Sten was away, but made the effort sound modest.

Iri helped Sten determine dimensions and angles, and then stood on the bedrock as he worked around her to mark locations with rocks and thinner logs. "It's still cold out," she commented, shivering in her oversized rabbit-fur coat.

"Then go stand by those trees to get out of the wind," he grunted, lifting a large stone.

"No, that's alright. I came with you to help, remember?"

Sten continued with his work. "And fine help you are," he said while he walked past her to pull a log from the stack. "I don't know what I'd do without you keeping that bedrock in place."

Iri ignored his sarcasm. "I could never understand how you could stand it, running around in the snow wearing little more than boots and that cur poncho."

"Except for the winter out on the Thunder Plains, cold never troubled me much. You get sick every winter, so it's plain why you don't like it. In the summers, though, you're like a squirrel on the chase." Sten then grinned and added, "Perhaps I should've asked for you to help me then."

"You prefer winter? That's a harsh season for hunting. Summers are better for everything."

Sten gave his sister an incredulous glance. "Summers are good for gardening and the like, but not much else. In summers, scents don't carry too well, game meat can spoil quickly, and bugs can ruin all sorts of things. But in winter, the lack of leaves makes for a better path of sight, and tracking prey in snow is much easier."

"Well... that may be, but I don't hunt. Summers are best for many other things."

"Fair enough; it's best for crops and herds and such. While it's not my favorite season, I do like summers as well... although I tend to draw flies like a field pie," he responded with a wink.

Iri chuckled at him, but a troubled expression quickly replaced her smile. She stood there for a few long moments before asking, "Sten, can I talk to you about my problem now?"

Sten stopped his work and saw his sister looking fragile and distressed. Hoping more light banter might brighten her mood, he said, "As you're not doing anything else, I don't see why not."

She scowled at him, and then reached into her coat. "I have something for you to see," she said, "but you cannot tell anyone. Please swear to it."

"Very well, I swear," he agreed, stepping closer.

Iri pulled out a wooden mug and held it in front of her. "Here," she whispered. "Look closely."

Sten looked at it, noticing nothing except for a small chip in the wood and the faint scent of mead. "Is this the mug you poured over Annori's head?" She nodded, looking down. "So you stole this from the inn?" he asked with a firmer tone.

"Yes, but—but, Sten, I—"

"You stole, Iri," he stated angrily, "and from a neighbor, no less. We've known Vendik all our lives. He has always shown us kindness, no matter what kind of daughter he raised. I can't believe you did this, taking from a good man."

"I'm sorry!" she wailed as tears began to well in her eyes. "I didn't mean to... I saw what I did, and I panicked. I mean, not to Annori, but the..." She pushed the mug out for him to take.

Sten held the mug in his hand and, turning it, saw that the wooden handle was quite warped. It also had deep depressions that small fingers could fit into, like a potter would squeeze clay. He looked at her with more alarm than confusion. "What did you do to it?" he asked, although a vague answer had already come to him—ancestral blood.

"I—I don't know," Iri sniffed. "I mean, I have a notion, but I've never done anything like that before. I was as angry as I'd ever been, and—and I saw the mug on the floor after I hit her. I suppose everyone was looking at Annori, but all I saw was the twisted mug. I picked it up and ran out. I didn't know how to explain if Vendik saw what I did to the mug."

"Then explain it to me," Sten said as calmly as he could.

"I don't know, Sten!" she cried louder than before.

Sten tossed the mug aside and pulled his sister into a firm embrace, letting her tears stain his wool shirt. "Alright, Iri, it's alright," he soothed with a whisper. "Take deep breaths and calm down, or I'll have to dunk your head in the creek."

A grunt of laughter ended her weeping. "I'll pull your ears if you try," she said into his shirt.

He pulled back, holding her at arm's length. "Let's get you out of this refreshing breeze and we'll find out what can be done for your matter." They stepped over to a nearby stand of evergreens that the wind couldn't cut through, and then sat facing each other. "Now," Sten continued, "you said you have a notion of what happened. What do you mean?"

"I've always been 'good in the garden', as mother says. You know our berry bushes always come into bloom early, and our orchard trees are bigger than most. Not to sound proud, but I think those things have happened because of me rather than lucky happenstance."

Trying to sound skeptical, Sten asked, "How do you know it was you?"

"I—I sort of urge them. The plants and trees, I mean." Seeing her brother's frown, she explained further. "The soil in the garden isn't as good as mother thinks. When I was little, I tested myself. I urged a few different cabbage plants, and they grew to nearly twice the size of the others. I've done more tests since. I'm sure it's me. Don't you remember those onions four summers ago that were bigger than your head?"

"Yes, I remember." Because of the excess, their mother plied them with onion stew until their father demanded that she stop. "So mother doesn't know about this... this special way you have with plants?"

"No, oh no," she replied, shaking her head emphatically.

"Why, Iri?" Sten asked. "This can only be a good thing, yes?"

"No, it can be a bad thing, too. All those cycles ago, when I saw you chase that fox... You looked at how your hands had changed, and you were scared. And it made me scared. Then you began going to Lady Krin's estate, I thought because she had to use some sort of magic to fix you. I didn't want that to happen to me, so I kept my, em, nature's touch a secret. That's why I knew you would understand more than anyone else. I might never have told you my secret, but things became truly strange this past winter."

"Strange?" he asked hesitantly. "From what you say, you made things strange enough already."

"I wasn't strange," Iri countered defensively. "All the plants liked me. Bees came near without stinging me. Butterflies followed me. It was my own special secret, and it was fun."

"So it's no longer fun? The plants don't like you anymore?"

"They still do, I suppose, but I no longer have to sit there and urge them," Iri answered, and then turned to a protruding evergreen branch. She slowly lifted her hand, and the branch began to curve upward. When she put her hand back in her lap, the branch remained in its new position. "After I got angry with Annori, something changed," she explained. "My fever this winter was worse than any before. Later, I urged a bush and it came to full bloom right before my eyes."

Sten looked from the branch to her. "That helps to explain the mug, I suppose."

Iri nodded. "And I've tried my touch on tree limbs since, alive and dead. I can make them bend like baker's dough. That's part of what scares me. I could end up hurting someone much worse than giving them a sore nose if I lose my temper. Can Lady Krin fix me?"

Sten's heart ached for the desperate tone in his sister's voice. He shook his head in answer her anxious question, and then explained, "Iri, Lady Tovira had no cure for me because I didn't need one. The tricks I learned from her did not save me from any Maker's madness. Her teachings are helpful, but not needed... for either of us. The abilities you have are not the signs of being a Maker, I'm sure of it."

"Then what is this, Sten? My secret used to be so fun. Now it frightens me."

Sten pursed his lips, trying to find the right words. He was no wise guide like Chohla. His sister was depending on him, though, so he could only follow the examples of his mentor. "I don't have your nature's touch," he stated. "Do you have a bond with animals as I do?"

"No," Iri replied with a faint grin. "Some autumns back, while you and father were off hunting, I tried to chase a rabbit as you chased that fox. It was gone before I was short of breath."

Her story confirmed Sten's hunch. "I learned some hidden truths from a man who is like us," he began. "We have ancient blood in us, Iri. It comes from people who were in this land before the first Kalde settlers arrived. Some of those people mated with ours, although they did not stay or wed to raise the children they sired. Those people were filled with wanderlust, and they had abilities greater than ours. They knew secrets."

Iri frowned. "I never heard of those people in my lessons with cleric Mundur. Does Lady Krin know of them?"

"I never asked, but I don't think so. The man I spoke of, the one who told me this... He has been my guide from time to time since I was younger than you are now. He doesn't have a care for being noticed, nor to have people remember him. I imagine the rest of his people are of the same mind. As far as I know, he never lived in a village or stayed in any one place for long. By his own words, his people have always been nomads. I doubt you would hear any stories or songs about them."

Pondering the new information, Iri slowly asked, "So, those people... Most likely mystics of some sort, I'd wager, but... Who exactly are they?"

"I don't know," Sten answered with a shrug and shake of his head. "I was never told. In my mind, I call them the Wanderers. The man I speak of is the same stranger who helped father all those cycles ago after curs attacked us."

"But... you and father said a traveling herbalist chanced upon you."

"He is an herbalist, and more—much more. He may be one of the first Wanderers, or perhaps a pure descendant of them. I'm not sure. What I know for truth is he taught me many things that Lady Tovira knows nothing of. I was told abilities come to us in different forms, or ways. Mine is 'the way of the beast', he said. Your way must be with trees and flowers and such."

Iri thought for a moment before pondering aloud, "Perhaps your guide and his kin are related to the old gods, the ones that some folks still pray to for harvests and fair weather."

"It's as good a guess as any, although that would put us as related to gods—false gods, cleric Mundur would say. Believe what you will, but I won't entertain such a smug notion."

"Then who do you think they are?"

Sten sighed. "I honestly don't know. If my guide thought I was ready to be told, he would have. Other than knowing many secrets, he always seemed to be a normal man. Overall, I tend not to dwell on the Wanderers; I think on who I am and what good I can do with my abilities."

Iri understood his meaning and nodded. She needed to find answers within herself rather than mysteries she might never know the truth of. "Could this man,

your guide... Since he came along and helped you with..." she rolled her hands to express her words, "...your own way, could he help me with mine?"

"I'm sure he could, but he has traveled on. I don't know when I'll see him again." Sten's words caused Iri's eyes to widen with dismay, so he tried to assure her. "I'm no teacher, Iri, but I will help as best I can."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Now, I don't know everything about my own abilities, let alone yours. Still, we won't let that won't stop us. I was taught to rely on my instincts and let things happen naturally. You should follow the same advice, and have faith in yourself. Most importantly, explore your 'nature's gift' with father's wisdom: heart and thought."

"I won't forget," she responded earnestly.

Sten smiled. "You're smart, Iri; I think you'll know when to be either bold or careful with testing yourself. Like I said, trust your feelings. Now, let's begin. Tell me what you feel is best."

Iri thought for a moment. "I should... keep this a secret, as before," she began hesitantly. "Most folks wouldn't understand." Sten nodded his agreement. "I should explore what I can do, but only on dead plants and trees at first; I don't want to hurt a live one."

"And do so out of sight and sound from home," he added to her statement, "just to be safe against the unexpected."

"Yes, alright," Iri concurred. "I also... need to repay Vendik for the mug."

"That would be only right and fair."

"And, I should..." she faltered, looking around absently beyond her brother. "I should mention that you have a problem."

The statement surprised Sten. "What—I—What problem do I have?" he stuttered.

"Well, look," Iri said as she pointed at the site of his future home. "You have bedrock flooring to build around, the land is clear in front, woods to the back, and you're less than thirty paces from fresh water. All good planning, I'd say."

"I think so, yes," Sten said slowly, unsure of what she was leading to. He wasn't concerned, though. The tension had left his sister's voice, and a sparkle was back in her eyes. The Iri he knew and loved was with him again. It was all that mattered.

"Then unless you plan to squat in the creek like a crude pig or a barbaric Ferren, you need to find a spot for an outhouse."

"Oh." He'd spent so much time squatting in the wild that an outhouse never came to mind. Once mentioned, the concept seemed almost too civilized.

* * * * *

Ten long days after riding out of Vallo, Kauldur Night-heart sat in the nearly empty common room of Duvinhal's Dancing Bear inn. The establishment had been commandeered by the Maker's party when they arrived the day before. Three of the accompanying domain guards sat near the front door, eating breakfast. Kauldur sat a table next to the inn's hearth, ignoring the crackling flames and the rumbling thunder outside as he mulled over recent information.

The front door of the inn swung open, interrupting his thoughts. Oradna walked in, pulling back the hood of her rain-soaked cloak. Stepping in behind her was one of their big domain guards, who had a rough grip on a haggard, middle-aged man.

"How did you fare with the villagers?" Kauldur asked as they approached his table.

Oradna unclasped her cloak and threw it aside before sitting next to him. "I tell you now," she said as she leaned back into her chair and smoothed her yellow robe, "I'd have no luck as an inquisitor. Most of the scum in this village ran when I came near. The rest cowered in silence or mumbled stupidly. However, I did find one resident of this pigsty," she gestured at the scared, unshaven man who was pulled near their table, "who might know a thing or two."

Kauldur glanced at the man's shabby appearance and held up a hand to stop the guard from forcing him any closer. With a jaded tone, the Maker asked, "Who are you?"

Averting his eyes from meeting either of the ones in front of him, the man replied, "A—a fair morn to you, g-good Maker. My name is—"

"Your name is meaningless," Kauldur interrupted. "I was inquiring of your vocation, if any. Do you have an aptitude worthy to secure subsistence?"

When the man looked at him with a baffled expression, Oradna let out an exasperated sigh. "He's asking what you do for a living, you oaf."

"Oh, eh... I'm a shepherdder."

"That would explain the stench that even a hard rain couldn't wash off," she commented.

Ignoring her, Kauldur spoke to the man. "There was supposedly an astounding occurrence in this village at the onset of winter, shepherdder. A young man was said to have slain a number of Den wolves that used to be a nuisance here. Were you present to witness and recollect the event?"

The shepherdder lowered his eyes again and nodded his head. "Yes sir, I was in the commons that morning."

Kauldur waited a moment, and then said with a hard tone, "Elaboration is required, my good peasant. Now, continue." The big guard gave the man a shake to emphasize the Maker's orders.

More nervous than before, the shepherdder said, "I'd come into the village early that morn to sell wool for spinning, and to buy a keg of ale. The fabric shop owner gives better prices early on market days, so I—"

"Enough!" Kauldur barked. "I did not ask you to ramble on like a buffoon!" He turned to Oradna and said, "I do not care to waste my energies on the likes of a lowly shepherdder. I confess to be currently suffering from a dark mood, and so he might not survive any impetus I might impose. A dead peasant does me no good. Would you be so kind as to give our guest some small incentive to provide the information I seek?"

Oradna nodded and smiled, then turned to the shepherdder. His face was drained of color, his eyes were wide with terror, and his body trembled in the guard's grasp. "Place your hand on the table," she softly demanded. When the frightened man hesitated, the guard roughly forced him to comply and kept a strong hand clamped on his wrist.

Drawing lazy symbols in the air, Oradna hissed a few words in Locan. She then touched her index finger onto the tip of the shepherd's middle finger. There was a soft *tick*—the sound of a small bone snapping. The man grunted and began to slump. The guard used his free hand to hold him upright.

"Let us begin anew, shall we?" Kauldur said over the shepherd's whimpering. "There was a hunter here in early winter, yes?" The man quickly nodded. "And I'm told he brought back proof of many dead wolves from the surrounding forest, is that correct?" The man nodded again. "Very good, shepherd; gentle persuasion leads to a succinct conversation, don't you agree? Now, how many wolves were killed? Remember, elucidation will serve you well."

"Fifteen or—or sixteen pelts and heads on the sled, Maker," the man answered through gritted teeth. "I didn't count. The number varies with the telling. Wolves were big, all adults."

"Did you see the hunter in question?"

The man nodded, holding back his pain. "He passed by me. Younger man, shorter than me, long black hair, trim beard." He paused to draw a breath, trying not to moan. "Fresh wounds on his face, one hand wrapped, slight limp, carried a good bow."

"If that is all you can recall," Kauldur said indifferently, "then the Order of Makers thanks you for your service. Oradna, pay the man."

Smirking, she leaned forward while hissing more Locan and broke another of his finger bones with a touch. The shepherd cried out and fell to his knees.

"I meant a coin, dearest," Kauldur casually chided. He looked at the guard and said, "Escort the shepherd out, and then bring a meal to Maker Shade-smith. If the whore he brought in last evening is still present, she can keep her legs open for you and the other men. If she demands payment, tell her to request it from me... if she dares."

The guard grinned, nodded his thanks, and then dragged the shepherd away. After he left, Oradna leaned forward on the table and asked, "What has you vexed, Kauldur?"

He frowned. "I ponder two points. First, I spoke with this village's elder early this morning. The information he gave has stirred an elusive memory in my mind, and I cannot capture it."

"A memory... Of dead wolves, do you mean?" Oradna ventured.

"No," Kauldur answered irritably. "I am referring to what the elder said of the hunter. Not in terms of depiction; the shepherd confirmed elder Berik's telling of the man's looks, and of the amount of wolves slain. The elder explained that the young man was not from Duuvihal, and that he left the village the on the same day he returned from his successful hunt. Innards used as rope was pure fabrication, but the majority of the story is sworn to. Evidently, elder Berik thinks of this hunter as a hero with skills that no group of woodmen could match."

"The weak-minded are easily impressed," Oradna scoffed.

"Agreed," Kauldur said, and then frowned. "Nonetheless, facts and nearly identical testimony from independent sources cannot be ignored. Besides my currently faulting memory, this troubles me. How did this man accomplish such a task? That I am aware of, no other Maker's art would explain it."

"You mean besides your own, of course," she purred, edging closer to him.

"Obviously," he agreed arrogantly. "My art is unmatched. I certainly would not deign to use my prowess slaughtering wolves, especially for peasants who are too pathetic to handle their own affairs." Kauldur then leaned his face closer to hers and spoke in lower tones. "I have gone to great lengths to ensure that there is no other Maker of blood besides myself."

Oradna raised her eyebrows at the new piece of information, but said nothing. She understood the implication. Her mentor was proud; his ego would not allow an equal.

"So," Kauldur continued in the same guarded manner, "if this hunter has some other art that nearly parallels mine, what could it be?" He clenched a fist with the question. He thought of the modest hero of Duuvihal as an unknown quantity, a possible obstruction or challenge of his plans of ascendancy. He also thought of him as a water well to be drained, and then closed off.

Oradna paused, unused to seeing Kauldur at a loss. She forced a smile and said, "We will ask this hunter once he is in our grasp. This young man... He is just another dirty peasant, like the fools and cowards he won over here. His only difference was luck. He cannot escape you, Kauldur. We will have to search for him, but I believe he will soon be within reach."

"Yes, he will be... although I am uncertain about how soon that might be. The target is nearly a season ahead of us and—leaving his allegedly wondrous skills aside—he is an outdoorsman as well, a hearty type of peasant. He could be anywhere in Kaldevarr by now, and without need of civilized provisions. We may have a long road ahead of us, Oradna."

She leaned closer and rested a hand on his forearm. "Fate has always favored you. The truth has never escaped the greatest Inquisitor of the Order of Makers, and this time will be no different."

"Of course it won't," Kauldur retorted with an indignant tone. "I am merely stating that pursuing this young hunter may prove to be an arduous task. There is no need to affirm my conviction."

"I meant no offense." Oradna pulled back and quickly changed the subject. "Now, about what the village elder told you of the hunter... Was a name given?"

"Yes," he answered after a deep breath. "The hunter's name was Stenhelt, originally from a village somewhere in the south called Bruvaal. Both the name and village sound familiar, but my memory fails me beyond that."

"Stenhelt, you said? And Bruvaal... I recall that place name in one of the reports you had me check before I sent it off to the scribes."

"Bruvaal village, in a report... Yes, you're right!" Kauldur exclaimed. "One of the more recent scrolls, almost surely from Maker Winter-hand, yes?"

"Yes," Oradna replied with a smile, happy to prove her value, "given by an estate servant."

"A girl... She made accusations against someone named Stenhelt?"

"Outlandish accusations, if I remember correctly."

"But of what nature?" he asked heatedly. "Can you recall any details of those accusations?"

Oradna thought for a moment. "Physical abilities, I believe..." She shrugged apologetically. "Forgive me, Kauldur. I looked over the report, but didn't study it."

"Not to worry, my dear," he replied with a brighter tone. "We'll review it once we've returned home. And it would be prudent of me to question Frimgar for any other information that his old mind may have mistakenly omitted."

The stomp of heavy feet coming down the inn's stairs drew Kauldur and Oradna's attention. A sleepy Rhone Shade-smith came into their view, wearing nothing but trousers and riding boots. He wandered over to them, flopped into a chair, and immediately rested his head on the table. "Why did you have smelly mutton brought to me?" he grumbled. "I need more wine, not the burnt flesh of some foul little creature. It nearly made me ill."

"And a good morning to you as well," Kauldur said, finding himself in a much better mood than only moments before.

Rhone lifted his head and looked at both of them with heavy-lidded eyes. "Ah, yes—manners," he said groggily. "Good morning to you both. Now please have someone bring me wine." His head then dropped back to the table.

Kauldur gestured to a guard for a cask of wine and three goblets. "Good news, my friend," he said to Rhone. "My inquiry has concluded."

"It has?" Rhone mumbled. "I thought you'd have the entire village lined up for questioning."

"I've gathered what I needed from them. Now I have questions for you. As a former entertainer of the King's court, you have become acquainted with many lords of estates, have you not?"

Rhone slowly lifted his head. "Mostly by name only," he replied, "not that there are many estate holders to begin with. Where are you going with this?"

While a guard set down the wine and goblets, Kauldur said, "I received a report from a girl who works on an estate in the south. Knowledge of that estate owner would assist in my choices of how to proceed. Both of the estate lords I know have small militias at their disposal, so it would be rash of me to interrogate one of their personnel without permission or bribe. The same may be true of this situation..."

"Yes, I see your meaning," Rhone said while he sloppily poured wine for each of them.

"So, are you familiar with any lords in the southern region?"

After a long sip, Rhone said, "I can think of only a few, but they live in remote areas and do not visit Vallo often. One may be dead by now, and I wouldn't be surprised if another—a lord Lohja, if I recall correctly—will be sooner or later knifed by his own workers. A tyrant, he is."

"Does either of those lords live near a village called Bruvaal?" Oradna asked.

Rhone ran his hand over his face and smoothed his long chin beard. "Bruvaal, down near the Skean Peaks? No, I don't think so," he answered. "I know for a fact that the Lohja estate is near Breskallin. The other may be outside of Troven."

"Surely there are more estates in the south," Kauldur said, his voice bordering on surly.

"Of course there are, but I'm not aware of every rich merchant in Kaldevarr," Rhone replied in kind. He sighed and took another drink. "The last I can vaguely recall," he continued, wiping his mouth, "is one of the traitorous ones who shunned the Order of Makers and instead took the mantle of an estate holder."

"Rhone, there are only two former Makers alive; Fog-caller and Dark-foot. Which one is it?"

"Dark-foot, I believe. A pity; Oma-Krin makes very good wine."

Kauldur sat back with a smile. "Ah, Tovira Dark-foot... That insolent, perfidious woman might face justice after all."

* * * * *

For Stenhelt, the passing spring was a season of eagerly anticipated undertakings and time with family. In the solitude of the Cragwood, he made time during whichever task he'd embarked on to reflect on his travels and adventures. He was eager to venture out again, but remained patient; there were goals to accomplish first.

Postponing the construction of his home, Sten went south on a hunt deep into the forest. He tracked wood curs for days, finally spearing one. He then sent out an aura for the rest of the pack to leave; they needed little convincing. He cleaned the pelt, and chose a thigh bone for his totem. Following Chohla's example, the meat was given to the forest.

During the trek home, a boar and two striped deer were also added to his sled. The excess meat was sold to the village innkeeper, Vendik, who seemed uncomfortable during the barter. Sten assumed the reaction was because of the failed courtship with Annori, so he explained that he understood her decision and that all was well.

Not long after his cur hunt, Sten explained the magic of bone totems to Irisella and offered to take her hunting for her own. She guiltily admitted that she'd already used her inherent skills to kill. A raccoon had gotten into her cherished autumnberry bushes. Angered at the damage it caused, she urged the low branch of a nearby tree to grab the fleeing animal. The urging was apparently too strong; the branch whipped out at the raccoon and snapped its neck.

Full of regret, Iri had buried the animal out beyond the sap trees. Sten dug it up, skinned it, and gave her a bone totem of her own. She received it with mixed emotions, seeing the mystic item as both a gift and a reminder.

One day, while Iri watched Sten clean a pelt with his Maker's trick, she asked, "Do you think any inherent gifts were passed on to Tull?"

Sten looked up from his work. "Isn't it obvious, Iri? He could most likely uproot one of mother's orchard trees if he put his mind and back to it."

"He's stronger than a team of oxen, true, but..." she paused and shrugged. "It's such a simple thing compared to what we can do with our gifts."

"Tull is a simple man, so perhaps it's fitting that his ability is the same."

Iri nodded her agreement of Sten's logic, and then asked, "Will you tell him of bone totems?"

Sten sat back. "I've thought about that," he replied with a sigh, "but I don't think it would be wise. Tull is fascinated by my little tricks; think of what he might do with his own totem. I love him, but I cannot trust his lack of good judgment to use a powerful tool with caution. I fear he'd fetch trouble, and quickly. Please avoid letting him see you use yours as well."

"I will, I swear." Iri wasn't fond of keeping secrets from Tull, and could sense that Sten wasn't, either. There was nothing to be done for it, though. Keeping their elder brother ignorant of hidden truths was the only way to ensure his safety.

The cabin came together more quickly than expected. Between chores, Irisella and Baraide came out to pack daubing between fitted logs, and helped set his sod roof. While Tullgar had lately become Lady Tovira's cooper for her winery, he still had time to assist in building the stone foundation and chimney. Halivik saw to details such as hinges for the door and shutters, but mostly came to spend time with his son and hear more accounts of his trek.

Sten was quite satisfied with the finished structure. Tull built and provided a sturdy table, chair and bedframe; his mother made down-stuffed padding for the latter two. His father gave him a few of the stretching racks for large pelts. Iri offered to plant berry bushes of Sten's choosing around the outside. He wanted skyberry, mostly to have the uncommon berries on hand for the purple paint needed to make high sigils. His father questioned the choice of a poisonous bush; Sten said they'd keep rodents away, which was true enough.

By the time summer set in, Sten had begun studying his maps and gathering supplies for another trek. As Chohla suggested, he would choose a destination in Kaldevarr. Surprisingly, there was a hallowed place marked where the city of Vallo was. He had no desire to travel there, but two other locations did seem appealing. The first was a place deep in the Whispering Pines, near the Thorn Hills. The other location, and most intriguing to Sten, was far out on a peninsula of the eastern coast - a large, remote, and possibly unexplored area. The notion of it thrilled him.

When the two moons were full again in autumn, Sten would go to the hallowed cave near Caribou Lake and depart. No doubt Iri would want to travel with him, but he knew their parents would refuse without debate. His sister was good company, but he selfishly didn't want the burden of looking after her in the event of unforeseen danger. He wanted his next trek to be a purely solitary one, unfettered by anything except what fate offered.

Time was the only obstacle left to hurdle, although Sten made the most of it. He helped Tull plane timber planks for Lady Tovira's wine casks, and traveled with him to deliver them on one occasion. He was greeted warmly by every resident of Oma-Krin estate, especially Tovira herself.

Sten noted Silga's odd behavior when she and other estate workers welcomed him back. She seemed shy at first, but her lips kept curling into a strange grin. When she found a moment to speak privately with him, she offered condolences for Annori choosing another suitor. Her eyes belied her words. Sten left soon after, wondering why Silga would be false with him.

A few days after the visit to Lady Tovira's estate, Iri came to Sten's cabin. She told him that she wanted to explore her 'nature's touch' further, and asked for assistance in the form of a game. Hide and seek, of all things. Trusting in his own skills and abilities, Sten doubted that his little sister had much chance to win. He soon learned differently—she'd been practicing.

First, Iri had somehow left no tracks into the woods at all -no pressed grass, no broken twigs, nor any marks on bare ground. Listening, he couldn't hear footsteps or movement through any underbrush. Sten had to use his sense of smell to lead him, and eventually caught her scent. Hunting for his sister was proving more difficult than any wild game he'd ever stalked.

He was surprised once more when wild grass and underbrush reached out and pulled at his boots to slow him. Then tree limbs began to move, groaning as they

slowly swung low to block his intended route. Somewhere nearby, he heard Iri giggle; her voice echoed around every tree. She could see him, but his sharp eyes couldn't find her. Impressed, he continued the hunt.

A short time later, Sten came to a shady spot in the woods and stopped. Iri's clean, fragrant scent was strong there. He turned quickly when he heard the rustle of a bush next to a broad yew tree. Iri, uncannily camouflaged to the exact likeness of that tree's bark, reached out and touched Sten's shoulder. Laughing, she stepped away from the tree, and her disguise silently fell away from her like leaves in a sudden gust. Sten touched his sister's smooth cheek as he smiled with wonder, then hugged her and praised her skill. Iri beamed with pride.

Nearing the longest days of summer, father and son ventured out for a short two-day trek. On the first evening, Halivik tended to a fish and some wild mushrooms cooking in his new bronze skillet over the campfire. He paid little attention to the food, though; a question weighed on his mind and in his heart, and had for some time. He was on the verge of asking it when he saw his son begin to work a Maker's craft on the pelt of a fresh deer kill.

He watched Sten kneel over the pelt, making gestures with his hands while whispering a strange chant in Locan. Halivik had seen 'the tricks' before, and always found them unsettling.

Sten then used the ridge of his hand to remove any flesh or fat from the inner pelt. It was clean in moments—no salting, no soaking, and no chance of rot. After another similar incantation, he turned the pelt over and brushed the hair off as if removing loose dirt. More than a day's work done in the time that anyone else would've just begun. Halivik had mixed feelings on the mystic matter; he acknowledged the obvious benefits, but the method felt unnatural to him.

"I think the fish is starting to burn, father," Sten informed him.

Halivik quickly pulled the skillet away from the fire. "Sorry, my mind wandered. It's not overly dark." While Sten began tying the hide between two trees to stretch it, Halivik thought to begin with casual talk rather than blurting out a possibly painful question. "You, uh... You came back quickly with that young buck."

Sten continued stringing the hide and replied simply. "I knew where it was."

Letting the strange reply pass, Halivik reminded him, "You know we already have a surplus of meat in the cold cellar, don't you?" Of course he knew; it was Sten who restocked the majority of it after he returned home.

"You have meat, but not much coin to barter with if need be. Vendik will need venison when the late summer traders come through and visit the inn. You can sell the meat to him."

"A good plan, but that kill is yours, son."

Sten looked over his shoulder for a moment. "It's ours, father, and I have no need for any of it." Changing the subject as he returned to his work, Sten asked, "Do you want this skin softened and smoked for clothes and such?"

"No need; rawhide will do," Halivik answered while he threw a few pinches of dirt into the fire to lower its heat. "I've a need for some rope, and your mother needs new soles for her shoes."

"Good, less work for me," his son replied lightheartedly.

A comfortable lull of conversation followed. While Halivik absently moved the skillet away from the fire, he decided that the time was as good as any to ask the

question that gnawed at his conscience for a long time. "Son, about Tovira's teachings... Did you ever see it as unfair that your mother and I made you visit the estate so often, when no one else had to?"

Sten shrugged as he pulled the deerskin taut. "I was frightened mostly, to be honest."

"Tovira taught you things that scared you?" Halivik asked, surprised. For whatever her wealth or mystic skill, he always considered the Lady of Oma-Krin estate a gentle soul.

Sten paused to answer. "No, I meant that the look in yours and mother's eyes made me afraid, that I was ill in some way." He resumed his work, and then added, "But only at first, though. Lady Tovira put me at ease, and I saw your worry lessen with time."

"I—I didn't know you could tell," Halivik guiltily admitted. "Your mother and I only wanted what we thought was best. I hope it didn't weigh too heavily on you."

"It was long ago," Sten casually replied as he snugged the last knot.

"Still, I never would have wanted my concern to be your burden, had I known."

"Please stop finding things to worry after, father. Being sent to Lady Tovira was for the best, as I see it. I soon felt lucky to be a guest at the estate. I learned many things beyond my lessons at the church. I was allowed to sip the same wine that the King drinks. I even rode a horse."

"Lucky indeed," Halivik said with a sigh, inwardly relieved to hear that the efforts to save his son's sanity were also fond memories. Still troubling was the strange deeds that Sten could perform, many of which Tovira never could explain.

"The only weight on my mind now," Sten commented with a hint of a grin as he stepped toward the campfire, "is trying to force my teeth through that overcooked fish."

* * * * *

The residents of Bruvaal village were enjoying a beautiful mid-summer morning. The refreshing weather brought a sense of hushed tranquility. Cool breezes from the shady Cragwood wafted through, carrying the scents of pine cones and earth. In the trees around the square, birds sang and squirrels chattered. Two toddlers laughed as they clumsily chased after an escaped chicken.

As usual, some neighbors who lived over or behind their shops met in the village square, most with the intent to gather water from the community well. They greeted one another and chatted in friendly tones of familiarity. Even the normally reserved bailiff, Movik, nodded hellos and offered honeyed walnuts to the merchant's children as he leisurely milled about.

The serenity of that morning was disturbed by a low but increasing rumble from an unknown source. Frowning villagers warily gazed about, searching for the cause of the echoed sound as they murmured amongst themselves. As rustic folk, they were superstitious and distrustful of any strange event.

The noise grew until, suddenly, the jarring thunder of shod hooves pounding across the Scroll Bridge destroyed whatever calmness that remained.

Alarmed, the unsuspecting villagers looked west and mutely gaped at the scene before them. More horses and metal than any of them had ever seen before rode

into Bruvaal. At least twenty iron-helmed men in chainmail over black leather armor sat atop the saddled steeds, hurrying them into the square.

Villagers scattered in fear, snatching up any nearby children as they ran for the safety of the nearby shops or behind ox troughs. They peered through the cloud of thin dust and saw that the horses had been reined to a halt near the bailiff's small compound.

Movik stepped further out in front of the women he was shielding as the commotion and dust settled. He noted that the horsemen's armor and weapons nearly matched that of the guards who accompanied Maker Winter-hand when he visited every year.

Three of the riders in the center of the group wore no armor, only robes of similar pattern to each other. The colors differed for each, and one of them was a woman with auburn hair and fair skin. She remarked to her two cohorts, "The air is cool for now, but I expect another warm day. I hate sweating."

"You can thank the council for that as well," one of the others replied with a bitter tone. "If they hadn't procrastinated with sanctioning my quest petition and supply requisitions, we would have arrived here in the spring. I realize that the current climate is not to your liking, but your incessant whining will not assist in completing this mission." Those angry words quieted the woman, and created an uncomfortable moment of silence.

Quickly making sure that the kingdom insignia stitched onto his vest could be seen clearly, Movik moved out toward the horsemen. Some of the guards saw his cautious approach. One of them called out to the three robed ones, "Here is the local bailiff, Makers."

Movik froze when nearly all of the strangers looked down at him. More distressing to him than the imposing guards was to have three Makers visiting the village. While old Frimgar was a happy and genuine sort, the three before him seemed the opposite.

One of the Makers goaded his horse through the group of guards and came forward. His robes were red and black, colors that added to his imperious manner. He was clean-shaven, with cropped hair and an intense glare. Adding more menace to his presence was a sword he wore across his back. Nonetheless, Movik held his ground.

Disregarding any pleasantries, the Maker brusquely said, "I am Kauldur Night-heart, Inquisitor of the Order of Makers. Do you speak for this village, or should I have the local elder fetched?" His tone was edged with impatience, and his scowl added to the tension of the moment.

Movik shook his head once. "The elder's mind is pruned. How may I help you, Maker?"

Kauldur leaned over in his saddle and asked, "The Oma-Krin estate is nearby, yes?"

Pointing to the east, Movik said, "Further along the South trail a piece, Maker. Not too far." He hoped the Makers and guards were simply asking for directions. He wanted them gone, and far better for the Lady Krin to deal with dangerous mystics; she used to be one, after all.

The grim Maker nodded, and then asked, "Where can I find a young man—a hunter—named Stenhelt, the son of Halivik?"

Frowning, Movik replied, "I'd heard that he built a home somewhere to the south, out in the Cragwood. I don't know where." The bailiff was confused as to why more than one Maker and a large number of guards were searching for Sten, who was never one to stir trouble.

"How well do you know this young man, bailiff?"

"Not well at all. He's seldom in the village." Movik was becoming defensive; he didn't want any decent folk to be harassed without good cause. Makers were powerful, though, and in more ways than one. There was little he could do. "I've never arrested him, if that's what you mean. His kin are good people. His father is highly respected in these parts. What's this about?"

Kauldur straightened. "You only need to concern yourself with leading me to this supposedly 'highly respected' father. I'm sure he knows the location of his own son's abode. Get your steed ready and show us the way, bailiff. Make haste."

"I don't—I don't have a steed."

"Then if only for your own sake, bailiff, I hope you're fleet of foot. Being trampled can be fatal. Now start running."

A short time later, Movik was winded and slowing. Halivik's home wasn't far from the village, but the middle-aged bailiff had to keep a fast pace to keep ahead of the riders that followed him. He was humiliated by being made to run like a whipped ox, and was angry with Maker Night-heart for abusing his privilege.

The cabin that they all first came to was Tull's, Movik knew. Not far beyond it and tucked deeper into the woods was Halivik and Baraide's home. The bailiff stopped to catch his breath, hating the situation he'd been put in.

"Is that where Stenhelt's father resides?" Kauldur asked from atop his dapple-gray horse.

Movik shook his head while inhaling deeply. "No, this... This is his son's home. Halivik's eldest son," he quickly corrected, "Tullgar."

"Ah, a brother," Kauldur commented with mock emotion. "Perhaps he also knows the location of Stenhelt's new residence. I imagine he would."

"Not to be rude, Maker," Movik said, "but I wouldn't wager on that." He took another deep breath and let it out before explaining, "Tullgar is simple-minded. He means well, but I wouldn't trust him to lead people off into the forest."

Kauldur turned when someone behind him barked a laugh. "By the Triad, the groundwater here must be poisoned," Rhone Shade-smith commented, still chuckling. "The elder is useless, this poor bailiff doesn't have the sense to request a horse from the nearest kingdom stable, and the brother of the wolf hunter is a dullard! I wouldn't be surprised if the village cleric was illiterate."

Oradna and some of the guards smiled, but Kauldur was not in the mood for levity. He turned his gaze back to the bailiff. "Fetch me this simple brother," he ordered.

"But... he's of no use to you..."

"Bailiff, your loyalty to your flock is noted. It is also irrelevant. I am not fond of the concept of a stone left unturned, no matter how diminished its mental capacity is. Get the brother—now."

Movik nodded reluctantly. He walked toward Tull's cabin, silently offended by the bearded Maker's glib insult. The bailiff actually did request a horse ages ago

from the Breskallin militia, and was denied. His thoughts then went back to the regrettable task at hand, and hoped the gentle woodworker wasn't at home.

Only a few paces along, Movik saw Tull come around from the back of the cabin. The big fellow had a roughly-hewn staff in one hand, a small stone blade in the other, and a puzzled expression on his face. Movik sighed sadly, but said, "Ah, there you are, Tullgar. Good to see you again."

Tull glanced at Movik before his confused stare went past him to the Makers' large party. "Hello, bailiff," he replied slowly. "Who are all the wealthy people?"

"The three without helmets are Makers, like old Frimgar."

Tull grinned slightly. "Fat Frimgar; I like him, he's a nice man." His grin turned into a frown as he scratched his short beard. "Those new Maker people don't look very nice," he whispered.

"I'd wager they're not," Movik whispered back. "But Makers are high-ranking folk, and by the King's law we have to do what they say. They want to talk to your father."

When Movik and Tull came back to the trail, Kauldur took in the young man's size and brawn. "You are a son of Halivik, and the brother of a man named Stenhelt?" he asked skeptically. Tull only nodded nervously. "Hmm," Kauldur observed, "I was told the hunter was barely of average stature. Ah well, no matter." He then glanced down at Movik standing next to the big simpleton. "Bailiff, your duty here is done," he stated dismissively.

Movik's jaw muscles flexed with the effort of biting down on angry words. He instead said, "No, Maker Night-heart, it's not. My duty, passed down by royal decree, is to be the upholder of law and fairness for the good folks of Bruvaal. I intend to make sure those edicts are followed, and by everyone."

Kauldur leaned forward in his saddle and replied with a cold smile, "And hopefully your edicts will not conflict with my own. Carry on."

* * * * *

Halivik was disappointed. Out near a tree-lined brook at the eastern edge of his property, he'd recently set a number of baited box traps. He hoped to catch raccoons; coats made of their fur were currently in high demand by traders. He'd seen tracks of those elusive animals in that area back in the wet spring. The traps were checked that morning, and all he'd caught instead was one scrawny beaver. Being summer, its fur was thin and nearly worthless. He let it loose and headed back toward home, where more chores awaited him.

On the way back to the cottage, Halivik heard his daughter call for him just as he reached their small orchard. Irisella's voice had an odd pitch to it; not panicked, but nearing it. He called back that he was on his way, and sped up his limping pace through the apple and pear trees.

Hurrying around the fenced garden, he went toward the front of the cottage. From his angled view, he initially saw armored men on horses; a surprising sight, and most likely not a good one. He rounded the corner of his home and saw the full crowd of visitors waiting for him.

Over twenty people were spread out in front of Halivik's cottage. There were ten or so soldiers to the right, seated on their horses. Another group of roughly the

same amount had dismounted and spread out. On Halivik's left were Tullgar and Movik the bailiff, both standing near the cottage. His son's face showed his confusion; the bailiff was obviously holding back a seething anger. Baraide and Iri stood next to each other at the front door, their faces pale with concern.

In front of the armored men and horses stood three people; two men and a woman, each wearing ornate robes. The woman's strange eyes and odd grin were disconcerting. The man with the sandy hair and long chin beard seemed bored with the situation. The other man, the tall one, had dark intent in his eyes... and perhaps a touch of madness.

Halivik, this is Maker Night-heart," Movik said with a bitter tone, gesturing at Kauldur with a vague wave of his hand. "He and his cohorts are looking for Stenhelt."

Baraide couldn't quite stifle a gasp. Her long-forgotten fear had been realized; Tovira had been found out. Both her friend and her son were in peril of a sort she couldn't imagine.

Others noticed her reaction. Halivik glanced at his fretting wife, sharing the fear in her wide eyes, and then turned his hard gaze back to the Maker in front of him. Kauldur let his cold stare linger on the stricken, attractive woman as his lips stretched into a malicious grin.

"They haven't stated their reason," Movik pressed on. "If a law has been broken, then I—"

"That will do, bailiff," Kauldur interrupted. "I am the higher authority of law here. You have pointed us in the right direction, and have made introductions... albeit brusque. Alas, your continued presence is inessential. Guards, please escort him away from the cottage."

One unsheathed sword would have been enough to make Movik step away; two iron blades left no doubt of how serious the guards were of their task. He walked backwards ten or so paces, looking as helpless as he felt.

Kauldur regarded Halivik once more. "Your son is of great interest to me," he said. "He has evidently made an impression on others as well. Why, on the journey here to meet Stenhelt, a rancher who lives near Doveen village told us a story of him. The man's sheep were being killed by bears, hungry from hibernation. Your son heard the man's plea for help in the village, and agreed to help. In less than the span of a full day, Stenhelt tracked and killed two individual bears. I'm told there was a third, but because she had cubs, the hunter merely scared her away."

Still grim-faced, Halivik nodded. "He told me."

"Ah, I'm sure. It must have been a captivating tale while huddled around the hearth, I'll wager. Did your son also regale you with his deeds while in Duuvihal?"

"Yes," the huntsman answered warily. "A wealthy merchant hired Sten to solve the problem of some troublesome wolves."

Kauldur grinned. "Is that his story? What a modest young man your 'Sten' is. His deed was not for one merchant, but for the entire village. The people there reverently refer to your son as 'the wolf-slayer'. A song has even been written in his honor." Ignoring Halivik's scowl, he continued. "Most intriguing of all, however, is a sworn account given by an estate peasant. Of the Oma-Krin estate, to be

specific, held by Tovira Krin—formerly Tovira Dark-foot. I'm sure you're aware of whom I speak, aren't you?"

"I know of her; Lady Krin is well respected in these parts." Halivik felt a bead of sweat roll down his back as he said it.

"Oh, I'm sure; vintages of Oma-Krin wine are always in demand, and I'd wager the Lady is locally generous with her excess crops. Perhaps she is generous with her time as well... But enough of banter; I've neither the desire nor the patience to continue with the tedious process. I am here to press my contention that you and your family—especially Stenhelt—have a closer relationship with Lady Krin than mere acquaintances, and only a passive respect."

Halivik shared another glance with his wife before responding. "Very well, we count her as a friend. We're not alone in that claim, though, Maker; Lady Tovira has many friends."

"I warn you, good peasant, not to test my tolerance of coy remarks," Kauldur said as he pointed a finger. "I put to you that Stenhelt received lessons from Lady Krin, lessons restricted by law. Her malefactions shall be dealt with in due course. As for the here and now, I know that Stenhelt resides somewhere deeper into the Cragwood. I am within my right to question your son, and you *will* lead me to him."

"I'd lead you to the Deep before that ever happened, Maker," Halivik growled. "You're a fool if you think otherwise."

Kauldur took a deep breath and let it out with a long sigh. "You are obviously unaware of the resolve I have for this mission. Unfortunately, an example is in order to clarify so that you may understand." He looked over his right shoulder and calmly commanded, "Dispatch the bailiff."

Before Movik could react, the two nearby guards stabbed their swords into him without any evident compunction. One blade sunk deeply into the bailiff's midsection; the other drove into his neck and came out the far side. The red-stained blades were pulled free just as quickly.

Irisella screamed; Baraide immediately turned her daughter's head away. Halivik and Tullgar both flinched at the sudden attack, causing more swords to be drawn and pointed at them. Movik, wide-eyed and with blood streaming down the front of him, grasped at his neck. He gurgled softly, stumbled, and then collapsed.

"Hopefully, I will have your full cooperation now," Kauldur said.

Halivik glared at him. "You're a madman," he hissed with restrained rage. "Put a blade to me as well if you must, but I will never hand Stenhelt over to you."

Kauldur nodded. "I believe you. However, your life would not be the one placed in harm's way." At that, he signaled to the guard nearest the women in the cottage doorway. The daughter was gripped by the arm and yanked out of her mother's grasp.

"No!" Halivik bellowed, and began a charge. Almost before he could begin, two more guards with weapons ready stepped in his path. Another guard shoved Baraide to the ground when she lunged to pull Irisella back.

What the parents were prevented from doing, their eldest son was not. With an inarticulate cry, Tullgar shouldered past the distracted guard in front of him and rammed into the one pulling at his wailing sister. The impact slammed that man into the cottage a few paces away, knocking bark of its logs. Before other guards

converged on him, Tull gave his sister a hard push toward the barn and yelled, "Run, Iri!"

The first two guards on Tull tried to bring him down, but he refused to fall. More guards rushed into the melee while Maker Night-heart loudly commanded them to leave the family alive. Through a tangle of restraining arms, Tull saw Iri. She was running swiftly past the barn and into the woods, her long dark hair and brown woolen dress catching the wind in her wake. It was the last image he'd ever have of her.

Baraide sprang up and attempted to help her son. Halivik surged forward as well, but was dropped to his knees when a sword blade sliced his thigh open. A moment after joining the fray, Baraide was clouted on the side of her head by an armored fist. She fell down again, dazed.

Despite the other guards attacking Tull, he held one in a painful headlock and wouldn't let go. Something stabbed into his shoulder and, instead of loosening his grip, he tightened it. The helpless man in his grasp screamed as his own iron helm was crushed into his skull.

Three guards pulled Tull's thick right arm out to his side; released from the big man's grip, their comrade slumped lifelessly to the ground. More guards wrapped around his left arm, and yet two more were on his back. Shouting his fury, Tull swung his right arm; the men holding it were sent tumbling out in front of him.

Stepping nimbly over those fallen guards, the female Maker walked toward Tull as she yelled strange words. His anger quickly turned to confusion; he wasn't supposed to hurt women, especially a Maker, and so hesitated with her quick approach. Before he could decide what to do, the pale woman with light eyes touched his trousers at the knee with three of her fingers. Tull heard his own bones break, and a moment later was writhing in pain on the ground.

"Enough!" Kauldur yelled, and then began giving orders. "Oradna, that will do, thank you." He then gestured to the guards. "Four of you pick up your downed associates. I want three others to go fetch me the girl. The rest of you will step away from these rebellious peasants, and see to any injuries you may have." After a moment, he added, "And someone remove the bailiff."

Halivik hobbled over to Baraide, kneeling with his wounded leg outstretched as he helped her sit up. Regaining her senses, she began tearing off her linen sleeve for him to use as a bandage. While wrapping it around his thigh, Halivik called to his eldest son and asked of his condition. As Tull lay on his side in the grass, he mumbled through labored breaths that his leg hurt.

Kauldur waited until Halivik finished tying the thin cloth bandage to his leg, and then said, "No more outbursts, no more recalcitrance. Lead me to Stenhelt."

Halivik only responded with, "Don't hurt my family anymore." The waver of his low tone implied both threat and plea.

"No, no, Halivik," Kauldur replied, waving his finger. "It is you who places your family in harm's way in your hindrance to my mission.. The culpability is yours; do not attempt to saddle me with that burden. Now, get up and bring me to your son."

Halivik shook his head. "It wouldn't matter if I took you to Sten's cabin. He's not there."

Kauldur frown and simply said, "I see." He then began droning words in Locan, moving fingers of one hand in the air as he did so. Abruptly, that dexterous hand made a fist.

Baraide wheezed, and her hands went to her chest. Halivik caught her as she began to slump, asking what was wrong. Trying to answer, her words came out as only a short, raspy noise.

"What have you done?!" Halivik screamed at Kauldur as he held his wife.

"I have stopped the blood flow to a few of her organs, most importantly her heart," he said, holding up his fist. "I can release the flow, of course, but you must tell me the truth. I promise to spare your wife if you give me your full and honest cooperation."

"I *am* being honest! I don't know! I don't know where he is! By the gods, I swear my words true. Now please... *Please* keep your promise."

Kauldur looked Halivik in the eye, watching as tears rolled down his cheeks. The Maker felt no sympathy; only a judgment of the peasant's character. In that moment, he also sensed the thin trickle of blood oozing from Halivik's hastily applied bandage. "Very well," the Maker finally agreed. Murmuring more words in Locan, he used his other hand to draw symbols in the air. Simultaneously, one hand unclenched while the other made a tight fist. That fist was then drawn back, as if pulling a rope.

Slouched in the cottage doorway, Baraide moaned and took a deep breath. At the same time, Halivik's eyes widened and became unfocused. Blood began to pour from his wound, forced out by the Maker's magic. The dark fluid welled in his buckskin trousers, and then flowed both out of the rip and down his leg. Baraide had turned away to cough and refill her lungs, unaware that her husband's life was quickly draining out of him.

"Impressive," Rhone said as he stepped over next to Kauldur. "I wasn't aware you could affect two targets at once."

"I rarely have the opportunity to practice the tactic," Kauldur replied while keeping focus on his art's effect. "However, you miss the finer nuance of what I've accomplished here. While obvious that I'm extracting the man's blood through a relatively small laceration, I've completely stopped the flow to the rest of his limbs and organs. It's all being redirected to that one opened vein, each drop compelled to escape. See how his leg swells?"

Rhone found his friend's detachment of taking a life in such a way to be morbid, but not overly so. In the time of just a few breaths, the wolf-slayer's father was showing signs of his impending death. The man had slouched against the doorway of his home; his skin was pale, his lips were blue, his breathing was labored, and the expanding pool of his blood was spreading out into the grass. "So, why are you doing away with him? He might've been useful."

Kauldur shook his head. "He would have been obstinate and misleading at every given chance. I had no faith that he would have been an asset in any way. The wife, however... Upon seeing my determination, she may be more amenable to spare other lives. If not..." He shrugged.

Rhone's attention was drawn back to the mother, and her eldest son nearby. She had turned to her husband, holding his head to her bosom as she began to wail. The son had begun to cry, and was dragging his bad leg behind him as he

crawled in their direction. "Chain the big man," Rhone ordered the guards. "Splint his leg, if he allows it. If there is a wagon in the barn, bring it out and put him in it. And by the Triad, hasn't that girl been caught yet?!"

Knowing that Halivik was all but dead, Kauldur finally uncurled his fist and let the effect of his blood art dissipate. He then signaled two of the guards and said, "Bring the woman to me."

Reluctant to leave her husband, Baraide put up a fight when the two armored men reached for her. Struggling in their grip, she cursed and spat at them as they dragged her toward Halivik's murderer. She was surprised into silence when one of them whispered, "I'm sorry".

Baraide was brought before Kauldur, just out of kicking distance. "You heartless fiend," she hissed through sobs. "I'll see the death of you."

Kauldur ignored her words. "Unless you would like your eldest son to share his father's fate, you will tell me where to find Stenhelt."

Thinking the madman might hurt Tull as well, Baraide had no choice. "It was as my husband said, you murderer. Sten trekked out into the Cragwood. He told us his plan to do so yesterday morn; said he'd be gone for three days, perhaps four. You'll never find him."

"From what I've gathered about the talented young man, I doubt I would," Kauldur agreed. He turned his head to see four guards helping the big—and amazingly strong—imbecile into the back of an ox-drawn wagon. Just then, the three guards he'd sent out emerged from the tree line of the forest. The escaped daughter wasn't with them.

Rhone strode over to the trio, who were still mounted. Scowling, he asked, "Where is the girl?" The men glanced at each other. "Well?" he prompted them.

"We couldn't find her anywhere, Maker Shade-smith," one of them answered. "She seemed to have simply... disappeared." The two others nodded.

"Disappeared," Rhone repeated mockingly. "One girl, not even of courting age... She barely had a lead, and she managed to elude three of you. You're on horseback, for snow's sake!" One of the men began to speak, but Rhone cut him off. "No, I don't want to hear pathetic excuses. You go back out and find the girl. Do *not* return without her."

Kauldur returned his attention to the woman before him. "How good of friends are you with Lady Tovira Krin?" he asked.

"There is no reason to trouble her with your foul presence," Baraide growled.

"My good woman, the reason to trouble her is quite obvious."

Oradna stepped next to Kauldur. To the two guards holding Baraide, she said, "Tie her hands and put her in the cart with the brutish oaf." After they led the woman away, Oradna looked up at Kauldur and asked, "Do you believe the hunter is away, as the peasants claim?"

"More than likely, I'd wager. Even if our Stenhelt was at his new cabin, I doubt any of his kin would lead us directly there. And if they did, they'd cause some sort of commotion to alert him; they're too loyal for their own good. No, attempting to hunt down someone of his supposed skills would be folly. We are in the vicinity, though, and that is enough."

Confused, Oradna asked, "Enough to do what? How are we to catch him, then?"

"We will make him come to us."

"Should I dare to ask how?"

Kauldur only smiled. He walked back to his horse, swung into the saddle, and said, "Mount up, my dear; we ride for the Krin estate."

* * * * *

On that beautiful mid-summer day in the eastern Cragwood, Stenhelt sat on the sandy bank of a wide lake. Stripped down to thin leather trousers under the warm sun, he cast his baited line out into the water and leaned back contentedly. His goals had been met. His parents' and Tull's homes were in good form, their cellars were full, and wood had been hoarded. The family was well-stocked for at least as long as Sten planned to be away.

While waiting for a pull on the line, Sten thought back to when he'd passed through Doveen village. He'd seen a young woman there, and their eyes had met. He remembered her light brown hair and healthy figure, but it was her shy smile that remained vivid in his mind. He began to daydream of crossing paths with her again one day.

Sten was brought out of his reverie when his powerful sense of smell caught a scent. Smoke, he was sure, and not from the twigs of a simple campfire. A large blaze, but not near enough to be a danger. He didn't see or hear any signs of a forest fire; no birds or other wildlife were fleeing. Curious, he grabbed his gear and walked out to a nearby clearing for a better view.

Far to the north, in contrast to the blue sky and wispy white clouds, was a widening cone of dark smoke over the trees. '*A large fire, without doubt,*' he thought. '*But what...*' Then a dreadful realization struck him. The Oma-Krin estate was burning.

Stenhelt rushed toward Lady Tovira's home with wild abandon, hurtling over the rugged forest terrain and through its lush underbrush with reckless speed. Barefoot, he leapt fallen trees and ducked low branches. He sped past a deer before it had a chance to react. A desperate goal and fear filled his mind. His teacher - his friend - was in danger.

A dull roar of flames in the distance came to Sten's ears as he ran north. He ignored his aching lungs and pushed himself faster. Only moments later, he heard an entirely different sound over the mounting background noise and his own labored breathing - a scream.

Sten ran on at a mad pace. The scent of smoke intensified. There was another scream, remote but piercing. And then another. In pockets of the dense foliage, he caught glimpses of distant flame. He came out of the trees and jumped over the back property fence without effort.

Winded, he paused to make sense of the scene. Standing at the back of Tovira's orchard, Sten was within his bow's accurate strike range—or roughly one hundred and fifty paces—of the manor house. Through and over the foliage of cherry trees, he saw that the Lady's home was engulfed in flames. Dark smoke poured up into the sky, and crackles of failing wood sounded within the fire's dull roar.

To Sten's right was one of the estates expansive vineyards. Two boys were running along one of the work paths, escaping the scene. Another scream came from Sten's left; he whipped his head around to the worker's cabins. The modest

log and earthen-brick homes had been built to form a U-shape at the south end of Tovira's back lawn, creating a grassy courtyard with a well in the middle. Between the cabins, Sten saw blurs of movement.

Short-hafted spear in hand, he raced over. Emerging between two of the cabins, Sten came upon a view of bloody chaos. A handful of men in chainmail and dark leather were attacking Tovira's relatives, swinging either with swords or heavy shields. More bodies were on the ground; some blood-stained, some clearly dead. Men or women, young or old—the armored men didn't seem to care.

Stenhelt knew those people. While not claiming any as close friends, he'd been around them for half of his life. They'd shared their knowledge of farming and simple skills; he'd shared fresh kills made on the way to the estate and his own knowledge of hunting. Food and stories had been passed around Tovira's huge outdoor table on many occasions.

Sten saw those good people helpless, stricken with fear, dead or dying... His heart sunk, only to suddenly be filled with rage.

After hastily throwing off his pack and bow, Sten took a step forward and launched his spear with all the strength he could muster. Powered by a wrathful need, the weapon drove into an unsuspecting enemy's chest and took him off his feet. The other armored men were busy putting down the workers, or corralling any trying to flee; they didn't immediately notice one of their own pinned by a spear to a cabin wall.

Bow and knife ignored, Sten unleashed his boiling anger. Ancestral blood burned through his body; nails grew into thick claws, and his form stretched and swelled with muscle. Raging with energy, he charged out and pounced on the nearest armored man.

Ripped into with wild abandon, the man screamed in surprise and pain being dealt out by the beast on top of him. A slash to his neck silenced him.

The other enemies came to that one's aid. Eagerly, Sten stood and turned to face them. They hesitated at seeing the creature he'd become; he took advantage of the men's fear and hurled himself at them. A short melee ensued; claws gauged, swords swung, teeth tore, blood gushed, and broken links of chain armor flew into the air.

The remaining workers hurried to gather their wounded loved ones and then scattered, seemingly as afraid of their savior as they were of the armored men. Sten paid no mind; they were alive, and that was what mattered.

Beginning to feel the burn of sword wounds, he leaned back against the well wall to inspect the severity of each. There was blood everywhere, although only some was his. Sten found many gashes and cuts, but surprised that most of them were relatively shallow.

He unexpectedly heard his mother's voice and looked up. Walking through the huge garden that bordered the courtyard, she came toward him with a look of concern. Six more of the armored men were spread out around her. "Stenhelt," she called again, "all is well now, son. Calm down. You're hurt. I've brought these guards to help you."

Sten let out a deep breath, but questions immediately sprang to mind. *'Why was his mother at the estate? And why was she with more of the men who'd*

attacked Tovira's family? Why is she acting strangely? Who were these armored men?

His mother stepped forward with arms out to embrace him. Trying to ignore the gathering pain of his numerous wounds, Sten wanted her comfort. He hesitated, though, not wanting any of the fresh blood to ruin her dress.

He took a deep, calming breath through his nose as she approached... And that was when he noticed it—her scent. Sten's mother always carried the faint aromas of rich earth and goat's milk and fresh herbs. The woman before him smelt of horses and sweat and lavender oil. Also, she wasn't favoring her right ankle, and showed oddly calm behavior. In Sten's mind, those details led to one conclusion: whoever the person was, she was *not* his mother.

Angered at the ruse of someone using a very clever impersonation to fool him, a growl began from deep in Sten's chest. Just as the fraud was about to touch him, he lashed out at her face with regrown claws. He felt flesh being met and torn, although no wounds appeared. Swatted as well as slashed, the woman was knocked away. She tumbled into the garden with a scream.

Just as the illusion around the woman began to disperse like smoke, Sten was rushed by the guards. He only caught a glimpse of a black and yellow robe before the six men tackled him to the ground. They were trying to pin him, subdue him; he took their tactics to mean that they wanted him alive. He had no such restrictions of his own.

Sten had initial success throwing men off him, and managed to gauge or bite through hard leather. The guards continued to swarm, however, and soon had nearly pinned him. His father's words came to him then; stern words given on the subject of brawling when he and Tull were boys: "*Fight with all your heart, flee if you must, but never—ever—submit.*"

A deafening bellow of rage blasted from Sten's throat. The two men on top of him were blown violently backwards from the concussive sound; the other four were likewise sent sprawling.

Consumed with fury, Sten sat up and let the need of his ancestral blood flow. Tingling energy collected in his fingertips, a sensation he remembered from once before. Near-invisible coils struck at each of the guards like whips, draining them of life. He cried out from the thrilling intensity of siphoning in so much vitality. Sten's wounds closed and scabbed over in mere moments, and his body bristled with raw potency.

He leapt to his feet and looked around him. There were nearly as many guards down on the ground as there were of their victims. Then Sten saw the illusion-woman not far away. She was laying on her side, holding her bloody face with both hands, and moaning out her agony. Her robe had the intricate stitch work of a Maker's, not that he cared at that moment.

Needing to expel some of his intoxicating energy, Sten stayed focused on the female Maker. He took one step toward her, and then stomped with all of his inhuman might. A thunderous wave of seismic force sped out at the groaning woman, flinging her body into the air. She landed further out into the garden with a grunt, and lay there stunned.

"Well done, you amazing creature!" yelled a voice from further up into the garden. "Simply the most primal and phenomenal thing I've ever seen!"

Sten looked toward the inferno that used to be Lady Tovira's home. Between him and the house was her extensive garden, stretching to within thirty paces of the back porch. The unfenced vegetable plot ended at a spigot and water trough. In front of the trough stood two more guards and another Maker in a black and red robe. With them was Tovira Krin, bound and gagged.

Two other people were standing roughly one hundred paces away along the grassy path to Sten's left side of the garden. One was another guard. A few paces apart from him was a yet third Maker wearing black and grey colors. It was he who called out again.

"Truly, that was a fantastic showcase of your exceptional abilities, wolf-slayer! And look at you now; half man, half beast... So full of uncanny surprises! I'd ask of you one more display of skill. Fletch an arrow to your bow, if you have them." The Maker held his arms out wide. "I am your target; show me how true your aim is!"

Sten glanced around, thinking the Maker was trying to cause a distraction so more guards could spring out and ambush him. Trusting his strong senses, he didn't detect anyone lurking nearby. The guards and Makers had misjudged his abilities once before; perhaps they would again. His father had amazing aim with a bow; Sten modestly knew he was better. He hurried back to where he'd dropped his gear, not wanting to miss the chance to bring down another foul Maker.

"Hurry, wolf-slayer!" the fearless Maker yelled encouragingly while Sten strung his bow and notched an arrow. "How accurate are you from this far? Come now, test your skill and let fly!"

Slowly drawing the arrow back to his cheek, Sten was momentarily distracted. Lady Tovira had begun struggling in a guard's grip, kicking and writhing. The Maker in black and red next to her made some swishing movements with his hand, and then touched Tovira on her head. She stopped resisting, and then began to slump to the ground. There was nothing to be done for her, not until after one more enemy was removed.

"You obviously have no qualms about killing, Stenhelt. That's easy to see," the Maker in black and grey shouted, "but what about now? Here I am, unarmed and causing no threat. Can you kill a man in cold blood?"

'*Yes I can,*' Sten said to himself, '*but my blood isn't cold*'. Refocusing on the target, he took a deep breath. Letting it out, he released. The speeding arrow gracefully arced out over the garden. Sten's aim was true, striking the Maker in the chest.

It was a shot that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Immediately after the arrow struck, smoky hazes of mystic disguises drifted off the Maker and the guard near him. When the illusion of armor wafted away a moment later, the guard revealed himself to actually be the Maker in black and grey. He was laughing.

The other illusion, the one that Sten had just put an arrow into, was his mother.

Shorter than the amused Maker next to her, the arrow did not land in Baraide's chest; it struck off-center just below her chin and drove deep into her neck. Gagged, bound, and with wide eyes focused on her son, she'd already begun collapsing to the ground.

* * * * *

"No!" Sten wailed. All else forgotten, he frantically ran to his mother.

He dropped to his knees next to her, his eyes full of tears. Her cloth gag was bloody, and she flinched with a minor convulsion. Her eyes were glazed, staring off at an angle into the sky. The arrow shaft... and the blood... Sten couldn't bear to look at his mother's mortal wound, the wound he gave her.

He untied her hands; they remained limp. He then removed the gag, and regretted it; blood poured out of her mouth. Drowning from her own fluid filling her lungs, she coughed. Sten ignored the spray. He sobbed and told his mother over and over that he was sorry. Baraide took in a shallow, gurgling breath, and never let it out.

Crying with his head on his dead mother's shoulder, Sten felt nothing but anguish and regret. At that moment he didn't hear the roaring house fire, or notice Makers or guards gathering around him. There were only the scents of rich earth and goat's milk and fresh herbs, and the crushing weight of his guilt.

A voice penetrated Sten's shell of pain; a familiar, mocking voice. "Can't sense illusions from a distance, eh? More's the pity."

With a last vestige of rage, Sten hurled himself at the Maker in black and grey. Teeth sank into the robed man's throat as he tackled him to the ground. Despite the hands that pulled at him or the hard blows he received, Sten wouldn't release his bite. He tasted blood and clenched his jaw tighter, taking dark pleasure from the Maker's wheezing screams.

The blunt edge of a shield struck Sten hard in the back of his head; he saw stars. A pair of leather-clad arms then wrapped around his neck and pulled. Sten still had a mouthful of the Maker's throat when he was thrown back. He turned his head to the side, spit out the human gristle, and began to sob once more. There was no fight left in him. Sten's will was sapped by the torturing image of his arrow driven into his mother's delicate neck.

While Sten had his wet eyes squeezed shut, he distractedly heard one of the men ask, "What of your cohort, Maker Night-heart? Can you do anything for him?"

"I can control and manipulate blood, not rebuild tissue. Shade-smith teased the wrong animal. I'll end his pain." There was a pause. "For the most part, Rhone's tactic worked; the hunter has no aggression left... Well, not any more. Shackle him, and then see to Maker Hammer-touch. And you," he called out to someone else, "escort Lady Krin around to the wagon."

Sten felt cold iron clasps being locked onto his wrists, and another pair on his ankles. He didn't care. The Maker was right; he had no more aggression, no rage or wrath. There was no room in his heavy heart for anything but sorrow and self-loathing.

Eventually, the Maker in black and red squatted down next to Sten. "I am Kauldur Night-heart, Inquisitor of the Order of Makers. I must say, Stenhelt, your reputation pales in comparison to what I've witnessed here today. I saw a man who is able to physically manifest the beast in his soul, unleashing it when needed; quite intriguing. The one thing I now am quite sure of is that you're not a Maker. So what are you, exactly?"

Sten didn't answer, or even bother to glare at his captor.

"Not feeling talkative?" Kauldur asked. "I understand. Let's get you to your feet; there's still more of the day ahead of us." He took Sten by the arm and helped him stand, and then began guiding him on a curving route around the burning house. "Ah, what a day I've had," the Maker continued merrily as they made their way to the front lawn. "This part of the country surely is picturesque, although I admit my impatience to return to Vallo. Have you been there?"

Again, Sten didn't answer. He was looking toward the estate's sunny front lawn. Continuing to shuffle forward in the chains, he saw his father's wagon come into view. Tull was sitting in the bed of it, one knee bent and the other straight with a splint of branches and rope around it. Next to the wagon were three more guards and a disheveled Tovira. Over twenty horses were picketed far away from the heat and licking flames.

Further out on the lawn was a new and odd sight. The land was formerly flat, but a low, strange hump had grown out of it. The oval mound had a ridge of upturned earth, and a seam along it like from a farmer's plow. Peering closer, Sten saw a leather-clad hand and forearm sticking out of the seam. At first, he thought it looked like a crop plant budding. Getting closer, he changed his mind; it appeared as if the ground opened up a mouth and swallowed at least one guard. *'At least Lady Tovira had a chance to react before they captured her,'* Sten thought.

"Ah, and see?" Kauldur commented. "There is your brother Tullgar and your mentor, Lady Krin, both relatively safe and sound. Now, as for the rest of your family... Well, I'm sure your brother will inform you. Oh, and I suppose you have a tale to tell him as well."

Sten let the cutting words pass. "It's only me you want, isn't it?"

"No, not quite," Kauldur calmly answered. "Lady Tovira of Oma-Krin manor will be facing some serious charges, and is currently considered a criminal until her trial. Your brother is in league with said criminal. I could release him, but I believe he might be helpful to me in loosening your tongue for the answers I seek. Or, you could save good Tullgar the inconvenience now..."

The Maker wanted Sten to give up the secrets he was shown, to offer up Chohla. His first reaction was never to tell, but what if his silence placed Tull in harm's way? He decided to keep his ancestral secrets until the choice *had* to be made.

"Obstinate to a fault, I see," Kauldur said. "It is of no grave concern. Now that I control your fate, I can be a very patient man. Perhaps your intractability will soften after you and your brother have enjoyed the hospitality of the King's dungeon... for as long as it takes."

