

Aesyr Wōdanaz

Vol. I



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We first met upon my visit to magnificent Loire some thousands of years ago in red hand caves of tranquility. Aesyra held the key of destiny, seen within twin duality of burning blue and auburn eyes, by word of crows soaring outside time and space. I, chained in heart and mind by heavy iron in my own time, had been drawn away by these black creatures and now stood before the red hand crimson mantled chieftain who was squatting, occupied by some obscure things on the flint rock ground with his back to me.

Aesyra?, I said, reaching through the misty morning stillness, laying my hand upon his soft coat, so as if to confirm that it was all not just another wishful illusion. The texture was cold and damp at first but warmed and softened quickly as if melted.

One of the crows accompanying me to the cave entrance flew and sat on his shoulder, whispering in his ear:

My Lord, son of undying Ramheaded Ra, thyne requested subject lived much hidden in the Northlands. Word of your exaltedness uttered led us to find him who then carried thyne name as if a son, and unto others call himself prophet.

Aesyra turned his head and looked at the crow from underneath his golden hair, and then to me and smiled exclaiming:

With this message, crow, you struck two birds in one stone, for it is double truth you speak! Come, son, let us dine together.

He called one of the soldiers standing in a small band some distance away from us with whom he exchanged unintelligible words while pointing with a stick on the pile of flint rocks which I could now see were placed in a special formation. The soldier called two other men to come and make notes of the stratagem while Aesyra rose up and brushed off his sandy knees calling yet another man to his side, clothed not in fine animal hide and warpaint, and teeth of beasts and weaponry, but simpler, in loincloth alone and torn as if a servant, and said to him:

Bring us wine, man.

As he stood some feet before me I realized that this was no man at all, but a pubescent boy, with glowing exposed skin whose scent filled the air around him like Valerian flowers on endless fields of green. He scratched his leg and looked up at me with a mysterious and curious, ravenlike feral countenance, as if I in my discerning presence held something of great value to him, that he too knew he had within, unexpressed and locked away in some distant future.

The Red hand is the name of this tribe, drawn from ritualistic cave-art created by ancestral shamans of mediterranean woodland caves in times of Atlantis, the first nation. The small nearby main compound was surrounded by low stone walls intertwining, dividing the embedded village into areas reserved for different purposes such as cattle and agriculture. Houses were made of the same material having straw roofs, except for Aesyra's home, which was a natural cave lit by burning torches on the outside and within, reached by walking a narrow clay path a short distance away from the tribe between patches of blooming forest teeming with singing bluejays and other small birds hidden in bushes, and ominous shadows of silent murders of crows, the eyes and ears of immortal magicians, resting on thick branches of the canopy.

The great hall inside the entrance of the cave was decorated with heads of slain deer and other felled game interspersed by fresh halved rotten and since long gone skeletal skulls of beasts scattered on

the crude dry stone floor. If not for the concealing odour of strong incense the putrefied stench caressing the nostrils discernable only in symbiotic whiffs of death and lavender would have been much too unbearable for one such as myself to stand for more than a few moments, having arrived from modern clinically sterile times.

It was clearly an abode of labyrinthian size as distant echoes of other men and strange sounds bounced off the torchlit flickering walls of animal trophies in what seemed to originate from sources above and below our own location. Amongst midst of dried meat strung by tendons on carved wooden stands clearly meant for food a peculiarity caught my attention - large chunks and entire livers had been carefully separated wholly and into pieces and piles on marble pillars. Eviscerated corpses of sheepen hosts round about in stacks of wooly carnage audienced a scrawny white haired man with crows feathers in his hair, busily scribbling strange symbols on a clay tablet in the shape of a living liver all the while roaches and bizarre insects which seemed to have migrated from the four corners of the world and beyond were busy forming a new empire with highway roads and bazaars along the bumpy cave walls and floor.

The entire complex was more akin to a common factory or medical laboratory rather than a permanent residence capable of sustaining civilized men and sheltering them from untamed elements, indeed nature was more pronounced in here than outside. It was a microverse of its own and in the middle of the farthest wall which branched out to the east and west, and ladders running up and down into small openings sat Aesyrr on a throne of bone covered by bearskin whose still attached paws and sharp claws formed the armrests, holding a trumpet of wine in his one hand while playfully jostling and arguing with the young servant boy, admiring the man as a father rather than a master. A clear behavioral boundary dividing the two classes seemed not yet invented in these days. Despite for some reason there were moments when his charades and smiles momentarily gave way to profound expressions of sorrow and grief, rapidly amended by a sip of the trumpet.

I sat down and stretched out on one of the long hide and hay covered stone rocks, smoothed by generations of red hand clan members in untold numbers of gatherings before the hunt and wars, and feasts and myths, coming upon a wolf paw locket hanging at the corner at the far end of the seat. It was not very large and stringed with a leather band to be worn as a necklace, soft underneath a thicket of grey blue hairs finely combed over white inch long sharpened claws. It felt as imbued with a magical fury, possessing some ancient spirit inside anxious to come out, calling out to me between the flickering flames and shadows on the wall of the fireplace occupying the middle of the great hall.

It was my greatest catch, I overheard Aesyrr solemnly utter behind me, his words echoing silently on the walls until quenched by warm sparks of the rising flame, its light blue center deepening until blackened as if burning the soul of a corpse on a funeral pyre. Its heat and sudden outburst broke my attentive exploration of the medallion, when I sat up Aesyrr and the boy were gone. At that moment I felt a hand upon me, covering my mouth and a sharp point sinking into my back;

Dont move lest it be the last thing you do in this world stranger, I heard a voice saying.

You may not understand your true purpose here, but we are watching you, and we have awaited your arrival. The knife went deeper into my back as I grimaced, uttering a muffled sound of pain and terror. I could taste dried blood on my lips and the smell of wool.

He lowered the knife around the right side of my body, stroking it saying;

I am resent to picking the intestines of beasts since he of the East became king of the Red Hand, when portents of the spirit world must be drawn from the blood of humans alone, as it has for

millenia.

I heard laughter and speech coming from one of the holes near the empty throne at the side of the room and before releasing me the voice said:

One word, and you fall before leaving this hall.

As quickly as he had come upon me he disappeared and in the same moment I saw Aesyrr coming from the depths below. I looked behind me into the shadows but there was none, neither to my sides or above.

Are you enjoying your visit? Aesyrr asked as he approached, by the sound of it not expecting a response beyond conversational courtesy.

Aye, I said, concealing my broken trust.

This congregation of ours and your red hand tribesmen certainly left a lasting impression on me.

Aesyrr looked upon me raising his trumpet exclaiming;

Let us drink together then, and celebrate the things which must shortly come to pass in jubilation of mankind and her destiny. My tribesmen I have been informed, have prepared the most splendid living quarters for our most distinguished guest.

CHAPTER II

Aesyrr and I spent the entire evening together in the great throne hall of the Red Hand cave, exchanging tales of successful battles and hunts in his time and of the tribulations experienced by those in my own, and things obscured to men uninitiated concerning the spirit worlds and fields of Am-Tuat. Upon my retreat back to the village where living quarters had been arranged a young girl was summoned to escort me. She was dressed in an elaborate elkskin smooth to the touch around the waist carrying carving tools and other necessities commonly used by young women such as herself, in any time.

Take my hand, she said in an urging and decisive but naive manner standing next to us, out stretching her soft thin sunburnt arm carrying many bracelets.

Still shaken by the threat to my life experienced hours earlier, although somewhat suppressed by joyful companionship and wine, when I grabbed her and felt the soft stroking thumb on the hairs of my hand and heard the smattering sound of bone bracelets rhythmically following our interlocked movements as we descended down an adjacent ladder into one of the holes, all was forgotten.

It's a shortcut, she said as we arrived on the floor below.

The room was much smaller than the open space above, narrow and much warmer and completely quiet. Scattered on the ground were pigments of different colour and brushes made of thick animal hairs which the tribesmen used for the cave art filling the room from top to bottom. She pressed my hand harder and led us quickly down the narrow dark passage carrying a torch in front. I had to brace myself not to stop her then and there, this enigmatic creature of savage beauty, and in a moment of drunken inspiration meet her forcibly against the wall in real union. I felt a fresh breeze and by realization that we were at end point was lifted from hypnotism, quipping;

Wait, girl.

She ignored my call, and I said again louder, slowing my gait and placing the free hand on her elkskin clad shoulder;

Stop and be quiet.

She looked back at me sun freckled with big green wild eyes and stopped, I could see the caves small opening behind her with overhanging branches of the same colour, they matched.

It is not safe for me here, something happened before that I have not told Aesyrr Wōdanaz. He might also be in danger.

Someone told me that he has not been your leader since birth, what did he mean by that?

Who told you that?, she replied casually.

I am not sure but it was likely one of the shamans of the cave.

Those men are dangerous and crazy, be mindful around them, before Aesyrr came and ma...

She was interrupted by a hissing sound.

I looked over her shoulder and saw a large snake crawling into the cave entrance, but what more, there was a shadow of a man disappearing where I had laid eyes upon him. I took the torch from the girls hands and told her to stay put as I squatted and picked up a sharp piece of wooden debris, slowly moving towards the exit, my feet sinking into sand and dirt as the stone floor gave way to the jungle outside. While leaning with my back against each wall to better get a view of the unknown outside I felt her arms grasping around mine and I looked at her and said;

There is noone now, they ran off.

We walked outside and made quick way through the clay path towards the tribal village in the rainy morning. Men were already in the process of milking goats and in midst of sounding hens whose noise were broken by mating calls of forest birds from whence we came, I saw a large eagle who in veil of night had slain and in dawn preyed upon a white tailed rooster where it lay dead in the center of the city. Throwing the smoking wet torch before walking past the knee high stone wall the girl took charge once more up a stone road whereupon we shortly arrived at my designated quarters.

CHAPTER III

She followed me inside the pitch black clay and stone hut as I was overheard fumbling in the darkness hitting my legs and head against various loose household objects in search of means for lighting a fire as the old torch had been discarded in the rainy ditch. It was but distinguishable a faint shadow as I sensed her darting round about the little hut, she clearly had perfect nightvision having spent her entire life without the benefits of modern electricity, and soon enough there was a fire lit and the rooms interior became discernable. There was no bed, only a straw mattress placed in the corner of the damp smoothed grey floor, female worn garments and accessories hanged from the ceiling on tendon lines across the room, pushing them to the side as I delved deeper into the uncharted parts of the abode. Hearing the front door consisting of a thick animal hide slide shut while feeling a brief breeze stroking the back of my neck, it was made clear by my escort that I had been left to momentary courteous privacy, but as soon as she was gone I felt a stomach tingling and nostrils drawing deeper breaths of air in hope of savouring a whiff of the honey-oiled scent her feline physique exuded while so generously sharing it with my own in the darkness' ruffling search of fire, much interspersed with tanned elkskin - a combination I had quickly grown remarkably attached towards, and her aswell.

This was it, about a half dozen meters deep and no more than a mans breadth wide, there was a cranking noise beneath my bare feet standing upon a wooden lid with some hay strewn on it in a vain attempt to hide whatever treasure lay beneath. Contrary to my assured instinct, upon throwing open the medium sized round lid I found that it was not a privy but another one of those holes, similar to the cave of Aesy. It was completely dark and as I grabbed the lid to close it once more my vision disappeared in full, and I felt the odour of honey and leather. She slid her hands from my eyesockets down on the backside of my neck and shaped them like claws of a beast until setting camp on my shoulders, softly massaging them peeking her head over my shoulder to inquire upon the ongoing investigation.

Can you bring me a torch, girl?, I asked.

She cranked my nose and ran off behind the jittering ceiling accessories and fetched some fire.

I held it over the hole and asked her what purpose the tribesmen found in such entertainment.

She said that this was not a common feature of her own or her familys huts, prompting my subsequent descent.

This tunnel was much lower than the ones encountered thus far, clearly meant as a form of transportation route without religious significance as it was barely possible to walk half upright. There was blood everywhere and my concern suddenly grew larger, I stopped and turned around telling the girl to fetch me a real weapon of steel after which I continued deeper. Scratchmarks assumed to belong to animals of some sort appeared side by side with unintelligible inscriptions of what seemed to be proto writing. The long winding pathway widened and I heard voices of many men, thick incense struck upon me and I thought myself have found another way into the cave of Aesy but there was something different about it. The observable grotto seemed completely submerged underground, with sharp stalagmites protruding from the ground and ceiling, and there were no decorations as I had seen in the first cave, but for a bloody sacrificial altar in the middle of the sanctuary. A woman dressed in white garments as the ones hanging in the hut laid stretched out on the stone table, and behold, beside her in the dispersing fog stood a great beastly figure half man and half demon surrounded by cloaked men chanting the language of the dead. The poor woman came to her senses eyes revealing horror, she was held into place by four of the monks as she

attempted to flee and the tendons of her bared neck tensed and she breathed frantically. The beastman ripped open her white garment exposing the snow white flesh underneath and he raised a twisted blade and stabbed it into the woman, and carved open her belly while her screams were muffled by a black bag placed over the head. Her entrails were scattered around the altar and monks became as vultures, squatting on and around her, feeding on the entrails of her smoking corpse, and out of their mouths came black snakes and lies.

The girl came up behind me, handing me a steel longsword and, I, in mighty shock, came to my senses and charged down towards the demon gathering and slew many of the monks, but more came from all corners of the cave, and when I looked back I saw the young girl struggling to break free from the claws of the black beastman and his cleft tongue liken unto a snake fouled her in her nakedness as he tore the fine elkskin dress from her body, and she wept and screamed; Help me! what is happening!

But I could not come to her aid and was overwhelmed by masses of beasts until there was only darkness and suffocation. As my strength faded and force of life grew fainter I said:

Come Aesyř Wōdanaz, come quickly in the darkest hour of man...

And there was a loud trumpet sounding. The earth cracked beneath my feet, stalagmites of the ceiling fell upon the masses of monks where they stood in corruption, a sharp light struck my eyes as they opened raising me up out of the hay floored hut where the young girl was sleeping beside me, and there was Aesyř, holding up the hideskin filling the room with light of day.

I see you have settled in good friend, said Aesyř.

House and wife, all in a days work, he continued jokingly as he entered the hut.

He squatted down beside us helping himself of a tray of fruits and nuts and as I sat up I noticed that he was dressed in full hunting gear, a bows string crossed his chest which was covered in a bear skin with a full quiver at his hip fastened in a bronze belt in shape of golden shields. His hair, blonde and auburn coloured was braided in a keltic knot hanging in front of the right shoulder down to his massive brown thighs which were half obscured by red silken fabric fortified in the seams by decorated rectangular shapes in a golden pattern. On his head wearing a golden crown with protruding brown antlers, struck by rays of light intermittently leaked into the hut from the midday sun outside, breaking against it as if series of small explosions of stars.

He looked at me amused with blue and brown eyes while chewing on a fig;

These aren't the quarters assigned to you, though...

I sat on my knees, my clothing in comparison quite simple, listening all the while cracking a large wrinkly walnut.

The girl, he said.

She led you to the wrong house.

As the split walnut was drawn slowly towards my mouths anxious anticipation I could see that there was nothing inside, every edible part had shrunk into dry flakes of wood, and out of the wood I beheld, and Lo therein crawled something living. From the dry flakes underneath crawled ladybugs red all over with black dotted shells, and there were seven of them, swarming out and crawling over

my fingers, lifting themselves by black wings into the air of the small clay hut, flying in all directions therein. My friend resting peacefully so close beside me was disturbed by the tingling of one crawling on her cheek forcing eyes out of dreams, remaining largely unmoved still, except for fingers playing on a locket tied around the youthful neck which I had not noticed until now. It was a wolves paw medallion.

These houses all look the same don't they, I replied.

Come, join me outside, said Aesy, and I followed him as he sailed past the thick hide to the freedom of nature, lending one eye to the tempting creature still resting there with absent dreamy gaze, having long postponed our proper introduction.

I shall return, I said to her before disappearing.

You certainly gathered a merry bunch, I observed loudly as we briefly collected ourselves outside the hut. There was atleast two dozen warriors in full hunting gear, some casually eating, chatting with villagers, others standing in small circles exchanging information on the proper hunting methods of different game, but during our conversational promenade there were always two battle ready men with large flint tipped spears flanking Aesy, who himself seemed carefree of any potential threat, never a smile away from children running about and by their natural curiosity following us.

Unaccustomed to such measures of security I asked him if he was expecting a visit.

A visit? he replied.

The only visitor here is me.

You came from the East I hear, by the utterance feeling a silent and stinging remembrance of a previous encounter with not so polite tribesmen involving knives.

Have I told you how I came upon this village, man?

My brothers in the east who are the tribesmen of Aryah tamed wild horses of the steppes and used them for transport. Our little band are destined thus to become the center of all the civilized world, as it were in days of my fathers long ago. I came to this village to reunite with one of the breakout groups of my ancestors, you see, our blood and spirits were diluted by millenia of genetic degradation which is the natural order of things, as that which we call evolution is in fact a degradation from perfection, and by reuniting with the blood of Cro-Magnon, spirits and priests in my homeland argue in favour of great future achievements. The house you slept in tonight good friend, was the house of my Cro-Magnon woman.

A flash of the dream I had before of the human sacrifice burnt my mind.

We stopped outside a clay hut, identical to the one we left, clearly this was my originally intended dwelling.

Where is this good wife of yours Aesy? shalln't we dine together in the evening, and feast!

He looked at me with the same concealed sorrowful expression as I had witnessed in the throne hall yesterday and replied:

Good man, we shall feast in the fortnight, but my fair wife and lover, alas, cometh not with us that day. Of this I have much regret. He was about to say something more but was interrupted by soldiers exclaiming that the sun shall set soon, and they hunger for the hunt to come afoot.

Further away nears the ravenhaired mistress. We salute Aesyrs and his band as she comes and take her hand in mine, departing from the green sunny field. I whisper to her;

Its good to be home.

CHAPTER IV

Later that evening when stars at dusk had fallen upon the Red Hand village, hearing the celebration of Aesyrs hunting success and naturally ensuing festivities of which we did not yet partake but would soon with the accompanying sense of adrenaline rushing through the veins in expectation of what was surely to become a magical night, I retreated back into the dry lukewarm hut where the young girl had been assigned a task by her family to honor the victories of tribal hunters by contributions of drawings on clay tablets. I looked at the far end of the room, curious of the other place we frequented earlier and yesterday night, and the girl, who was she, she looked different from the others, perchance was it due to my own skewed favourable perception towards her?

Tell me girl, I said.

Does Aesyrs have no children? I take it his wife is deceased...

She looked up at me from her nearly finished drawing, a quite violent hunting scene of a deer being surrounded by hunters, and beside the group stood what looked like a sorcerer with antlers and a staff held erect in the front, ejaculating white pigments on the rest. Assumably a propitious contribution of hers, talented nonetheless, garnering benevolence of the gods towards future expeditions, yet I could not contain breaking into a smile at the genuine thoughts of young women.

It was her house, she replied as if having read my thoughts.

I am his daughter, silly.

And whatabout that necklace of yours, I have seen one such in his cave upon my arrival here.

My father made my mother and himself one each from a slain wolf, its for good luck and protection against the monster.

Indeed, I thought, what besides carnal pleasure fill the minds of savages but beasts and boogeymen.

Come to me, she interrupted, tidying up the little artstudio she had built on the floor outside the haymat from where she had finished moments earlier, her white bone bracelets smattering against each other as the arms and thin tanned fingers with white skin underneath delicately brushed off any residue of pigments, intermittently wetting them on her tongue while rubbing hard against the clay floor, frowning at it with a stubborn pout.

I sat down beside her, she took my hand, twice her size, holding it firmly while with the other drawing her long finger softly on my face, following its contours. I closed my eyes.

Before my mother died we lived in that house together as a family all three of us, she said.

How did your mother and father meet? I replied, words dribbling out of my mouth barely intelligible as if I had suffered some brain malady or other from the divine treatment of the angelic apparition.

She dipped her finger on the tip of her tongue, I stole a moments peek but she was quick to place her hand in front of my eyes while bursting out in an energetic laughter.

Be still, she commanded, squeezing my hand in a naive attempt of control. I felt something wet above my left eyebrow, moving in short motions interchanged by longer strokes down my cheek, she was painting my face in preparation of the coming festivities.

Aesyf is not telling you the entire truth, she continued.

My mother and he knew each other since childhood, it was her father, a great huntsman and trader of goods, our former tribal chieftain, who found him.

I mean, she conjectured.

What he says about the horses is probably true, he must have arrived somehow. Maybe its his memories of a father or someone else who left him here, hes certainly not from within the outer rims, but you don't need me to tell you that, its quite obvious.

My grandfather was gone most of the time, if not for hunts and trading, then to solve tribal disputes, he was gone for three days before returning with Aesyf I've heard. Usually he would return in the daytime, when all villagers would be curious to see what he had brought, different in the way that he was fearless and often traveled without escort, not that my own father is a coward, but things have changed since those days. This time he came at night, waking up the others in the house, telling of how he had come upon a great wolf on the first day, stalking him in the shadows, he had tried to catch it but this wolf was different, thinking it a spiritual being on affairs not to be meddled with. He told the household that the wolf had led him to a gift from the heavens and earth fused together in one being, which was the boy child he had brought home, about the same age as my mother, speaking in unknown tongue. My grandfathers wife, my mother used to tell me, was angry with them both, for those times as I said were different from these, and more austere, but she had a great heart, and thus the boy was fed and clothed. Thinking him a child of providence, my grandfather named him Aesyf Wōdanaz, which is the name of kings.

My parents naturally became good friends, but the other children were not so accommodating in their demeanor towards his presence in the village, where he was considered additional competition to an already scarce pool of resources. As my grandfathers health waned, Aesyf was increasingly displaced by contenders to the title of tribal chieftain, coming from the outside with change to our beliefs of old. They did not believe in spirit beings of the woodlands, nor of any gods in heavens but the one true god as they called him.

CHAPTER V

My mother was of the crows, named Lightfoot because of her high spirits and sharp eyes, capable of much love, stealing the attention of all those around her with passionate mischiefs. When the old man passed on Aesyf found hardship, young as he was still, forced to till the fields in winter and rain, schooled in the art of leadership and sorcery, no more. He was strong and cared little for fame or control over others, a child of nature where his own love lay, and with my mother foremost, who played with him everyday there out in fields of wilderness where spirits of the Animals of the Fields and hidden groves embraced them fully in their bosom. One day the little boy returned home without my mother by his side, they had been playing in the fields racing one another past the forest trees and thicket of the jungle bushes, running further than usual past the leafless old tree marking the limit of their own village. Aesyf, having won the race turned and told his friend to come and see what he had found beyond the tall hedges of the woodlands. There was a strange new house there in the middle of the village, unlike the others, and larger with openings on the sides. Children as they were determined to still a growing curiosity sneaked into the empty village and up on a sack of wheat on the long side of the big house, and there within they saw all villagers of the neighbouring tribe gathered around a podium of wood, with wooden benches strewn about in lines such as the younglings had never seen before. Amongst chanting and calling to the spirit they saw a man with a dress such as women wore and a long pike curled at the end pulling a braided thick rope attached to something obscured by the crowds inside. Anxious to see the children entered the small window and slid down the side of the inner wall, Aesyf was first followed by Lightfoot who leapt into his arms. Most villagers where they sat and stood chanting loudly had grey and brown clothes torn in rags, and like the Red Hand children suffered hardships of drought and famine. The man with a gown pulled hard on the leash, a warrior whipped the beast with a wooden stick which they now could see entering the temple, it was a big dire wolf. It was frightened and growling, its hair standing on edge and claws protruding into the stone floor, making a hideous rasping noise audible despite the frantic singing. The priest attempted to lay his stick upon the neck of the beast in order to calm it, to no avail and he said:

See, men.

Is this what you worship?

Demons of the unknown forests!

Is this what you call spirits of divine?

The children looked at each other and Lightfoot whispered into Aesyf's ear;

It's the wolf my father saw Aesyf, when he found you!

The priest interrupted spittingly;

To you who are the one true god, we offer this demon!

Bless us with rain and growth of plenty by the purging of this black plague!

And all the villagers rose and fell into silence and lifted spears which they had placed in front of each other on the temple floor.

Kill it!

On the priests command a large group of people burst forth, impaling the beast which uttered a heart wrenching cry of pain and death. And they stabbed it, and stabbed it until it was a lifeless lump of flesh whose blood had reddened the white walls and faces of all who were in the house that day of spiritual usurpation.

Lightfoot screamed in horror of their savagery, and the priest looked up and said;

What are you doing here, this place is forbidden for those who are not of our kin, capture these children and bring them to me.

Aesyrr took a spear resting on the side of one of the wooden benches tainted by a stream of blood from the wolf, and said;

None of you come near us!

Run Lightfoot!

But the priest commanded;

Lower your weapon child, we shall not harm you, but if you use that spear we have no choice but to restrain you both by force.

Wait! Lightfoot exclaimed.

Wait, Aesyrr, if they want us I will surrender freely to spare us from violence, which we have seen too much of already.

You boy, leave this place! said the priest.

In your eyes I see only savagery, you have no soul.

Go Aesyrr, said Lightfoot, I will return soon, I promise. These men will not hurt me when I tell them who my father was.

Reluctantly Aesyrr took flight and ran as quickly as his feet could carry him out from the temple still holding the spear, which was to become the spear of destiny, past the withering flowers, cursed by the ill deed of humanity that day, over the small hill where he took station and waited until nightfall when he sneaked back into the village.

It was dark and quiet that night as he leapt over the little stone wall after having thrown his spear on the other side, some stray hens clucked and flapped their wings where white feathers fell at Aesyrrs feet as he carefully inspected still lit houses in search of Lightfoot whom he soon came upon. As she had told him before they were separated, the tribesmen treated her like the daughter of a chieftain, indulging her of every good and green they came upon, mesmerized he thought her a queen where she sat, his queen. The priest was there too, visiting the family where she stayed, he explained to her the business of their religion and how god cursed men for their ignorance of the one true lord, and how the things she had witnessed were not suitable for the fragile mind of a child, but most of all he wanted to make sure that she was plenty pampered fearing retaliation from the Red Hand warriors if any harm came to her. Aesyrr, who saw that she seemed happy and well, felt confused but relieved, retreating once more. Outside the village he saw men collecting wood in preparation of a pyre, he followed them at a distance sliding near the stone wall, overhearing muffled talk of the dead demon and how it must be burnt to prevent it from haunting the villagers.

Around the corner of the wall turning he saw the furry corpse of the great wolf lying next to branches and wood making up an unfinished pyre. When both men had left he quickly ran towards the beast touching it while placing the spear next to himself. Near the pyre lay a small hand axe used to chop up wood, he grabbed it and said to the beast;

Great wolf spirit, give me your power and the blood of the Animals of the Fields that I may avenge your death. These villagers know not the folly of their natural transgression.

Holding the big beasts paws he raised the axe and severed them one by one, picked up the spear and vanished into the forest night.

CHAPTER VII

Lightfoot returned to the Red Hand tribe the next full moon, tribal leaders after having reassured themselves of her safety and wellbeing used the opportunity to strengthen ties with their neighbours, she was approaching puberty after all. The Priest had taken Lightfoot under his tutelage in a successful attempt at grooming her with tribal superstition, cunningly informing of her exalted position above others, as he knew the Red Hands were good friends of the natural kingdom, all things equal, which then was intolerable. Her demeanors changed rapidly in the course of those few weeks, not so much more civilized as domesticated, compared to untethered Aesy - a brute in comparison some might say, even moreso after she left him. During her absence he spent more time with others, teaching what little he knew of the process of self expression and natural wonders of the world, seeking counsel from the tribal elders in affairs of religious leadership, who were reluctant to offer assistance, but saw that he possessed unifying ability in his conviction that every man had a purpose and roll to fill in society. The hardships of drought and famine forced change upon the Red Hand tribe, with good hearted Aesy being the epicenter of that change despite his tender age. The unbridled generativity from an outsiders perspective might appear crude and disorganized, but it is only from chaos and deconstruction true creative blooming can take root, a concept little Lightfoot seemed oblivious to when she laid eyes upon her friend for the first time since the last new moon;

Aesy!, she called upon arriving on the doorstep of the quiet house. There was clutter of strange symbols on the brown clay wall and animals were outside their pens roaming freely about the yard.

Walking around the small hut she laid eyes upon a circle of smooth pebbles wherein Aesy was digging a deep hole in the grass. He looked at her and did not immediately recognize that it was Lightfoot, she was so well groomed and her demeanor was different, but when she ran to embrace him all memories of the past, as a month or two is a lifetime at age 11, returned with overwhelming confusion;

Are you not happy to see me, Aesy? she asked passionately.

Lightfoot, he replied.

You returned. A silent joy was felt inside, struggling against weeks worth of accumulated suppressed angst which he had channeled so masterfully into other productive endeavours and expanded horizons.

Come, help me dig this hole Lightfoot. Im making an offering to our tutelary deity, replanting the

spirit of our city, burying the old, so that it may grant our people rain and food again in a new beginning. Without his own knowing he was about to unlock the secrets of fertilization.

Well, what do you need then, besides the digging part I mean? replied Lightfoot hesitatingly and slightly repulsed as she looked at him where he squatted like a pig in mud, happy as one too.

First, take a handful of fresh soil, since you have been gone so long it will be the first soil of your native land, then bring me twelve jars of water that I may pour in this hole. Lastly we bury the skull of a cow with everything.

He stopped his digging and looked at her for some sign of confirmation, but found only a deflated posture which quickly erected itself and presented a half hearted smile of pity and high strung resistance as she crossed her arms. The notion of getting down and dirty was not in her list of things to do that day, atleast not literally.

Nevermind he said, having called her bluffed enthusiasm.

Ill get it myself.

He strode towards the stone road running past the little hut, leading down to the local goods market in search of waste products, leaving Lightfoot standing at the empty stone circle with a hole in it. Her return by now welcomed in full by pigs and goats, she made a hasty escape in an attempt at saving the tarnished dress, and pride.

The following day word of visit reached the household, the neighbouring tribe were sending a diplomatic delegation as a gesture of friendship, atleast that was the official excuse. In reality the Priest who had taken such good care of Lightfoot bore a vested interest in preserving that relationship, and perhaps even expanding it should circumstance allow it. The childrens mother, old chieftains widow, under influence of her daughter submitted to requests that the animals be ordered in their penhouses, and all symbols and strange writings be washed clean off the walls, so as not to anger the good man and his god. Aesyrr had grown increasingly agitated and sour during the day after he heard the news;

A waste of time! he thought to himself as he drove the pigs into their sty.

That mans an opportunist with an agenda of his own, its got nothing to do with spirituality, hiding things, emotions or real, won't fix the problems of our tribes, neither will animal sacrifice. He boiled inside when remembering how the priest had agitated everyone back then, it was a demonic butcher, a call from the darkest pits of death for the amusement of watching things suffer and bleed. Grinding his teeth in vitriol he could already sense the evil prescence of the man, he'd prefer the stench of the sty for a week before spending a minute in the same room as him, but he would, just as he would tidy up the yard and walls, for her.

Aesyrr walked up to the wooden rain collector meant for livestock and looked at his own reflection as it clucked against the built up sediment along the sides. He scooped up a handful of cold water and rinsed his face, it so thick with mud that at first he almost didn't sense any of its wetness, he looked down again and smiled with his teeth, atleast they were white, he thought to himself.

There was a sound of tumult, he looked up and saw a small gathering of men from the other tribe approaching the walls of the village, proceeding towards his house. They were escorted by two elders surrounded by children, and adult villagers came out of their houses to greet them, the Priest, having garnered the nickname Riverain because of the tribes proximity to the largest river in the

known west, while the suffix rain symbolized the lack of wetseason this year, used to be a warrior named Trapper, known throughout the four corners of the Loire delta for his uncanny ability to set deadly traps, which in all fairness contributed greatly to the long peace experienced by surrounding villages, as it was their main source of food with the added benefit of discouraging misbehavior as the methods of punishment knew no limits due to his ingeniousness in the art of painful death. Aesyf did not recognize the other men following Riverain, but they looked like huntsmen.

Hey!, he heard a soft voice call.

Aesyf come!, Lightfoot waved at him to come quickly and greet her patron outside the house.

He speedily washed off the last residue of mud from his face and arms, and ran as fast as his feet could carry him to Lightfoot, who smiled at him before turning her head to the crowd.

Good friends! rumbled the priest as he stopped in front of the little family and walked up to them, placing his hand and arm on the shoulder of the childrens mother.

Lightfoot, little woman, come greet me!

He put out his hand and Lightfoot kissed it gently, whispering; Master Riverain.

Obscene, Aesyf thought.

The man looked at him, stretched out his hand and said;

Aesyf, the little man with great ambition, how much we hear of your deeds in the Red Hand village. Come forth and greet your elder. His blue eyes flashed as if he already knew what was about to take place.

Aesyf slapped his hand away from himself, Riverain swiftly took control of his projectiled limb and calmly slowed it and lowered it to his side.

Dont be a fool, said Lightfoot while sneering at him.

Why did u have to be a fool, her expression changed into sympathy.

He looked back at her and felt a hard force pulling him into the mud. The huntsmen would have none of this insolence towards their leader, certainly not as visitors in a neighbouring tribe.

Kneel boy! exclaimed one of the huntsmen who had grabbed him by the neck.

Kneel before the River tribe.

Two elders of the Red Hand stood silently observing, a successor not chosen since the department of the old one, here clearly lacking in assertive leadership to ease rising tensions.

A cracking sound was heard, trembling the earth, blowing a sudden strong gush of wind over the village. A drop of water fell on the stone road, then another on the face of an elder. The skies opened.

Rain?! someone remarked.

Rain comes with the River tribe!

The chatter increased amongst the spectators, and then someone cheered loudly:

Its raining again!

Riverain has brought divine providence this day, after one year of drought!

In the tumult everybody seemed to have forgotten about Aesy, who used the opportunity to run away, hiding behind the house.

A Red Hand elder intervened atlast;

Every man! Every man!

For the goodness, leave our guests to their intended visit now, and be happy of this blessing which have come to us.

The crowd slowly dispersed, and from behind the house facade Aesy saw the Priest and his family enter the hut while two huntsmen guarded outside. He turned and leaned against the wall and looked at the stone circle which he had filled with waste the day before, in a call for nature to bless the village...

Have a sit if you will Master Riverain, said the widow.

You have come twice with fortune upon our family, first by taking such good care of my daughter and now by the miracle of heavens, I am much in your debt, and my husband were he still alive, surely would be of the same opinion, she continued with a voice of gratitude.

The Priest nodded and presented his biggest "I dont give a piece of what you think old hag" smile as he studied the interior of the abode, noticing the scrubmarks on the walls as he tore a big chunk of meat from the bone of boiled sheep. His own visage was that of a weathered middle aged man, dark blonde fuzzy hair and cleanly shaven wrinkly bronze face, a Cro-Magnon, with rectangular eye sockets revealing two piercing blue eyes. He reached for a loaf of bread, squeezing it between thickly veined scarred hands.

Lightfoot! the widow exclaimed when she observed his motion, behaving as if she had just been given the same command as his outstretched limb.

Pour our guest some more stew from the pot, and carve up another loaf.

Lightfoot was torn inside, she couldn't stop thinking about Aesy, agonizing about his well being out there in the cold thundering, while at the same time feeling a cathartic release from the sound of pouring and smattering on the tilted hay roof, and the men from the River tribe coming to visit for her sake.

The evening drew on with many guest villagers coming and going with gifts of friendship, as this was a diplomatic mission officially, although much intensified by recent events. Drums sounded outside, the rain having subsided somewhat into light trickling. Torches were lit in the front of the house and along the road, Lightfoot excused herself during the height of festivities, having no shortage of suiters to entertain her, but in her mind there was only one.

Aesy, where are you? I know you're there, she whispered holding her hands on the side of the facade while the rhythm of drums and laughter mingled in the background.

I brought you some food, come and sit with me.

You sure it's tidy enough for a madam such as yourself, he remarked with sarcasm.

Dont be silly, come to me. The last words beggingly dragged on her lips as if to lure him out of hiding, she needed him.

Soon enough, a silhouette appeared in the shadows where the moon struck the right half of his wet face, seemingly calm and collected, but determined. Within Aesy that day a new fire had been lit beside the one already burning there so intensely.

Its finished, I heard a voice speak softly.

I opened my eyes and looked at smiling Ravenhair, perfecting some minor details of the face paint with a finger.

Its certainly not, I replied.

She looked at me with a big O face and then placed her fingers on my chin and yanked my nose while rising up towards me from her kneeling position.

Whats that supposed to mean? You want more?

We were at a nosewidths distance of each other and all I could see were her big brown owl eyes with green tinted dots around the iris.

I jostled her around so that my body was on top of hers, she shrieked with surprise and laughter.

Yes, yes, I want more, I want it all, I said.

Reaching for a kiss she stopped me and put her finger on my lips, looking deep into my eyes while stroking my side with her silken smooth leg, took a deep breath ready to continue.

CHAPTER VIII

Lightfoot suppressed her free spiritedness during the Priests frequent visits as he was most intolerable to any unusual or extravagant behavior in these times of urgency, wary that any wrong doing might attract punishment of higher authority. His primary goal was the manipulation of the girl, but a close second was his crucifixion of Aesyrr, seldomly passing up on a chance to blame him for every trouble big or small, considering him a major obstacle in the Red Hands purification from sin, and his own grab for power. Understanding the two youths deep relation he worked hard to subvert it by fueling the flame of Lightfoots selfish weaknesses and inner pride, complementing her wherever they went, speaking to her with cleft tongue of how all people of the two tribes loved her for her beauty, chastity and politeness, poison which she, in her tender age, eagerly swallowed having discerned no inconsistency, often being courted by young men proclaiming their love for her. Of course some of the boys *were* genuinely interested, but most of them, atleast from the River tribe, had been recruited by the Priest for the sole purpose with the added benefit of diluting Aesyrs impact in her life.

Lightfoot!, whispered Aesyrr, sneaking into the hut after having seen the Priest go tend to villagers who had come down with mysterious illness in wake of the rainy feast a week earlier, the two had hardly talked to each other during the interval.

Why are you not with the Priest today? he asked.

People are very sick, he wanted to protect me from getting sick too, she replied.

Whats that you are wearing, he continued observing her hooded woolen white robe.

Riverain says this garment will keep me safe from impure thoughts, and that I may wear it at all times, that it was very expensive to make, and that it was made just for me.

Damn Priest, he thought, riding far and wide in the fields of her mind.

Why are you here? she interrupted.

You know that he'll be on you upon returning.

I want to be with you, he replied while advancing and sitting down beside her where she was busy preparing the nights meal.

The huntsmen if they see us will surely inform him of our meeting, he has eyes and ears everywhere it seems.

You'd better go.

They're out on a hunting trip, collecting special berries ordered by Riverain. He says it will cure the sick, replied Aesyrr.

Lightfoot, I dont think.. he was interrupted by the arrival of their mother, carrying a stone bowl of ground seed.

She put down her work and brushed her hands clean from flour residue, whitening the room with floating particles, then took the bowl of seed from her mothers hands, ready to start anew.

What is it I must know? she replied overtly nonchalant but secretly curious and flattered by his persistence, revealed by a moment's glance at his ruggedly fair countenance and long braided auburn and blonde knot hanging on his bare chest, where she briefly lost focus of her preoccupation before swiftly averting her eyes behind the safety of the white hood, blushing slightly.

Come out with me in the forest, where we were free, like it used to be. He took her hand, and leaned forward with his brown muscular upper body, standing on one knee to garner her full attention.

She sensed his commanding, dominant presence and fragrance which was like trees, leaves and leather and enigmatic wonders of the deep jungle.

Why can't you grow up Aesyrr, she tried.

Can't you see that there is nothing out there but poison in the leaves, and the insects and snakes.

Nature is dangerous Aesyrr.

Is that what you think?!, he grabbed her hand firmly.

I know that can't be how you really feel, you were the fastest girl in the village, and I the fastest boy, no one could catch us when we ran far away to our own secret grove by the lakes and caves, where we laughed and lay together until nightfall and wondered of the moon and sailing stars and strangeness of it all.

That was the past friend, a dream that you should have awakened from long ago, she replied yanking her hand loose.

Lightfoot why are you saying such things!, said Aesyrr, visibly upset.

It's here and now, it's out there, we just have to seize it together, break yourself out of this prison you have made, can't you see that it's a waste!

He tipped over the bowl of seeds so that it spilled out over the floor in a desperate attempt at breaking through the spell of her hypnotic haze.

The only waste is you upon my time Aesyrr, she mumbled as a last line of defense attempting to quell her growing anger, emotions which she refused him.

There were sounds of footsteps and speech outside the house further away down the stone road, Riverain had met up with a hunter on the way, revealing his approach.

Aesyrr grabbed his spear, squeezing her hand one last time before departing saying;

I'll come back for you Lightfoot, I promise I'll come back.

Riverain caught a glance of the fleeing intruder and hastened his steps while ordering and pointing the huntsman towards different houses with the newly picked berries.

He threw up the hide skin door of the hut, violently disrupting the calm flame in the middle in front of Lightfoot who was sitting still with her hands on her thighs torn inside but motionless, the bowl of seeds spilled in a long line over the clay floor, half spread over cool shadows, the other half near burning fire, contrasting the two younglings' troubles.

It's going to be alright, improvised Riverain, scanning the room frantically looking for any signs of disturbance or danger, a custom ingrained in him whenever entering new territory, master trapper as he was.

He too wore a long gown covering his entire body, but it was brown in colour, with a white sheep's hide thrown over the shoulders.

Sitting down beside her he continued;

We have gathered the berries, let us pray together that your people will recover soon.

She placed her hand in his as he stretched it out palm up, holding it firmly.

Did he hurt you, Riverain asked? knowing full well that the framing of the sentence would anchor into her subverted mind.

No... no i'm fine, she replied quietly.

Huntsman!, he yelled.

A hunter drew back the doors cover with a bowstip.

Make sure that all those who are sick are divided from the rest of the village, we must do everything in our god given power to stop the illness from spreading, It is important that we protect the most important members of the clan at every cost. He placed his other hand on her shoulder half embracing her while talking to the soldier.

Aye, a muffled reply was heard as the hide flapped back to its original position.

You are the key, Lightfoot, together you and I will rebuild our homes in the image of god and his land which is the celestial heavens above, and gain immortality and sanction to rule by divine right.

Do you hear me girl! his call to action sounded as he rattled her where she sat.

Yes, master Riverain, she replied.

Do as you wish, and segregate the sick from the healthy.

Those who are sick, even if cured must be held from us at all cost, they are tainted by the Lords wrath, do you understand girl? he quickly interjected.

Yes... tainted, her eyes were deeply transfixed in the blue flame.

He pulled down her hood and kissed her black hair saying;

You are the most precious thing I have, Lightfoot, don't ever leave me, promise that you'll stay with me forever.

I'll stay, she said.

I'll stay with you, forever...

Her mother entered the house and looked at the spilled seed, embarrassed at her daughters supposed clumsiness exclaiming;

Oh dear! what is the matter with you girl, is it so hard to observe the slightest care when food is running scarce!

And Aesy, the rascal, running around the woods when he should be tending to the cattle and hens.

She set the rack of dried rabbit meat she was carrying aside, bent down and scraped the seeds back into the thick stone bowl.

Finally Lightfoot could not retain the confusion and burning emotions bubbling inside and snapped into a loud fit;

It's your fault!, I cant help that you fill the bowls to the brim, we never finish it all anyway! Look at all this food around us, and you say we're starving, there's plenty of food for *us*, but whatabout the sick villagers, why don't we send some hunters to catch food for them?! The only one helping them are Aesy..

She realized that her tongue had slipped, and broke loose from Riverains grip before he had a chance to react.

Why don't you just go away and leave me alone! she snatched back at her mother, but considering her previous gesture its ambiguity could not be escaped, lingering long in the air of the cabin until wood charcoaled and devoured by flames made a cracking noise while glowing fervently.

Her mother, not unaccustomed to Lightfoots outbursts, though infrequent nowadays, instead of fueling the argument in a snappy retort, excused her daughters behavior in front of the good priest;

Sweetest Lightfoot, I'm sorry, you must be tired from working so hard, lay and rest so that you don't catch illness from overstrain.

She embraced her daughter and led her to the hay mattress in an attempt at concealing the precariousness of the situation and said;

Forgive us exaltedness.

Riverain, wise enough and knowing of the emotional melody of men, as he often played them, slyly leveraged her energetic outburst and molded it to draw himself in a more favourable light;

No, no, the girl is absolutely correct, he smeared.

It's very important to hear what she has to say, I will immediately order two hunters to take half of our meat and grain, mirrored by an equal amount from the River tribe as a sign of good measure, and bring it to *our* sickly.

Young lady, I shall make my departure at your request, using the ambiguity of her previous statement to his advantage.

Lightfoot, mentally submitted and utterly dominated by Riverains manipulation, exclaimed;

No, don't go!, I didn't mean that you should go Riverain, stay with us and sup. I'm not tired, nor

sick.

Seeing an opportune moment at seizing further control over her manners he blackmailed her;

Oh but surely I cannot stay with such restless spirits about, lest I invite evil to the shelter of my mind and hearts abode. This you know, Lightfoot.

He continued to rise and brush off his gown to buy her time to think of some desperate retort, to which he would intentionally succumb, and thus with words alone tamed the wild mare without having actually performed any of his verbal commitments.

Wait! she yelled, breaking loose once more, this time from her mother's arms.

Teach me, teach me how to lock the doors to my own heart and mind, that I may be safe from evil spirits of the outside.

I will teach you girl, but first we must cleanse this house of the wickedness you conjured.

Master Riverain! a Red Hand elder shouts as he runs towards the little hut. The priest meets him outside after having been interrupted in his proposition.

Master, the villagers!

Some of them are recovering slowly from the berries, but there are others who are behaving in strange manner, you must come and look!

The men bolted to one of the houses of which the elder spoke, and there inside was a man, blue around his whole mouth, carving animals on the walls with a wooden knife, barely coherently speaking of spirits and gods that he saw. Riverain knew that the berries, which had been prepared according to his specific instructions learned during visits to one of the largest tribes, ten times the size of the Red Hand and River combined in the southern outer rims in youth-hood, besides antidotal properties when taken in large amounts during ailment could bring about a state of delirium and hallucination.

Quickly!, he commanded the white haired elder.

Bring me bones of weaving from his mistress basket in the corner.

The white haired elder complied flinging his simian like scrawny limbs towards the braided basket turning it upside down in search of bone knitters.

This man is in the spirit, such as the girl in my house, the contagion has spread!, he said, cleverly fabricating the last part.

The elder handed him a long thin and very sharp bone knitter, which Riverain quickly yanked and said loudly while restraining the man underneath his immense physique;

You must separate the sickly, this is only the beginning! if we don't examine every man woman and youngling for signs as these upon their recovery, all work will have been for naught, its now or never, I have brought you rain and now healed your people, listen to my words man, and let us rid the wickedness that has come upon the Red Hand forever!

He pierced the nose of the poor villager deeply with the bone knitter which was as long as a mans forearm, blood gushed from his nostrils and he spat blood in their faces. Riverain slowly inserted it further until he felt resistance, whereupon he thrust it ferociously in a short burst that a hard plop sounded. He then vibrated the knitter up and down in short movements, as if stirring a stew, and it was as if a magical spell had fallen upon the spastic man, that the priest had lulled him into a long peaceful waken slumber and the spirits exorcised. The wooden carving knife slipped silently from the mans fingers.

He ripped pieces of wool from his fur coat and stopped the incessant bleeding, as the elder came closer laying his hand upon Riverains shoulder, looking with eyes eager to jump out of their sockets, whispering to himself;

Sorcery...

Elder, Riverain preyed.

I shall teach your tribe of this healing of spirits, will you help me?

The elder had not a breadths time to retort before a huntsman came up behind them, yelling;

The people have been cured of their ailment, but there are some captured by spirits!

Go, and see to it that they are not amongst the cured and healthy, lest this curse never depart, The Elder ordered the hunter.

I will help you healer, he finished.

Instruct us in your wisdom that we may follow it and learn.

CHAPTER IX

Riverains influence grew over the following seven long years, giving him more leeway and less restraints on concealing aggressive and abusive impulses as no one but Aesyrd dared questioning his authority. Holding dominion over both the River and Red Hand tribes he secretly planned their merger into a single large tribe which was to make war with others beyond the outer rims, in this epic mobilization he demanded complete obedience. The village had been divided into two areas; the western part founded during time of disease, holding those who Riverain deemed unfit, which was basically any person speaking against him or uttering words of old beliefs, which he used as a scapegoat to blame on natural omens, and those otherwise mentally or physically unfit. The eastern area, the one everybody wanted to be in, was flush with goods drawn from western populations who then fell into grave destitution, and was used to sustain support and discourage rebellion, effectively bribing the most important tribesmen which included all warriors and elders and their families. Aesyrd had been designated to the western section but he spent little time in the village anymore having taken up shelter in a nearby natural cave since a few years back, the ancestral cave of the Red Hand tribe, making sporadic visits to Lightfoot and secretly smuggling food and fresh water to the westerners.

This will do them well for some time to come, Aesyrd thought to himself as he wrapped chunks of deer meat in the flayed skin and picked up the two rabbit racks.

After having prepared the nights delivery and picked up his old childhood spear lying on a thick hide amongst a small bag of personal belongings he noticed the two wolves paws which he had saved all these years, unchanged by times and new as the day he severed them from the great spirit beast. He paused for a moment, set the other things aside and squatted in front of the two paws and picked them up, they were glowing with a blueish tint, its claws as crystals. Taking a knife from his loin he pierced the claw, and walked over to the piles of dried tendons which he used for extra bowstrings.

He drew a string through the small hole in the paw covered by fur and tied it in a sturdy knot.

That's one each for the both of us, he thought while threading the wolves paw necklace over his head.

Aesyrd ran through the forest night on a small clay path as he had so many times before, the moon was full and he could see the glow of the village ahead.

Wōdanaz! by miracle you come night after night with blessings of nature for us, exclaimed an old woman as he entered her hut.

She lived with two other old women who uncovered the bag of meat and began preparing it on the open firepit.

Come closer, she said.

There is word of a tribal council tonight Aesyrd, we fear what the Priest and Elders might propose to our detriment this time, what more can he take from us but the very blood in our veins.

What else have you heard woman?, tell me will there be word of Lightfoot in this meeting, he anxiously responded, having partaken in earlier news of rumours of the priests close relationship with her through jungledrums of the western ghetto.

She looked at the two necklaces around his neck and touched them with old weathery fingers, reminiscingly smiling as she lifted her hand and caressed his face saying;

There is still hope Aesy, go to her and speak truth with her.

He rushed off as fast as his legs could carry him to Lightfoots house, his heart beating like stampeding hordes of wild horses.

Mother, are you inside?, Lightfoot whispered as she stuck her head inside their house after having arrived from the council.

Yes, Lightfoot, she replied.

She entered and sat down beside her and and picked up one of the bone bracelets her mother was making, fiddling with it anxiously.

Have Aesy been here tonight?, she started after having sat in silence for a half minute.

No dear, I have not seen the boy since two nights ago, and he only stayed with me for a short while tending to the cattle, as you know he is not allowed here anymore.

I wanted to tell you first, its a secret, by the morning everyone will know.

It was decided in the meeting by unanimous decision that Riverain take me for his wife.

Oh, really? she responded, internally turning her eyes up at the notion her daughter thought *that* a secret.

When asked I voted in favour aswell, do you think it was the right thing to do?

Even if it wasn't you can't do anything about it now, Lightfoot, the council would banish you if you tried, her mother informed.

I know, but between the two of us, as a mother and a daughter.

You never told me your feelings for Riverain, are you happy with him? do you love him?

Yes, she quipped.

Why do you love him, Lightfoot?

He's physically attractive.

Her mother gave her a questioning look.

He loves me, I guess, and he is powerful.

Let the answer be true to your inner self, don't tell me what you think I want to hear, or anyone else.

It's the here and now that counts, Lightfoot uttered.

Then that's that!, her mother smiled, as she finished another bone bracelet.

But I know I'm wrong, said Lightfoot.

My soul says I'm wrong.

And in my dreams there is only Aesy.

But we can never be together he and I, since I would become an outcast too, like himself. Because of this I must not dishonour my ancestors name by marrying Aesy.

And he'll never know how much I love him, and not because the things I said before, but because in him I see my own reflection.

Are you certain that what you just described is love? a voice sounded from outside the hut.

Lightfoot shook up as if hit by a lightning bolt and ran outside.

Aesy!?

She caressed him and they met in a long kiss.

It's you I want Aesy Wōdanaz, from the moment I laid my eyes on you, there was none other.

He held her with both arms and said;

That's not true Lightfoot, you love only yourself, for in me all things are reflected. I am nothing, and everything.

She clasped the wolves paw locket, recognizing it, and kissed him once more;

Let's run away together you and I as you said we would seven years ago, I am ready now to leave it all behind and never turn back, as long as we can be together forever.

Aesy, having understood his true nature atlast was as the still waters inside;

You will marry Riverain, and you will love him as a husband, and he will bring you a gift which is a true secret, and when he calls upon the tribes to rise in war in the name of his god I shall return upon a beast to lay the tribes beneath me and vanquish the false prophet. From thence you and I shall be together forever and ever, if your love for me is true. He removed one of the wolves paws and thread it over her fragile neck.

Aesy no, don't leave me, Aesy! Lightfoot cried as he let go of her and walked in slow pace down the stone road into the night.

She hesitated for a few minutes, sobbing uncontrollably then ran after him but by then he was already gone, and there she stood alone in the faint moonlight surrounded by shivering emptiness of the dark mistress caressing her young body, stalking her like a predator waiting for the right moment to sink its fangs into her and steal her youthful innocence away.

CHAPTER X

Missed again!, Aesyr cursed to himself while standing up from his hiding place.

He had dug a deep hole and covered it with leaves near the flowing stream where the wild horses came to drink. This time a beaver had trashed the camouflage just before the horde arrived, and that wasn't everyday, it's been three days since the first and last time he saw them, having tracked them to the farthest reaches of the outer rim in the weeks prior.

It's almost impossible, he thought.

I'd have to dig a thousand holes and a thousand again before luck would have it to trap one of the steeds, and then theres the whole business of riding the damn thing!

The crystalline water glittered in the spring sun filling the leathery hands as he squatted and sank them into the cold liquid. He held them there for a moment, feeling the everchanging flow rushing restlessly on his fingers, embracing the foreign obstacles in the same unconditional way a mother would her infant. He unfolded and filled a small sheeps bladder, wetting the flaky dry lips and scorched face.

Retreating back to the small forest shelter where a natural overhanging rock formation served as a temporary home he turned around, glancing once more at the failed endeavour while resting his chin on the natural cushions of his muscular arms, firmly grasping the long wooden and flint spear.

There must be some other way, some critical aspect overlooked, he mumbled to himself silently.

A black feather sailed across his eyes, the suns rays striking it in a tint of neon dark green.

Aesyr Aesyr Aesyr, an echo was heard.

Wōdanaz Wōdanaz Wōdanaz.

Son of Atlantis.

He looked up and there in the trees were two black crows.

Speak you demon beings! he yelled terrified at what he'd just heard.

And I'll throw you in my hole!

Aesyr, you are the King of Kings, the natural child, we are your servants, said Hugin.

We are the Animals of the Fields, rasped Munin.

There is another way, said the first crow flapping its wings, sailing down to his left shoulder, confident by the look of the mans expression that he would not make real his threat.

Some critical aspect overlooked, croaked the second, mirroring the movements of his companion.

Where the water flows and a mother embrace her infant, the first crow continued.

Look! there she is, the crows whispered.

Aesyf squinted his eyes and focused in the distance, being a simian not as well endowed in the visual department he had some trouble making sense of the tiny dot.

A mare!, Munin cried.

A pregnant mare, about to labour.

He stringed the pieces together and blazed off laughing.

The foal, of course! I'll take the foal and raise it as it's own mother.

The crows soared high above him in the vast expanse of the rocky steppes as the trio approached in great speed. The mare was alone giving birth when one of the crows first to arrive sat on her brown and white belly.

We have come for your newborn, he rasped.

The mares eyes were wide open experiencing the pain of labour. She frothed and growled heavily as the foal slipped into existence hidden in an amniotic sac looking no less as its mother had just been surgically severed of a large tumor.

Spooked at the sight of the wild man crossing the stream she stood up with some effort, abandoning her infant as it was about to take its first trembling steps on this gods given earth.

Aesyf tore away the debris and tried to pick it up in his arms but immediately realized that it would be too heavy to carry it all the way back to the cave.

Birds up there in the sky, hear me! he yelled.

Fetch my bundle of bowstrings near the cave dwelling and bring them to me!

The two shadows circled up there for a moment and then darted towards the forest.

He held it hard in his arms, but to his surprise it was calm and did not resist him.

Then there dropped from the sky a lump of bowstrings which he tied in a noose around the foals neck, leading it carefully over the stream and fields into the woods.

Night fell and when he sat there by the fire under the stars eating cooked beaver he looked at the foal tied to a tree, pondered a while and said;

Sleipnir. I think i'll call you Sleipnir, as your first steps in this world were across a stream.

That night he dreamed.

He was walking down stone stairs with steel railings on the side overlooking a small park with a lake in the middle, in an instant transported to the opposite side of the stairs, visible in the distance. Now old and wrinkly he retreated into the pine wood forest with green and brown fir needles strewn about the slope leading down towards the lake, and on it crawled toads of different kinds, and he had a great audience who could follow his own footsteps as the toads were attacked by enlarged

ticks, leathery and terrifying, sucking the life out of some toads, while other toads ate the ticks. And then, again in an instant, he was transported to the stairs greeting a friend whose horse were carved into pieces by others, his friend was happy and threw unto them leaves. Aesyrs own chariot, of hard and cold steel warmed the body with pillows underneath, above a hollow grid with wheels, and was a most prized possession as his childhood rivals came and touched it, wanting it for themselves. In a great battle they were vanquished by his hands whereout shot shards of green glass slitting their throats, many fled and he made his own escape, coming upon a barrier of thick men and women clothed in strange stripes revealing part of their bellies. Saying unto him; you may not pass this barrier! although seeing the freedom of the fields behind them, he knew it wise to listen. They led him away to a room where three men of his own age greeted him, outside a great hall of striking hammers. Behind them beyond the window were pillars with circles around them, and horses standing on tilted platforms above floating clouds in heaven, and behold, the four of them rode an old starved horse out there on the platform, stampeding towards the edge. Yelling; break its four limbs! and bend them out from the body!, the men laid their hands on the horse and broke them out from its body, where it stopped. Upon their return stood another man of great frame next to a large boom which kept his horse, held out of sight, from passing. Much agitated he waved his hand above his head, wherein holding a rectangular magical stone the size of a childs palm, thinner than a leaf, which he slid through steel genitalia saying; open this barrier, and let us pass! The man became so furious that Aesyrs found it troubling should he stay another minute. The three men beside him vanished, and once more he was in a different location. It was a small room with low ceiling and a large oak table with black tilted clubs on top, behind him hanged a black curtain. He sensed a prescence, thinking himself observed in an experiment to see what men did in their solitude he remained still. Behind the curtain a man appeared, young and restlessly running past Aesyrs, taking little notice. Quickly he laid his hand on the falling curtain and snuck into whatever was hidden there behind, which was then a larger room containing a white table with no legs fastened to the wall. A woman holding a magical wand pointed at a sheet lying on a small table, on it written with symbols it said; totalitarian, and she wept much, and outside the small window openings which were above them in the ceiling corners as the white room laid sheltered in a hole, rain fell. He came upon a long hallway with an open empty side room in the end, but for some hay mattresses stacked in the left corner, and he yelled; come quickly, and show yourself demon, and the half wall in a corner slid open, behind revealing a black passage, whereupon a force uplifted him. Flying fast as the speed of sunrays striking the ground behind shadows of clouds on the plains through the dark hallway it led to a wooden square hole carved out in the roof which he entered. Therein the black force poured itself over Aesyrs as thick water, whereupon he sounded; I am afraid of thee force, but fortitude is my ally and we shall not bend down before thy darkness! And behold, there he wakened, but wakened not, for he was sleeping still. In his house stood stacks of waste and waste everywhere inside littered, contained in wrinkly goats bladders. In a room within the room crawled on the ground beside a crystal chair with swirling water inside two worms transforming themselves into terrible black wasps, and before the wasps could fully leave their hosts cadaver and fill their wings with blood to fly about and sting all men, he took them into his hands and sacrificed them to the depths of the crystal chair vortex.

Aesyrs opened his eyes where he was resting in front of the fizzled fire, dawn had come with fog filling the forest. There in the fuming mists near the tree where he had bound the foal he heard a deep growl impossibly conceived of a horse the size of a dog, not moving he scanned the camp for his spear leaning against the rocky wall. Without letting his eyes from the cloudy whiteness at the trees trunk he silently sneaked away and grabbed it with his hands and charged rapidly into the mist which scattered around him, revealing a fully grown white glowing steed resting calmly by the tree chewing on mornings dewed green grass, freed from it's leash.

Sleipnir, he whispered silently.

The beast, responding to his call stood up mightily. Aesyf grabbed his other belongings in a sack and grasped the steed by its white thick mane and jumped upon it. At first, due to the sheer power of its frame he thought it a mistake as the beast charged uncontrollably into the misty plains, they were going fast, too fast, holding on as best he could while the hooves trampled the ground in a trembling rhythm.

As the horse climbed a low hill it slowed almost to a halt and growled heavily as white air blew out of its muzzle.

Go on horse!, he called to it.

What's wrong?

The horse stood on its back feet and let out a sharp noise, and a low horn blew beyond the mount.

Continuing slowly forward Aesyf felt an uneasy feeling in his stomach.

Aesyf Wōdanaz? a distant call echoed in the valley below.

Aye, that is him! He shouted.

Who is there in the mist, who are you that brought Sleipnir to salute?

The roar of a thousand warriors as of the thundering sky before a storm sounded and the horse moved restlessly under him, piercing his entire body.

Trampling hooves of a single horse approached him fast, and there out of the mist came another man, white haired with a long thick beard in full armor wearing a steel winged helm upon his head;

Son of Arya, you have returned as foretold, the tribes of the East welcome you and stand ready to battle.

I kissed her gently as she finished the last sentence, her mouth was soft and warm and wet. Ravenhair, grabbing my hair, could hardly still her desire as I lured her further into rhythmic temptation like an Indian snake charmer luring a cobra out of its basket.

Now I've got you, I thought to myself, feeling her heart rate increasing and muscles tensing as she breathed heavily. I slid my hand underneath her elkskin dress and felt the firmness of her behind for the first time, then with a loud and wet "smack" as our lips separated she opened her eyes and said;

Not yet, at the feast.

Had it not been for the arrival of the boy servant of Aesyf, and even then in lustful spontaneity of the moment laying eyes upon his scanty loincloth as he entered, briefly judging the benefits of inviting him to partake in a cultivating expedition of what he surely thought a foreign land called young women, I am not sure I could have come to my full senses in a timely and civilized manner.

Nevertheless I yielded before her demands and sat up, mumbling mildly frustrated with red and white paint covering my face in a hysterical pattern;

Bless the man who bolted the first solid door.

Master, he said.

You must come outside and choose a garment for the evening.

Bring it in, I replied.

Master, he whispered more intensely while leaning slightly forward casting a brief eye on Ravenhair as if she were his mother and he had just done some mischief, confirming that she was not paying any attention.

Expecting a long gaze of yearful desire at the conquered vixen laying beside me, I inquisitively followed him as he slipped behind the hide.

As I suspected he squatted and presented me with the whole selection of one hooded white robe. I snatched it from him with a frown and headed back in.

Wasting my time, I thought.

Wait, he said.

He came closer and took me by the arm;

Tonight we strike.

CHAPTER XI

In the large camp of Arya, situated some weeks ride away from the small Red Hand and River tribes of western Loire, Aesyra was informed by the white bearded captain that the west and east had experienced rivalry for many generations since the tribes of Arya first domesticated horses and expanded westward. Since before he was a child there had been a long stalemate; while their people had conquered large areas of the south and north, the remote outposts of western tribes of the coast remained isolated beyond their influence, in some part due to logistical difficulties and the curse of drought and famine holding the entire western plateau in its deathly grip, but primarily because of the western tribes mastery of trapping, which in combination seized further expansion. In their ingenuity, the seers of the clan of Aesyra, one of the large clans of Arya, had sacrificed dozens of their chieftain male born infants and children of different ages to the fate of the western forests decades ago. According to divine prophecy all would starve and suffer terrible fates but one unknown child who would return to one of the clans on this day many years in the future with knowledge of the coastal tribes, and by providence guide Arya to victory.

Meanwhile in the Red Hand, one year later...

Slap!

I don't want to hear your whining any longer woman, roared Riverain furious at Lightfoots constant displeasure and antipathy towards him not spending more time with her.

She fell back into the corner of the hut, trashing the interior, sobbing silently while holding her hand over the right cheek, which was blushing painfully. Her long shiny black hair hanged over her face as she tried to sweep it aside in an attempt at recovering dignity, only to let it slide back again to hide her shame as she broke out in tears. Riverain had failed to give her the child she so much wanted. After having witnessed how her people suffered under his dictatorship, and how she blamed herself for their pain as the couples union had been a catalyst paving the way for his absolute control, Lightfoot desperately tried to turn his abuse away from the tribesmen and direct it onto her instead.

Having lost his appetite, Riverain excused himself.

Don't go husband, she begged, fearing to release him in this mood from her sight.

To her own detriment, he decided to stay just a little longer and squatted in front of her in silence observing the creatures pityful countenance. He violently lifted her head by the beautiful tangled hair and she herself fell completely silent and froze in terror.

Riverain squeezed her cheeks in an upward motion;

Didn't I tell you to stop whining, whore?

Now... he continued as he leaned forward.

Smile.

Sinking his sturdy trappers fingers harder into her delicate visage, she began hyperventilating and then, with a sudden feline burst, pressed his eye as hard as she could with her thumb. Shocked, he staggered backwards and was forced to release the girl who shot off like an animal given a second

chance at life, having barely escaped the jaws of its captor. He tried to trip her with his leg but she nimbly leapt over it and disappeared out in the streets, barely touching the ground while frantically running past the neighbouring huts out of the village.

However, she did not manage to get very far as one of the returning River huntsmen scooped her up in her arms saying;

Ho, little miss! what's the rush?

He looked up to the chieftains house, witnessing Riverain outside covering his left eye.

Realizing that he, a trapper, had been trapped by fate that day, clenched his jaw muscles and cursed silently to himself.

Let me go, hunter! she ordered.

Don't you dare lay your hand on me!

He would have let her go immediately once recognizing who she was but was stopped.

Stay where you are! Riverain commanded, having reached the stone palisade.

He pushed the hunter away and struck Lightfoot flat across the face for the second time that day, but hardly the second in all...

She fell down on the dry green grass, the commotion having set aflight a flock of birds from their trees.

I thought you told me to stay? he said.

Well, here I am.

Hunter!

Give me your dagger.

The hunter hesitated as he looked at the poor woman, but had little choice but to comply, lest he himself fall prey to Riverains punishment, which he knew would be severe.

Once again the priest grabbed her by the scalp and lifted her head and spit her in the face.

That's for running, you sly fox, he said.

And this is for laying hands upon your master. He raised the knife into the air as Lightfoot whispered to herself;

Come Aesyf Wōdanaz.

Come in the darkest hour of man.

A large "thump" was heard.

"thump", and another.

Riverain halted his swing and looked towards the forest glade taking a good three seconds to comprehend that his hunter lay dead beside him, pierced by two arrows.

In his psychotic rage he fell into a fit yelling;

Hunters! War is upon us!

He ran back into the village, leaving Lightfoot behind. She raised her head, her hearts faintly flickering flame fueled by the forest foreigner.

Aesy? she called.

Lightfoot ran into the forest pushing every little shrub aside hoping to lay eyes upon her true love at long last.

Lightfoot!, he whispered from behind the trunk of a massive oak tree.

The two childhood friends were united once more.

They spent the night together, the long lost love they had for each other thought forever gone reawakened.

Lying beside him naked under a large hide while looking into the flames he told her of his adventures with the horse and birds and all the things he had seen, they laughed together and healed. He told her about the tribes of Arya and how they would arrive the next day, Aesy having led them through the safe paths into the isolated western villages. She admired his large horse and he taught her how to ride it with great skill, it was a mysterious sense of freedom and unbridled adventure of a kind she had never experienced before.

Lightfoot, are you ready? he asked her in the morning the next day when she had been promised to meet his tribesmen, looking very much forward to learning more of his early past.

Yes Aesy, she replied and mounted the large steed.

He led the horse by its leash through the teeming jungle out to a field.

I don't see anything, she said, expecting the Aryans.

They're right over here, he answered excitedly.

Men! have you come yet? he called.

There was no answer.

Lightfoot admired her lovers naked back where he walked in front of her, it was as chiseled from rock, yet nimble, he carried himself with noble grace.

There! he interrupted and let go of the two.

She quickly dismounted and ran after him in the high grass feeling happy and jittery inside.

I wonder what they're like, how they speak, look, and their customs, and everything! she mused internally.

She parted the grass where Aesyrr had last disappeared, revealing his feline physique once more. He was kneeling in front of what looked like carved wooden figurines, but she couldn't quite make it out yet.

What's that Aesyrr? she asked, looking at the little pile of rubble.

He seemed preoccupied and didn't answer, only mumbling incoherently to himself, laughing and seemingly responding sporadically to questions.

But there's no one here? she thought.

Aesyrr, she tried again and squatted down beside him.

Where are your friends?

Where are the Aryan tribes?

What do you mean Lightfoot? he replied

They are right here in front of us, all thousand.

He kissed her on her forehead and stood up.

We charge the village at noon tomorrow, be ready men, he ordered the pile of wooden figurines as he mounted Sleipnir.

Come Lightfoot! he offered his arm to her.

She picked up one of the idols, and another one, and a whole bunch of them in her hands. Then she stood up and turned to him and threw them away;

What's this supposed to mean?!, she snapped.

I knew you were taking me for a ride, but this is just rude Aesyrr!

He laughed heartily;

Come sweetest Lightfoot, victory is in the air, let us feast and fill our bellies with luck of war.

Perplexed she mounted in front of him, and he caressed her flat belly as the horse pranced off.

CHAPTER XII

If he is serious about attacking my village tomorrow they will butcher him.

It was the eve of battle and, like Aesyrr promised, the couple had finished a little feast for luck, as he called it, himself having dozed off from an overdose of deer meat and rabbits.

What's wrong with my friend, she thought to herself.

Did he catch an illness or eat some strange seeds while away?

He as a young man in his early twenties shouldn't be behaving like a child, playing with dolls, she continued.

Thinking them real, worst of all, she muttered.

I must go back.

Now, how do I make *him* stay here...

She knew he would be up and after her the moment she pranced off, he'd hardly let her five yards beyond the camp the entire afternoon.

I could sedate him, but it's dangerous, I don't know if Riverain will have my life for running off, but he didn't spot Aesyrr in his fevered frenzy.

She concocted a plan involving the sedation of her lover by means of feeding him herbs of Valeria.

I could use that on the Priest too, given the chance.

Aesyrr! she whispered.

He mumbled something about bears and knives to her.

He's far off, maybe I should make way now rather than spend precious time looking for the herb.

Lightfoot picked up a dagger from his belongings and sneaked past him back to the village.

The Red Hands, by command of Riverain had fortified the stone palisade and posted several huntsmen to guard the entrance.

Help! one of the huntsmen heard a voice crying in the dark. Thinking it nothing less than a trap he ordered six hunters to escort him;

Who goes there? he sounded.

It's me Lightfoot. She limped out of the glade having cut herself in the leg on purpose to corroborate the story of how she was kidnapped by what she thought were tribesmen from the outer rims. Uneager to stir the boiling cauldron of war further, she continued;

But I couldn't make out which one.

A hunter carried her into the village and set her down in front of her house which also was heavily guarded. She went inside, observing by the state of things, and smell of special sacred incense, that a council had been held earlier. Riverain was not there.

Where's Riverain? she asked one of the guards.

In the western section, an answer casually followed.

Of course, she thought.

The first thing he does when given opportunity to run loose is tormenting my people.

It didn't take Lightfoot long to find him in the piles of stinking waste and rat infested roads of the western city, simply following the sound of voices screaming in loudest pain.

She listened outside before entering, drawing the dagger.

Priest, I beg you, no more! an old woman cried.

My child is much too sickly to partake in the expedition in the morning, and what good will this do? you're better off lashing a lame horse.

What on earth is the man doing, Lightfoot thought.

What demonic wizardry and spells have he cast upon this family this night.

Aargh! a gurgling noise was heard.

Lightfoot wasn't going to have it any longer, she flung open the hide cover and walked straight to Riverain who turned around and stood up, soiled with blood of his poor victim saying;

Lightfo...

Without hesitation she chucked the dagger into his neck, sinking it all the way, twisting it.

hah!? he exhaled before falling as a lump of meat to the floor.

Putting her finger on her mouth she signaled the frightened family to stay quiet, whereafter pulling out the dagger, causing the wound to gush incessantly, and carved up her former husband as one would a chicken for christmas.

She cleaned the blade on his bloody sheep fur, slid it back into the belt around her waist, got up and left.

Immediately she went to the house of the foremost elders and told them what had happened, and that there was no hidden army out there, and that what she had done was a matter of duty towards her own people.

She were to marry Aesyrr and together they would restore peace and a thriving community in the Red Hand and River tribes.

Of all the elders she visited not one raised an eyebrow or objected.

Riverain's body? Discarded behind the stone palisades and put ablaze the day after.

CHAPTER XIII

We cannot let this happen again, said Lightfoot during the large village meeting several months after having freed the tribes and worked to rejuvenate the western block.

Look how our people have suffered at the hands of one man, capable of bringing such destruction without much resistance, she continued.

I propose that we implement measures to safeguard against opportunist predators such as the one I just mentioned. That the village elders work together more efficiently to support each other and the people, and be mindful that our community is vulnerable to exploitation. We need volunteers to report any unusual behavior that may be deemed a danger to our society. I will take personal responsibility in organizing such an undertaking.

Every living thing in this world is of equal value, Aesyr began as Lightfoot paused.

The beast of the plains, many insects, birds and trees. We are all chieftains and gods within, creative spiritual creatures capable of love for one another.

Now let us get to work, and mend the open wounds, and mourn those who have suffered and fallen.

The River tribe may come and go and treat the Red Hands as brothers, and every man I say, if his spirit is drawn, may learn of leadership and sorcery.

In closing I propose the wicked house of Riverain be burnt and buried in the past, remembered only as the dark age when man was shackled in body and mind.

Aesyr may not have had the pleasure of exacting revenge on the killer of his spirit companion in boyhood, but at least the cursed house would taunt him no more by its wretched continued existence.

This meeting is adjourned! yelled the most senior elder.

But many more shall follow hereafter.

As the crowd dispersed around them Lightfoot pulled Aesyr to herself, looking at him stringently;

What do you mean burn the house of Riverain?

It's new times, as you said yourself Lightfoot, now calm your ambition, we shall sup together and remember to nourish our own tribe as well, he smiled and placed his hand on her big belly.

Little RavenHair was born on the next fullmoon, proving early on to be quite the handful in her younger years for the two first time parents, beaming with energy, never passing up on a chance to do mischief and play with the other village children who loved and admired her courage and zest.

Especially fond of the child naturally was her mother, the two being inseparable the first 10 years as her husband's behavior became increasingly erratic. Lightfoot still to this day did not know what caused his strange obsession with the eastern fantasy tribes, and she cared not be around him when he spoke of them, despite all his celebrated contributions in the fields of religion and humanities,

things she also had a mind about, having shouldered the role of matriarch little by little.

Ravenhair? asked a young boy as he visited the house of the Red Hand leaders, one of her many playmates.

Are you coming out today?

I can't, she answered.

I'll be with you tomorrow, my mother and I are going to the woods, she's going to teach me of the seeded bushes and herbs of nature.

Oh I see her now, the boy replied as her mother approached the house.

Ravenhair picked up her woven basket and met Lightfoot outside, and together they wandered off into the woods.

How about this one? Ravenhair said after a few minutes holding a red mushroom with white spots in her hand.

That's no good, her mother replied.

They arrived at a small glen, it was a beautiful summers day in mid june and nature was blooming with life all around them. Lightfoot sat on her knees as she spotted an old herb she knew very well.

The Valerian, she recalled smiling to herself.

We can use this Ravenhair! She called her daughter to her while demonstrating the find in the palm of her hand.

Goodness! that's a pretty flower. She looked at it with her big brown eyes and then smiled at her mother.

Let's get lots of those!

She bent down in front of her mother who flinched back slightly at Ravenhairs unrestrained freespirted personality.

Just like her father, she thought.

The two had the same exact chiseled lean backs, she observed. Of course, her ten year old daughters was much more nimble.

She stroked her hand on Ravenhairs soft back and leaned forward and kissed the side of the young girls head, who was very preoccupied with her newly discovered knowledge.

Mother, come on and help pick the ones over there!, she said slightly embarrassed.

Ravenhair come, she said and grabbed her daughters hand, flinging Valerian into the air.

I want to show you a place that is very special to me, your father and I used to spend all our summer days here.

The two ran across a small creek where frogs were croaking loudly, leading past a waterfall rushing restlessly with life giving force to the hungry world around it. They reached a small quiet grove with butterflies hovering everywhere, and dragonflies and ladybugs resting on huge flowers of red and blue and all the colours of the rainbow.

Lightfoot threw herself on the soft grass with outstretched arms and looked up into the cloudfree blue sky.

Ravenhair came and laid beside her on her side towards her mother, stroking her arm with the stalk of a flower.

Everything I ever wanted is right here in this place, she said to Ravenhair and turned her head towards her.

You know I love you dearly don't you?

The girl nodded rapidly and smiled.

Lightfoot looked back up into the sky.

Everything.

Two black birds landed on the only leafless tree of the small enclosure.

I heard you two were picking flowers this afternoon, Aesyrr said to his wife as they shared an evening together in his large throne hall cave.

It's important for her to learn about the secrets of nature, Lightfoot replied.

They might come in handy one day, she continued and looked at him with a cold stare while taking a sip of the wine filled sheeps horn trumpet.

She shouldn't neglect spending time with boys her own age, Aesyrr said.

There's a learning experience in that aswell, wouldn't you agree?

Lightfoot didn't answer him, but turned her head away slightly in discontent.

As the servant boy refilled their trumpets she commented;

If you could only show the same enthusiasm about your own child, she's the Red Hands next leader.

Aesyrr looked up at her, paying the words little attention;

We have decided that such symbols of division are a thing of the past, he commented.

We have certainly not, Lightfoot blurted angrily.

From this point, all future children conceived in the villages will be by atleast four fathers, that way we'll achieve true equality at last.

You're not well in the head Aesyrr, have you even pushed this suggestion before the elders? she tried.

I have, while you were out picking daisies neglecting *your* duties, he responded chugging a big sip of wine, fully expecting hell to break loose.

But that's gang rape! she yelled and threw her trumpet at him.

I won't have my daughter subjected to something that should have been buried and forgotten like the day we burnt the Priest.

And his house, Aesyrr reminded, fueling her growing rage further.

And his house! she continued.

Which you had no business burning down.

Why do you always react so fiercely to that decision Lightfoot, you knew we couldn't leave it standing, it's a symbol of his evil, you knew *I couldn't*.

We are the chosen people, she said while standing up ready to depart.

And now with the poison, damn the man! Aesyrr exclaimed.

Riverain was a fool, she admitted.

But I have seen the holy trigonal myself, beyond space and time, it's there, it's real.

So? he replied.

That doesn't stop us, the children of this trigonal, to do as we choose, why do you think we are here anyway? The unmoved mover is frozen in absolute zero, he can't do anything but replicate.

You're wrong Aesyrr, we must restrain our savage selves, but I won't have this argument anymore, you'll never understand, but you'll see one day, and then you'll regret having said what you just did!

In a fit she tore loose the wolves paw necklace and threw it at Aesyrr, turned her back against him and walked away from the hall, maddened and crying.

Lightfoot, wait come back woman, don't let us part the evening like this! Aesyrr called, not realizing the resoluteness of the anguish she'd kept locked inside and suppressed all these years.

Her pace quickened and she disappeared out of the cave.

Hugin, Munin, he commanded.

Follow her.

The two crows who had been sitting on his bear skin throne flapped and cawed, their response echoing throughout the empty hall, and departed like swift projectiles.

Lightfoot sat by a silent nearby pond glowing in the white moonshine, crying while tearing the grass with her fingers in anger and sadness.

Girl, rolled Hugin.

Of the crows, countered Munin.

She looked up at them where they sat in a tree;

Go away, ugly birds!

Leave me to mourn in solitude, for that is my fate.

We can help you, the first crow cawed.

Help you, followed his brother in a silent whisper.

Ravenhair will be yours forever.

And you'll command the tribes, your chosen people.

Before the one true god...

Liars, she said.

Only a miracle could make those words ever come true!

We know a secret, rolled Hugin from his sly beak.

A secret, echoed Munin.

But there's a price...girl of crows, they said in tandem.

CHAPTER XIV

The two crows prophesied her return someday, but Aesyrr often spent the nights of the following years wandering on and off in his large throne hall by the pyre restlessly crying out for her, calling her name in the emptiness of the forest night from the cave entrance.

It's time, Ravenhair said as I returned with the garment and slipped it over my head, thinking myself a great hunter who had just returned with its bounty having courageously bested a mighty beast and been rewarded in full by the tribes fairest woman now lying at his feet.

We walked together down the small torchlit stone road past the palisades and the clay path of the forest leading into Aesyrrs cave. Many villagers had gathered outside and within, and the mood was mysterious but friendly.

Like any other cult meeting, I thought to myself.

Nearing the main hall I saw people sitting on the hide covered stone benches and in front of us before the large throne stood Aesyrr, dressed in a bearskin, painted all over holding a large staff curled at the end. On his head wearing a helmet with two long antler horns protruding from it. Around him stood several other hooded hunters, wearing the same garment I had on, and in the midst of the charming party had been constructed a makeshift altar consisting of one of the benches moved from its original position, decorated with dead insects and newly picked flowers. Ravenhair slipped her hand out of mine and ran up to the men, kissing her father and the others one by one as heavy drums began beating from the sides of the room. Aesyrr gave her the second wolves paw locket which she took in her hand and when I had arrived standing some distance away from them unsure of my role in the ritual Aesyrr said;

Come, Rons, and stand with us.

Do me the honour, as our guest from times that have not yet come to pass, and accept the gift of the Red Hand.

Oh dear, I thought to myself as young Ravenhair began strutting around the bench suggestively dancing to the rhythm of the beating drums, ecstatically altering her state of consciousness.

She unclothed her self slowly, leaving only the necklace around her thin neck and walked up to the men surrounding her, teasing them, and at the moment each man was about to throw himself upon her, she escaped him and began working anew on another. When she came to me she performed the same dance as before but this time, as she saw that I could barely restrain myself longer, she stood up and took my hand, leading me to the altar, telling me to remove the white hooded garment. I took her in my arms as she lay before me and felt as if I had finally reunited with my maker, and in the moment of death given life. She moaned encouragingly, singing with the tapping of the musicians fingers upon the drum skin membrane while slowly with some difficulty unwrapping the leather band around her wrist, threading it over my head. I must be doing something right a thought flashed up before being drowned once more by the intensity of the moment, overwhelmed by the sweetness of her scent and sweet caress.

Crack! I was disturbed by the sound of a drum as it broke while at the same time experiencing stars and galaxies floating about my eyes at the speed of light, flying into the sun.

Hearing gurling and the clanky sound of a staff hitting the low stairs near the throne along with a

piercing shriek as the drums stopped, I opened my eyes and saw Aesyr lying in convulsions, bleeding from his mouth with a knife sticking out of his back.

Mother?!

-FIN-