Short stories

from

The Community Story Team

Drums of War

Written by Jünger des Xardas, translation by Madhur

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.
Aram pulled his blankets over his head and turned over on his rough bedding.
It was no good.
In fact, the thunder of the Orcish war drums felt even louder than before. He had not heard anything for the last days but the hammering of Orcish fists on the troll firs they used for their drums. It was part of their siege tactics. Every town which had fallen in this war had endured the sound of the Orcish drums for several days. It was a gesture of strength and an attempt to demoralize the enemy. At the same time it was some kind of religious ceremony – if Aram had really got this right. But right now, he couldn't have cared less. The Orcs may not be disturbed by the sound of their drums, but Aram wished for nothing else than an end to their siege, no matter the consequences – as long as this damn noise would finally stop, at least for a moment.
He heard a rustling noise next to him as the curtain of the tent was swept aside, followed by quiet footsteps. "Master Moren?" Aram raised his head.
A man in a wide black robe sat down on a small stool, the only piece of furniture inside the tent apart from a crude table. "You should be asleep."

Despite his own tiredness, Aram found that it was his master who needed some sleep the most. His voice sounded faint, the already hollow cheeks were fallen and deep wrinkles were visible on his bare forehead.
"What has happened?"
"The same as last night and the night before. The next assault will begin any minute now. And we should hope it succeeds. I will not be able to distract them forever."
Aram remained silent. Then, after hesitating shortly, he heard himself ask: "With your permission, may I go outside and watch the storming of the castle?"
A bitter smile crossed the old mage's lips. "Is today's youth so fond of death and despair?"
Thrown off balance, the young man observed his master's profile. For a moment, Aram was afraid of having said something wrong, but then he raised his hand and waved as if to swipe at a fly. "Go ahead, boy. Don't let an old man's rambling keep you."
Aram nodded, his mouth half open. Then he reached for his rope, pulled it over his head and strapped the small pouch containing his runes around his waist. Without a further glance at Moren, he left the tent. He could not put his finger on the reason, but during the last few days the presence of his master had been… unsettling. It was nothing about him personally – on the contrary, Moren hat always treated him like a son and taught him everything he knew – but rather the helpless state he was in. Yes: his master, who had always seemed so strong, so mighty, now looked more like a frail old man than ever before. Aram knew what had been bothering him lately, and it was the pain of not being able to comfort him that made his presence unbearable.
Stepping out of the tent, Aram's line thought came to a sudden end. It hadn't seemed possible, but the drums sounded a lot louder all of a sudden. But that was not all. Aram was looking at a view that made him freeze in awe and shudder at the same time.
Gotha, the fortress of the Paladins, was illuminated by hundreds of torches. The warriors were gathering at the edge of the ramp leading up

to the castle. Aram had always admired the force, the strength emanating from the Orcs and this perfect calm they displayed during battle. If anything, this race had mastered the art of fighting. A voice thundered through the valley, a voice louder than even the mighty drums. Upon the ancient tower at the edge of the encampment stood Varek the Great, Marshal of the Orcs, surrounded by his advisors and veterans and gave out orders to his commanding officers.
Aram's gaze wondered up into the sky. It was black. As black as their god. Not a single star was to be seen through the thick layer of clouds above the camp.
Someone ran into him.
"Oy! At least get out of our way if you're not going to make yourself useful, Morra!"
Aram froze as he looked up and say the contorted face of an Orc staring back at him, the light of the torches mingling with the war paint to form a gruesome picture, one the young mage had only known from his darkest nightmares.
But then the Orc turned away from him and marched on without even bothering to look back. Aram noticed the large crossbow he was holding in his hands.
All of a sudden, the rhythm of the drums changed. Aram knew this could only mean one thing: the assault had begun.
The same moment, he saw warriors run up the slope. A hailstorm of arrows rained on their formation, countered at once by the Orcish archers' crossbows. The five mighty catapults on the outskirts of the camp also opened fire.
The storming Orcs faltered and rolled down the ramp, pierced by many arrows, tearing their comrades with them and vanishing in the dark of the forest. But this was all the time the first attackers needed to reach the small village at the foot of the castle and find cover behind the solid wooden walls of the deserted houses.
Aram was not fooled. They would also lose today's battle. Up to now, the War had gone well for the Orcs. But after the fall of Montera, the tide had

turned. The Myrtans were still defending, but the Orcs had been unable to penetrate the walls of the mighty fortresses of Gotha and Faring and had not won a single foot of ground. Without a miracle, nothing was going to change.
The cries of the Orcs gained in volume as a sortie of Paladins stormed at them and the village was transformed into a battlefield. A horn was blown somewhere behind Aram and four Orcish mercenaries rushed past him toward the slope.
He turned away from the battle. The sound of battle had risen to an almost unbearable level. Aram sped up, almost ran, only to stop near the edge of the camp. Here, humans sat at small campfires between all the tents and carts, apparently untouched by the ongoing battle. They were the people who accompanied any army. Merchants and doctors, cooks and prostitutes. No, he was not going to join them. He already felt their lurking gazes. It already seemed as though the dark figures were huddling closer under his stare.
When the Orcs came, Aram had seen their arrival as salvation of a long life of persecution. There had only been one fate for Dark Mages in the Kingdom of Myrtana: death. Their order had been almost wiped out and Master Moren and his student were forced to spend their lives under long hoods in the darkest taverns in the poorest corners of towns – whenever they actually dared mingle with other people. The Orcs, however, didn't care which gods the humans were worshipping as long as they recognized their new masters. In the hope of a new golden age, an age of freedom, Moren and Aram had joined the long army trek that had marched north from Trelis. They wanted to help overthrow the hated King and build relations with the new rulers.
But meanwhile, Aram doubted whether or not life had really improved. Despite being free, humans still saw him as an exile, an evil witcher who belonged on a pyre or was ,at least, to be feared. He saw it in each of their gazes.
Aram realized he was shaking. He was feeling cold, still disgusted by the sound of the fighting. He wished he could run away as far as possible.

Instead, he turned tail and returned to their tent. What had made him leave it in the first place? Was it a feeble attempt to escape from the helplessness he felt in Moren's presence? He had almost reached the tent when he paused. Half a dozen Orcish warriors had surrounded it. Two of them were holding his master and had twisted his arms in an obviously painful way. And the Orc standing before the tent and gazing at the old Dark Mage with unsurpressed hate was…
"Varek", Aram whispered.
"Enough, Morra!", he heard the Orc say. "Four times you refused. I should have snapped your neck the first time! When you asked to join us, you promised to use your magic against our enemies. Now I see you are but another disgraceful liar, just like the remainder of your people."
"This is different", the mage whispered in pain. "What you are planning is madness. You will never be able to controll…"
Varek's mighty fist hit the Dark Mage in the face. An unhealthy breaking sound echoed in the night. Blood sprang from his, now oddly distorted, nose.
"Master!", Aram exclaimed. He felt his lips tremble.
Varek only turned his head for a moment. For the fraction of a second, Aram stared in his cold eyes. Then the Warlord turned his full attention back to Moren. "I am no longer prepared to sacrifice the lives of good warriors, just because an old Morra lacks the courage to use his knowledge", he grunted. "We are Orcs! We will use every weapon at our disposal. That is what has made us strong. That is how we pushed you filthy Morras back this far."
That moment, the curtain of the tent was lifted and another Orc appeared. He was clad in heavy grey robes.
"Did you find it?", Varek asked the Shaman.
He nodded slowly. "Yes." He passed a thick book to the Warlord. Aram recognized it immediately as his master's spellbook, from which he himself had learned so much. "This contains the spell we need to summon him."
The Warlord nodded his approval and grinned slightly, his face still

distorted by the dancing light of the many torches. “Then you, Morra, are of no further value to me”, he hissed at Moren. He then turned to his Elite warriors and gave them an order: “You are to punish him at once for the treachery he has committed. Hang his corpse where everyone can see it, as a warning to all other Morras!” As the warriors left with Moren, Varek and the Shaman, departed as well. “Come now”, Aram heard the Warlord say, “let us call this Demon and end this battle once and for all.” The two warriors dragged Master Moren past his student. “Master!”, he whispered helplessly.

The Dark Mage raised his head slightly. Blood was still pouring from his broken nose, drenching the old, broken lipps. “Get out of here”, he whispered. “Take whatever you can carry from my things and leave this place.”

The Orcs dragged Moren away. Then he was gone, and Aram was on his own. For a few minutes, he simply stood there, gazing after his Master, the man who had been like a father to him during the last years. Around him, the Orcish drums were thundering.

The mysterious customer

Written by HerrFenrisWolf, translation by Madhur

The bartender did no more than raise an eyebrow when the lad ordered another pint of beer.
This man had been sitting in the Angry Boar, Montera's finest inn, for three hours straight and quaffed one beer after another. His clothes were, without a doubt, those of a mage.
The color of his robe, however, was to dark for both the Circles of Fire and of Water. Therefore, the man was definitely not a priest of Innos, let alone Adanos.
The only possible conclusion made every person in the Angry Board shiver. This milk-faced man was a Dark Mage, a servant of Beliar, the God of Death. It had been a very long time since a priest of Beliar had been able to show his allegiance openly in Myrtana.
But under the rule of the Orcs, there were no more Paladins – no one to pursue such people.
It was rumored that these mysterious figures formed the ruling class in the distant country of Varant. But this boy was obviously a Midlander.
The barman had heard many rumors about dispersed Beliar cultists in Myrtana during his many years of serving drinks to strangers. And now, all of a sudden, proof was sitting in his tavern – let alone the fact that this Dark Mage was getting drunk before his eyes.
What in the world could cause a Dark Mage such distress that he saw no

choice but to drown it in booze?
Were such problems not restricted to common people?
An unsettling thought. One could only hope that this dark priest would leave town as soon as humanly possible and, most important of all, stay gone.
Making all the effort he could muster, the bartender raised his voice: "Excuse me? You want another one? On the house."

Ugo and the Stars

Written by HerrFenrisWolf, translation by Madhur

"Been a long time, long-finger!" Bertha laughed at him before giving him a warm hug. "How's life? Who did you get your money from this time?" The matron didn't think much of discretion when talking to her customers, and Ugo was one of her favorites.
"Oh, Bertha! No, I just came from Cape Dun. Had a message to pass on to Marik."
"Cape Dun? You sure took your time! The girls and I were worried sick. A lad like you doesn't belong in the wild. What if a boar attacked you? We couldn't survive without your gold." The woman giggled like a young maiden why she produced two goblets from under the bar. Oddly enough, the thief had rarely even entered the house.
Bertha was a kind soul. This lady could be as scratchy as a troll's pelt or as soft as that of an Ice Wolf, but she always managed to soften his villain's soul.
Ugo refused the heavy Archoloss drop she offered him.
"Well, Bertha, I took my time in Cape Dun with good reason. And believe me, it wasn't about the forest or the sea. People like me are townspeople through and through, no matter what happens. I pilfered the store of that bitchy old warrior called Urkrass. And guess what I found." With this, Ugo grinned and produced his own bottle of wine. Bertha's eyes shone in the candlelight as she looked at the label. Her

voice shook: “A genuine Khoriner! Wine from their monastery of Innos. I haven’t seen a drop like that in ages.”
The signature scrawled on the bottle confirmed it’s origin: “Master Gorax”.
“How much?” In an instant, the wine expert had transformed back into a rough businesswoman.
“Oh, my dear Bertha. You’ll have to admit that this bottle is invaluable, really. But let’s just say I’ll let you have it if you let me in free of charge the next two times.”
“Ugo, you horny weasel!”, the matron exclaimed. “There’s no way I’ll let you swindle me! Here’s an offer: you’ll only pay half the next two times.”
“Deal!”, Ugo replied at once. Haggling with Bertha was pointless; he had already asked for more than the bottle was worth. This was a deal he could be more than happy with. “Always a pleasure doing business with you. But not today, the trip was more than exhausting.”
“Nonsense!” Bertha clapped her fleshy hands. “There’s no better way to relax than in a girl’s arms.”
On Bertha’s sign, a girl had joined them, giving the mercenary a warm and irresistible smile. “Hello there, Ugo.”
The thief suppressed a grin. Bertha sure knew her customers and never hesitated to use her knowledge. She would have been hard-pressed to miss his fancy for redheads. And these hips! No, he definitely could not say No to Magdalena. He sighed, opened his moneybag and paid Bertha, who grinned at him contently. Then he let Magdalena take his hand and lead him upstairs.

Trouble with the Mercenaries

Written by HerrFenrisWolf, translation by Madhur

"People, trust me, there's none left for today!" Flint implored the four grim-looking mercenaries. The lot came every night to his tavern, drank their fill, and turned restless. Ever more restless, day after day. "You've been draining my kegs like ogres."
"Oh, bullcrap! I see a couple of barrels right behind you!" grunted Spike. "Give us some or we'll stuff you in an empty one and roll you down the street!"
A burst of obnoxious laughter. One of them cried out, "He probably filled the barrel with his own sweat. Not that you can tell the difference — the stuff tastes like troll piss anyway."
Whimpering, the landlord replied, "They're not for you. I've sold them to the Raging Boar in Montera."
Spike continued, unfazed, "We don't give a shit. Who cares about what promises you made? We're the elite around here, and if we demand drinks, we'd damn better get them." He leant forward, smirking, propping himself up on an elbow. "If you want our protection, bring us the damned piss already." Roars of agreement filled the air.
"Have you ever considered why the booze tastes like piss?" came a voice from the doorway. "A threatened landlord might just get the inkling to wee into the tankard."
Flint drew back while the other men turned their heads to the entrance.

Darkness had already set in, dotted by a few sparks of light. The pungent smell of swampweed permeated the air.
"What've we here, then, a joker? Why don't you step in and repeat what you've just said?" barked Spike.
The small glint inched closer, and before the mercenaries stood a grimy fellow in black leather armour, his hair ruffled, his boots caked with mud, dirt on his face. The throng of mercenaries tittered. "A jester, huh? You've a pretty big mouth for a lousy guy like you," spat one of them. Spike flashed a nasty grin.
Flint stayed out of it. The stranger was already in a heap of trouble. The orcs cared little for brawls between mercenaries and tramps. That's why Spike was the absolute champion of the Faring arena. People had to give him a wide berth before yanking his chains. But the figure under the doorframe goaded Spike further as he stepped in and flicked the smouldering reefer away. "What? Is this it? I'd thought, the ruckus in this place, I'd find some pretty tough fighters in here, but all I see are bigmouths."
The gladiator's face crumpled with rage as he drew his blade. "You asked for–"
A hand swept from above and clamped around Spike's sword arm; a kick to the shin and his balance was toppled. He still stood upright — only just — before a punch to the chin took him off his feet.
"As you were, men. Take your friend and make for the hills before you join him on the floor."
The mercenaries' courage seemed to plummet at those words; they did as instructed. Flint handed the traveller a wet cloth to dab at his filthy face. After the stranger had rubbed the dirt away, Flint realised who he was.
"Raven! I should've known. No-one deals with troublemakers like you do."
"Ah, let's just say I had a lousy day. Thrashing that guy really hit the spot. Too bad he wasn't an assassin," laughed the bounty hunter.
"So? What happened?"
"Ah, well," said Raven, waving his hand, "I'd caught a paladin in

Montera, but one of those bloody assassins ambushed me, shot me with a poisoned arrow and made off with the guy." The bounty hunter bent against the counter. "If I'm right, the assassin's on his way to Cape Dun. I'll send Bufford a letter tomorrow. The least I can do is make sure the bastard doesn't get rewarded."

Flint nodded understandingly. He knew of Raven's repulsion with the desert folk and how the Hashishin made life hard for Myrtanian bounty hunters.

"And the swampweed?" asked the landlord. "What's that for? Smoking it will make you slow, and the gods know slow people don't live long in this world."

"For the pain. And, besides, you've seen I'm anything but slow."

"Go wash yourself, then. If you'll stick here a little longer and keep the scumbags from breathing down my neck, I'll let you sleep here for free and give you all the Schnaps you can drink for little money."

"Now that's what I like to hear."

Unbidden guests

Written by Jünger des Xardas, translation by Madhur

"Here. That's all we have left." With an apologetic glance Magda handed the old piece of cloth over to Jalena. The moth holes were big enough to stick a finger through them. The original color, whatever it may have been, had changed into several shades of grey. Magda was almost ashamed, but it was true: she didn't have anything else left. The young maidservant thanked the hostess with a week nod. It seemed she didn't have the energy for more. No surprise. The poor thing had just arrived and had went through enough on her way to Ardea.
Magda turned away and made her way to the exit of the huge room. The floor of the dormitory was strewn with old mats and blankets. The fugitives bodies lay extremely close to each other. Only with great effort she managed to step over an old couple without stepping on the hand of the woman. She knew them. The man had been a farmer by the road to Vengard. He had visited her inn at least once a week. Now his farm lay in ruins. His fields were burned down. Magda squeezed her way through one of the beds, which hadn't been enough for a long time, and a man, whose arm was bleeding heavily. By his side, stuck between a sleeping menial and a maidservant drinking from her soup bowl, knelt Agathe. Magda forced herself to smile encouragingly and nodded to the herb-woman as friendly as possible. She didn't notice it. She was too concentrated on her work. Just now she was pushing a Healing Herb to

the bleeding wound at the mans arm. Magda went on, as fast as it was possible in the crowd. Although there had been many injured coming to Ardea lately she still didn't get used to the sight.
"We should go back. If we don't guard the farm, bandits will burn it down."
"Father, they already did!"
Magda passed by an aged farmer who was tightly wrapped in one of the few blankets and apparently was suffering from a bad fever. A young woman knelt beside him holding his hand.
"We need to feed the pigs!"
"The pigs are gone, father", the young woman tried to explain to him with tears in her eyes. "The bandits took them!"
"Bandits? We should go back. If we don't guard the farm, the bandits will burn it down."
The young woman sobbed loudly.
Magda bit her tongue and swallowed hard as she went on. But that didn't rid her of the knot in her throat.
Then she finally reached the door. For a second she stood still and breathed the cool air of the night. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the silence at Ardea's backdoor. She managed to ban the misery from her thought for a short while. But then she called herself to order. The fugitives needed her. She had to pull herself together! The people in there were far worse off than her.
She went down the stairs at the wall of the inn. At least the snow was gone. Spring was coming. That was a blessing, because else many of the refugees might have frozen to death quite soon. But how were they supposed to survive the next year? Just a few weeks ago the coastal area had still been the granary of the empire, but now the country was devastated, the cattle were stolen.
Magda reached the door. The sign above the door read "To the Black Corsair". It had seen better days, too.
After entering the door, you first couldn't see anything of the misery that afflicted the upper floor and the whole coastal are. At first sight.

At second sight, you could see there weren't any farmers from the region, no shrimpers from Kap Dun and no hunters either, just a few villagers. At third sight you saw the fear and uncertainty in their faces. Nobody knew what was going to happen. They just knew the king had deserted them. The only question they were asking themselves was whether they would be killed by orcs, bandits or the famine that would surely soon begin.

She flashed her husband Wulf, who was standing behind the counter, a glance. She could see her own thoughts in his face: when the first refugees had arrived, Hamlar had ordered the couple to house them. "Just for one or two weeks." And Jon, the commander of the militia had assured them: "Lord Hagen's soldiers are going to bring these bandits to justice. Soon, the farmers will be able to return to their fields." But both Wulf and Magda knew that the fugitives would still be with them when summer came. But they didn't know how to feed them.

The landlady stepped to a huge pot behind the counter and started filling the soup that was simmering in it into small wooden bowls. Calling it "soup" was an euphemism as it was barely more than hot water. But she couldn't afford putting any more vegetables into it. Not now, with the food supply being worse than ever.

As she was working the wanted poster that showed the former landlord's face caught her eye. Jon had put it on the wall. She didn't know whether it had been his own idea or that of his superiors. But whoever had put up this poster was either very naive or very desperate – or maybe both. The promised money would probably have solved her problems at once, but nobody would have been crazy enough to start a fight with Ortega and his men. When the orcs had arrived at the coast, Ortega had gone mad. Lord Hagen and his men had been able to fight the orcish attack off , but still many smaller farms had been destroyed and Ortega had lost many tenants. It was said he had personally requested men from the king to protect his fields. But not only did the king turn him down, he even sent some of Ortega's workers into war. After that, Ortega announced he didn't feel commited to the king anymore and promised to secure the

coastal region himself. Reportedly he even proclaimed the free kingdom Tymoris and declared himself ruler of the coast. But instead of ruling and guarding it, he had taken his servants and fled to the mountains with them. Together with some deserters these bandits had been attacking the farmers and looting the farms which had endured the orcish attack. Lord Hagen hadn't come again, though. The king didn't consider the fight against the bandits important, now that Montera had fallen and the orcs were at the gates of the coastal area. Only the completely overstrained militia tried to defend them from Ortega's men.

Three men entering the inn interrupted Magda's thoughts. They were strangers. This alone was strange enough, now that neither hunters and travelers nor people from ships on their way to Vengard visited Ardea, like it had been in the past. But these strangers would have stood out even in the high period of the "Black Corsair".

At first Magda noticed the bald giant with the thick black beard and bushy eyebrows. Barely had she turned her eyes away from his face when she noticed the heavy mace on the mans back.

Her widened eyes wandered to the figure on the left side. A rather small and skinny man, whose rapier matched his appearance as well as the mace of his companion. The white shirt, the dark vest, the battered tricorn and the extensively plaited beard gave him a mixture of venturous elegance and exotic eccentricity.

And finally the middle one. Had they been in Varant, he would have been the most unremarkable one. But they weren't. They were in Ardea. And here people weren't used to bent sabers and tanned skin.

The strange party headed directly for the counter. Magda looked at her husband and saw him standing petrified. But he shook it of and asked, his voice a little more high-pitched than usual: "What can I get you?"

"Rum" droned the giant.

"I suppose you don't serve cactus liquor, my myrtanian friend? Of course not." the varantean answered his own question in a tone indicating that only a fool could ask himself such a question. "Well, then it will have to bee some myrtanian booze. I assume you will take the same, Magister?"

The last sentence had been directed to the third man.
He nodded. “Positive.”
Wulf carried out the order in a hurry that wasn’t like him at all. Magda realized the bowl she had been filling with soup was already flowing over. Quickly she put the scoop back into the pot, put down the bowl and wiped her hands on her apron. The fugitives would be waiting for there food, but she couldn’t go right now. She felt her husband would be needing her. Furthermore, she was too afraid to move or even walk by the three strangers on her way to the exit.
She was aware who was doing them the questionable honour of visiting their inn. Wulf surely knew it, too. Everyone near the coast knew the wanted posters of the three and their many comrades.
They were pirates. Pirates whose names were well known in Ardea and Kap Dun: Moeller, referred to as Hautot, Shaid, named the Sheik, and Goetke, who was called Magister. By now the three had got what they had ordered, and drank nearly synchronously. Hautot emptied his jar in one draft. His varantish comrade took his time. And Goetke put his jar down after one sip. With a disgusted look he said: “Villainous distillate!”
Magda clearly saw her husband jerk at these words. He threw a glance at the pirates rapier. But Shaid moved his hand in a pacifying way. “Don’t be afraid, father of sorrow. We haven’t come for you.”
Goetke nodded. “Our presence might be terrifying, but is just a temporary state.”
The three men silently leaned on the counter. While Moeller was watching Wulf and the magister was staring on the floor, Shaid let his gaze wander across the room. For split second he looked at Magda, but that was enough to send cold shivers down her back.
This varantean was so completely different from every other pirate. He had something melancholic in his eye, something that didn’t quite fit a buccaneer. And it was that what made him so frightening, even compared to his comrades.
“I hypothesize there is a man named Marlo residing near this village?”, Goetke interjected.

“Marlo? I don’t know a Marlo!”, Wulf hurried to reply while he wiped his forehead with the cloth he usually used to clean his jars.
“The contemplated sir operates in the field of commerce and currently resides in Tymoris.”
“I r-really d-don’t know…”
“Ah, never mind, Magister.” Moeller buzzed. “Waste of time.”
“Maybe you know someone who could help us”, the sheik barged in. “Someone who also works as a… tradesman.”
“Ermm… well.. there is Garvin. He manages the warehouse. On the left side just out the door. He…”
“Thank you, son of the kind advice. That’s enough.” Shaid signaled his comrades to follow him and together they left the “Black Corsair”.
It took a moment until Magda could move and finally relax a bit. She stepped to her man and took his sweaty hand. “Now even pirates”, Wulf muttered.
Yes, now even pirates. Until now they had all believed the attack of the orcish galleys had brought at least one good thing and freed the coastal region from that scourge.
When Magda stepped outside some minutes later to bring the refugees their soup, she saw the buccaneers standing in front of the warehouse and talking to the terrified storekeeper.
“The mine out in the forest”, she heard Garvin say. “He has hid there and now winds up his affairs from there.”
“The old Reddock’s hideout?” Shaid stroke his beard lost in thought. “I thought it had been abandoned since the great war with my home country.”
“It was. But I tell you, he is there!”
Magda quickened her steps. She didn’t even want to imagine what would happen to her if the pirates caught her eavesdropping.
She sighed as she went up the stairs to the dormitory and looked at the horizon. The orcs were coming closer, the landlord was looting the barnyards and now even the pirates had returned. “Innos, what will happen to us?”

Written by HerrFenrisWolf, translation by Madhur

Darkness had covered the dunes of Varant like a dark curtain. The area outside the towns was only lit by a few fires in the camps of caravans and nomads. In an oasis, remote between some sand-covered ruins, there was a man about to regain his freedom. Plissken leaned against a tent pole in his new master's camp. Around him the other slaves were sleeping on ordinary mats. None of them had any idea that one of their comrades was going to flee. Slowly and carefully Plissken cut the ropes that were restraining him in two, using a sharp shard he had found. His one eye was watching the entrance. While all the other prisoners had come to terms with their situation and fallen into an uneasy sleep, he had searched the sand until he had felt that very shard. When the rough leather of his restraints finally gave in the one-eyed man raised and stretched. He had been in this uncomfortable position way too long. When the barrier had collapsed he had sworn never to become a prisoner again. But destiny had never been kind to him and it had played some dirty tricks on him. First it had brought him into the colony, then it had robbed him of one of his eyes through the hand of one of Gomez' guards. In the end it had been the orcs who had captured Plissken, directly after the barrier had fallen, and sold him to their allies, the assassins of Varant. But these times were over. He'd rather die than getting captured again, he thought. Carefully placing one foot before the other, Plissken slowly made his way to the exit.
He could already hear the desert winds howling. Apparently they had been too loud, as suddenly on of the ither prisoners awoke. Pausing in his movement for a moment, Plissken tried to tell the other prisoner: "Don't do anything stupid!" He wasn't successful, the slave began screaming: "Alarm! The new one with the eye patch is trying to escape!"

Plissken had already been afraid that something like this could happen. The slaves had been broken by the assassins, they had become submissive servants to their new masters.
It didn't take a second until a guard stormed into the tent with a drawn saber. It had probably been standing by the entrance. Plissken ducked and tossed sand into the eyes of his attacker. He wasn't someone who cared about honour. Who stayed fair in a fight had already lost. Not losing any time, he punched both ears of his foe with his flat hands, making him blind and deaf for some time, so he was no danger. But someone who had been in the colony always made sure, and so Plissken hit him between the shoulders with the pommel of his own sword, stunning him.
Without wasting any more time Plissken ran out of the tent and sprinted towards the ruin of a wall that was just a few steps from the tent. Standing behind this wall the escaped prisoner awaited to more guards coming from north. They had probably just returned from a patrol. Holding the saber in his right hand, the one-eyed ripped a torch out of its retainer in the wall and tossed it towards his enemies. He didn't hit them, but Plissken used their short distraction well. With a quick stroke, he opened the throat of one of his enemies, and before the other one could react, he thrust the saber into his shoulder, making him stumble. In an instant, Plissken grabbed his enemies head and hit him in the face with his knee. The unpleasent crack told the former bandit that he had broken his foe's nose. But the guard was tough. His face twisted with pain, he managed to strike Plissken with his saber. A metallic taste spread through the mouth of the old warhorse. Spitting out his blood, he kicked his opponent between the legs, which caused the man to scream and fall down. ramming his elbow in the guards face, Plissken made sure that he wouldn't be making any trouble for the next few hours, either.
Plissken thanked the wind for howling so lowdly. Hadn't it been that way, the noise would probably already have alerted the other guards. But still, he had to hurry. He turned towards the tent a last time and, directed to the slave who had sold him out, hissed "Pray you will never meet me

again!"
Then he disappeared southwards, in the direction of the coast, into the dark desert. He had dropped the saber, as it would only have restrained him on his flight. Plissken would run as far as his feet would carry him. Nobody would ever again catch him, no orc and definitely no human being.

Night of thieves

Written by HerrFenrisWolf, translation by Madhur

The orcish reign wasn't all that bad, Lares thought as he patrolled along the wall walk with an exceptionally dutiful look on his face. When the Mages of Fire had been in charge, he hadn't dared to go after the treasures of the tempel. They had been rather sensitive about their riches. Many unlucky novices had been sentenced to guard the relics for days. To steal some of these treasures, you would have needed to be magically talented yourself.
Two Orcs were walking towards Lares, their huge battle-axes resting on their shoulders. The change of guards he had been waiting for was in progress. The warriors ignored his greetings and went down the stairs from the wall. Nobody minded his presence, as he had been patrolling on the wall for days until they had got used to him. It would have been absolutely impossible to pull something like that off in the time when the militia was controlling the city. Without a written permission, he would probably have been down from the battlements. Apart from that, he would never have put on the surcoat of the militia; but he didn't mind wearing a mercenary's armour. Most Orcs didn't even pay any attention to their mercenaries – most humans looked exactly the same to them anyways.
By now, Lares had reached the end of the battlements. The wall merged into an elevated green that had probably once been the temple's herbal

garden. This was the place he had chosen to gain entry to the place of worship via a small side entrance.
He had taken measures to ensure that the guard who should take the next shift would not be in its place tonight. During his “patrols”, Lares had memorised the guards’ schedule and found out that there would only be one warrior on the next shift. The thief had taken care of that one by calling him a weakling in the tavern. In the end, the soldier had overestimated himself. Tunnelrumble was strong enough to knock down an Orc. An immense hangover should prevent him from doing his duty tonight, freeing the way for Lares.
He darted through the door and crossed the shamans’ bedchamber. Their snoring was the only sound to be heard. With a short glance to the main entrance Lares made sure that the coast was clear. Usually there was a guard patrolling in the corridor leading to the shamans’ hall, but today it was empty. Lares noticed a group of slaves rioting in front of the temple. They were drawing the temple guards’ attention, providing a nice distraction for the thief; although they might prove to be a double-edged sword. If their noise would wake the shamans, his way back would be cut off.
But he couldn’t just quit now, after he had come so far. He didn’t mean to rifle through the temple treasure until he found something he liked, but rather had a clear goal in mind: the six golden bowls of the alchemists. In the time of the king, these had been scattered throughout the city, as awards for the most skilled and influential members of their profession. Now he had the chance to obtain all of them at once, as the Orcs had collected them and brought them to the temple. Lares quickly entered the hall that the shaman Grok used to inhabit during the day. He noticed with amazement that the room was completely dark, not a single candle or torch provided any light. Only a bit of starlight illuminated the room, falling through the holes beneath the temple’s ceiling. The thief was growing even more suspicious. He stayed close to the ground and slowly approached the cabinet that should, if his informant had been right, contain the bowls. Then Lares realized what was strange about the whole

scene. Was that a rope hanging from the ceiling?
Just a second after he had made that discovery, he saw something flashing in a corner of the room. A hooded figure was kneeling in front of the cabinet, apparently stealing the very bowls he had come for. Lares couldn't contain a disbelieving snort. The figure paused and turned around. The uproar in front of the temple had calmed down, the fighting had stopped and the angry voices of several Orcs came nearer.
Suddenly, the full moon's light burst through the clouds and enlightened the hall. For a moment that seemed like an eternity, the two thieves watched each other. With surprising quickness the other one drew a dagger and darted to the other side of the room. The stranger obviously took Lares to be one of the mercenaries. Without taking his eyes from the dagger, Lares walked a few steps back to hide himself from the people coming through the corridor. An instance later, the other thief followed his example. He was still holding on to the bag containing the bowls.
Lares whispered: "Put the weapon down! I'm a thief, just like you!" The stranger seemed to relax a bit, but didn't yet lower the blade. "Then prove it! I need to be sure!" Lares approached the rope and replied "Let's get out and share the profit from the bowls!" The Orcs were already approaching the entrance to the main hall. The stranger hissed "Wrong answer." as he pushed Lares away from the rope and into a nearby commode that collapsed under his weight with a loud crash. But he immediately got on his feet again, and as his opponent started climbing the rope, he grabbed the bag and pulled with all his strength. Just as he managed to wretch it from the hooded figure, he took a kick to the chin that sent him flying to the ground. As he landed on the floor and the bowls rolled out of the bag with a deafening clanging, he shouted "Here! Over here! The thief is getting away!"
Suddenly, everything happened very quickly.
One of the Orcs grabbed his arm and roughly pulled him to his feet, while the others could just watch as the thief cut his rope and disappeared over the roof into the night. In an instant, all the torches flared up as some of the guards stormed out of the temple to catch the

intruder. Orders were shouted. Somebody picked up the golden bowls. Lares was dizzy. The stranger's boot had hit him well. Grok, the leader of the shamans, and Nemrok, captain of the orcish warriors, were looking down upon him. While Grok confined himself to just watching Lares thoughtfully, Nemrok was questioning the supposed mercenary: "What are you doing in here? What happened?"
"When the riot outside started, I saw a figure sneaking into the temple. I thought I should get to the bottom of it and caught that thief in here." Lares responded. "He got away, but I managed to take his loot from him." "Why didn't you just inform the guard?" "Well, they were busy, and I didn't want to trouble them with what could just have been a false alarm."
Nemrok seemed satisfied, but Grok still watched Lares warily. The two talked Orcish for a while. To the thief, it sounded like they were going to hang him next to the paladins by the city gate. He just hated it when he wasn't able to properly assess his situation.
Suddenly, Nemrok slapped him on the back with his huge hand: "You managed to prevent the thief from stealing anything. Go and get your double pay from Samuel. Also tell him that we will reinforce the guards in and around the temple with our warriors. His mercenaries will take on their duties throughout the city."
Lares nodded and quickly left the temple. It was hard to believe that he had actually survived this disaster. He wouldn't be able to enter the temple again, but that would not stop him from trying to obtain the bowls. More than ever his mind was focused on that particular treasure.

The die is cast

Written by Jünger des Xardas, translation by Madhur

"By Innos! Another six?" Surprise was written in Pavel's face.
"Shit!" Falk cursed as he threw his purse on the table. "I'm out." The hunter turned around and stomped out of the hut.
With a grin on his face, Alea picked up the bag and fastened it to his belt. "I hope you won't follow his example. Double jackpot – who's with me?"
Pavel snorted. "You are robbing us!"
Alea shrugged his shoulders. "That's the game. And what would be the fun of playing it if it weren't for the risk? Don't be sad, you know how it works, lucky at cards, unlucky in…"
"You're cheating."
The smile vanished from Alea's face. Pavel fell silent and tensed up. Both of them looked at Lukjan, who sat in a corner of the small room with his arms crossed.
Quickly, Alea recovered himself. "Now you are insulting me! Alright, I'm a bit lucky right now, but to accuse me of cheating? That marks a sore loser, my friend."
"We aren't your friends", Lukjan hissed.
Alea sighed theatrically. "And I thought we were here in a merry round, having some fun… and now you call me a cheater, just because I'm having a short lucky streak."
"I would hardly call that a "short" streak", Pavel remarked.

“All right, a long one. But is that a crime? The gods are smiling down on me, that’s all! And after all, that is just an assumption without any evidence! Benefit of the doubt!”
“All right. We’ll play another round. Double jackpot”, Lukjan said. Alea was about to utter a relieved sigh, when the hunter added: “But this time, we are going to swap our dies.”
“No way!”, Alea gasped out.
“I knew it!”
“Are you implying…”, Alea started, but the hunter finished the sentence for him: “… that your die is pronged? Damn right.”
“It’s just my lucky die, that’s all. I have been using it for years. I got it in Vengard, and it has never let me down!”
It hadn’t always brought him luck either, though. It was not the first time that someone accused him of cheating. At least these hunters here in their hut in the middle of nowhere weren’t nearly as influential as the enemies he had made himself back in the days at the court in Vengard.
“Let’s see if your die is lucky for me, too.”
Lukjan reached over the table for the die, but Alea hit him on the hand.
“Hands off!” Nobody would get his hands on his lucky die!
“I’m starting to that Lukjan is right”, Pavel piped up. “We should have known it. You just can’t trust these damn rangers.”
Alea knew when it was his time to leave. “Fine”, he said as he stood up with a very piqued look on his face. “I suppose I am not wanted here anymore.”
He was already heading to the door when Lukjan called “Not so fast! We first want our money back!”
“What? That’s ridiculous! If you want to play, you have to take the risk of losing!”
“I am alright with losing. But not with being cheated.” Suddenly, Lukjan had a knife in his hand.
“Fine, have it your way”, Alea said in a pacifying manner. “I don’t wan’t any trouble.” Reluctantly, he put his winnings down on the table. He would have liked to throw the money in the hunter’s dumb visage, but

he knew when it was better for him to keep back. He could defend himself well enough, but had never been much of a warrior, and here he was outnumbered two to one. Three to one, actually, as Falk would surely come to his comrades' aid.
As Alea was about to leave, Pavel spit on the floor and muttered: "Rangers! Wandering people. We should have known better than trusting their kind."
In front of the little hut, Falk was plucking a Scavenger. As Alea walked by him, the hunter gave him a grim look. He pretended not to have noticed.
In front of him the wide plains spread out, that no-man's-land in the north-west of Myrtana, that was travelled by no one save a few hunters. Well, hunters and rangers.
It was raining. Just a bit, but the cold drops falling on Alea's head annoyed him. He put on his hood.
It had always been the same. Ever since his time in Vengard. And since he had joined the rangers, people were even more suspicious towards him than before. Maybe he should take off his green cloak the next time he socialized. But in the end, it wouldn't really change anything. People were always assuming the worst about their fellow men, especially about those who were – like Alea – blessed with extraordinary luck in gambling.
His lucky die was pronged, that was what Lukjan had claimed. Ha! Alea had carved it himself, from a piece of troll bone he had bought at a high price back in Vengard. Granted, he was no learnt craftsman, so his work might have been a bit sloppy, but was he really to be blamed for that?
A bison-herd passed by. Their meat and fur made these animals a valuable target for any hunter, but only a madman would have taken on a whole herd of them. Alea wasn't much of a hunter, anyway. He usually sticked to rabbits.
But at the moment, he didn't care about bisons or rabbits. He was approaching the river, and it was usually swarming with lurkers, blood flies and even crocodiles. No matter what kind of stories the town people

might tell about the rangers, these beasts didn't leave you alone just because of a green cloak.
Well, maybe they did around the ancient stone circles and monoliths that were spread all around Myrtana. Runak kept telling that at these sites, Adanos himself guarded his people. Alea had never put that to the test. He didn't feel like luring a pack of wolves or a shadowbeast to one of the stone circles just to notice that a strong pair of jaws could tear him apart there just like everywhere else.
Alea was lucky. The lurkers had already found a good meal in a careless group of goblins by the river, and the blood flies preferred to stay at the ground in the rain, that had gotten a bit heavier by now.
A fight was the last thing he needed right now. Whether in a stone circle or in the middle of nowhere, no beast asked someone if he happened to be a ranger. Not even the flower-pickers where safe against their oh so beloved nature, Alea thought with a grin.
Soon, the sound of the waterfall drowned out the falling rain. The sun was slowly going down behind the mountains. The ranger took an anxious glance at the summit to his left.
Runak and his flower-pickers could call it a sacred place as often as they wanted to, he didn't like living at the slope of the Archolos. Every child in the area knew that the mountain was cursed. Alea had never been one to care much for spooky stories, but it still didn't feel right. And he was sure he had once seen a strange light at the top of the mountain.
He put aside these gloomy thoughts about the walking dead when the camp of Runak's rangers started coming in sight between the trees. Rangers of both genders had taken places around the campfire in front of the hut that Runak inhabited at the moment. Two others were practising with the bow, using a small tree as a target. One ranger was washing his cloak in the river.
"Alea!"
He flinched and slowly turned around. He knew what was about to happen.
"You know very well that you shouldn't be wandering around on your

own!"
Alea was looking into Silva's face, that had been terribly scarred by some beast's claws. The ranger was giving him a very disapproving look.
"Well, technically Runak only requested…", Alea started, but he was interrupted: "And you should accede to his requests. He was worrying about you."
"Unnecessary. I haven't even been gone a day."
"You were out there, and you know perfectly well how the situation is. We don't know what the Orcs think about us, so we will hide here for a while. Runak doesn't want any trouble, and I hope, I don't have to remind you of that."
"Don't worry. We want to be neutral, so we stay here and don't draw any attention to us until all this has settled down. I know about it."
"Than act accordingly!"
Alea sighed. It was always the same problem with the flower-pickers. There were lots of rangers like himself; normal people who had gotten into trouble and gone into hiding. People you could get along with very well. But these flower-pickers always had to be so strict. They were so very serious about everything, and the word of the druids was their law.
"Come on." Alea gave Silva an amicable pat on the shoulder. It was time for deescalation. And after all, the ranger was nice guy, if he didn't let the flower-picker hang out too much. "I didn't mean any harm. And I haven't been to any tavern, just out at the hunters'."
"Hmm, I suppose, that's more than we could have expected."
"That's it, my friend. Think positive!" Alea gave him another pat on the shoulder. "It won't happen again, promise. But if I can't leave to gamble a bit, I'll have to pass the time here. How about a short game?"
Silva shrugged his shoulders. "If that keeps you from wandering around, why not?"
Alea grinned. Silva was quite a good guy, after all, he thought as he was fiddling about with his lucky die inside his pocket.

Campfire stories

Written by HerrFenrisWolf, translation by Madhur

"Are you going to keep talking or finally drink something so the damn bottle goes round?" one of the men sitting around the fire snarled.
The recipient of his message only now realized that he had been holding the bottle with the booze that was so vital for these men for at least a minute without drinking from it. He took a good pull and passed it on. It was a big bottle, and its content tasted terrible. It would make many more rounds around the fire.
It was one of these freezing nights when the campfire wasn't enough to keep the men warm. Just the few new ones among them could remember sleeping in a warm bed or on a bag of dry straw without the cold wind constantly pulling at you. The only thing that made nights like these somewhat bearable was lots of alcohol, combined with the stories they used to tell each other. Feeling the alcohol's grip on his throat, the narrator gasped "Where was I?"
"You were talking about the stories you heard about the mountain, back when you were with the militia!" one of the more attentive listeners answered.
"Yes" the other man resumed his tale, "we heard lots of stuff. Even before the war, people around here told weird stories about that thing. You know the talk of old blabbermouths, and their crazy fantasies. They claimed that Beliar himself lives on the mountain, stealing the souls of

those who are foolish enough to climb it at night. That he poisoned the wine. Right, the Dark One just needs to piss down the mountain, and all the plants are ruined, was my response to that kind of talk." The bandits laughed, the narrator spit in the fire and continued: "Nonsense, obviously. If Beliar was walking about this world, he wouldn't bother with poising wine. But", and he lowered his voice so that his listeners had to bend forward to understand him, "it's a fact that quite a few people have disappeared on that mountain. We went looking for them. Mostly hunters from Silden or adventurers from Geldern. Obstinate fools who went up there. We didn't follow them very far. Way too dangerous." The bottle had reached him again. He took his time with drinking from it. His listeners waited impatiently, but silent. He finally passed it on and resumed his tale: "I've once met a hunter who's supposed to have been up there. A tough bastard, I can tell you that. He said it's the kind of place where you don't hunt. The place is swarming with beasts. Shadowbeasts prowling around, trolls churn up the ground and amid all these monsters there is a ruin. The remnants of an old citadel, destroyed decades ago. Nobody remembers anymore who once has lived there, and to be honest we don't really want to know.

Because this hunter also told me that, if you listen closely, you can still hear the old inhabitants screaming, cursing their murderers and all living beings. That drives the beasts up there really crazy."

All of the hardened men around the fire were nervous now, looking around. To them, the wind sounded like terrible screams, and cracking of the fire seemed like the last breath of dying men. They started fidgeting about and were getting afraid. The bottle had been completely forgotten. The narrator grasped it. Now he reversed his speech, getting faster and louder: "Nobody cultivates the wine anymore. Nobody climbs the mountain. And all of us, who once were farmer, soldiers or hunters, are now nothing but prey!" His voice was getting shriller. "We have been hunted and killed, our comrades slaughtered and executed! The Orcs and their servants made us outlaws, and now we are hiding here, right at the foot of the cursed mountain!" By now, he was screaming hysterically:

“Do you see the black mountain? Do you hear it calling? Do you feel its grasp?” He took a big gulp from the bottle and spit it into the fire. As it combusted with a bright blue flame, the men jumped away from the fire in terror.
Out of nowhere, a heavy blow hit the storyteller right in his face and sent him to the ground. Ivan, who stood in front of his now unconscious follower, hated these nights. On a similar occasion he would probably just kill the damn guy. The bandit leader would spend the rest of the night restoring his men’s moral. Ivan truly hated these nights.

The lads of Reddock

Written by HerrFenrisWolf, translation by controlled

“Get up, lad. Hurry up! You ain´t made out of cotton! You can take it!”
The shouts of instructor Norris slowly made their way to Joey’s mind.
“Get up! That was nothing! Get back on your feet!”
The instructions of the old man resounded in his skull.
Troubled the kneeling one rose to his feet, stretching them. Pain crawled in waves through his entire body. Copper had knocked him to the ground with his last savage blow. Joey staggered a little bit, shaking his head, and where seconds ago distortive fogs had lingered, he could see clearly again. In front of him pranced Copper, wielding sword and shield like him, this fly bastard. Recalling Norris’ instructions, the young rebel prepared himself for the counter-charge. First reduce the distance to the enemy, parry attacks with the shield, forcing the enemy into an undefended position to hit hard by yourself. It couldn´t be that hard to execute those three steps. Copper had also managed it a moment ago. Joey jumped forward, got perilous close to Copper, caught his heavy blow with his shield, but hit only the shield of his enemy, too. But the lad was not about to give in yet. A feint then. He feinted a slash at Copper’s legs who lowered his shield, but Joey drove his own shield right in his opponent’s surprised mug. For a short moment he saw his eyes become glassy. Joey turned now, hitting his enemy’s weapon hand with his pommel whilst he threw himself with his shoulder against the man who

lost his balance. Copper dropped disarmed on the soil of the small, improvised arena.
“Yeah, knew you´re not made out of cotton, lad!” Norris shouted. The surrounding men rushed into the ring to help Copper get back on his feet and to congratulate Joey. The old instructor sought him out, gave him a pat on the back and said: “You went right for the chap in the end, like one of those Northmarian savages. Rude technique, but effective. I´ll turn you into a real fighter, lad. You truly earned your soldier armor after this fight.” He waved his hand at a bunch nearby him and told Joey to get some booze first, to cool his heated temper. The young rebel was yet still under tension, he took a deep breath, sweat trickling down his forehead. Well, he had earned his prize in the fight: He had proven himself worthy of wearing the armor of the royal soldiers. There were not many left of these and quite a few refugees here in Reddock had to fight in rags. Norris was choosing very strictly who of the freshmen was worthy and who was not. From now on Joey was a true rebel, with no opportunity to back away.
Norris though turned away from the events in the ring, walked over to Javier´s little hut on the edge of the mine shaft.
“Our boys are getting better slowly “, he said towards the paladin: “Right now they may be nothing more than a bunch of cutpurses, but with a little bit of time I shall turn them into a squad of royal soldiers.”
“A squad without arming”, Javier returned. “We barely have enough sufficient equipment right now to withstand against those creatures in the caves. Better don’t even think about those orcs in Cape Dun. Even if you make these peasants into soldiers, their scythes won´t turn into swords and their tatters not into armors.”
“Aye, an ill thing that whole story about the smith. Damn, I´ve even sent one of those lumberjacks from above to the anvil. When I told him he had fashioned a quite decent frying pan, he dropped the hammer into the muck and none could find that damned thing again. He´s back on his old job.” Norris spat.
“The whole situation is desperate. It won´t be long until the orcs get to

know about this place. The only thing we can do if this happens is to retreat or to strike immediately against Cape Dun. It would be suicide."
"May I speak openly?", the old man asked, but continued talking, because he knew Javier well and that he was allowed to do so: "I was born, raised and had family on this very coast. It is my home and I will not yield it to these damned feltpelts which thought they needed a little vacation and decided to march down from their nordic velds!"
"Acknowledged", Javier answered, cracking a sad smile:"I`m feeling quite similar. Everybody around here most likely knows how desperate our situation is, nonetheless we all endure, together. Oh, and our contact in Cape Dun sent word. The talk is, that the Orcs purchased a paladin from one of the slave hunters, threw him straight into the lighthouse, of course. Maybe this will yield us an opportunity eventually. But right now we can only hope for a miracle."
"Miracles, miracles are sent by the gods. But it happens that they didn´t show up here on this coast for quite a while. Instead we here know the wind and how he´s and I tell you, Javier… something is happening!"

The black wolf

Written by Jünger des Xardas, translation by OLtGrusel

The trail is fresh. It stopped snowing half an hour ago. The snow was almost virgin. Just here and there a crow had left the imprint of its talons and under a tree the shapes of little squirrel feet loomed. And there were the trails of the hind. Evert loosened the strap that held his quiver and let it slide down his side where he could reach the arrows faster and more easily. Then he began to follow the trails. On the left hand side there was a little grove consisting of some dozen fir trees bending under the pressure of the fresh fallen snow. He frowned as he saw that one of the branches not far ahead was free of the white mantle and a small mound of snow underneath proved that it had been covered like the others until recently. Evert grasped the branch. It wasn't only free of snow but at least at the tip free of needles. Just some of them still held on to the wood, lonely and twisted. Some more were lying on the snow mantle underneath the branch but most of the needles were missing completely. He didn't need to lower his sight to the trails to know what he was dealing with. Only a ripper ate fir needles in this way. As a precaution he grasped his sword, maybe the beast was still near.

He had been taken by surprise by a ripper once. He had been couched and hadn't noticed the porcine animal sneaking up behind him until he'd felt its warm breath on his neck and had been alarmed by a sudden

grunt. But it had been too late. The beast had driven its teeth into the flesh of his leg. Its fangs had cut through the fur and the leather he'd worn, through flesh and cord right to the bone. Just in time he'd been able to draw his knife and had stabbed it into the side of the beast. He'd put the ripper to flight but then he'd succumbed to the pain. Helpless and nearly fainting as he'd been he had witnessed how the leather of his trousers had gone black and the snow underneath him had turned red. At the end Bogir had found him and had brought him back to the clan where his parents had been out of their minds in fear for their son. But this hadn't been the end to the story. He had had to learn that the worst about rippers weren't their sharp fangs but the diseases you could get from their bite. He'd spent a whole month in bed under half a dozen furs of bisons alternating between sweating like hell and freezing like he hadn't in the coldest of Nordmar's winters. In the end Gydja's herbs and spells had healed him along with the good will of the ancestors. But the Gydja wasn't here now, just like Bogir, who, so he was told, had given up hunting. Concerning the good will of the ancestors: That was something he didn't want to think about. He had the suspicion that if he did an inner voice would rise - a voice that would sound suspiciously like Garik – and would whisper him that he had lost this good will through his defiance of his ancestral line from his grandfather Harald to Snorre the cunning. In short he didn't want to encounter another ripper. The scars he had from his first encounter with such a beast sufficed as a reminder. He took a closer look at the ground surrounding the trunk of the fir tree. There, where the thicker branches and the needles had a brown ring of mud, the ground was dug over. Also the ripper. Which other animal would dig through the frozen ground witch its snout to get some roots or a small rodent? Evert looked back to the trails of the hind. They crossed those of the ripper but there were no signs for a fight. He knelt down for a moment and took a closer look at the trails. The trails of the ripper were slightly blurred from the gusts of wind that rose every few minutes from the big canyon and made the fir trees rustle. Those of the hind were fresher so apparently both animals hadn't met and no one had disputed

his quarry so far. Also the chance of the ripper bursting out between the trees was small. Probably the beast had already moved on.

Evert also moved on and followed the trails of the hind's hoofs in the snow. Much had changed since back then. He had been an adolescent and had seen maybe twelve or thirteen winters. He had been on his first solo hunt instead of being accompanied by his father or Bogir or Jensgar or a different member of the clan. Meanwhile he had become a young man, had completed his challenge of manliness, had hunted down his first sabertooth long ago and even had fought against some orcs. He had also been on so many solo hunts he couldn't count them and even lived alone outside of the clan. He was no Orc Slayer and even less a chief and would never become one regardless of how much some of his brothers in the clan blamed him for that. But hunting, that was something he now was good at. Once again a gust of wind from the canyon to his right rose. But this time it wasn't a short one breaking of immediately. Evert followed the trails but took of his gloves while moving. He licked his thumb and held it in the wind. The wind came from the south east which was perfect. He could follow the hind without worrying that the hind might pick up his scent. Behind the grove there was smoke rising from a hilltop. He stayed in the shadow of the hill under a slightly overlapping cliff. Most orcs camped in the north or the east and one of his men wouldn't pitch his camp in the open like that, so he assumed that it were some goblins. Probably they wouldn't bother climbing down the hill just for him but there was no need to provoke them. On the other side of the hill the canyon turned south and cleared into a slightly sloping plane with spruces and pine trees growing. Evert saw a hare fleeing into the brushwood as he neared him, but he wasn't interested in bunnies today. If he couldn't catch the hind he hoped that a bunny had found his way into one of the traps he had laid out around his camp. Nonetheless he was hoping that he could taste some deer this evening and it wasn't far. That he knew for sure. He found his quarry on a small clearing while the hind was pawing between the fallen branches and the snow for some

grass. He approached the hind from behind between some bushes and slowly put an arrow on the bowstring. Like his bow he had made the arrow by himself, like Gunnar had shown him. The tip was made of a wolf's tooth and therefore extremely pointed and excellent for the hunt for game. The hind rose its head and its big round eyes searched hectically the brushwood all around. Its ears were erected and one was slightly twitching. Evert stressed the bowstring slowly so he wouldn't make a noise as it would be neck or nothing in a few seconds. Whether he was stressing the bowstring for the hind or for what it had scented he didn't know himself. Maybe a sabertooth had the same goal as he did? Was there an orc scout on the hunt here in the area? The animal dashed away and he let loose his bowstring. His arrow, aimed for the neck, hit the flank and found his way into the flesh right above the left leg. In an instant he had a second arrow ready but his prey would surely have escaped if it weren't for a black lightning bolt coming from the other side of the clearing and launching into the hind. In the blink of an eye everything was over. The wolf stood over the dead hind the white fangs dripping with red blood. Evert's second arrow was pointed at the wolf but he let it sink slowly. Not only that wild ice wolves never hunt alone but he also knew only one ice wolf that wasn't white like the ice of Nordmar but pitch black. He put his arrow back in the quiver and left his cover. The wolf, like the hind, hadn't picked up his scent because the wind was still coming from the front but now it bared its teeth and snarled. Evert paused for a moment. Such a behavior wasn't typical for the tamed wolves at his clan. What happened next was even more surprising. A man came from between the trees behind the wolf. Evert wasn't surprised by the fact that a man was here, in fact he was expecting this since he had recognized the wolf, but it wasn't the man he had anticipated. The sight was a pleasing one nonetheless.

"Ronar!" "Evert, nice to see you!" The two men met in the middle of the clearing and hugged. "Are you on your way to the clan?" Evert asked the other huntsman. He knew that they were half way between Ronar's

hunting lodge and the village. His counterpart nodded. He was older than Evert but still a young man. His den was stately and his cloths were made of furs and leather just like Evert's. The bow on his shoulder was similar to Evert's one also. Like all hunters of the Wolf Clan he used a bow that was devised by Helmar one of their ancestors and that was extremely useful for the hunt. All of Nordmar knew this bows as Wolf Rippers. "Have spent enough time in my hut" explained Ronar. "It's time I get back to the clan, meet some people and get a little bit of rest. I haven't had a Nordmar Nogginfog for weeks." He pointed behind him. There was a sleigh he pulled by a rope that was full of furs and a bag with claws and teeth bound to it. "Also it's time to bring my quarry to Rune. He is awaiting our yield impatiently these days." Evert's eyes went back from Ronar's furs to the black wolf that took no notice of them and instead punched its teeth in the dead hind. "Since when does Bullvik's wolf belong to you?" Ronar's look eclipsed. "It doesn't. I just ran into it." Evert's heart misgave him. "What happened to Bullvik?" "He accompanied one of the hunting parties your father is sending out nowadays. They met some orcs and he was brought home on his shield. I guess you can imagine how devastated Arsa is now." Bullvik. Rune had joked one time that one of Bullvik's ancestors must have been an ogre. Bullvik had been a real giant with arms like tree trunks and had been one of the best warriors of the clan. Hogar had been the only one of the Orc Slayers who had been able to hold a candle to him. And after all Hogar was the Hersir. All of the women of the clan had been jealous of Arsa and her husband, but they probably weren't anymore. A living man was better than a dead one, even if the dead one was Bullvik. The idea that even such a warrior like Bullvik wasn't safe from the orcs was a disturbing one. "And his wolf?" "I wasn't there, but the men say that he went insane. He raged under the orcs and then ran away. No one has seen him since then until he crossed my path." Evert turned to the wolf again. Its mother had expulsed it from the litter, he knew, because of his black fur. This fur was told to be a bad omen, a curse by the ancestors. But Bullvik had taken care of the wolf, they had become inseparable and

together they had killed quite a few orcs. Slowly Evert walked towards the wolf and immediately it raised its head and started to bare its teeth. Evert made another step and the wolf snarled. “Be careful!” warned Ronar and took of his gloves to show Evert the deep cuts on his hand. “It already bit me. I think it has gone wild and unpredictable. It doesn’t let me touch it and I’m happy that it follows me to the clan. And in between I’m almost surprised that it doesn’t attack me. I’m hoping that the Gydja has some advice or maybe Bogir. Maybe he can calm down the wolf. “How is Bogir anyway?” Evert acted on the new topic. “Last time I was in the village the situation hadn’t changed. He sits at the fire, talks little and doesn’t want to go hunting.” The worrying feeling in Evert’s chest grew stronger. Bullvik, who had always seemed so strong and unbeatable died in battle. Bogir, who had been the best hunter in the clan since Evert’s birth, and who had taught Evert so many things and had saved his life, sat apathetically in front of his hut. The orcs stormed the land of the ancestors in rising numbers and made living more and more difficult. It was like a dark shadow lied over Nordmar. “I’m sorry for your quarry” said Ronar and thus snapped him out of his thoughts. “I fear you won’t get much out of this hind.” Evert smiled wickedly. “The wolf shall have the meat. I’m hoping that a hare stumbled in one of my traps.” “Don’t you want to join me?” asked Ronar. “No thanks, you know…” he broke off without knowing how to end this sentence himself. “We lost some good men, not only Bullvik. And I fear it will get worse. More and more orcs are coming. At the moment they seem to concentrate on the Hammer Clan but I don’t want to imagine what will happen when they are finished with them. The hunt gets more and more difficult. We could use your help.” “Father will take care of everything.” Evert responded, but after the latest news he got from Ronar not as confidently, as he would have been beforehand. “He sends out the hunters in bigger parties and sends some Orc Slayers to escort them” granted Ronar. “But as you can see with Bullvik even with them they are not safe. Additionally half of the wild animals are chased off by so many people at one spot. Nonetheless except for Hanson and me no one is

leaving the village alone. Some think that Grim should rather seek the open battle with the orcs than just protecting the village and the hunting parties. They think he should send reinforcements to the Hammer Clan." Evert sighed. "And surely they think I should finally join the Orc Slayers and lead the warriors in this open battle because that is the will of the ancestors." Ronar pulled his hands up defensively. "I didn't want to say that." "I Know. But others do." "Don't care about them. You know how it is. Especially in bad times everyone thinks he himself would be the best jarl." "My father is the best jarl." Evert and his father might not talk much since he became a hunter, but Grim was undoubtedly a great leader and he was doing the right thing. The clan was too small for an open fight with the orcs. It had to defend itself and make sure that the hunters brought home enough food for the survival of the village. Those demanding action and taking up the fight against the orcs from Grim were the same ones asking Evert to finally join the Orc Slayers and to follow the path of the ancestors. "Just think about it", said Ronar. Evert nodded. "I will." Then he forced himself to put on a little smile and padded Ronar's shoulder. "Take care." The other hunter repeated the gesture. "You too. Farewell, and may the ancestors watch over you."

Like he had hoped a bunny had fallen into one of his traps near the snow line. The even more pleasing surprise was the column of smoke that rose above the pass. In the grass next to Evert's camp sat Wilson and roasted a deer above the open fire. Seeing Evert coming this way he stood up. "Evert! I've been asking myself if I would still find you up here." Both men shook hands. "Do you want to have a share of this? The meat should be ready soon and I can't take everything with me down the pass anyway. Evert smiled. "It's a pleasure. You wouldn't imagine." And sitting down next to the fire and pulling of the gloves to warm his hands he asked: "How was your hunt?" "Splendid. I hunted down a shadow beast, and what a nice one." He pointed at the fur that he had spread out on the ground a little bit away from the fire. A particular pretty one. Big and thick and black, but a little bit silvery in the shine of the fire and the

slowly setting sun, scraggy but at the same time silky. “In Faring there is an orc that should give me 400 pieces of gold for that.” Evert nodded approvingly. Wilson was a gifted hunter what was exceptional for one who came from the flat lands. Even most of Nordmar’s hunters wouldn’t get near a shadow beast. “Over there in the bush I’ve hidden some claws and furs. Not as impressive as your fur, but they should be worth some gold anyway. You can take them with you like always, they shall be my payment for the deer haunch.” Wilson waved aside. “Don’t mention it.” “And for some booze” Evert amended. “I really need a good booze.” And while he was sitting there and staring into the fire he thought about Ronar’s words. Maybe it really was time to visit the clan once more. One black wolf had returned to the Wolf Clan. Why shouldn’t the other one too?