

# THE DARKLING BAND



JASON HENDERSON



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## The Darkling Band

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## PROLOGUE

### FREIBURG IM BREISGAU, BADEN THE GERMAN LANDS AD 1249

Heinrich and Peter had been gone for an hour, hunting wayward dark elves with the Order of the Holy Vehm, and Rudolf Hauptmann was getting nervous. Behind him, his wife was wiping off the wooden plates with a clean cloth. Rudolph stood at the top of the stairs that led down to his shop, listening to the kitchen sounds and his own breath. He stepped away from the banister to the front window and glanced back at Frau Hauptmann. She returned a quick, nervous look before handing a plate to their youngest daughter, Christa.

“Here,” she said, “put this away, then go with Mary to your room.” Frau Hauptmann spoke aloud with a forced sound, as if she wanted to whisper.

The dark-haired, pale cherub nodded briskly. As she turned to slide the dish onto a shelf under the basin, she stopped. “Look, mamma!”

Frau Hauptmann looked down. “What is it now?”

“Heinrich didn’t wear the necklace I made for him.”

“Well, he must have forgotten it.”

“He doesn’t like it,” Christa whined, crushed. “He never wears it.”

“Please!” Rudolf snapped at them both. Christa scurried off in a huff to her and Mary’s room.

Rudolf touched the shutters and let the window fall open, the silence so complete that he could hear the greased hinges moving as a cold wind sliced in from the snow-covered streets. He looked out to a horizon that yawned cold and grey where the Black Forest clawed at the sky.

A white glow grew in the distance like a vast, ghostly cloud.

A dog howled down the main street. Rudolf nodded, and his wife soundlessly drew a sword from the hearth. She handed it to him, adding, “Should I get the old one, too?”

Rudolf watched the still-distant shimmering in the sky, still a distant cloud. “*Ja*, get the other one. And give Hans an axe.”

“But he’s so small.”

“Then find a *small* axe,” Rudolf replied. Damn Mueller and his damn Vehm dragging off Heinrich and Peter now. “Hans!” Rudolf lifted his voice, and his young son emerged from his room, quiet like the world outside.

“Papa?”

“Go down to the shop. Get an axe you can swing. Come back here with it.”



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He heard it, now, underneath the sound of Hans' small feet making their way down to the shop below: the bristling, crackling sound of popping air in hot, black wings. A crow fluttered from its perch atop the shop across the street, and a few of the horses whinnied.

Rudolf watched his own breath swirl in the freezing air. He shut the window gingerly, held his sword, and prayed.



# PART I

## CHAPTER 1

Not twenty-four hours before Rudolf held his sword behind a closed window and hoped to God he wasn't about to die, there was a cockfight in the main square of Freiburg.

Heinrich Hauptmann was grouching the morning away about the Darkling Band that Peter had scouted thirty miles to the east. "The Vehm should take them out before they move," Heinrich insisted, thrusting a giant pair of hands into his trousers, the young man's mountainous, blond frame moving through the snowy crossroads at the edge of town. "They're probably planning to steal some midwives, then we'll never catch them." This was people's most throbbing fear, the loss of women to flying elves, whatever the purpose.

Peter had just met Heinrich on the banks of the Dreisam River after Peter had returned from his latest scouting. They both lived and breathed according to the slimmest wishes of His Eminence the Holy Father's own Order of the Holy Vehm, Heinrich as an Initiate—a barely tolerated young member—and Peter as a Scout.

*Vehm* meant *wise*, as in, *it would be wise to do as the Vehm say*. Once upon a time the Holy Order had been a secret society, but of course that was before the Elf Problem. Now they were out in the open and merely secretive, like a more mystical version of the town constabulary, and better-dressed for all that.

No one had seen the Elf Problem coming because no one had seen elves for so long. But the expansion of humans into the wilderness had changed all that. Today there were ten times as many human towns scattered across the German lands as there had been in 1200. That's a lot of growth.

It was this growth, this seam-bursting, fattening humanity that drove humans into those territories that had once been considered off-limits, lands that surely ran with dark dangers. Those fears had been correct.

If there had been no elves, things might have been different. But there *were* elves, a race once quiet and now springing back at mankind. And thus had begun a long-running spell of raids, skirmishes, slaughters on both sides, between the dark elves and the humans who had them on the run.

In 1249, Peter was eighteen years old, living in Freiburg and scouting elves for the Vehm—and by extension for the Pope—keeping a constant eye on the Black Forest and the creatures that moved through it. No one could or would handle elves the way the Vehm did. And no one else had a changeling.

So Peter went out each day into the Black Forest, checking the path of the Darklings and reporting back to the Vehm House on the river's edge.



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“I think it’s time we clean the woods out again,” Heinrich concluded.

“Oh, for— they’re not a war Band, Heinrich,” Peter shook his head. “And they’re not taking midwives. I think they’re headed for Wintercamp—where they would be turned away if they had human captives. They’re going in, and once that happens they’ll be church-protected.” Wintercamp was a near-fortress in the Bavarian Alps run by “Elf-Beguines,” an order of monks who for some reason or another wanted to see the Darklings survive. As a favor to the Church the ever-philosophical Emperor Frederick II himself had approved Wintercamp and now the Vehm were stuck with it, the elf-serving Order and the Vehm tip-toeing around one another with constant suspicion. Frederick’s favor hadn’t even worked all that well; the Pope still despised the Emperor, and the only one who had benefited, as it turned out, had been the possibly demonic creatures themselves.

“If they’re *headed* that way, then they lie in *our* jurisdiction now,” Heinrich argued, his breath blasting forward in a cloud of angry, rolling condensation. “And our jurisdiction is the one where we’re not afraid to do what needs to be done with elves.” As a mere Initiate, it made sense that Heinrich would be inclined to urge the Vehm into a fight, but the changeling shook his head, his gray hair swaying over a bone-thin, bone-white sliver of a body. Everyone figured Peter to be an elf with no wings. He could scout them, serve the Vehm that way, but he felt sure he would never be able to convince the Vehm to change their minds once a course were set. It mattered now to try to talk Heinrich out of this idea before it buzzed in loftier ears.

Peter looked back at the crossroads as they trudged back into Freiburg proper. In a distant corner of his mind he saw himself and Heinrich, aged seven or so, wooden swords and wet boots and imaginary elf war, the town before them, the unknowable Vehm House behind. *See you at the crossroads*, every morning, all day until Peter scurried back to the monastery dormitory and Heinrich back to the Hauptmann shop. Now they were living those lives; Peter kept wondering if he were getting it right or not.

“If they’re big as you say they are, it’s the biggest Band we’ve ever seen,” Heinrich continued. “Is that not threat enough?”

Peter scratched at the brittle hairs at the back of his neck and grimaced as they broke off into a fine powder. Just another piece of his *otherness*. “Wait a day,” Peter said. “Before you go making any suggestions, wait a day. See if they move off.” He patted his giant friend’s shoulder. “What can happen in a day?”

They moved through the main gates into the square as Peter noticed the crowd around the cockpit, people thrusting their hands into the air and blasts of steam emanating from vicious mouths.

“One day.” Heinrich nodded, raising his voice over the cries of the crowd as they drew near. “But if someone else recommends a strike first, I’ll blame you.”

“Come on.” Peter smiled, reflexively hiding his sharp incisors with his upper lip. Nothing he could do about his bulging eyes, but he had worked with

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his thin lips since he was a child under the eye of the Cistercians. “They’re just a bunch of poor, peaceful elves headed in for winter. Even Freischoffe Mueller’s not inclined to waste resources on that. If one of the other Initiates suggests a raid on these Blue Banders, he’ll be laughed out of Mueller’s court, and you’ll be glad you listened to me.” Franz Mueller was *Freischoffe*, the local head of the Vehm. This made him one of the most-feared magistrates in the Black Forest region, and the red-haired giant played the part well.

Heinrich stopped, glancing at the crowd as they cheered at the hidden cockfight. “Listen to you. Always listen to you. It’s my damn curse.”

“And a fine curse, too.” Peter squeezed Heinrich’s shoulder. “Without me you’d be a total loss.”

“That could be.” Heinrich sighed. Meaning that most certainly was *not*.

Just then, the cockfight crowd erupted in a roar of laughter. One of the voices, a sharp cackle of a human female voice, slid through the air and caught Peter’s ear above the rest. “Cluck! Look up! Cluck, cluck!” The changeling’s eyes swiveled towards the crowd and saw a heavy woman with her back turned to him, nastily gesticulating at the cockpit.

“Hey, there, demon bitch! Cluck, cluck!”

Peter moved his lips, looking at Heinrich. *Demon bitch?*

Heinrich shrugged. “It’s a cock fight.”

Peter was already speeding up, moving into the throng of bodies, his vision swooping between shoulders as his body followed. “What in hell is going on?”

He heard the groan a moment before he saw its source, already knowing what he would see. He pushed someone aside, heard an annoyed cry as some Freiburg peasant tripped over his foot, staggering back. The groan was low and ululating, like a mournful song, human-like and not human-like. Sickness clawed its way up Peter’s throat and squeezed his tonsils as he looked down and saw a Darkling in the mud.

She was young, maybe seventeen, a long, lithe body covered in thin Darkling cloth that shimmered against the filth that covered it. The creature writhed in the pit, large eyes swiveling like Peter’s did now, swatting and hissing at the chicken someone had thrown in with her. She groaned again, and that was the last sound Peter heard, because the sound sucked out of his head, the roaring and jeering swept away with the throb in his ears. The Darkling sprawled on her side and Peter knew by the way her wings lay that one of them was broken, the thin bones most likely snapped in three or four places. Her human-like arms pulled her into a crouching position, but the thin, white limbs quivered at the elbow. The Darkling was weak. Peter watched, stunned, as the chicken flexed its wings and pecked the Darkling viciously on the human-hand, drawing blood.

She was saying something, hissing something, and presently the garbled words spewed past mud and profanity to reach Peter’s ears. “By the Erl-king you ground-sucking *worms* will pay for this...” But she was shaking, losing



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strength, and her curses were beginning to slow.

Peter was stunned. *I can't be seeing this; am I actually seeing this?* He slowly shook his head as the sight reeled heavily before him. Heinrich was beside him, touching his arm, saying something.

Peter growled, not even meeting Heinrich's blue eyes and red-blood swimming pink face. He felt his arms moving, elbows flying up. His eyes locked into place, and he felt the spittle squirting through sharp teeth as the bow came down before him. The top of his hand leveled out as his other arm brought an arrow from his quiver, notching and shooting in the time it took Heinrich to say his name. The arrow tore the bird's head in half and spat chicken blood on the muddy pit floor.

The crowd went wild.



## CHAPTER 2

Thirty miles away, as the crow flies, a song lifted into the November air.

*In the beginning was the void*

*And in the void the Erlkonig was alone.*

The Blue Band was singing the holy *Erlkonigsaga* rapidly and passionately; the song filled the clear and swept Lek. Even the Nekros sang, for Stell Farrago could hear their labored gasps in the Nekro huts, keeping time.

Farrago leaned forward as Stella Alezan masterfully ran a mash of saliva and crackle through his wings and kneaded his shoulders. “You should look content, my Stell,” she whispered. Periodically he saw her hand reach out and snatch a dried bulb of the mushroom-like plant from a basket by his side. She crumbled the crackle in her hand as she kissed his neck.

“I am content.”

A Nekro’s cough slunk through the air below the chant, and Farrago grimaced. “At this rate the Nekros will outnumber us all.” The disease made the Darklings’ wings slough off and skin crack before it killed, and no one knew where it came from.

“Don’t exaggerate,” she sang. Farrago had kept the afflicted well in check, and he knew it.

“Some of the escorts think I should kill the Nekros.” Farrago observed, “To keep the Band strong.” That was his job, the job of the Stell, the leader of a Darkling Band: to keep it strong. His band numbered over a thousand Darklings; it was a big job. He spent every moment fiddling with it like a system of knots and string. He awoke in the middle of the night teasing at it. It was never done.

“There are many ways to keep the Band strong,” Alezan noted.

*He heard their call, and made his own wings...*

“The Erl-King would have killed them. Cuk-wo?” Dead though he was, there was no end to opportunities to argue what the God-King of the dark elves would do. *What would Erlkonig do?*

“Not everyone believes that,” Alezan kneaded the elbow of Farrago’s left wing with her palm.

Farrago looked into the sky, his eyes swiveling towards a glimmer of crackle coming over the trees. “*He* believes it.” The Stell straightened his back and stood, stepping out from under the tree to cast a hand towards the sky.

The perimeter guards had been right—above, circling as they dropped from the sky, were five Darklings. The outer two were Farrago’s escorts; he didn’t need to see their shimmering blue sashes to recognize the twins Af and Tap, the defiant black streaks visible against their gray hair from miles off.



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After the perimeter guards had come back reporting three strange Darklings entering the area, Farrago had sent Af and Tap to bring the three strangers in or race back without them. But what a catch they were bringing. Between them, two escorts wearing Redgreen sashes fluidly matched Af and Tap's every twist and turn as they descended, every wing-beat so perfect Farrago was sure they were displaying for him. Just showing what a whip-crack Band they came from.

And in the center of it all, "Rimmion."

The Darkling in the center smiled, his thin lips mouthing Farrago's name in return. The Redgreen Stell's gargantuan wings beat impossibly slowly, his massive chest rising and falling with each well-oiled wing beat, sparks streaming down in a shower as wasteful as it was gorgeous. He needed a lot of the crackle plant to keep his wings working, as the dead Erl-King had taught them. Without crackle, elf wings dried up, feathers fell off, and there was no flight. Rimmion must have required heaps of the stuff.

Rimmion's wings were huge— fifteen feet tip to tip easily. Farrago wondered how he managed to stay aloft at all.

After a moment, the five Darklings touched ground in the center of the Lek, and the Erkonigsaga came to an abrupt end, in the middle of the verse in which the Erl-King punished Manlover and took away the children's High Wings. There were low murmurings in the distance, and Farrago felt an undulating wave of communal tension, feathers rising and eyes dilating all through the Roost.

Farrago stepped forward, body rocking slightly as his wings swept into place behind his back, so that the center joints rose up behind his collar and blended feathers with the mane of ashen hair. A nod to Af and Tap, and they fell back. Rimmion stood still where he had alighted, his arms locked low.

Farrago locked eyes with Rimmion, and when he felt the tether of gaze he lifted his chin and tilted back his head, slowly, mouth closed and set. Rimmion curled an eyebrow and mimicked Farrago's motion, and as his head rolled back, he opened his mouth, clicking his tongue against the backs of his teeth. Other than this mimicry of begging, a way of saying he offered no threat, Rimmion made no vocalization.

The foreign Stell's head dropped back to its former posture, his mouth closing into the slightest hint of a sneer. "Stell Farrago," the Darkling said.

"Stell Rimmion."

"I have suit with you." The Redgreen Stell flicked his head, and his own escorts fell back as he moved towards Farrago.

Farrago stepped towards his visitor and spat into his own hand, bowing as his brother Stell did the same. Farrago felt the forelocks of Rimmion's hair brushing against his own forehead, and together, moving as one, each reached over the other's shoulder and slid his hand in the other's chinks. Each felt the loose ends break off and slide into mush in his fingers, mixing with the saliva, and each smoothly kneaded the chinks into the other's shoulder feathers.

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This done, Farrago felt the tension in the Roost drop like a stone.

“What suit, brother?” Farrago asked. Behind him, Alezan began to sing the Erkonigsaga again, and the roost heard her and gently joined in.

Rimmion smiled his unreadable smile and said, “Let’s fly.”



The inky blanket of Black Forest treetops stretched out below the Stells and plummeted into a distant gray sky. Farrago found that he could keep up with Rimmion without too much trouble, although he had to beat his wings roughly half again as many times as Rimmion did to stay abreast.

Finally Rimmion cocked his head toward a lake and said, “There.” They whipped their wings and dove, and Rimmion playfully banked and rolled all the way around Farrago on his way down.

“What’s this about, Rimm?” Farrago asked, alighting on the frosty edge of the lake. “I’d heard you were in the Black Forest, but I wasn’t sure until my sentries spotted you and your escorts inside my perimeter.”

“Surely you’re not offended. Perimeter is a loose game when we’re on the move.”

Farrago flicked his head in agreement. “What’s your suit?”

Rimmion tilted his head back, slightly begging with his lips. “I need crackle.”

“You?” Farrago frowned. “Why would you need crackle?”

“You have seen the human town just west of here?”

“Freiburg, yes.” Farrago had a scout at Freiburg, in fact. The humans had an army there, and his scouts told him that many of the humans were itching for a fight. Farrago was hoping he could skirt around them without event.

“I need to make a raid, and I could use some more crackle for it. I understand you have a surplus.”

Farrago sighed. “And where do you get this understanding?”

“You have five bushels,” Rimmion replied. “That’s more than enough to last you through winter.”

Farrago shook his head. Rimmion’s spies had the amount wrong, but there was no denying the Blue Band *did* have a lot of crackle. “This is no time to go raiding.”

“I can’t avoid it,” Rimmion replied. “We need midwives. Just a small raid. I think we can be in and out without too much trouble, but of course we’re low on crackle.”

“How could you be low on crackle, Rimm? Are you *all* oversized?” Farrago flicked his head. “Go in. Wintercamp has crackle.”

Rimmion tilted his head, studying Farrago. “Are you going to Wintercamp?”

“Yes, of course. It’s going to be a hard winter.”



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“If you’re going in, then you have even more of a surplus.”

“Good Erlkonig,” Farrago spat. “Do you need a lesson in Stelling? We’ve conserved, but I have no idea how long that will last. We could be attacked; more of us could get sick.”

“Oh,” groaned Rimmion testily. “Of course, the Nekros have a *harder time*, don’t they? They have trouble breathing, have to beat their wings more in flight, and crackle runs through a Nekro’s wings like a sieve.” Disgust gurgled in Rimmion’s mouth.

“I don’t put my Nekros to death,” Farrago said flatly.

Rimmion’s smile returned after a moment, and Farrago winced as the Redgreen Stell slapped his shoulder in a brotherly fashion. “Of course not. Of course not. That’s not your style, brother. I forgot myself. Cuk-wo,” he said. “I back down. But I don’t need a lesson. I need crackle and midwives.”

“Join us. We’ll reach Wintercamp in a week or so,” Farrago said. “There’s crackle there. Plenty.”

“At a price. You have to mix it in with a handful of human religion.”

“They have medicine, and I have sick. They have crackle, and I have wings. If you want my advice, I’d say go in with us. What difference does religion make?” The Darklings were all alone, anyway.

Rimmion bit his lip. “Not this winter. We’re headed for Davert Forest.”

“Then go. But if you don’t have the crackle, don’t do it. Don’t go raiding when you don’t need it—“

Rimmion slammed his fists into Farrago’s collarbone and grabbed the leather straps that came down across his chest, tugging, so that the leather bit into Farrago’s flesh. “We... *need... midwives!*” Rimmion hissed.

Farrago peered into Rimmion’s eyes. Everyone was having trouble with birthing, but it was interesting to get a clue that Rimmion’s Band might be in real trouble, indeed.

“I cannot help you.” Farrago pried Rimmion’s fingers off of him and backed up, preparing to fly. “You’re on your own, Brother Stell. If you’re smart, I’ll see you at Wintercamp. If you’re not...”

“Raina.”

“Eh?”

“Raina,” Rimmion said flatly. “My Stella. She’s sick... and she has an egg.”

“Oh.” Farrago looked out over the water. “Oh.”

“There’s a... there is someone in Davert Forest. Someone special, and he might be able to help her. But he needs more midwives. There are so many sick females...”

“Rimmion. I understand what you’re going through, but it doesn’t change



what I'm up against. I have no crackle to spare."

"If you can't help me," Rimmion said finally, snapping back his head in respect, "I'll see you soon enough." The momentary desperation in Rimmion's eyes had faded now.

"Then I bid you fair winds." Farrago took to the air in a shower of crackle and left Rimmion behind. The Redgreen Stell could have caught up with him easily, but Farrago knew that he would not. Rimmion had just forced Farrago to insult him, and the last thing he wanted was to stretch the moment on. Farrago felt nauseous, a light stream of tart bile rising in his throat. This had not gone right. But there was no other way for it to have gone.

Af and Tap were waiting for Farrago when he arrived at the Lek.

"How did it go?" Af asked.

"The elf is mad," Farrago looked around. "Is Zoe back?"

Af shook his head. "Not yet. Should I go after her?"

"The scout can take care of herself," the Stell answered. He stopped for a moment, surveying the sleeping Blue Band. They'd have to wake up. They shouldn't be nearby if Rimmion was going to go raiding.

Finally Farrago crossed his arms and said, "Leave her some crackle. We're on the wing tonight."



## CHAPTER 3

Peter forced himself in amongst the gibbering mass of people around the Freiburg cockpit, shoving townsfolk aside of the way as he replaced his bow. “What in God’s name do you think you’re doing?”

“That was my chicken!” cried a woman, and Peter turned to see the amply-sized Marjorie Fries waddling towards him, a finger wagging before him. “You had no right to kill my chicken.”

Peter ignored her, seething as he stood at the edge of the pit, addressing the crowd. “This is a Darkling!” He wrung his hands. “You don’t *do* this.”

“Klaus and I caught her,” spoke a bearded man nearby. He wore a hunter’s outfit, his boots caked in snow and mud. He indicated another hunter next to him. “The elf was spying. She put up quite a fight. Just thought we’d put her to some sport.”

“Sport?” Out of the corner of his right eye Peter could see the wounded creature, panting in the pit. Peter spat “All captured Darklings are to be handed over to the Holy Vehm. Freischoffe Mueller will hear of this. The German Lands have quite an Elf Problem, you imbeciles. Prisoners are for information.”

“You don’t care about that, freak,” Marjorie Fries fumed. “It’s the elves you care for.”

“See here!” cried Heinrich. “That’s the wrong tone to take with a Vehm officer.”

“Last I checked my soul is in no danger for violating the command of the Vehm,” the woman hissed. She was right. By law, since those early days when the Vehm operated only in secret, the Order had no jurisdiction over women or Jews. Just one of those things. And she was encouraged in any event; Heinrich could see the various fealties stacked behind the eyes of the townsfolk. The Vehm, important as they were, were still far behind the Emperor, town, and parish.

“Anyway, he’s no Vehm,” the woman continued, snapping her head towards Peter. “He’s a freak changeling you don’t know what to do with, so you keep him close.”

Peter let the words fly in, chewed and swallowed. “I don’t care for elves or anything, Frau. But understand I have my duties to perform.”

“You owe me for that chicken.”

“And you’re lucky you don’t go to jail for interfering in Vehm business.” Peter was already dropping into the pit, crouching by the elf. “Lucky you’re a woman.”

Now, shutting out the world for a moment, Peter brought his head down and searched the face of the female Darkling. She had stopped moving, and would have seemed dead but for the rise and fall of her breast. Her hair was strewn with mud. Bruises bloomed fresh on her shoulders and the right side





of her face, but the broken wing seemed to be the extent of her serious injuries. Her eyes were half-open, but he wasn't sure if she could see him. Peter shook his head in disgust.

"I am Peter Meinhof. Scout of the Order of the Holy Vehm. Have you a name?" That wasn't completely accurate. He *was* the Freiburg Vehm's scout, but he was also a jailer, and even a cook, from time to time. And whatever the bloody hell else. He belonged to the Vehm in as many senses of the word *belong* as one could devise, but he was not a member, not even the lowest *Frohnbotte*, honest worker. He could not be. This distinction needled and chafed him every day, because he saw no way around it. He had grown up with and loved these people, and that pays for a lot of abuse.

Large, black eyes fluttered and blearily stared. "Changeling?"

Suddenly a set of hooves splattered mud down into the pit as a voice like eggshells cracking filled the air. "What goes on here?" Peter looked up to see a curtain of onlookers sweep open as a large, red-bearded man on horseback loomed.

Peter laid his hand on the Darkling woman's shoulder. "A couple of hunters managed to capture a Darkling. Looks like the fair townspeople decided to start the interrogations early."

"Is this the support we can expect?" Freischoffe Franz Mueller of the Order of the Holy Vehm scowled at the crowd. "Is this changeling we favor to be the only one who observes our laws?"

Peter raised an eyebrow at that, no more. He was already sliding his shoulder under the elbow of the elf. She picked up her dagger and Peter seized it before her fingers closed. He slipped her dagger into the quiver on his back. "Heinrich! Help me up."

A short time later, Peter was satisfied that the elf was safe in her cell at the Vehm House—safe from any elf-fearing folk who might decide to bribe a different jailer and kill her before the Vehm had their chance. He asked about for a surgeon to check her wounds but found none available. He failed at binding her wing himself when she tried to bite him.

For an hour Peter watched her through the bars, sleeping, exhausted. The hunters told him they'd chased her for nearly a mile, because once she'd seen them, she'd tried to kill them.

This happened all the time.

This war was a strange one, not even war, really, just skirmishes between humans and elves of so many different Bands that no even those who distinguished friendly elves from the enemy in the abstract had a hard time in practice.

Peter looked through the bars as the Darkling female sat up, slowly, in the bed of straw that was her new home. After a moment, she leaned forward, her head on her hand. She said something in Darkling that Peter didn't understand, then judged his confused look and said, in perfect German, "Are you going to kill me?"



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“What do you mean?”

“I saw men hanging by the neck near the gate as I scouted. Is that what you do?”

“Oh, we’re complicated.” Peter shrugged. “If you were a prisoner of the Constable, I’d say yes. If you were a prisoner of the Emperor’s men, I’d say... maybe. If you were a prisoner of the Church—well, they don’t keep cells for elves. But you’re a prisoner of the Holy Vehm.” Of course they were going to kill her. But they would ask questions first. It was just another thing he would be unable to prevent even if he wanted to. For a moment he felt pangs of familiarity tugging to be entertained, a friendship he might strike up only to be snuffed out when she was hauled away. He was too old to fool himself any more. He could ease her suffering, though. “I can bind that wing for you.”

“Throw me the bandages and a stick,” she said. “I’ll not be touched by you.”

Peter turned around to find the articles. As he slid them through the bars he gestured at the sash about her waist and said, “You’re a Darkling of the Blue Band. You’re not dangerous. This should not have happened.”

“What do you know, changeling?” she asked sullenly.

Peter held up two fingers. “That’s the second time you’ve called me that in twenty words at most. Do you know many changelings?”

She laughed nastily and winced as she began to straighten her wing. “You’re the first I’ve ever seen.”

He chewed on that. “You know, this is absurd. I’ll see if I can get you released. You’re not part of the war.”

“We’re all part of the war,” the Darkling sighed. She looked around at her cell, felt for dagger he’d taken. “Some of us just don’t know it yet.”

Peter shrugged. “Good night, elf.”

“Good night, changeling.”

Peter wandered out into the night, searching for dinner. At least she hadn’t called him a freak.



Below the floorboards, in the waters that seeped down into the rushing River Dreisam, a being of water and more than water moved and followed them and watched the precious and only changeling sulk his way out of the Vehm house. The being touched the mind of the Darkling woman and helped her sleep and heel. He swept into the snow below Peter’s feet and felt at his strange aura.

The changeling was the walking future of the dark elves, the most vital piece in the race’s destiny, and he had no idea.

*Peter, the being below thought, you don’t know. You don’t know how it’s already begun.*



## CHAPTER 4

### THE BAVARIAN ALPS

The Wintercamp search party trudged silently through the Alpine snow behind the tall, gray monk MacDuff. The monk was getting worried; they'd been out for three hours already and still had no idea how many elves they were looking for or where those survivors might be. The single Darkling who had successfully arrived at Wintercamp hadn't been lucid enough to tell MacDuff that or even how far back the stragglers had stopped. MacDuff could feel the sweat starting to freeze under his clothes. Even your insides could freeze, if you stayed out too long. He feared they might not find them at all, and the lost party would die on the doorstep of salvation.

Spirits roamed below the treeline, careless and dead. MacDuff saw them here and there out of the corner of his left eye. A glint of snow would catch his eye and light them as they danced across the Alps.

MacDuff noticed Zolo's chinks bristling at the back of his neck as the young scout looked sharply to the left and placed his hand on his dagger.

"You see them, too, don't you?" Zolo asked.

MacDuff smiled slightly as his staff crunched in the snow. "Not in the way you do, I imagine."

Zolo wore the white and yellow sash of the Draggers, who were already in place at the Wintercamp. In fact, the White-Yellows had been at the camp since last winter. Never very strong to begin with, Stell Drager had been pressed by the Cistercians and by the many sick in his Band to set up a permanent residence there. MacDuff had found having a Band at Wintercamp at all times to be useful for a variety of reasons. One of those uses came into play right now.

Zolo shivered. "I see the aura of the spirits." He looked at MacDuff, and seemed to study MacDuff's distant, gray eyes for a moment. "Their color is as hard to describe as that of yours."

"I have a man's aura like any other." MacDuff eyed the horizon. It was getting cold. Hell, it was always cold, but it was getting *killing* cold.

"It's a man's aura, all right," nodded Zolo, "but not like any other. The rest of the Elf-Beghards at the camp are normal men. You... I'm not so sure."

MacDuff laughed, "*Mein Gott*, Zolo, you're saying it bothers you that not all human auras look alike? And in any case they're not normal men, for heaven's sake, they're monks who work with elves." MacDuff looked ahead at the rest of the search party and pointed with his staff. "We should catch up."

Zolo nodded. "You're hiding something, Brother MacDuff."

The monk gave an exasperated look as they began to walk again, and he



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wagged his gray beard. “Do I look like the sort of person who would lead you astray?”

“Absolutely,” the scout responded.

“Then my looks are deceiving.”

“Humph,” Zolo chewed his lip. “Your weird aura is safe with me. The rest of them, in case you’re wondering, they’re not strong readers. You blend in with the rest of the humans as far as everybody else is concerned.”

“I hadn’t asked,” MacDuff said, “because I am not concerned.”

“Of course not.”

A frown crossed MacDuff’s face as he scanned the area. “Perhaps we’re close enough now— can you sense the ones we’re looking for?”

Zolo held up his hand and made a guttural sound in his throat, and the seven Darklings stopped and turned as they reached the top of the hill. Instantly all sets of boots ceased crunching; silence fell on the forest once more. MacDuff listened to the sound of the wind brushing snow off the low limbs of fir trees, the tiny flakes falling frozen onto the white blanket of the forest floor. He peered out into the trees past Zolo, down the hill, a kaleidoscope of black-green and white oozing into distant gray nothingness.

“There!” Zolo said, pointing south-southwest. “I see them through the trees. There are enough of them that their aura is a loud one, indeed.”

MacDuff nodded, and the party began to move again. After they’d passed another quarter mile, half of the rest of the party said they could see the elves’ auras, too, and perhaps they were telling the truth. After a mile, it was moot, because they could hear the lost elves singing.

Trembling through the firs and snow came the words of the *Erlkoningsaga*,

*Don’t bother calling, for the Master won’t come,*

*Don’t bother crying to him,*

MacDuff pumped his arms, moving faster through the trees as the Darkling song filled the air. His boots barely sank into the snow as his staff blurred along beside him. The saga was at its end, which MacDuff had heard numerous times by now, but hardly as many as he’d heard the first two-thirds or so. The end section was the death verse of the Darklings.

A palpable, urgent weight fell across the party. They bounded over another ridge, and MacDuff slid, righting himself and finding his feet, snow exploding off the fir trees as the party ran past.

*Nornagesta’s found him and lopped off his head,*

A cloud moved over MacDuff’s gray eyes and he could even *feel* them nearby. He could hear their mourning. Even *now* they mourned! Darklings who had never known a time when the Erl-King lived and breathed and led them in battle against the humans. He could hear the



sadness of these three-hundred-years-removed children for the loss of their King God and their righteous anger, even today, at the evil Nornagesta.

MacDuff's heart ached. That's why he had founded Wintercamp. The whole race was under the sword of the humans, and, all the more dangerous, under the sword of their own bodies. It was as if they were getting sicker because some hidden mass mind of the raven-like race knew it was losing, and there was no sense fighting anymore.

*Old father Erlkonig's dead.*

But the Darklings weren't dead yet, God knew. MacDuff had several Bands of them at Wintercamp already.

"Here!" cried Poe, another of the Darklings from Zolo's Band. Poe was standing next to a tree, looking down into a creek bed. Gasps of horror rang out from the party.

Over the small ridge, gathered together in a clump, lay seven Darklings. They were still murmuring the Erlkonigsaga, starting over again at the beginning, the part where the Erl-King flew through the void alone and heard the call of the Darklings. MacDuff hopped down, legs sinking into the frozen mud next to the creatures.

The first thing that caught MacDuff's eye was the amount of feathers strewn about the group. The Darklings shivered, clutching one another and the meager blankets they covered themselves with. MacDuff bent down next to one and held up a hand to the rest of the search party, who still waited at the top of the ridge. He waved his hand past the fluttery eyes of the oldest-looking Darkling.

"Do they have the Nekro?" called Zolo.

"I don't know," MacDuff said. The Darklings had noticed him, now, and they shivered and stared, still murmuring the Erlkonigsaga. MacDuff pulled back his hood and said, in the Darkling language, "I am Julian MacDuff Scotus. I run Wintercamp."

The eldest Darkling moved, and the blanket slipped off of him and fell to reveal an orange sash over his tunic. "Is it time for the Gray One to come for us yet?" he answered in Darkling, his mouth drawing up in a thin, sad smile that reached made the crust in his eyes flake and fall.

"Only if the Gray One to which you refer is me," chuckled MacDuff. "Now you must answer me truthfully. Are you listening?" He flicked back his head and rattled off the words. "I have come from Wintercamp, Protectorate of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and the Holy Beguine Order of the Roman Catholic Church. Do you request asylum?"

"Wintercamp," the Darkling responded, before he coughed nastily, the cough ratcheting up his thin throat. "I... am Naran, Stell of the Orange Band. Yes... we request asylum."

MacDuff was studying the Darkling's skin, looking for scales, looking on



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the ground for tell-tale discharge. He held out his hand to touch the Darkling's pale forehead. "You're feverish. I need to know if that's the worst of it. Do you have the Nekro?"

The Darkling repeated the word and finally shook his head, "No."

MacDuff gazed at the leader and the other six, who had fallen silent and were all in a similar condition, feverish and losing feathers, but probably merely from malnourishment and cold. MacDuff called to Zolo. "It's all right. There are seven of them." He looked at the smallest of the seven, a child whose hair was still the near black of the hatchlings. "I'd say the ages are nine to thirty-five."

They made fur mummies of the stragglers and began to haul them up the ridge towards the horses. When the party stopped to tie the mummies to the backs of the horses, MacDuff looked at the falling sun and knelt next to Naran. "There are no more?"

"No more. The rest had the Nekro," Naran said. "None of them survived. We are the last of the Naran Band."

So the Nekro had devastated another Band. And most likely, if they had *all* died from it, it was because Naran had been under- rather than over-vigilant. "You're all right now," MacDuff said softly. "You've made it."

They were home at Wintercamp in less than another hour. The mummies continued their song once they were moving, coughing loudly enough that MacDuff could hear it over the crunch of snow under the horses' hooves.

The Gray One had come for them after all, and had brought life.



## CHAPTER 5

Sixteen year-old Mary Hauptmann pretended to be embarrassed when her sister Christa begged Peter for a story, rolling her eyes as she wiped off the table and tossed the last bits of uneaten truncheon out the window.

Heinrich had come home alone, a great yellow mountain clomping up the stairs from Papa's shop below. He'd announced that Peter would be joining them for dinner after locking up a captured elf. An elf! Heinrich brought snow into the room, flying off his coat as he flung it, and Mary had to clean the table once more before they ate.

And of course Peter followed, just in time for dinner, all bones and gray hair, smirking and witty but polite and distant, too. They passed dinner discussing whether Mary should marry in one year or two, and whom, and whether Heinrich's little brother Hans—who was even now out hunting rabbits—might be trusted to keep the shop free of dust and whether that would violate the rules of Papa's guild, and whether Heinrich would move into the Vehm dormitory now that he was a *Frohnbotte*, or whether he should transfer to Munich, to be nearer the Emperor.

Peter had lived in the dormitory since he was a child—Mary knew he came to the Hauptmann's for dinner because the food was better and the prayers shorter—but he was the changeling and nothing he did applied. But he was a brother to Heinrich, as if his white skin were invisibly pink, his gray hair blond.

Mary watched the bone-white changeling fall back in a chair by the fire, the frost and darkness on the window forming a phantom wing, jutting from his shoulder. Christa was at his feet supplicant and begging for her story. She was nine, and Mary and she still had to share the same truncheon for stew.

"Oh, don't bother Peter for a story," Mary called falsely. Peter smirked at her. He lived next to a Vehm library and was bursting with stories.

"I say we let Peter earn his keep," Heinrich said, as he sat across from Peter.

"Nonsense," said Papa in the kitchen, looking up from some discussion he was having with Mama. "He needs do no such thing!"

Peter leaned forward, his eyes blazing black and sparkly as he looked at Christa, rubbing his hands. "What sort of story?"

"An elf story!" Christa demanded, her uncommonly black locks flying back and forth as she moved her head.

"I think by now *you* could tell *me* an elf story," Peter taunted, nudging her with his boot.

"Not enough of them," observed Mary, taking her place by Christa. "Come on then, have us a story, Peter the changeling."

"An elf story," the changeling repeated. "What sort? A war tale?" He dropped his head and came close to Christa's giant eyes. "No, there's enough



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of that. What are you hoping for?”

Christa seemed to roll through a thousand images and sucked in her breath as she said, “A journey.”

Heinrich laughed. “A what?”

“A journey with the elves.”

Peter closed his eyes and seemed to... *bask* for a moment, then opened them again. “All right,” he said. “Have you heard the story of the Melinda, the shepherd’s daughter?”

“Noooo.” Mary and Christa called. Heinrich shrugged, watching the fire but listening enough.

“Then that is what you shall have.”

Mama interrupted her conversation with Papa to call out from the kitchen, “Make it a quick one, Peter, we can’t have them up all night.”

“Right. The short version.” Peter waited a second, allowing the crackle of the fire to fill the space as he collected his thoughts. “There was a certain shepherd of Kassuben who fell very ill, and soon so did his wife and daughter, who was called Melinda. The priests came and visited and swore that they were all bound to die.”

Christa gasped, “Did they?”

Peter waved a hand. “His wife went to her reward. And the sick shepherd was left to watch his equally sick daughter withering away as he was doing so himself. Then, one night, he felt his blood slowing. His rashes began to run, he felt very hot, and he knew that his time had come. And in the darkness he watched his daughter, in her bed, and he was so weak he could not go to her. He prayed to God that if he did not pass the night, the Lord would grant his daughter an escape.”

Mary had frozen, watching Peter as he paused. Visions danced in her head to the deafening crackle of the fire, familiar sights of snow at the door, coughing people, calling out to God for deliverance. “The night passed.” Peter dropped his voice to a hush. “The shepherd’s dreams were fevered, and he saw the Darklings come. Their wings shimmered as they came through the window, and in the haze, he saw them touch Melinda, and listen for her breath, and finally, shake their heads. And he said to them, ‘Please, save her. Save my daughter. I know that God has sent you to help me.’ He saw them talk amongst themselves in strange language, and finally, wings beating, they carried Melinda away.”

Peter heard his own voice continuing but he was lost in the image himself, not even sure why he chose this story, but telling it and thinking of the elves that were and were not his brothers. “The shepherd awoke sometime later, with the townspeople around him and a Priest at his bed. His fever had broken and he was alive.”

“What happened to the daughter?” Mary asked, leaning forward and brushing aside her blonde hair. “Tell us!”

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“No one could say. And the shepherd was alone, and he wondered where his daughter was. It had not been a dream, after all. She was a captive of the elves.”

“He asked them!” Christa cried.

“What people ask for,” Heinrich said, “and what they want...”

Peter nodded. “The shepherd went to the priest and said, ‘I must get my daughter back.’ The priest shook his head, saying, ‘What is lost, is lost. Mourn her and live your life.’

“But the shepherd was distraught and thought about Melinda day and night. He began to traverse the countryside in search of her, following the places he had heard elves to be. No luck. He returned to the priest, who shrugged and said, ‘Forget her. Live your life.’ But he searched on. He saw spirits and lost ghosts and many a wayward human on this quest or that. But he could not find his Melinda. Finally he returned to the priest, heartsick. A year had passed. ‘I must find her.’

“The priest said, ‘Meet me at midnight by the church.’”

Christa shivered, and Mary put her arms around her sister, and it was as if they were swimmers coming up for air and diving down again. “Go on.”

“The shepherd met the priest at midnight and the priest was there with a coach, and four fine horses. The priest looked down and said, ‘Get in. I will show you what you want to see.’

“They rode for what seemed like days, until they reached the shore of an ocean, but the shepherd felt feverish again and could not fathom the directions nor the proper passing of time, so he was lost and traveling at the priest’s whim. At the shore he and the priest boarded a small boat, and the shepherd rowed for days, rowing through the haze. Finally they reached a distant shore and got out and walked, and in the distance was a mountain. The priest led the shepherd to the foot of the mountain, showed him a hidden cave with a river flowing into it, and said, ‘Go in. You will see what you must see.’”

A sapling on the fire popped and sizzled, and Peter drew his breath and continued. “Down below the mountain the shepherd found many elves, and he heard them sing. And he passed through their ranks and found a deeper home of the elves, where there were many Darkling women, knitting and sewing and birthing young. And the Darkling women were sad because their young were dying in the womb, and each birth was a great moment of rejoicing. And the heroes of the Darkling women were the midwives.

“The shepherd passed along the rows of birthing Darkling women and the midwives, and he heard a familiar voice, caught up in a impassioned birthing. He saw a human woman, her hands clutched to the hands of the birthing Darkling, speaking in a strange tongue. Her face was painted white, but he knew her even before he looked closer, although she had grown by years, and now was a fully-grown woman. It was his daughter, Melinda.”

Mary looked around and marked the faces of Heinrich, Papa, and Mama,



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who were ashen. “What did he do?” Heinrich asked, as if he were Christa, but with a more urgent tone. Peter said, “The shepherd turned, and walked away. He met the priest at the foot of the mountain and together they made the journey back to Kassuben. And Melinda was never spoken of again.”

Silence, for a moment, thick and pasty. The changeling’s spell altered the room. Finally Heinrich shook his head as Christa and Mary each gasped admiringly, lost in visions of dark caverns and speckled walls.

Suddenly there was a clamor on the stairs, Hans panting his way up and around the banister from below. “Heinrich!”

“Where have you been?” Mama demanded.

“Hunting rabbits,” replied little Hans distractedly, and he held out a string of three he had caught. Mary expected him to launch into the tale of his vicious battle with the creatures, but Hans hung over the banister and turned to his brother immediately. “There are men looking for you. You and Peter.”

“Men?”

Mama interrupted. “Did you lock the shop?”

“Of course,” the boy said. The front of the shop was a pair of doors, one above the other, which formed a floor and ceiling for displaying goods by day. Hans counted it a matter of honor that he could latch the great things. Hans answered Heinrich’s question. “Herr Mueller and some others. He said you and Peter should make ready.”

Mary recognized the name of the Freiburg *Freischoffe* of the Vehm as Heinrich hopped up and went to the window behind Peter.

Presently the sound of a horses’ hooves filled the air and Peter heard the eggshell voice of Master Mueller calling ahead as he rode, “Heinrich! Peter!”

Heinrich looked at Peter in an instant’s challenge. “I count five.”

The changeling listened to the approaching sounds for a moment. “Six.”

Heinrich turned back to his little brother “Did Freischoffe Mueller say what he needs Peter and me for?”

Hans’ eyes darted across the room at his mother and two sisters before he leaned in close to Heinrich’s ear and whispered something.

Mary heard one word: “Darklings.”



## CHAPTER 6

Peter and Heinrich wasted no time getting their horses from the stables behind the shop and meeting Mueller's party in the street.

"Scout," called Mueller in that eggshell voice of his. "I'm glad we found you."

Peter looked the party over, making out the blond locks of Swann Fort, a blacksmith initiate to the Vehm like Heinrich, and like Michael Grunewald, who rode with his father, another cloth-seller. Last were old shepherd Horst Ganz with his son David. "Hunting late, Herr Mueller?"

"What's this about?" asked Heinrich.

Horst the shepherd spoke. "A murder of Darklings stole my sheep."

Peter almost laughed. "*Sheep?*"

"How many?" Heinrich asked.

"Fifteen young lambs, and at least six full-sized lambs and ewes each," David Ganz said. "They moved fast."

Heinrich shook his head. "I don't know, I've never seen Darklings go after livestock. Women, maybe, but not livestock."

"I have," sighed Peter. "They'll do a little illegal shepherding when they run low on food."

Horst continued. "We hid in the trees when we saw the crackle in the sky. These were big, strong elves."

Peter got up on his horse. "You're lucky you're alive."

"They never saw us."

"Did you notice a sash color?"

"N... no."

Heinrich looked at Peter as he slid into the saddle. "We caught that elf this afternoon; you think this is the same Band you've been watching?"

Peter shrugged. "The Blue Band's not typically violent, but... Hell, I don't know. Horst, which way?"

"North, towards the woods."

"Then we'd better hurry or we'll lose them. They'll be tired if they've been carrying sheep. With any luck we can find them resting before they return to their Band." He whipped the reins and began to move off. "Whichever Band it is."



All over the German Lands, new roads and new towns had cropped up, many of them in areas that were strictly dark elf territory until recently. It stood to reason the elves tended to loop back on land where they used to spend a lot of time.

No one knew how many Darkling Bands there actually were. In the 1240s, when the humans of the German Lands began to have *serious* trouble with the dark elves, the number of Bands jumped markedly, at least in the popular



imagination. So that if you asked one man in the Munich, he would say there were nine Bands, but a man in Freiburg might say there were thirty, more if he had ever been under the sword of a War Band. Some said once there were a hundred Bands and now there were less; some said once there were less and now there were more. There were even stories people told about there having once been only one Band, a great family of Darklings under a dark elf king. It was the kind of thing Peter the changeling and Heinrich talked about at night, faces lit by firelight.

The last theory was the truth, but they did not know it yet.



The party spilled out of the main gate into the craggy green and white of the valley, galloping until they reached the edge of the woods. “Now,” Mueller said, “it’s up to the changeling.”

Peter rode forward a few yards, and Heinrich joined him, out of earshot of the rest.

“I’ll admit it,” Peter said. “I’m not sure what I’m looking for.”

“You have to try, *bruder*,” Heinrich looked back at Mueller and the rest. “You can listen. It’s a big forest; we need a direction.”

“Listen?” Peter smirked. He sat there, gazing off into the wood, where the road twisted and disappeared from sight.

“Listen with your mind,” Heinrich said. “*We* cannot do it. But I know that *you* can.”

And the trees swam with sap, coursing through the grains, not like blood pumps through a man, fast and tense and bringing on death, but like only sap does, slow coursing, so slow that only a tree-dweller can see it move. The Darkling in Peter sang to hear the motion of the sap in the trees, and the sound opened up and sank into the auras of the wood, green and vast.

Peter listened to the auras, only vaguely aware of Heinrich’s patient eyes. He reached out to the sound of the wood-aura and peeled it back, stripped away to top of the wood, and gasped.

*Birds snakes rabbits squirrels grubs snails worms creatures creatures unknown moths butterflies unknown winged beetles lizards unknown unknown!*  
“So many...”

“Sift,” Peter heard Heinrich say, far away, far behind the flood of auras swirling through his ears and eyes and nose and tongue, “you know what we’re looking for.”

“Sometimes if I think if I knew what I was looking for I’d be able to see my own aura,” Peter said, concentrating. Aura-seeing was not a skill he had developed much, for every moment at it was another moment reveling in the *other* he wanted to avoid, to forget and make others forget, as if he could erase the color of his face or the shape of his eyes. And yet when times came that something or someone needed finding, someone invariably came to him and



asked. When it was useful, everyone loved the different.

He flicked these thoughts aside now, stripping away auric layers, whole layers peeling away with moths and butterflies sticking to this layer and squirrels and rabbits sticking to that, aurae chattering as the changeling sifted them out, searching the wood, listening for the right colors.

A layer stretched out before him, bubbling underneath, alive with color unrevealed, and Peter reached out with his mind and peeled it back.

*Crackle.* There it was, shimmering in the night, shimmering in the trees, in a dense grove. He saw the silvery hair move and the wiry body sitting in the tree, a mile away, giving off the aura that crackled like a dying star. He could even see the physical Crackling itself, the wings popping and sparking in the night.

“There’s one.” Peter sliced his hand in the direction. “North-north-west.”

Heinrich scratched his chin. “One Darkling?”

“I...” How was he to know? “Perhaps it’s just a *general* Darkling aura. That crackle they give off, that’s what I hear, but... I could swear there’s just one.”

Heinrich seemed to chew on this for a moment and asked, “What about Horst’s sheep?”

Peter peeled away the crackling layer and listened. After a moment, he heard a soft aura, a smell of wool on the air, but it was slow and small. “It’s there...”

“It?”

“Heinrich, I don’t know. It looks like just *one* to me.”

They rejoined the group to hash it out. “What do you mean, one?” demanded Horst.

“It could be a general aura,” Peter repeated. He made up his mind. “But I don’t think so.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Swann Fort. Swann was so fair and beautiful a young man he struck Peter as being something like a model human, a sort of mold for people to admire and envy. But he was an idiot. “Using witchcraft to do the work of the Holy Vehm.”

“I’m a changeling,” said Peter evenly. “Not a witch.” The church had said from the start of the elf problems that of course Peter, who was called Changeling because he had been left behind in exchange for a human child, but who obviously seemed to be a a Darkling/human mix—would have no soul. Of course Peter was the only one of his kind. Presumably all the other changelings just looked like babies, and you didn’t know they were other until something really strange happened later. Peter thought this sounded like a fable to explain why some people just aren’t “right.”

“Stow that talk, Swann,” Heinrich scowled. “The Scout has never been wrong before.” He stopped for a moment, looking out to the woods, then back up the road. After drifting for a moment, he looked at Mueller. “Freischoffe, I think we should trust Peter. Something’s not right. We should turn back.”

“You’re an elf-lover and a coward,” David Ganz spat.

Heinrich looked down at the snow and waited a moment before he said,



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“David, I see that you and your father are upset, so I’m going to ignore that. Now, if I may be so bold, I think we need to turn back. I have no... powers... but something’s not right.”

Mueller looked at Peter. “Changeling, what do you think?”

Peter shrugged. “I call them as I see them. You can do the interpreting.” He looked at Heinrich and heard his friend’s aura ripple grayish-green with doom.

“Fine,” Horst said. “David and I will go. You people can all—“

Heinrich cut him off. “We’re not sending you to your death, old man.”

“Come on,” Mueller said finally. “Let’s go.”

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They followed Peter as they would a hunting dog, until they came to a dark mound, a great skirt stretching thirty yards on either side of a huge, gnarled birch. It was Peter and Heinrich who slid down, disappearing behind the skirt.

Peter dropped a few feet, heard Heinrich do the same, and looked around as a slithering voice came to his ears.

“Changeling,” came the voice. Peter’s eyes swiveled round to find the aura of the sheep he had seen, the beast nestled in the arms of a Darkling who lay against another tree. The elf’s eyes were bleary and pussed, his wings almost featherless.

And around, all around, the slaughtered carcasses of Horst Ganz’ sheep.

The disgust rang in Heinrich’s voice. “Damned elves... slaughtered the whole flock.”

The elf hissed, in almost indecipherable German, “Allbut one.”

Peter crept closer to the living elf.

“Careful, Peter,” Heinrich said. “He’s sick.”

“Why?” Peter stared. The Darkling seemed to be falling apart and clung to the living lamb like a god.

The elf’s eyes were open, but they were milky gray and sightless now, and he laughed, short and nastily, before he died.

Peter froze, his fingers cold against the snow. “To get us....” He sprang up. “Heinrich!”

The blond man spoke in a hollow creak that spewed from his lips in steam. “I was right.”

“They knew we had an aura scout. They wanted us out *here*.”

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Over the mound, onto the horses, no words, just fever, panic, and flying snow.

When they poured onto the road to Freiburg, they could all see the white, crackling cloud circling low. As they reached the crossroads, the auras flooded Peter’s mind, but he ignored them, because by then he could hear the screams.



## CHAPTER 7

“Which house?” Peter cried.

The Darklings circled before them in the air, a brilliant eddy of white bodies, slick and glistening, gray hair sparkling as if on fire, and Heinrich and Peter whipped reins and forced their horses into an even faster gallop.

*Too late...*

“Mine!” Heinrich called. There was someone in the street, waving his arms, a man Peter didn’t recognize, and he nearly fell under Heinrich’s horse. The town militia’s alarm bell was splitting air and ears as swarms of folk, pitchforks and swords and axes in hand, swamped the streets below the horses of the Vehm. “Out of the way! Move!”

Peter notched and shot as fast as he could draw arrows from his quiver. His eyes kept traveling down to the street, drawn by the screams of the people. “Move!”

Heinrich reached the front of the shop first, springing from his horse before Peter managed to come to a stop behind him. Peter heard the rest of the party coming up fast.

“Horst! David!” Peter cried. “Get these people clear!”

David, madly clopping to a stop, looked at Peter as if he had asked him to clean a burning house.

“Get *us* clear,” someone shouted, and Peter swiveled in irritation to see Josef Kipper, head of the Mayor’s militia and town watchman. “This looks like an attack. I should think we should be getting you clear.” He waved a hand-axe towards the house. Peter brushed past him.

Heinrich ran to the gate of the shop. The wall was still up, bolted on the inside. “We can’t get through this, Peter.”

Peter nodded, stepping back, looking up at the house.

In the air, the Darklings made no sound. Save the sound of their beating wings, they might not have been there at all. That, and the screaming.

A large section of the roof had been ripped off, straw and wood thrown in every direction. Peter could see through the front window and into the night sky. Shapes moved in the house, and now and again Peter heard the clash of metal.

“Papa!” Heinrich cried “Papa!”

Peter heard Rudolf Hauptmann in there, all right. The man was screaming, not in fear but in anger, wailing screams of mortal exertion. Amid the shimmering of black Elf blades, Peter could see a glint of steel. The Darklings came, one after the other, swooping down from above the roof, and in through the hole in the roof, blades clashing, swooping out, never more than two or three staying in the upper floor at one time. The line of Darklings swooped and churned like a snake.



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“What are they *doing*?” Heinrich cried, shaking his head.

“They’re wearing him down,” Peter said hollowly. He had heard of this; they both had. Rudolf should be dead now, but the Darklings were playing with him, seeing how long the keeper of the house could take the circling onslaught. “The gate! Somebody’s got to open the gate!”

Then came another voice, muffled, behind the heavy front gate. “Heinrich?” It was Hans, Heinrich’s little brother.

Peter slammed himself against the gate and shouted through the cracks, “Hans! Hans, you’ve got to open the gate and let us in, for the love of God...”

“I can’t!”

More screams, the whipping of wings, clashing of metal, and now Peter heard Heinrich’s mother screaming above the rest, louder, clearer, as if God himself wanted them to recognize that scream, just for a moment, just to be sure, so that when it cut off abruptly Heinrich would know for sure.

“Hans! Please!” Peter shouted.

“Hans,” Heinrich said slowly. Peter watched the light from inside filtering through the crack between the boards on Heinrich’s lips. “You lifted the gate earlier, remember? You said you locked it behind you when you came up.”

“No!” The boy cried, and through the cracks Peter could see him the reddish cheeks glistening with tears. “I just left it unlocked. Papa locked it.”

The rational part of Peter’s brain digested this and realized it was true; when Heinrich and Peter had come down to meet Mueller, they had simply opened the gate, without having to move the heavy wooden beam over the door. Then Peter realized that Heinrich had disappeared around the side of the house and was still shouting to himself.

Suddenly Heinrich returned with a cry of, “Back up!” Peter looked over his shoulder and moved out of the way. Heinrich swung a pick axe at the gate. The heavy metal tip struck the wood in the thin groove between two of the boards. Heinrich pulled it free and began to swing again.

“There’s no time to hack it down,” Peter shouted, regarding the mining tool.

The pick slammed into the boards again and this time penetrated deeper into the seam. “Not going to hack it down,” Heinrich grunted, wriggling the pick-axe free. The axe came down and around in a mighty arc. *Slam*. He panted, looking around. “Get me a rope.”

“What?”

“Rope!” he howled. Peter saw the pickaxe puncture the wood, leaving an almost-neat hole in the gate. He saw what Heinrich he was trying to do. Heinrich swung again and connected with the lower half of the gate, about three feet to the right from the first hole. Peter turned around and shouted. “You! Watchman! We need rope! About forty feet! As long as you can find!”

The watchman stared. “Rope?”

Swann, who despite his Vehm aspirations was still a blacksmith, said, “I can get you a chain.”





“Be quick,” Peter said. Heinrich’s pickaxe chunked another piece of wood from the heavy gate. Swann whipped the reins and sped down the street towards his shop, cutting through the crowd with stunning efficiency.

“There!” Heinrich cried, and he pulled the axe away to reveal two holes in the gate, one in the top and one in the bottom half, forming a diagonal line for the chain when it arrived. Within moments Swann returned, mud and snow flying as he came to a halt and threw down the chain. Darklings swirled dipping down and rising in their circular attack. Heinrich yanked up the chain. Mary and Christa’s screams still echoed, but Peter no longer heard the clashing of Herr Hauptmann’s sword.

Heinrich yelled to little Hans through the seam. “Here!” He slipped the hook on the end of the chain through the fresh upper hole he had cut. “Thread this through the lower hole! Thread it through!” Peter saw him crouched there, hands clenched, eyes furious, shouting through the crack, asking a tiny rabbit-hunting boy to save himself. “There! There!” Peter turned, notched another arrow, and shot at a Darkling in the sky.

Hans’ aura was bright and blazing, shimmering through the cracks in the wood. Peter could imagine the boy, crouching, guiding himself by streaks of light coming in from outside, and soon he saw the hook push itself through the other hole. No sooner did the hook appear but Heinrich seized it, ripping it out. The wood clattered loudly as Heinrich slammed the hook into a link a few feet from the gate. Swann had already taken up the slack. Peter and the rest fell into line, wrapping the links around their thick leather coat sleeves. Heinrich shouted, “Now!”

“Ho!” Peter shouted. They all dug in and lunged back. The wood groaned and heaved below the din of alarm bells and the eery swoosh of the elves. “Ho!”

“Crack! There’s a crack!” shouted Heinrich, then he looked back at the gate, “Hans, I’m stepping back, now, but we’ll be in before you—”

“Ho!” They jerked back once more. Wood roared furiously, the three tethered boards pulling against the middle of the heavy board barring the door. Peter’s forearms throbbed with the pain of the links biting through leather and skin. “One more. Ho!”

*Better be just one more.*

A great roar and crack as the chains ripped the boards clear, the bar busting in half.

Slow motion, now. Slow motion, as Heinrich stood back, holding up the pick axe to deflect the flying wood as the upper and lower halves of the gate ripped from their hinges. Chunks of wood flew. Peter grabbed his bow. Swann and Mueller and Horst and David stood with swords at the ready. Slow motion, as moonlight flooded into the shop. Little Hans bathed in it, grinning in triumph, floating over the ground.

Floating, because of the black blade that lifted him up from behind and pushed through the small breast and birthed itself from beneath a splattered



shirt, every moment crawling, a year to each second. Hans did not scream, but Heinrich did. All Peter could see was *crackle*.

Crackle! The spark and shimmer of black wings in darkness, the grinning, skeletal visage of the dark elf behind Hans, those crackling wings whipping as the Darkling soared through the gate, Hans sliding off the sword and crumpling in a heap before them.

Peter threw up his hand. The gate retched out four of the flying creatures, waiting all along for them, laughing at the vainglorious attempt at a rescue.

All at once, chaos.

Heinrich roared and whipped the pickaxe around in a powerful arc, catching the foot of the Hans' slayer as the Darkling shot past and into the air. The dark elf howled but kept going, whipping up and coming around, a chunk of bone-white foot dangling and dripping black blood.

Peter stared at the fallen Hans as an arrow came into his hands. He shifted his gaze rapidly, notched and shot at the first target that came his way, a Darkling soaring towards him. Peter saw the black eyes staring from beneath the bony brow and gray hair, and shot, grabbing instantly for another arrow. The shaft flew through the flesh underneath the creature's collarbone, slicing through and out to stick in the great black, crackling wing. The Darkling swiped at him viciously with his sword. Peter had no shield; he dropped to the ground. The sword barely caught the side of his quiver. Peter rolled over and saw the creature swoop up like his comrade and come around again for another pass.

Peter sat up and drew two arrows at once, holding one between his index and second, one between his middle and forth finger, notching them at once and pulling back.

The wings whipped and spewed crackling light as the Darkling grinned wide. Peter drew back and let the arrows fly. One sailed through the Darklings' right wing, doing minimal damage. The other caught the dark elf in the throat at an angle. Peter watched the shaft tear through the neck, sticking in the back of the creature's lower jaw.

The Darkling howled in pain. Peter wasted no time notching another arrow and aimed for the chest. The creature, unable to regain composure, was caught between continuing his descent or gaining altitude again. As he brought his legs down and whipped his wings, deciding upon the latter, Peter fired. The shaft found its mark, bursting through the thinly-covered sternum and stopping deep.

The dark elf fell with a massive thud at the changeling's feet, and Peter scrambled, looking around.

At nothing, or almost nothing.

Where a moment before Peter had heard a thousand sounds and the crackle and the whip of the massive Dark wings, where he had heard the clash of Heinrich's axe against the sword of his now-fallen foe, the similar sounds of battle from Swann and David—now there was only quiet. No beating wings. No crackle. No auras.

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“What, are they...”

Peter heard Heinrich say, “They’re done.”

Not gone. *Done*. Peter looked past the house into the distant sky, where a crackling white and black cloud receded at full wing.





## CHAPTER 8

Heinrich cradled Hans in his arms and began to climb the stairs, Peter following. The shop was dark and relatively undisturbed. They had not come to steal cloth. The upstairs was more of a shock.

“Oh, dear God,” Mueller said. The Freischoffe entered behind them. Peter said nothing, struck dumb and trembling, his head caught in a vise of moonlight and blood.

Underneath the dining table lay the body of Herr Hauptmann. The man lay with the hilt of his sword just a few inches from his hand.

Heinrich his head as he looked at Peter, then knelt, looking for something to cover his father. Rudolf lay on the tablecloth, and Heinrich gingerly touched the body, sliding the cloth awkwardly out from under it. He was pulling the red and white linen over his father’s head when the dead man coughed.

Heinrich gasped and dropping the cloth. Peter saw a steely arm reach out, a hand with three fingers grabbing his wrist. “Papa,” Heinrich whispered, his head sinking with his body, his lips next to his father’s.

Peter could hear it, could see the bubbles of blood on Rudolf’s lips, spelling out words. “Heinrich?” Rudolf shook his head, disoriented. “I can’t see,” he whispered. And he couldn’t, because of a massive slash across the bridge of his nose that had swelled his eyes shut.

“Papa... shhh...”

“You’ve got to... they took... you’ve got to find them.” He coughed, then. Peter turned away, leaving his friend. He had no idea what to say. Peter turned back to see Heinrich covering his father’s face, his cheeks taugt and red.

He was whispering. “I vow. I vow.”

When he rose, he glared at Peter. Then he shrugged, looking down. “He didn’t see Hans,” Heinrich said hollowly and bent to pick up his brother. He lay the body of Rudolf Hauptmann’s younger son on the table after he righted it. Then Heinrich stepped to the center of the room and began to turn, staring at the carnage, his mouth moving but producing no sound.

“Mother...”

“Heinrich,” came Mueller’s eggshell voice, “maybe you should wait.”

Heinrich shot the Freischoffe a look that cut him short. Peter scanned the room. There was so much damage, so many articles of clothing covering the room, so many chairs overturned. So much clotted blood covering the whole place that Peter couldn’t focus on anything in particular, save the table with Hans above and his father below. It stood in the center as an anchor. Peter stood by the door and stared at the night sky, which he could see through the peeled-back roof. This was not a home. This was a death-place. A charnel house concocted in a nightmare, stars twinkling above and reflecting in the blood that



pooled near Rudolf Hauptmann’s head.

Horst and David found their way up behind Mueller and emitted similarly meaningless exhortations. Heinrich gasped like a baby and ran into the kitchen area. A pair of great black wings splayed out, white Darkling legs sprouting from beneath the dark tunic underneath, but now Peter saw the material underneath the fallen elf. It was his mother.

Heinrich threw the Darkling to one side, revealing Lil Hauptmann, her throat cut, her eyes trapped and piercing at the night sky, searing right through Heinrich and on forever. Heinrich, moved by some ceaseless inner mechanism, knelt down and closed his mother’s eyes and looked about. He muttered inaudibly, stammering something Peter could not understand. He shook in the way a man’s head shakes when he can’t believe what he’s seeing. It was too much at once, and he was shaking his head to get the debris out and let the truth in. But the truth was here, disappearing only because Heinrich was pulling a table-cloth over the woman’s cooling remains. Peter watched, stunned, as Heinrich reached over and found what else the giant blond seemed to be looking for, some article that had slid under the stove. Heinrich picked up and gingerly replaced the woman’s arm.

“Find the rest,” Mueller said, and Peter nodded, gesturing at Swann.

Peter stepped into the room shared by Mary and Christa, holding his breath, Swann looking over his shoulder. David said, loudly, “Mary!” just as Peter was entering that room, and Peter turned back and snapped at David, “Stay here. Wait.”

“But...”

“David. Wait.” Their eyes met, and David nodded sullenly, wanting to be some sort of belated hero, wanting to see whatever, but maybe he listened to Peter because Peter spent more time here. Or maybe for once common sense worked its way through an upset man’s mind, and he stayed as Peter told him to, because he was in love with Mary Hauptmann and expected to marry her, and there was no sense in him being the first one in now.

Peter turned again to the dark room, beyond the gash in the ceiling, and waited for the light from the windows to work into his eyes and reveal blood and torn sheets and twisted, torn bodies. Peter waited in vain.

When the room succumbed to the ambient light, it gave forth no blood, having none.

“They’re gone,” Peter shouted, tearing back into the living area. Heinrich leaned on the table, resing on his knuckles, staring at a piece of paper, maybe staring at the wood or nothing at all.

“Gone?” Mueller looked around.

Swann emerged from the room where Rudolf, Lil and little Hans once slept. “They’re not here.”

Heinrich rubbed his face, looking around him, tugging at his sparse blond beard. “Murder raid... murder raids don’t...”

“Why would they?” Horst the shepherd muttered. Heinrich shot the



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shepherd a look that burned auras from the air. Horst leaned on his son, shaking his head, over and over. “Heinrich, I’m sorry. God, I’m so sorry.”

The Watchman, Kipper, was nervously pacing about the room. “I don’t know what I’m looking at,” he said, staring at the blood. “I know attacks... hirelings out to kill Lords. I don’t know what this is. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Peter wished he could banish the watchman immediately. Town authority would be useless now; no council or guild would be interested in spending resources on elves. Kipper would be gone soon.

“That’s very interesting,” Heinrich laughed nastily, “because we Vehm *have* seen this kind of *thing* before.” Heinrich looked at Peter. “We’ve seen it different ways. Sometimes they come to take something valuable and kill whomever they find. Sometimes they come to avenge the loss of a Darkling killed. And sometimes they take captives.”

“We have to find them,” David said flatly, shaking his head, “Mary is sixteen, they’ll surely...”

“We’ll find them,” Heinrich said, dropping to his knees, gripping his sword, head swinging side to side. He looked at Peter, cried out, “Oh, oh, god, Peter! Your precious *cousins* stole my *sisters*.”



## CHAPTER 9

“I pray you’ll at least wait until after the funeral.” Margaret Grossmann eyed Heinrich gently, looking up from the wooden floor of the shop. Margaret was a friend of the Hauptmann’s and widely thought acknowledged to be betrothed to Heinrich. She had scrubbed until almost no trace of dying elf nor boy remained except a bulbous and seeping stain which began near where she kneeled and ran out into the snow.

Heinrich pretended to go over his father’s books, running his hand along the lines of the ledger. *I vow*, he whispered, with every grain and tiniest ridge that scraped against his fingertips. *I vow*. “I’m sorry,” he looked up. “You said something?”

“I said at least you should wait for the funeral before you go off.”

“Where’s Peter?” Heinrich looked around. Then he heard the changeling upstairs, muttering, as wooden furniture scraped against the ceiling. Heinrich winced; every sound he heard was a chastisement, every vibration in the air sending hot sparks up and down his spine, like those that fell from Darkling wings and burned holes in the snow. *Move. Go. Find them.*

“Peter!” Heinrich shouted at the ceiling. “What are you looking for?”

“He’s looking for Christa’s amulet,” Margaret said.

“Amulet?” Heinrich kept his hands flat on the ledger, still feeling the hands of his father there. Father reaching out through paper grains and ink, grabbing him by the wrist, *go, go*. “What amulet?”

Peter’s boots made hardly a sound as he descended the stairs, saying, “Come along, Heinrich, the wooden heart, remember? But I can’t find it. She must have been wearing it.”

Margaret wiped her chin with the clean part of a blood-red rag. “Remember, Heinrich? Christa showed it to you. I was there.”

“I don’t remember a thing about it.”

Margaret stood up, laying the rag on the counter. “Mary helped your sister carve an amulet, a wooden heart, with a P engraved on one side and an H on the other.”

Heinrich looked from Margaret to Peter and shrugged, helplessly.

“For her two big brothers.” Margaret nodded. “She showed it to you. She did.”

“I’m sorry,” Heinrich said, talking to the ink lines on the ledger.

Margaret looked down. “She cried. She talked to me about it and she cried, and kept saying, ‘and he didn’t even notice.’”

Heinrich wasn’t sure more sadness could pour in, but it did, he could feel it, gushing up from the ink on the pages, seeping through the tiny ridges of his fingertips, strangling his soul and choking his mind. “I’ll make it up to her when we find her.”



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Margaret shook her head. “You just don’t listen.”

“To what?”

“To anything, Heinrich. The lesson there isn’t to run off and raise the dead, it’s to pay attention before you miss something...”

“*Raise the dead?*” Heinrich quivered, from head to foot. “You’re wrong. You’re wrong.”

He watched Margaret regroup, letting the tension pass as she surveyed the store. The bolts of cloth had been neatly re-stacked and most of the blood was gone. The place upstairs was still a wreck and probably would be for some time. He wasn’t even sure why she was trying to fix the place. “So,” she said. “Peter, I imagine *you’ll* talk to me.”

“Eh?”

Margaret sighed. “Are you staying for the funeral or off immediately?”

“What—whatever Heinrich decides,” Peter said, avoiding eye contact as much as Heinrich was.

“The trail will grow cold,” Heinrich said simply.

Margaret cleared her throat. “And how long are you going to give it?”

“Margaret, they’ve been gone for half a day,” he replied.

“You won’t come back.”

“I can’t listen to this,” he winced.

“Heinrich, please. Listen to me.” She put her hands on his chest, staring as if trying to see deep into him. “You know you’ll be killed. I... I know it’s not a great thing to you right now, but we’re supposed to be married.” she stepped back, frowning sadly. There was no good way for her to say it, but she considered the girls dead.

“I can’t believe you’d try to stop me.” Ten hours ago Heinrich had replaced his mother’s arm, and this woman was worried he wouldn’t come back to get married.

“I can’t stop you,” she said

Peter tried to be helpful. “I think I can track them, in—”

“We’ll look as long as it takes,” Heinrich said, cutting the changeling off. A bell rang in the distance, and he looked up, saying, “It’s late.” He closed his father’s ledgers and grabbed his coat. “I’ll be back. Peter? I want to be gone by sundown.”

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Margaret watched him barrel into the street and disappear. Peter lingered, looking uncomfortable. “It shouldn’t take long,” said the changeling.

“Don’t tell me that,” she spat.

“What do you want me to say?”

Margaret rubbed her temples. God, they were such *children*. “Oh, well, nothing. Nothing to me. To him, I want you to say to him, to my betrothed, that he’s misguided. That he has a life here and that he’s going to miss it if he goes off like this. Enough people are dead.” She reached Peter’s odd, giant eyes. “You can tell him that. You alone, I think.”

Peter raised his eyebrows in a pained expression. “I think you overestimate

✠ 40 ✠





my influence.”

She shook her head. “You men! A dead man made Heinrich promise he’d leave, and I’m beaten by that, aren’t I? They’ll be *dead*, you know. Tell Heinrich that. The elves will kill him when they see him coming, and his sisters will already be dead. Or—and I know you’ve heard of this, those elves will kill Christa and Mary the moment they find out someone’s looking for them. Nothing good can come of this. It’s just Heinrich, trying to fix the irreparably damaged and learning not a damned thing.” She looked at Peter and thought of the amulet again.

She shouldn’t have told Heinrich that amulet. She had stood there and inflicted pain, and not even useful pain. She had only driven Heinrich on to do what she didn’t want him to do. Why had she done that?

“Please, Margaret,” Peter stammered.

“Fine,” she said. “Maybe he won’t listen to you. Or maybe you just don’t care. Go ahead. Go be brave men.”

“Heinrich needs to search,” Peter said. “The parish won’t. The militia won’t. There’s no *wergild* in it to be collected in exchange for those lost. It’s a thing so terrible, everyone’s going to do nothing. He needs to search.” And his eyes said, I need to search, too.

Margaret nodded sullenly. “Who knows?” she said finally. “Perhaps the interrogation he left for will give you a lead.”

Peter’s head tilted violently as his eyes swiveled, locking in on her like those of a plunging hawk. “Interrogation?”



## CHAPTER 10

The Freiburg Vehm Hall hung precariously over the Dreisam River, its entrance so close to the burbling water that the Vehm could hear the machine churning under the house. There witnesses went in. They came out, if they came out, in the river itself, in pieces the size of a man's thumb.

"Normally," a voice like cracking shells said, "the subject would not have a place before this court."

Zoë shook her head, slowly, blinking, until the sound of the human's voice became clear. It was another moment or two before she began to translate the sounds and process what he was saying.

Something was biting nastily into Zoë's feet and she looked down at her ankles to see that they were chained, and her weight was pulling against them. She was rising forcefully away from the floor, black chains cutting into her feet and ankles. No—she was looking at the ceiling of a human building, and she was hanging from the rafters. Her arms hung down below her head, stretched out and tied at the wrists. She tried to adjust her wings and felt the rush of the fracture return. Erlkonig, they hadn't killed her yet. She hurt too much to be dead.

Zoë's eyes adjusted to the upside-down room, the crescent-shaped table across from her, before a large fire. She saw fifteen human males gathered, seven on each side of the table, with one seated at the crescent's middle in what appeared to be a throne. She shifted her weight and felt the handles of at least three knives concealed on her body, none of which she could reach.

The throned man stood, placing his hands behind his back. The shells cracked on. "Since the Secrets of the Vehm were brought back from the Holy Land and we began our Holy Reign, it has been our practice not to concern ourselves with trials of the unanswerable, such as women, or children, or Jews." He leaned forward, "or with the soulless. Such as you."

Zoë looked down—towards the floor—to see she was suspended over a metal statue of a human woman. For a moment she absently tried to place the icon—it was a human goddess. The wife of the God Chief, wasn't that it? Wife *and* mother, somehow, as well; she remembered that much. Because the God-chief had split into father and son, or something like that. She couldn't recall the goddess' name.

Suddenly Zoë heard rushing water and the cranking of chains. The human goddess split open, three ways, splitting from the center in seams, so she opened up like a ghastly three-pronged beak. As the statue bloomed, hollow, Zoë saw below it wheels, long and thick, churning with dagger-like teeth. Beyond that, the source of the water sounds—the rushing river.

"Where are they?" the Freischoffe called once more.

"I don't know."



Something down there, in the water, past the spinning shiny teeth, past the rolling logs, something whispered in the water and in her brain. *Fear not... the Erlkonigsson watches, and hears, and sees.*

A door slammed, and a voice cried, “Wait!” Zoë’s eyes swiveled up to see a figure pushing through several other Vehm, the changeling aura shimmering as he moved into view. “Wait, there’s another way!” It was the strange creature from the jail, the only such being she had ever seen, appearing again.

“This is none of your concern, Peter,” a blond man, next to the Freischoffe, said. “She has refused to tell us where my sisters will be taken.”

“For God’s sake, Heinrich, has it not occurred to you that she might not *know*?”

“I *don’t* know!” Zoë cried, staring into the wide open maw as she dropped half a span, her ankles singing out with pain. The wheels in the god-machine spun with jutting teeth and razors, and she saw herself falling, sliced into a thousand pieces, washed into the river, never to be seen again. *The Erl-King made his own wings, and so shall you, Make your own wings, and fly...* and her mind shut it out, grew dark, not caring if she were ground into pieces the size of her thumb; she was flying, her soul flying already to meet the dead one. But of course, her soul would go nowhere. *We are alone, now. Rest.*

Suddenly the changeling was there before her, his eyes urgent but friendly. He wanted her to trust him. “What is your name?” she heard through the haze, maybe the second or third time he’d asked it. She felt a thin, cool hand touch her cheek.

“Zoë.”

Their eyes locked, swiveling in and grabbing. “Zoë. Do you know where your Stell would have taken these girls?”

Zoë’s , realized that the chains no longer hurt, because her feet had gone numb. “We don’t do that.”

“How long will they be camped in the forest?”

“They will be waiting for me.”

Heinrich spat an oath and stormed to the lever, swatting the executioner out of the way and placing his hand on the grip. “They’ll wait forever.”

Zoë’s eyes met those of the changeling tracking his face as she twisted slowly. Peter spoke, his voice low and calm, his eyes not leaving her. “You do that, Heinrich, and it’ll be a mistake.”

“They made the mistake!”

“No,” Peter said. “No, not yet.” As he pulled away from Zoë’s gaze, she felt herself recoil as if cut loose from a cord. Peter continued, “But it won’t make any difference if we kill this one.” *What? Wouldn’t matter?*

“What do you mean?” Mueller moved forward in his chair. “I remind the changeling that he may be our friend, but he cannot be our brother. He has no place here but at our pleasure.”

She watched the changeling shrug, and as he looked at her, she saw in his eyes a wiliness that had not been there in the jail, or at least had lain dormant.



“She’s a piece... that we can use.” Peter stopped for a moment, and Zoë waited for the court to respond.

“Go on.”

Peter began again, faster now, and she heard a sound in his voice that indicated that he was trying not to care. “We have their scout. This is a valuable thing. Scouts are trained heavily,;they cost time and resources.”

Heinrich said, “Peter, you’re wasting our time.”

“I *may* be saving your sisters, Heinrich, if you’ll just settle down and let me speak.”

“Go on,” Mueller said.

“I propose a trade expedition.”

“A *what?*” Heinrich cried.

“You’ll come, Heinrich,” Peter said, looking at Mueller and the rest of the council. He stepped back to the hanging scout. Zoë listened, but she faded out again, making her own wings and flying. “We—Heinrich and I—will take the Darkling scout as our captive. With any luck we might be able to trade her for the girls.”

“Peter, what makes you think such a ridiculous thing would work?” Heinrich said, shaking his head slowly.

“Heinrich.” Peter stepped to the blond and put his hand on the man’s shoulder, “You’re not thinking. This doesn’t have to be about revenge.”

“I don’t know what more you could *need.*”

Peter leaned in, whispering harshly. “You must get them back. You *must*. Mary’s sixteen; you know how it could go for her. That must be your first concern.”

Heinrich asked slowly, “And what is *your* concern?”

“My concern is yours. I’m telling you the truth. If you kill this woman simply because you’re angry, you’ll lose everything.”

“You’re asking an awful lot from me, friend.” Peter knew was true. He was asking Heinrich to make a deal with the very Darklings who had slain his parents. If in fact they even had the right Darklings.

Mueller rasped, “I beg of you both.” He touched his temple, almost crumpling in his chair. “Stop torturing me.” He looked around, touching his fingertips together, and mused, “I’ll consider the request.” The Freischoffe rose and pointed at the captive. “If we save this *thing*,” he intoned, “it is because the changeling has a point.” Then he kicked a small lever next to his foot and Zoë saw the three parts of the statue slam back together.

The eggshell voice said, “Let us have two hours recess.” Zoë faded out again.

When Freischoffe Mueller reached his chambers, there was an important man waiting for him, and that made all the difference.



## CHAPTER 11

Listen.

Rise up with wind-blown snow, flow under floorboards and around the icy Vehm house. Settle with specks in the office shutters of Freischoffe Franz Mueller of the Freiburg Vehm.

Listen.

“Frederick is dead.” The seldom-heard voice of Stuhlherr Jacob Schwartzkopf, the leader of the Order of the Holy Vehm, cut the air just as Mueller shuffled coldly into his office.

The squat, powerful Stuhlherr Schwartzkopf crammed into Mueller’s chair, behind Mueller’s desk, idly fondling Mueller’s exquisite miniature eastern equestrian sculpture. Mueller sighed, taking a less comfortable chair near the door. “Frederick who?”

“For the love of Christ. Frederick the Second, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily. It is the end of the Hohenstaufen line. This leaves us with an opportunity to solidify our power.”

Mueller scratched his beard. “I’d almost forgotten we had an emperor.”

“The Pope, our father, has not forgotten. As officers of the Church, we Vehm have not forgotten.”

“So. What does any of this have to do with me, Stuhlherr? What is your suit with the Freiburg Vehm?”

“My suit with you just got a lot more focused.” Schwartzkopf ran a finger down the statue’s tail, which was made of interlaced strands of ivory. He gestured at an ivory horn that attached to a channel of air that ran some twenty yards through the building to the courtroom. He had been listening. “This scout who entered had a proposition for you.”

“The scout is Peter, the Changeling. Yes. He wants to go trade the captured scout for some captives. The sisters of my initiate Heinrich Hauptmann, whose family was killed.”

“You’re going to grant them leave.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Mueller said idly. “We do not deal with elves.”

“I wasn’t asking your assessment, Freischoffe. I’m telling you. Grant them leave.”

“With the proper methods we can extract from the witness all we want to know.”

Schwartzkopf poked at the tabletop with a perfectly square forefinger. “We need to know *more!* This now and again war has got to stop before it explodes into something far greater and uglier. Right now, we’re the saviors and the experts on the elves, but we don’t know enough. Send your man Hauptmann with his changeling and his captive and his quest. Give him room. He’ll collect



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just the sort of information we need. Who knows? Perhaps having the half-elf with him will win him favor.”

Mueller sighed. “I already *have* experts I can send out to study—“

Schwartzkopf waived his hand. “All fools. Oh, mine, too! We can’t have another Hightree, Mueller. If we’re going to protect the people from the elves, we must understand them better. Give the boy all the room he needs. Encourage him. He has no family left here, correct? So his heart’s in it. The perfect opportunity for reconnaissance has fallen right into your lap. I just wanted to be sure—to be extremely sure—that you take it.”

Mueller continued to look at his statue. “I understand.”

“Good.” Schwartzkopf nodded, pleased. “Because it may be the most important thing the Vehm has ever done. We must know everything about these elves.”

“But the changeling, you’re sure I should trust him?”

“You’re the one who’s had him close all these years. All I care about is the information this expedition can deliver. I don’t care if you send the Hauptmann boy out with a talking horse. All you have to do is say, ‘Permission granted.’”



Two hours later, Freischoffe Mueller called all parties into court.

“Permission granted,” Mueller growled. “Heinrich, you and the changeling have a new assignment.”



## PART II

### CHAPTER 1

The Children of the Erl-King danced in whispering woods, near Mellrichstadt, where the slit-ears dragged children into the hungry River Streu. So the story went.

*Douglas, tell us a story*, the souls called, and Douglas, the Dweller by the Dark Stream, came alive in the River Streu. From below the Mellrichstadt Bridge, he traveled across the mist and dew to the nearby woods, where he stood and held out his arms. The wind traveled round, and the leaves brushed at his forming chest, black cloth flapping into place. Douglas listened to the call of the souls. He opened his crystal eyes and saw them all, long and liquid souls, shadows that flew hither and thither in the trees. Here and there, crows danced among the spinning leaves and the souls. Douglas held out his arms and watched his hands waver in the wind, losing and reclaiming shape.

*Tell us a story*, sang the souls.

“I’m tired, brothers.” Douglas leaned back his head. The River Streu, babbling dark and cold, called to him, and he knew the time had come, and the children knew it, too.

Or did they? Douglas had to ask, as he watched their forms dance in and out of the trees, the leaves scattering over the dark forms in the wind, falling in and through the mouths of the soulstuff bodies. They were playing; all they knew was that they had played forever with father Erlkonig, and now they played forever with Erlkonigsson, and it would always be thus. Douglas took a deep breath and felt cold air filter through the lungs he’d made in this perfect image of the human body. He felt the blood rush from blue to red inside him, as he directed, all of his body perfect and planned. And the singing of the souls in him was as pure as the air itself.

*You always are tired when it’s time for an adoption*, the souls said.

“How astute of you,” Douglas closed his eyes. As much as he liked to pretend that he was separate from them, they were him and he them. If not the souls, after all, what, where was he? “I don’t need to tell you a story,” said the Dweller by the Dark Stream. The hunger guided his mind. “I can find one.” The wind swirled, and he saw the shapes slicing through the air and trees, like liquid ghosts, falling to mist and drops and back as they passed. “And we will all take part.”



A boy from Mellrichstadt named Johann played on the banks of the Streu with his friend Bruno. If they heard the sound of the souls in the forest, they



made no mention of to one another. They battled Darklings in their minds, wielding wooden swords against a dark army entirely imagined.

The wind eavesdropped on their battle and made note of the accuracies and inaccuracies of their narrative but did not bother to share them. The shouted narrative, as the two boys scuffed knees and shed identities, shifted and changed to suit the needs of the play of an afternoon. The sun sank down beyond the wood, and as the light shifted, Johann changed the set-up.

“Now I am the Erl-King,” cried Johann, standing on a log and waving his stick. For a moment he lifted his hair on one side with his hand to indicate that he had pointed ears, because of course the Erlkonig would have had pointed ears.

“And I am the King of Germany!” Bruno shouted, taking a different log and adopting a similarly puffed stance.

“Not *Germany*,” Johann shook his head, breaking character. “Scotland. The final battle took place in *Scotland*.”

“Is this the final battle, then?”

“It is!” cried Johann. He sprang. “This time the Erl-King has no intention of dying!” The boy moved across the grass and slammed into his friend’s chest, sending the boy toppling over.

The two boys hopped to their feet once more and set upon one another with wooden blades. “Why would the Erl-King have gone to Scotland?” Bruno asked.

Johann frowned and bellowed in high dramatic fashion. “Question not my motives! I am become mystery!”

“Oh, clever,” Bruno rolled his eyes.

“Watch as I disappear!” Johann demanded. Bruno dutifully turned away, always one to play along, and along Johann ran down the banks of the Streu.

The Erl-King, it was said, had taken his army of Darklings to Scotland, and there had faced the King of Scotland and finally died. The Darklings, who were making mincemeat of towns all through Germany as they wandered, said the slayer of the Erl-King himself was the Gray One, but everyone knew *he* was just the Darkling devil, and not a person at all. The Gray One, what was he called? At any rate, he was made up.

Not like the Erl-King. Johann stamped on the snow ybanks and scanned for a proper hiding place. There wasn’t a chance Bruno would give him more than a count of fifty, so it was time to disappear. Johann was about to head into the wood when he heard the sound of waves lapping against boards and looked at the footbridge.

A whisper, now.

*(Eat honey, for it is good,*

*Drink milk and all that flows)*

Johann took no time in moving lightly over the snow and inserting himself under the footbridge, next to the icy waters of the Streu. He braced himself against the boards and watched the waters moving along, disappearing under a sheet of ice beneath the bridge. The mud cracked slightly as he dug in his heels





and curled up underneath, trying to hide himself from Bruno, once he chose to start looking. In the distance he heard Bruno shout, “I shall find you, *Erkonig!*”

*(Swim rivers, catch fishes,  
And swat at horse-flies,  
Catch rabbits that run thro’ the rows.)*



Johann heard the sound of Bruno’s heavy footfall and even the whisk of Bruno’s wooden sword along the snow. Underneath the footbridge, suddenly, he heard everything. Saw everything. Perfectly.

*Because there are times when you wish you could freeze time, aren’t there?  
And aren’t there, Johann, times when you know that your days are  
numbered at this sort of thing? You’re playing at elves and men, now, but surely  
that won’t go on too long, will it? This morning you suggested to Bruno that  
this is what you’d spend the day doing and what did he say? Didn’t he say,  
‘Aren’t we getting a bit old for that, chum?’*

*And it’s true, isn’t it? You are getting a bit old for this sort of thing. You  
know you can carry on for a time, but how long will that be? Until tomorrow?  
Until next week? Do you expect your childhood to survive the winter?*

*Look at me.  
Look at me.  
Look in the water.  
Everything dies in winter.*

*(But mind the dark corners,  
And mind the steep banks,  
And mind the bridge o’er the Streu:)*

*And you hear me, don’t you, little Johann, you know what I am saying is  
the truth. And why am I telling you this? Close your eyes and keep looking,  
close your eyes and see, look in the dark liquid behind your eyes and hear my  
voice, Johann. Hear our voices.*

*There is a world beyond this one, where you will play forever, and there will  
be no pain. You saw your sister die last year, that awful childbirth horror that  
everyone crossed themselves about, you can avoid that world of grown-ups. You  
stand on the cusp of that world and if you’re not careful you’ll walk right into  
it, Johann, glide right in like a deer on a frozen lake- that’s the way you’re  
headed. Now is the time to choose another direction.*

*You hear me, Johann, and I see you closing your eyes, and I am listening,  
listening to your mind and the sound of the blood flowing through your body  
and the sound of your breathing. And look and listen, Johann. See your  
brothers and sisters, here, see how we play, forever, see how we sing, forever,  
and dance, forever.*



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*(For if you look down  
In the water below,  
The slit-ears 'll reach up for you!)*

*Yes, I hear that in your mind, that old poem. You've heard of the boys and girls who were lost here. And here they are.*

*Here they are.*

*Years and years of them, and hear them laugh, hear the music, hear the home. Forever. Your brother is in the army, and he lost his leg already. Forever. Your father is getting old but you can play with us. Forever.*

*All you have to do, Johann- now that you're nodding, and you can hear me more clearly, now that the slightest sound echoes in your brain, the deep liquid of the river, the tufts of falling snow, the wind in your hair and under the dank boards— all you have to do, Johann, little Johann, little new brother, is say yes.*

*Forever.*

*Forever.*

*And your lips are moving, Johann, and I hear them: forever.*

*Yes...*

Bruno was running in the wrong direction when he heard the sound of legs splashing into water. Bruno turned in time to see Johann standing like a statue under the bridge, looking at him, looking through him, pale as a ghost, the wooden sword falling from his hand.

He never could describe it, describe the way the body fell forward and was caught, the way the slit-ears rose from the water like shadows of substance, like liquid dancing, reaching up and embracing Johann as the boy buckled, pale and still, and fell back into the embrace of the River Streu.

And Bruno grew up and played no more, and Johann played forever.

And the dark stream had another soul.

And Douglas, having done what he must, had another brother.



## CHAPTER 2

On leaving Freiburg, Heinrich had said, “Fine. We’ll take her to them. I was going to search anyway. But what I do when we find the bastards is something else, and it doesn’t involve trading.” Peter had to be satisfied with that; it had been less than two days after the Heinrich had held his dying parents. With any luck, Heinrich would change his mind when they proposed the trade to Zoë’s band. As long as Heinrich didn’t rashly kill the captive along the way. Peter felt that was a distinct possibility, and he determined to keep it from happening, since Zoë was their only asset.

That was the only reason he cared, he told himself.



The trio met their first of many defeats when they found that Farrago’s Blue Band roost was empty.

“Christ!” Heinrich roared. Heinrich kicked the last glowing embers of a campfire; they flew up and scattered across the Lek.

“Easy,” Peter said. “You’re supposed to be a holy warrior, remember?”

“We wasted time and missed them,” the blond responded in frustration. A cloud of ash, borne aloft by Heinrich’s boot, settled gradually back down in the snow, speckles of black on white, like a reversed sky.

“Well, Zoë?” Peter turned to the Darkling woman, who stood in the center of the clearing. Peter kept himself between her and Heinrich, afraid that, at any moment, Heinrich might rend the Darkling scout limb from limb.

“They’re not here,” the Darkling said, shaking her head in astonishment. She ran across the cleared area, her wings rising and falling on her shoulders as she did so. “They’re gone!”

“Oh, thanks,” Heinrich grumbled, scratching his beard. He swiveled in his place, then looked down and ran a boot along the snow. “This area has been swept. What am I looking at here?”

Peter said, “It’s a Lek.”

“A what?”

“A Lek. It’s a sort of courtyard. Darkling roosts, temporary or otherwise, are arranged around a clearing called a Lek. The Stell, the leader, will have his place here, and all manner of social activity will take place here.”

Zoë was crouching next to what had been Farrago’s tree. “I can’t believe they left me.”

“Right,” Heinrich said. He glared at the captive. “You know what I think? I think this is all some sort of ruse. They’re making off with my sisters while you keep us busy looking at an empty nest.”

“You human...” Peter watched her stop herself. She was excitable, but not stupid. Zoë clutched her hands in fury. “I have no idea where they are!” She



looked from Peter to Heinrich, turning around and lowering herself to the ground. “I can’t believe they left me.”

“Why do you suppose they’d do that?” Peter crouched next to the Darkling. “Perhaps because they had captives and knew they needed to hurry?”

Zoë shook her head again. “If there were any such plan, I would have heard about it. They must have had some other reason to move on. Maybe when I didn’t come back they decided they were in danger.” She stood up, her head swiveling. “Cawpuk.”

Peter looked around. “What is it?”

“Caught a glimpse of something in the trees,” she said. “There!” Zoë pointed up at the top of the fir under which she stood.

“What?”

“Crackle,” she said. Peter looked past her pointed hand and saw a sparkle in the snow at the top of the tree. Something hung there, a sack tied loosely to the top of the tree. The shimmer the sack gave off was due to the crackle inside shining through the cloth, but Zoë had been the only one keen enough to distinguish it from the sparkle of the snow in daytime. “They left me crackle.” She whispered, “Thank you, Stell Farrago. Thank you, dead Erkonig.”

“A note of some kind? A message?”

“With any luck, that too,” Zoë said, “but I need that crackle.”

“What the Hell is crackle,” Heinrich asked, coming up from behind.

“The food of our wings,” Zoë said.

“Food?”

Peter nodded. “The elves use it to... I don’t know, to make their wings work.”

“Well, that’s valuable information,” Heinrich said, looking up. “But why would they leave it up there?”

Zoë looked up at the top of the fir tree. The sack was tied to the tip loosely, but shaking the tree would not dislodge it. “Because he doesn’t know I have a broken wing.”

“Of course,” Heinrich said. “You lot live in trees, after all.”

“That’s a common misconception,” Peter said. Heinrich glared. Peter’s mind was still back on what he had said. *They use it to make their wings work.* There was something wrong with that statement, but he did not know what.

Zoë turned to Peter, and he realized how comparatively small she was and how bluish her skin appeared. Suddenly she resembled the dying creature Peter had seen in the forest with the sheep. “You’ve got to get it for me. I’ll never fly again without it. If you get it for me, I’ll be a greater help to you. I’m not a skilled climber, but you look like you could.”

“Climb?” Peter said, as he drew his bow and arrow. “Oh, of course,” he remembered, as Zoë squirmed at the sight of the weapon. “You don’t use arrows. Nothing but blades for the Darklings.” He raised the bow, notched an arrow, zeroed in on the shiny yellow cord that tied the sack to the top of the fir.

The arrow sliced through the cord; the sack fell to the ground at Zoë’s feet.



The Darkling knelt next to the sack, looking once at Peter before hurriedly unwrapping it. Within the sack were two items: a feather and a smaller package wrapped in a large leaf.

“What is that?”

“This,” Zoë held up the feather, “is a message.”

“A message?”

“It’s a feather from the elbow of Farrago’s left wing. That indicates they went southwest. For Wintercamp.”

“Wintercamp?” Peter stared at the feather. “You get that from a feather?”

Heinrich spoke. “The Church threw the Beguines out of Magdeburg. They’re practically hiding in the Alps. The Vehm would very much like to close that place down.”

“Not this winter,” Zoë said. “I hope.”

Peter nodded. He pointed to the leaf-package. “What’s the other?” Zoë had already cut the leafy cord around it with her dagger, opening the leaves up. She gasped with relief at the mound of sparkling, dried foliage, like crushed mushrooms. She picked some of the stuff up in her hands and let it fall through her fingers. “My wings are dry and brittle, my mouth is stale and bitter, my mind dark and lonely,” she whispered. “All for the want of crackle.”



They made camp in the Lek. Heinrich huffed frequently. Peter reminded himself with every huff that Heinrich had plenty of reason to be upset. It fell to Peter to keep a short leash on Zoë. Heinrich was certain she would fly off and join her Band, leaving the searchers with nothing with which to bargain. No sooner had Peter made his pallet than Zoë said yet again that she really must crackle.

“So crackle.” Peter looked the Darkling up and down as she nervously touched her feathers and caressed the small parcel. “Set on fire. Whatever, just don’t go anywhere.”

Zoë looked for a moment towards Heinrich, who went on making great, silent drama of his efforts at getting a fire going. He eyed her sullenly for a moment before returning his attention to the growing wisps of smoke. Zoë whispered to Peter, “I need your help.”

“My help?”

Zoë shifted her thin frame from one foot to the other, holding up the parcel and biting her lip. “I can’t do this alone.”

Heinrich spoke up, never once raising his eyes. “I suppose if it’s this or a dead captive, then go.”

Peter sighed and then felt a tug on his shoulder. Zoë turned and moved quickly out of the Lek, so that he had to jog behind her. They moved through the trees a few yards until Zoë stopped, looking back to ensure they were out of sight. The moon waned behind the fir trees, slicing through the clouds in the



sky into the gray and white patterns of the forest.

“What’s this all about?” Peter whispered. Zoë’s hand went down to her waist and Peter moved in, snatching a dagger from her belt. Until she had used it just now he hadn’t realized she still had a dagger. Had she kept it in her feathers? Feeling stupid, he slipped the weapon into the quiver on his back. Zoë smirked.

“Erl-King crackling,” she exclaimed in exasperation and turned her back to him, “I didn’t drag you out here to slit your throat, changeling.”

“One can never be too sure.”

“Kuk-wo,” she murmured, and Peter took the vocalization to be something on the order of “for heaven’s sake,” although he had also heard her use it to mean, “all right.” Zoë’s hands returned to her belt, removing it in a quick motion and letting it fall to the snow.

Peter found himself studying the make of a Darkling tunic. It was actually all one piece, he realized- a thick, form-fitting shirt with long sleeves, slit in the back to allow the protrusion of Zoë’s wings from the patch of skin just below her shoulder blades. The iridescent cloth gathered snugly below the sprout of feathers where they started high on her back. As Zoë’s hand fumbled at her back, the contrast of bone-white on black was almost blinding.

“Can you help me?”

“Hm?”

“Laces,” the fingers struggled at a knot where her belt crossed the small of her back.

Peter bent forward and lifted a few feathers, studying the laces. “What are these made of?”

“Lamb gut,” Zoë said. “And they’re tight; can you get at this knot?”

“Oh. Of course.” Peter shrugged and deftly untied the double knot. He let his hands drop. “There.”

“Danke,” Zoë said, and she flexed her back and wings a bit. Peter watched the seam expand and the laces come loose, pushed by what seemed to be hundreds of tiny, sharply defined bone-white muscles in her back. Zoë wriggled her arms free of the tight sleeves and Peter stared as the garment dropped and fell forward, resting on her hips.

Below her wings, tiny, coarse hairs ran down Zoë’s spine, hairs that almost wanted to be feathers. Her back appeared to erupt with wings about half-way up, as if her body were yearning to change into that of a bird.

The chinks at the nape of Zoë’s neck swayed as she looked back over her shoulder, turning her head at least one-hundred and twenty degrees. “You look ill. Are you well?”

“Just... studying.”

Zoë shrugged, rubbing her highly muscled shoulders with her chin. “Here, study this.” She tossed the crackle packet over her shoulder and Peter caught it, opening it up. Zoë leaned forward, resting her hands on her knees. “Have you



never done this before?”

Peter looked from the packet to Zoë, biting his lip, trying not to stare. The tunic was threatening to fall down her thin, exposed hips, and Zoë adjusted the garment a little higher, so that the bottom of the split in the cloth rested firmly against the small of her back. “What am I doing?”

She looked back at him again. “I thought you were a changeling.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Have you never been among the Children?”

“I was raised by humans. I only started scouting last year.”

“You don’t know the crackle,” she said slowly. There was a hint of sorrow in her voice.

“This stuff in my hand, this plant is crackle. Right?”

Zoë’s wings brushed near Peter’s face as she straightened and turned to face him. “You may not have wings, changeling, but if you’re going to deal with us you’re going to have to learn more about us. The crackle is this, yes,” she said, as she cupped his hands in hers. “But this is only the first part of it. The crackle is the way we commune with the Erl-King, dead as he is, and it is the way we remember what we are.”

“What do I do?”

“Kok-uk,” the strange captive said. “Watch.” Zoë tilted Peter’s hand and let some of the sparkling, ground leaves rolled out and into the palm of her own. She reached behind her own neck with her other hand, and there was a slight crunching sound as she broke off a small handful of her own chalks. She sprinkled the crumbling chalks into the mound of crackle, then looked down and spat a raindrop-sized amount of saliva into the mix. She began to knead the mixture with her fingers. Peter watched, rapt, as the mixture glowed slightly, leaving sparkling streaks across her palm and squishing up between her fingers.

“My wings are dry, dark and silent,” Zoë whispered. “They have no crackle.” She stepped around Peter and lightly pushed his head forward, and then he felt the mixture on her fingers meet the base of his neck and burn.

Peter gasped audibly, and Zoë clamped her hand on his mouth. “Cowp-ek,” he heard her say. “Hush, it won’t hurt you.” Peter moved his neck as her fingers kneaded his skin, the air around it popping and hissing. He stared ahead into the snowy wood and felt his skin burn and throb. He felt a rush of something like high mountain air, just for a moment. As she massaged his neck, knuckles melting into his skin, Zoë said, “close your eyes.” He did.

Brilliant stars scattered by the Phoenix flew past, and Peter breathed, and his skin breathed with him, stars shooting out of his pores and pushing him forward into the void. Somewhere in the distance, he heard a gentle voice say:

*In the beginning there was the void,*

*And the Darklings were alone*

Infinite nothing stretched out before Peter. He fell past the stars and



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tumbled head over heel through the darkest reaches of the heavens. Zoë's voice was far away, somewhere wound up with the heat coming off her knuckles and hissing out of his pores, crackling like the Erl-King.

*And the Erلكonig was alone*

*And the Erl-king heard the Darklings call*

Peter looked and saw light and darkness spotting across the void like milk and oil, and feathers were forming as the dark spots drew together, feathers and milk-drops in the void, feathers and stars, and the hissing crackle. And in the distance, tiny and clear, were a pair of brilliant, sparkling eyes.

*Down from the Heavens the High Wings fell:*

*High feathers like stars to the ground.*

*And from each feather the Crackle grew*

*Called by Erلكonig's hand.*

The feathers flew across infinite distance, drawing together near the eyes, and now a chorus of thousands joined Zoë's voice, and the voices drowned out the hissing, and the feathers crackled and whipped and gave off showers of sparks.

*With Crackle the Darklings sparkled and flew*

*Through Crackle, the Food of the Father*

*Let every feather and every pore run and spark:*

*This do in remembrance of Him.*

Zoë let go of his shoulders. Peter gasped and opened his eyes. For a moment he was blind except for the brilliant spots of white the slowly melted into the snow and trees around him. He shook, and she steadied his body until he held up a hand, nodding to indicate he could stand. Peter turned around and saw that Zoë was handing him the crackle.

"I can't do it alone." She took his hand and brought it up to his mouth, and he spat into it and added a few flakes from the chalks on the back of her neck. Once this was done, Zoë turned her naked back to him, presenting her wings.

"Where?"

"Every pore of my back," said Zoë, bending forward, "and every feather."

Peter nodded, still swaying from the vision, and began to rub the mixture into her skin, feeling it tingle and hiss.

He knew he would be haunted by her.

The Darkling watching from the trees knew it, too.





## CHAPTER 3

On the night that Peter and Heinrich were summoned to find the lost sheep, Mary Hauptmann awoke to the sound of screaming. The elves had come.

There were so many sounds, sounds enough that she seemed to awaken in a soup of sound. Sound that ran so thick that she could not separate sound from substance; voices and tearing wood were the same as the torchlight, loud and grating, roaring in her room and in the house.

Christa was already sitting bolt upright in their bed and looked at her and mouthed the word, “Elves!”

Elves! Singing, loudly chanting in the elf language, the sounds of which she had imagined a thousand times before and which Peter had sung for her from time to time, even though she knew he was making most of that up. Elves! She ran to the window and saw them, circling the house, black tunics and wings showering sparks.

Or had she run to the window at all? Or had she imagined that, had she sat up in bed and stared out, seen nothing out there but the sparks from the wings, heard nothing but the wind devouring all sound, the chants and the screams...

Father was screaming and Hans was screaming and the roof was torn through, must have been, because she had heard wood ripping asunder, and the sound of the ripping wood mixed with the chanting of the Darklings and the shower of sparks in the air.

And *that* was when she ran to the window, she remembered it more clearly now: she and Christa had run and seen not a whole army of Darklings but just one, far away, a black silhouette against the gray winter sky. His back was turned, and Mary swore she heard metal scraping in those giant wings as the Darkling dove and turned around and came soaring towards them. The sounds of screaming and tearing wood still went on, but she could see none of the commotion now: only this one creature, framed in the window, this huge-chested, white-faced creature with wings as wide as a barn, coming fast towards her room.

Mary felt Christa freeze, and she froze, too. The elf soared closer. She blinked, and he landed on the sill, his tunic wrinkling as he bent his body to fit there. His feet were like marble, like the feet of Jesus, and his hair was long and shimmering gray.

“You’re in trouble,” he said, and his voice was smooth and strong. The Darkling spoke German. He smiled, or maybe his voice smiled. “You two must come with me.”

Mary found herself strangely calm, but asked, “But my parents. What’s going on?”



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The Darkling reached out and touched each of the girls with a hand, and Mary felt the sizzle of his skin, the flush of air running from his pores. “Your house is under attack by an evil Band. You must come with me. There is no time. You must trust me.”

Christa, a little statue, moved her mouth, and her eyes sparkled like the elf’s. “Melinda,” she said, remembering the story of the girl rescued by elves.

“We must tell our parents,” Mary said. “We must.” In the back of the syrupy fog of sound intruded breaking wood and clashing metal, and screams, and he touched her again and that melted back.

“You must listen to me. Here. Let me put my arms around you.” He took them in his arms and leapt from the windowsill. They clung to his tunic, his gigantic, hot black feathered wings flapping slowly.

“Close your eyes,” said the elf. “Close them tightly and listen to the crackle.”

“When will we meet our parents?”

“When it is safe,” he said.

The wings beat over them, and the last vestiges of horrible not-even-there sounds went away. The elf’s wings hissed and bleated sparks with every wingbeat, and every wingbeat was as long and slow as father’s breath.

“Who are you?” Mary asked, feeling her head swim. The shower of sparks swirled in the night, and she looked down at the darkness and the snow, and the colors and lights began to blur with the hissing of the crackling wings.

“I am Rimmion,” said the Darkling. “Stell of the Redgreen Band. You will be safe with me.”



## CHAPTER 4

MacDuff was meditating in his cell when Mechthild poked her head in. “Brother MacDuff?”

MacDuff opened his eyes and looked up to see the sturdy German woman standing in the doorway. She had very wide, blue eyes, which seemed all the wider because she always held them open at the extreme as if she were intensely studying whoever happened to speak to her, a habit which unnerved almost everyone else. “Eh?”

The mystic nun leaned in the doorway, running a hand through her white-streaked blond hair. MacDuff admired her writing; she had described divinity in terms that were at once spiritual and achingly physical, and the Church feared her for reasons it never seemed able to fully articulate. She had been run out of at least three convents for her own divine visions, and had been threatened with excommunication. “Thought you’d like to get a drink.”

MacDuff closed his eyes again, clasping his hands and resting his forearms once more on his knees, breathing steadily. “Tomorrow.”

“I thought perhaps you’d like a drink tonight,” she said. Her tone was raised, calm but insistent. Something was going on and she wanted him to see it.

MacDuff frowned and rose. “Aye,” he said. As he moved past the doorway, he snatched up his staff.

The monastery was situated to the east end of Wintercamp, in a clump of houses that had once belonged to a pair of Robber Barons who had made a fortune taking tolls from Alpine travelers. Feeling the heat of the Imperial Army, who disliked unofficial taxation, the Barons had sold the houses to the Beguines and relocated to Spain. Housed in the monastery were eighteen Beguine sisters, of which Mechthild was prioress, and eight Beghard monks, of which MacDuff was one.

Wintercamp itself, a sprawling, walled camp designed with dark elves in mind, was at least five times the size of the monastery. There was a Lek and a mess tent and room enough for as many Bands as decided to come in for the winter.

And there was a tavern called the Nester.

MacDuff and Mechthild walked briskly downhill towards the Nester. The woman spoke hurriedly as she tried to keep up with MacDuff’s long strides. “Good Lord, MacDuff. Have mercy on an old woman.”

The monk looked back from under his hood. “Forty-three is not old,” he said flatly.

“What country are you from?” she panted.

His eyes remained on the path. “Tell me what the problem is.”

“That Orange Band you picked up today isn’t very popular.” They rounded the last house of the monastery, and the path melted into the trees that



surrounded the campus.

“I expected as much,” MacDuff nodded. “A couple of years ago Naran’s Oranges were a powerful Band. They started a few small territorial wars.”

“Well,” Mechthild said, “there’s but a handful of them now, and I think a few of our charges plan revenge.”

“Which?” They moved into Wintercamp Square—or the Lek, as the Darklings called it—past the giant posts and perches, and out on another path, until they heard the first sounds of voices in the Nester.

“White/yellow,” Mechthild said.

“I’d expect as much,” MacDuff sighed as another clearing in the trees opened up and they caught sight of the Nester, a round, wooden house with a high roof. Through the windows, he could see black feathers and white arms raising glasses. “The White/Yellow Stell was killed in one of the Orange attacks.”

“This is your territory,” the mystic replied as the pair approached the overly wide door. “I just try to teach them to love God and all his creatures.”

“You teach,” MacDuff smiled, putting one hand on the door and the other on his staff. He heard loud voices, nothing he could understand. “I educate.”

The door swung wide and MacDuff stepped in.

The voices in the torchlit tavern fell silent, replaced by the sound of rapid foot movement as MacDuff looked towards the bar. Aside from the Darklings scattered among thirty or so tables, a large congregation of yellow and white sashes and black wings obscured the bar itself. MacDuff dropped his hood back and nodded. The conversation in the room resumed at a decidedly lower level. Mechthild stood by the door as MacDuff moved into the crowd.

A Darkling with a green sash looked up and back down into his drink, his wings folding inward as if he were trying to disappear. The yellow/whites were more anxious, fidgeting about and staring at the monk. MacDuff made a show of trying to look over the wings of a pair who had their back to him, blocking the bar. He cleared his throat, and the pair deigned to look back sullenly as he reached a hand between their wings.

“Hello, Med. Gar,” he nodded, moving through. Med and Gar each murmured, “Cuk-wo.”

Finally MacDuff reached the bar and looked to Cam, the bartender. Cam wore a green sash and looked nervously at MacDuff, smiling a little too wide and baring his sharp teeth.

“If it isn’t the Nornagesta,” Cam smiled.

“Right, right,” MacDuff smiled back, acknowledging his resemblance to the Darkling approximation of the devil. He drummed his hands on the bar. “How’s business tonight?” The room had gone silent, and MacDuff tried to ignore the density of teeth and wings around him. At least they weren’t armed—weren’t *supposed* to be, anyway. And in truth, the vast majority



enforced that rule for him and for one another.

Cam shrugged his wings. “Quiet. Fancy a drink?”

“Ale,” said MacDuff. As Cam poured the drink into a cup, MacDuff looked around at the crowd. He could hear feathers rustling, the way humans gritted their teeth when they were nervous. “So. I don’t see...what was his name?”

“Who?”

“Oh, yes. Naran. I don’t see *Naran* here. He came in today, didn’t he? Zolo and I brought him in.” MacDuff looked about and caught many sets of eyes, all of which were swiveling and locking on him in that unnerving way of the dark elves. “I expected he’d want to get acquainted with our little community. In fact, I don’t see *any* orange sashes here.”

“Cuk-wo,” someone said, and MacDuff nodded again, squinting.

“Cuk-wo,” MacDuff repeated softly. “Amen. So thank God we’re all among friends, I guess. No intermingling here.” He scanned the room. There was still an unusually dense cluster near the end of the bar, and he noticed that a number of elves had their wings spread artificially wide. He nodded and picked up his drink with his left hand, holding his staff in the right. Moving to his left, MacDuff encountered the dense crowd, more backs turned to him, and he said. “I’d like to sit by the east window.”

Cam said helpfully, “Perhaps you’d prefer to drink that here.”

“I like the east window. That way, if I’m here all night, I can watch the sun come up.”

Now a pair of yellow/white-sashed Darklings turned and visibly snarled at him, and MacDuff serenely nodded back. “If you don’t mind.”

There was a muffled sound, something hard thumping against the floor, and MacDuff heard a voice gasp, “Pruk!”

MacDuff moved and the pair of Darklings stepped closer together, and he barked, “Kok-uk! Out of my way.” When they stayed still he said, “You don’t really want this,” meeting their eyes, one at a time. The pair sighed and stepped back, but MacDuff still had to bodily brush them aside, parting their wings like curtains. He saw what they were hiding.

There was a Darkling on the ground with an Orange sash wrapped around his head, gagging him. Another Darkling straddled him, his head turned, a black dagger to his captive’s throat, knees clamped viciously into the lower elf’s ribs. It took a moment to recognize the captive Darkling as Naran, the Stell of the fallen Band, because his eyes were swollen from a beating. “What is this?” MacDuff demanded.

Naran tried to look at him and gasped something. MacDuff flew forward and grabbed the dominant Darkling by the top of his wings. Wings fluttered throughout the bar as MacDuff threw the Darkling back against the wall, pressing his staff across the Darkling’s chest and grabbing the dagger.

It was Zolo, MacDuff’s own aide. “Zolo. What in Hell are you doing?”



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Zolo snarled, “What should have been done long ago. We don’t want the Oranges here.”

“Why? Why, because the Orange Band killed Stell Wick at Hightree?” He took a moment too study Zolo’s eyes before saying, “What, you’re surprised that I keep track of these things?” Zolo released his grip on the dagger and MacDuff slipped it into his belt. “You’re not supposed to have weapons in here!” he cried, turning around to look at the rest. The monk bent down to help Naran to his feet. The Orange Stell groped about and adjusted his tunic, obviously blind and nervous, but trying not to appear frightened. “Zolo, I’m shocked. You, of all the Children here.”

“I lost a *brother* at *Hightree*.”

“Wasn’t... wasn’t me,” Naran managed to say, holding forward his jaw, in a gesture of deference. “It was a different Stell.”

“Doesn’t matter!” cried a Darkling from behind MacDuff, who plunged past the monk with another dagger, slashing at Naran.

MacDuff moved so fast that no one saw exactly what he did, his staff slamming into the lower back of the attacker. The Darkling turned around to face him, slashing again, and MacDuff moved his staff in two long sweeps, the first knocking the dagger out of the attacker’s wrist, the second swipe flying up and over and around to smack the Darkling on the back of the head. The Darkling fell forward to his knees, stunned, and MacDuff prodded him in the chest, raising him up and pinning him to the wall next to Zolo, and bringing Zolo back under his hold.

“Now you listen to me,” MacDuff hissed, pressing slightly with every other syllable. “I’m not going to have some of the best citizens of this community bringing everything we’ve worked for to *ruin*.” He pressed the staff as the two Darklings stared at him, baring their teeth. There was a tinge of shame in their defiant eyes.

MacDuff whispered, “We don’t *house* and *feed* and give *medicine* to the Children of the Erl-King so that you can *kill* one another. Look at your ‘enemy’ over there. *Look* at him” After a moment the two cast a glance at Naran, who had backed against the bar. “All but a few of the Orange Band are *dead*. I don’t *care* what happened at Hightree. I don’t care about anything that happened outside my walls. Do you hear me?” MacDuff sighed, looking at Zolo, who was standing with his arms crossed, staring at the floor. “I’ll talk to *you* in the morning.” MacDuff turned around to face the tavern, the whole crowd backing away from his imposing gray frame.

“Whatever happened outside these walls is *over!* If the Darklings are to survive, you must do it *together!* If you choose to come behind these walls, you will remember that. If this happens again, if you refuse to realize what my rules mean, you will be cast out.”

MacDuff looked around and began to walk toward the door, the Darklings parting like the Red Sea. He reached Mechthild, opened the door, and turned

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back to say, “Grow up, Children. There were no Bands under the Erl-King. There should be none now.”

And with that, MacDuff and Mechthild left.





## CHAPTER 5

In Davert Forest, the Erlkonigsson worked. He had felt the new soul melting in. The distant pangs of guilt seeping through Douglas' soulstuff body ebbed away as he turned to his task. *All of you will I put to use. My father's sins are mine. But my father's power is, as well.*

Douglas looked down on the pool in which Glori the Darkling lay. The pregnant female was silent, asleep, the tendril of soulstuff snaking into one nostril, whispering to her:

*Yours will be the children that make their own wings,  
Yours and the others among you, sleep now, dreamer, sleep...*

Down, down into the dark blood Douglas went, traveling through the body, feeling at the edges, the stomach, the entrails, and down, where tiny beings grew and divided and grew more.

Father was a genius, wasn't he? Father knew it all, knew how Douglas' magic worked, which was even greater. Douglas was only the son, but he could use that special power that came from mixing Erl-King and human, could feel the life in every tiny speck of this woman.

He could hear the sounds of life in her. Hear it sing like the souls he ached for among the humans, the souls he cherished and kept and lived by. Douglas dove in, becoming one with the stuff of life and swimming through it at once.

Douglas found the tiny *new* life that waited, the Darkling-not-yet a Darkling, the tiny globs of being that already reached out to one another and formed in the fertilized egg. Diving in, smaller, reaching in, this is that which sings, *I will make silver hair*, this is that which sings, *I will make the bones light*, this is that which sings, *I will make wings*.

And that which sang, *I will make wings*, sang in a different way: he could hear the sound amid the faraway rushing of blood, a sound different from that of the heart and lungs, singing in a voice he heard only one other place on earth...

He sighed, deep in the sleeping elf's being, cringed, felt the tendrils moving, and the parts sang, *I am that which makes the heart...*

Douglas pulled up, out, and re-formed once more above the Darkling. He passed a dark hand over her mouth, feeling her breath. She was alive. Her child was growing.

He turned away, and that which *made the wings* sang no more.





## CHAPTER 6

The cruel cold of the Black Forest at dawn came slicing the searchers awake, stinging ears and noses.

Zoë was just finishing packing her gear when Peter threw a bundle in the center of the camp next to the fire. The bundle was long as a leg and landed with a series of wooden thwacks. Heinrich slung his pack over his shoulder and approached it, moving sluggishly with the morning cold.

Zoë looked at it. “What are those?”

Peter looked at her as he untied the strings at either end of the bundle. He lifted out a pair of long, slender pieces of wood with straps at the center, then two more pairs just like it. “Skis,” he said with a slight laugh.

“What are those?” she repeated blankly.

The changeling and the human looked at one another, and then Peter threw a pair to Heinrich and began to strap his own around his boots. “If we are to eat, we must hunt. Here. Put these on your boots.”

Zoë watched the two men and crouched next to the pair of slats that Peter removed and tossed at her feet. She had seen these before, once or twice. Men moved on them.

Heinrich slid over to her, and he now held a pair of poles he had whisked up from the bundle. “What are you waiting for?”

Zoë looked over at the horses, who were watching her idly, as if they, too, expected her put them on. “Why don’t we take the horses?”

Heinrich answered, “They scare the deer too much, and it’s hard to get close. This is a more silent way.”

“I’ll stay with the horses,” Zoë said, looking around. Maybe she could figure out where they were, make her way towards Farrago.

“Zoë.” Peter leaned on his poles. “We can’t leave you here while we hunt. That’s part of the agreement. You have hunted before?”

“Not with something on my feet.” *I fly, you imbecile.*

“Your wing is broken,” Peter gestured at her wing, as if reading her mind. His hair was blowing in the wind, and it made him look more like a Darkling. “You’re going to have to come with us and hunt like a human.”

“Like a worm,” Zoë muttered, without even thinking.

“Eh?” Heinrich spat. “What was that?”

A pair of poles clattered to the snow next to Zoe’s skis. “It’s this or go hungry.” Peter pointed at the poles, then slid up next to her, gliding in a way that was too fast for Zoë to make sense out of. “Here. Crouch down.” He beckoned, and she crouched low. Peter reached out to touch her ankle; she jerked it away. He waved his hand. “Please.” He looked up, his eyes searching. “Please. Let me help.”



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Finally she rolled her eyes. This was close enough to a yes. Zoë balanced herself as Peter lifted her right foot and placed it atop the slat, and he narrated his own movements as he went along. “The front strap goes across.... and around... the back in the reverse way... and you buckle it.... like so.” Then he stopped, looking up again, his eyes roving around, shining. “What’s wrong?”

Zoë was trembling, shaking her head. “This is a man thing, this is a Manlover thing, to use a machine, to wear any but the necessity, to carry any but the sword.” Very fast, almost chanting. So long, since the childhood catechism, and there it was, all over again.

“We’re losing time,” Heinrich grumbled, and Peter cast a sideways glance at him and back up at Zoë, still kneeling at her feet.

The changeling seemed to be playing what she had just chanted in his head, looking down at the ski. After a moment he touched his lips and said, “No. Why is it that you can use a sword?”

“Swords are not a man thing.” Zoë frowned. “We’ve always used swords.”

“Yes, but why is a sword like clothing, and not like a machine?”

“We’ve always used swords,” Zoë said again, tired already of crouching. “Please, don’t make me do this. I’m not hungry.”

“But I am,” Peter jabbed a bony thumb at his own chest, “and Heinrich is, and you are our...guest.”

“Prisoner,” Zoë said, at the same time that Heinrich did, only his was under his breath.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Peter said. “It’s like a sword. You elves must be allowed to use swords because a sword isn’t like a machine so much as it’s an extension of your *arm*. Correct? Your arm isn’t sharp, though, so the sword is a little different, but it’s still all right.” He thought that would sound right. He continued, gaining confidence, his voice firm and steady, like a Stell’s. “The ski is unlike a foot but *close*, as the sword is to your arm, the dagger to your hand. There is no sin against the Erlkonig in wearing skis.”

“How would you know?” she demanded.

Peter blinked. “Because Erlkonig has to make sense. And this makes sense.” The changeling reached for her other ankle and gestured at Heinrich. “You go on. I’ll need to train her, but I’ll have her keeping up in no time.”

Heinrich seemed about to grumble something else, but he turned and slid off, in brisk, fluid movements, and moved into the trees. When he was gone Peter said, “You have to do this. Your wing is broken and this is the way.”

Zoë was chanting the catechism in her head and thinking of Manlover and of the Erl-king taking the high wings away. There was a grumble in her stomach, and Peter’s words about the dagger and the sword played again. “All right.” She bent down, swatting his hand away. “I’ll do it. I’m not a bloody Nekro.”

“What’s a Nekro?”

“Never mind.” She looked down the hill, where Heinrich was sliding off into the woods. Zoë sighed and looked at the changeling. “You know, I saw the



way they treat you.”

“They?”

“These humans,” Zoë said as she tied the straps. “You’re as much a prisoner as I am; they just don’t keep you in chains. You’re a slave. Now you’re *his* slave.”

“No.” The changeling smiled, shaking his head. “And if you’re asking me to run off with you, I’m cleverer than that. You’d cut my throat in a second. I’m no Darkling.” He continued, more seriously. “Listen. Heinrich is having a rough time. But you’ll come out of this all right. We’ll get you home by the time we find our captives. Of all the humans in the world, Heinrich is the only one I trust.”

“Why?”

“He’s my friend,” Peter answered. “My only friend.”



Moving on the wooden slats was a nauseating experience at first. Zoë felt tied to the earth. The skis slid through the snow and grabbed at it, and she wanted to fly but even now the ache in her wings kept them held in close, dry and brittle-feeling.

“Lean forward,” Peter said for what must have been the fortieth time, sliding along beside her. “Knees bent. Flow with it” He moved his head, looking at his own legs, and she watched as he moved, his legs stretching out and sliding one after the other, his arms moving in mirror time with his legs, the poles gliding along. “Watch me.”

Peter neared a tree, still moving slowly, and dipped his right leg, stretching his left out a little, his body following to the right. He slid around and stopped, his bow bobbing at his shoulder. He even used sacrilegious weaponry, like all men. “Bend the leg on the inside of the turn; it will bring your body forward.”

Zoë found the ground beginning to slope as she moved onto the slight grade, headed for the slender reed of a tree.

“*Bend it bend it bend it!*”

Zoë tried to step to the side, lifting her ski off the powder. Suddenly she flew forward, brushing savagely against the tree. Then she was spinning, or she thought so, pitching forward, her legs flying in separate directions. The next thing she knew she was on her face in the snow.

Peter grabbed her hand when she knew where she was again and lifted her up. She stood there with her poles in her hand, her chest heaving, her breath a white cloud of defiance. “I can’t do this damn sinful man thing,” she growled.

The changeling brushed some snow from her face. “Hm. Maybe...” He scratched his gray head. “Maybe you should think of it as flying.”

“Flying,” she repeated sullenly. All of this for breakfast.

“Mm-hm.” He smiled, grotesquely cheerful. “Come on. Down the grade.”

They began to slide together, maddeningly slow, side by side, as Peter talked, moving his poles as she tried to copy him. Zoë watched his slender back, the wide muscles at the top flexing as he bent forward,



one side and then the other. "I have no wings," Peter said, "but I understand the concept. Your wings are a part of you. So are the skis and the poles. You use the skis as you would your wings, as if they are supposed to be there and there is no other way to move your legs but as you do with skis. Now we come... towards a tree. Bank," he whispered, moving ahead of her. "Bank, and turn, and glide." He slid past the tree and looked back. "Fly."

Zoë slid forward, imagining her wings, feeling her legs as wings, her arms as wings, her body a new body, a different body. She saw the tree and bent at the knee, moving to the side, banking. She eased out of the bank and slid on, up next to Peter, stopping by sliding sideways as she would slow in the air.

Zoë began to pitch forward again and Peter grabbed her shoulder. "Good try on the stop," he said.

"I guess I should think of it as landing," Zoë grimaced.

Peter shrugged. "Whatever works. Can't you stop in flight?"

"Stop? You mean hover?"

"Yes."

"No."

"You can't hover?" He appeared to think about that. "Why not?"

"Why can't you fly?" Zoë snapped.

"Well answered," the changeling smiled again as they started moving. "Now that we have the basics down, there's a point to all this. We have to hunt." Peter reached across the path and tapped Zoë on the temple. "And I'd like to see how good you are at hunting with an aural sense." She sighed with relief. This was something a Darkling scout could do.



Down, down into the woods and snow, bobbing left and right, now and again moving slowly and vigorously over long, flat land, then slipping fast over hills they skied. Zoë was already feeling her arms and chest burning with fatigue by the time she looked through the trees and said, "There."

The deer flashed, brighter than day, a flit of an image behind the light shadows of trees, a brilliant green aura lighting and disappearing in a moment. "Did you see it?"

Peter nodded, putting one of his poles into a strap on his back and bringing down his bow. "Yes." He smiled at her. "But not until you pointed it out."

"So you can see auras?"

"Sometimes very well. Sometimes not well at all." He pushed off in the direction of the deer.

As Zoë hunted, as in all things, she remembered the Erl-King. *When you hunt, the sayings of the wingmaker held, say to your quarry, I understand you.*

Dipping and slipping through the snow more naturally now, the aura coming back into view, trees bobbing in and out of the way as they would in flight.

Say to your quarry, *I know you, I know your eyes, I know your heartbeat, I know your aura.*



It was a great, six-pointed buck, its tail full, and for a brief moment its aura faded, and Zoë watched the creature and felt the visual sense mix with the auric. The buck's breath blasted hot from black lips, snow flying up from its hooves. It came to a stop; they were thirty feet away.

*I feel the blood in your veins, your heart pumping. Parts of the same game are we, pieces on the board of eternity. My sword is ready, and I feel you near.*

The buck froze for a second, and Zoë and Peter slowed to a halt. The creature looked around and finally stopped, staring in their direction. Zoë felt the beady eyes searching and tried to remember the visual acuity of deer.

*I feel your high wings and remember my own.*

Zoë heard the quiet slip of an arrow sliding across wood and saw Peter notching an arrow on his bow string, and Zoë felt herself deciding something and acting on it. "No!" She reached out, and Peter gasped, letting fly the arrow. The shaft slid madly into the air and glanced off a nearby tree, teetering into the snow ten feet away.

"What in Hell did you do that for?" Peter demanded. The buck started and burst into flight across the snow as Peter pushed off after it, notching another arrow.

"Not with this," Zoë snarled and jumped at him, grabbing the bow out of his hand. Peter lost his balance, and the two tumbled into the snow.

"I'm sorry," Peter said, shaking his head angrily, "I thought we were *hunting*." He grabbed for his bow, but Zoë held it up, straddling him with her legs.

"No," Zoë held it away from him. He was so close, so near to being one of the children. But he wasn't. She tossed the bow aside and fell forward, fists jamming down on his chest. "You listen. *Listen* to me."

Peter stared at her, his breath fast and billowing gray on her face. "He's getting away."

"You don't even speak Darkling, do you? A few words here and there," she said, pushing at his breastbone with every word. "I speak your human tongue. And we were here *first*."

"What are you talking about?"

He struggled, and Zoë dug her heels into his sides and pressed him down, bringing her eyes close to his. "I am a Darkling Scout. I have been *beaten*, strung up like *meat*, and I have a hole in my wing where you featherless *freaks* used your cowards' weapons and *shot* me. I have allowed myself to be escorted like a *slave* because of something I had nothing to do with. And now you want me to hunt!" Saliva flew from her teeth, falling on Peter's face. He fought on and she pressed harder.

"You want me to hunt, *your* way. You want me to move across the ground, like a human, like a *worm*. And you want to use my blessed sense, as I would to hunt, as any honorable creature would. But then you want to kill *your* way. And I will not help you anymore. Not with that, that *thing*." She pointed angrily at the bow in the snow.



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“I have the sense, too,” Peter said coolly. “Anyway, it’s just a bow, it’s easier than—”

“Damn you!” Zoë cried. Peter had stopped fighting her but she still held him down, pounding his chest. He lay still, his eyes studying her, and she saw in them two white images, her snarling face. She looked horrible. Zoë breathed. “If we hunt,” she said, “if we ‘fly’... we hunt my way. Not the way of a coward. And that’s it. You can go ahead and kill me. But you *won’t*, because you need me a lot more than I need you.”

“All right. All right.” Peter moved his head up and down, slowly. “Maybe we can catch him.” The changeling tried to rise, and after a moment she released her hold and let him up.

Zoë eyed him warily, picked up the bow, and for a moment considered smashing it against a tree. Instead she slid the thing into the straps on her back and felt its evil between her wings. “I’ll give this back to you when we’re done.”

“Absolutely,” Peter shrugged, tapping his sword. He watched her for a moment, and Zoë was astonished to see a smile cross his face. “And if we do catch this buck, won’t Heinrich be amazed!”

They found the buck again a quarter hour later, when the dark gray of early morning began to lighten into the less ominous gray that would follow them for the rest of the day. “He’s headed for the lake,” Peter said, and Zoë nodded and pushed on, skiing a bit more naturally. Then he added, “You’re a remarkably quick learner. Are all of you?” She bared her fangs in response.

There was a lake nearby, a small one, and Zoë could see the green-flashing image of the deer making its way down a slope, beyond which the water was white, frozen across. “You head that way,” Peter said, pointing to the east. “Lead him to the ice; don’t let him back in the woods. He’ll try to pass around the lake but he won’t cross your path.” Peter shoved off and headed west.

The buck stopped and looked back, saw nothing, and moved on. Zoë curved through the trees and closed in, forty yards from the quarry. She drew her sword and swatted at a fir tree; a lump of snow fell. The buck started again nervously and moved away from her and toward the ice. He neared the lake, and she drew a breath and decided to drive him harder. Zoë shoved off with one pole and flew forward after the buck, the trees opening up as she spilled into the shore of the lake. The deer began to run faster, trying to move along the shore and back into the woods, and she stayed on him, pushing him back.

I feel you, she said. I hear your heart. The buck’s heat was throbbing, his green aura etched with fear and blindness. The snow sparkled brilliantly, and she moved through it faster than before and now screeched at the deer as she moved in, her sword held back, “*Ik-ik-ik-iye-iye-iyeiye!*”

The buck ran straight away from her and stopped at the edge of the snow-covered ice, moving back and forth, considering its options, and she screeched again.

Zoë moved sharply down the slope, the great beast getting larger,



the smell hitting her in the cold air, and she lunged at the buck's hide with her sword.

The tip of her blade hit fur, and the deer snorted and shot out onto the ice as she flew after it. The buck immediately splayed out its legs, spinning, trying valiantly to stay aloft.

Zoë found herself doing the same thing when her skis cut through the snow and hit the frozen lake. Suddenly, a new sense of flying came to her. She was still chasing after the buck, all right, but now she was falling forward, her own legs going in opposite directions, and she held onto her sword and let her arm fall far to her side to keep from impaling herself.

The deer stopped in the center of the lake, shaking with fear. Zoë lifted herself up to her elbows, tried to bring her feet under her, and failed. She howled. The deer looked back at her, regarded her sprawling form, and continued to edge away, wary of falling itself. Where the Hell was the changeling? "These...things...don't work...on ice...very well!"

"No, they don't!" came the voice of the changeling, and Zoë looked off to the west to see Peter on his rump at the edge of the ice. At first, she thought with some relish that he had fallen, too, but now she saw that he had discarded his skis and was strapping something to his boots. How many things could a human strap to his boots?

Suddenly the changeling was up and moving, moving faster than she had skied. His boots slid along the ice and scattered snow. How was he doing it? It looked as if he were *above* the ice. Could the changeling fly?

Peter held out his sword and moved, his legs pumping as he flew across the ice, gliding from one foot to the next, turning sideways and moving in a long circle around the center of the lake, where the nervous buck waited.

The changeling circled as if in flight, and Zoë heard no sounds but the quiet wind moving across the lake, her own breath, and the whispering scraping of ice. He circled and looped, like an artist etching, etching with his legs and feet on a frozen canvas. He held out his arms, his sword, his gray hair waving in the wind, his slender legs pumping and gliding, never anything but pure and fluid, like an expert flyer.

*Make your own wings*, Zoë thought, as the changeling closed in. He was the most magnificently obscene thing she had ever seen. Having no wings, the Erl-King's mysterious motto had meaning for him.



The searchers spent the rest of the morning cleaning the deer and wrapping the meat, after bringing Peter's horse to the lake to carry it back to camp. Heinrich grumbled predictably and often about nothing and everything. For his part, Heinrich had managed to shoot a couple of rabbits. "But my heart wasn't in it," he said, several times.

Peter's boots had worked on the ice because of something he called



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“skates,” a pair of ribs from some great fish, honed to a fine edge and bound to a piece of wood which strapped to the bottom of his boots. “I made them myself,” he said, with a hint of pride.

“So many ways to move.” Zoë shook her head.

“Well, when you can’t *fly*...” Peter shrugged and stashed the skates in a bag and stowed it them in the bundle of skis, which he strapped to the saddle of his horse.

But it *was* like flying. She had seen that in his eyes and remembered it despite herself all day, even after they had packed up and moved on. As she rode silently behind Peter on his horse, listening to Heinrich and Peter talk about possible routes, her mind kept wandering back to the form of the changeling, flying across the ice, like a Darkling warrior without wings. No. No, with different wings.

“I can teach you to skate,” Peter said idly, as the night came on and they camped once more. “If you’d like to learn.”

Zoë considered it and finally said, “One sacrilege at a time, if you please.”

By the time the sun was down and they were planning the next day’s trek, she felt much less like a captive.





## CHAPTER 7

It was dark and deep past midnight when the cold seeped through Peter's shoulder, and he awoke to see the fire was out, a thin line of smoke trailing up into the glistening night. He heard something moving and turned in his pallet to see Zoë on the other side of the fire, her wings twitching as she slept. He scanned over to his left and saw Heinrich huddled up and turned away from him, a blanket pulled over his head, a mountainous cocoon on a bed of fir limbs. Peter's eyes fluttered and sleep growled at the back of his head, dragging him under. As he drifted away with it, he watched the aura of the Darkling through closed eyelids, until it faded from his mind. He wrapped himself around the animal sleep and tumbled with it into the void.

In the void where the Erl-King flew, Peter spun, staring through closed eyes at countless glistening lights. His arms ached from the cold and froze to his body, and the changeling fell, trying to tilt himself towards the lights, chasing one and then the other. One after the other the lights stayed distant and pulled away from him as he seemed to fall close, and the darkness opened up, and he plummeted into the void, wingless.

On the other side of the void, on the other side of the very air, a shimmering green light appeared. At first fuzzy, then more distinct, not coming from far away but rather coming into view close by, tiny tendrils of light and sound slipped through the folds of the void. The void slit open, and Peter tried to move, and only tumbled further, and then the green light exploded. Whooshing by him the aura flew, filling the void and disappearing again, passing loudly out of his vision.

Peter was tumbling again, drifting farther from the lights, already forgetting the visiting green, when he heard Heinrich cry out.

Peter turned over in the void, his eyes blazing with green auras and sound, and he opened them.

There was a Darkling flapping its wings madly over the doused fire, flapping so hard that crackle was shimmering in a white rain over the Lek. Peter shook his head, still trying to come awake, and it took him a moment to see the cord wrapped around the Darkling's neck, as the creature struggled to fly away. It wasn't Zoë, because now Peter heard Zoë shouting as she sprang to her feet. "Af!"

"There!" cried Heinrich. "Peter, help me!" Peter's eyes flew to see the mountain of sleep he assumed to be Heinrich and realized that wasn't Heinrich at all. A black sword clattered to the ground as the Darkling let go of it, struggling at the loop around its neck. Heinrich was standing near the edge of the Lek, holding a long stripped sapling, at the end of which the new captive pitched like a fish.



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Peter crawled to his feet. “Where did he come from?”

“Zoë! Fly! Fly!” the captive managed to growl out, in the language Peter recognized as Darkling.

Heinrich was struggling with the pole, leaning back so that his weight was fighting against the wing-beats of the Darkling Zoë had called Af. “Get his sword, Peter! Get his sword!”

Peter sprang for the black sword. The Darkling hissed at him, and Peter saw the blue sash around his waist. “Heinrich, wait!”

“Secure her!” Heinrich called, saliva flying from his mouth, and Peter realized his friend was talking about Zoë.

Peter looked at Zoë. He wanted to ask, *Are you secure?* But instead he said, “This is one of yours?”

“Yes,” Zoë said, and she shifted from foot to foot and screeched in Darkling words that Peter managed to grasp, “Af, I can’t fly! I can’t fly!”

“Heinrich,” Peter shouted, “what goes on here?”

Heinrich gave the leash a hard yank and reeled his fish in, leaping for the Darkling Af as he hit the ground, bringing a sword to the Darkling’s neck and putting his arms around and over the top of Af’s wings.

“Let him go!” Zoë cried. Her hand reached back behind here and suddenly she was wielding a dagger and moving towards Heinrich.

“Wait,” Peter grabbed her and held her back and whispered in exasperation as she fought to break free. “Where in Hell did you get another dagger?”

“He’s been tracking us since we left,” Heinrich managed to get out as he struggled. “Stop struggling, boy. Stop!”

“Af! Stop!” Zoë called.

Speaking loudly and slowly, Peter moved away from Zoë, holding his hands up as if to freeze everyone in their place. “We won’t hurt you. Will we, Heinrich? We won’t hurt you. We need to know things; we can’t hurt you if we need to know things from you.”

Heinrich glared, still struggling with Af. “I don’t think he knows German, Peter.”

“I speak...” Af coughed, his eyes swiveling toward the man at his back “your human tongue.”

Heinrich jerked hard at Af’s neck and said, “Then you tell me what you’ve done with my sisters, you filthy *kestrel*.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Af struggled as he spoke.

“Please,” Peter said. “Heinrich, let him go. You won’t get any answers out of him this way.”

Heinrich swore and jerked the cord away from Af’s neck and kicked the Darkling in the small of the back. Af hopped a few yards before steadying himself and turned around to face him. “What do you want, Peter?” Heinrich said. “As soon as he thought we were all sleeping he came down to kill us.”

Peter raised an eyebrow. “So you baited him with Zoë and me by sneaking



away and leaving a dummy as a stand-in for yourself?” Peter watched Heinrich’s eyes and saw a hint of irritation at the insinuation. Except it was true. The fact that Peter could grasp the fundamental soundness of the bait didn’t make him feel any better that Peter had been used as bait at all.

Af rubbed his neck and said, “Is that what he thinks of you, changeling? Is that what you’re worth to the humans?”

Did all the Darklings know about changelings? Did that mean there were more? “Why were you following us?”

“You have one of our scouts.”

“She has a broken wing. We’re escorting her back.” Peter gestured a pale hand at Zoë. “See for yourself.”

Af stepped over to Zoë and gingerly inspected her wing, finding the minor break. “This will heal soon,” he observed to Zoë. He ran a fingertip under the back of her neck. Af turned to Peter again. “But she’s your prisoner.”

“Really?” Peter tilted his head. “Have we chained her? Is she shackled?”

“She has been,” Af said, holding up Zoë’s wrist. “These are shackle marks.”

“What the Hell do you expect?” Heinrich grumbled. Peter shot him a look, tried to convey that he knew better how to handle this.

“She’s not our prisoner now. We’re *escorting* her.”

“Zoë?” Af said, turning to the scout. “Are you a prisoner of these men?”

The smallest of words can make all the difference. Zoë could have said anything she liked. She could have insisted, correctly, that a lack of chains made her no less a prisoner. *Yes, I am a prisoner*, and all that followed might never have happened.

“No,” Zoë answered, gazing at Peter intently. “I was a prisoner of the humans, but I am traveling with this changeling and this man.”

“Where?”

“We’re looking for *you*, in fact,” Peter added. “We’re looking for Farrago’s camp.”

“Why?”

“Because you have my sisters,” Heinrich said. Peter looked at his friend and realized just how much restraint, overall, the Vehm initiate was showing. He was staying cool because he was thinking about the future, a talent Peter was ill used to ascribing to his friend. But Heinrich wanted his sisters back, and if it meant being nice for once, he was smart enough to behave.

Af licked his white lips. One of them was puffed up where the cord Heinrich had wrapped around his neck had struck him. He shook his head and said, “I don’t know what you mean.”

Peter said, “Two days ago a murder of Darklings swooped down on Freiburg and slaughtered a human family. They stole two human females, one sixteen and one nine.”

Af shook his head again. “It wasn’t Farrago’s Band,” he said.



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“I told them that,” Zoë said, nodding vigorously.

“They didn’t wear sashes,” Peter said.

Af nodded. “That’s normal for a night attack on humans. But we’ve been on the move.”

Heinrich shook his head violently. “You’re lying. We caught this scout outside of town, and then the attack came.”

“It wasn’t us!” Af flexed his wings in exasperation. “Now, I think I can carry Zoë the rest of the way, so if you don’t mind...”

“Hold on.” Peter chewed his lip. What if it were true? What good would it do to have a captive to trade if there were nothing to trade her for? “Not yet.”

“I thought she wasn’t a prisoner,” Af said.

“No,” Peter said, “but she’s under our protection, and I’m not prepared to give her up to the first Darkling that comes along.”

“This,” Af pointed at his waist, “is a Blue Band sash. Zoë belongs with us.”

“But maybe not with *you*,” Peter intoned. “Where is Farrago’s Band?”

“Why?”

“We will escort her there, and only then will we rele— only then will our protection end.”

“I can’t allow that,” Af said.

“In that case I can only assume that you do, in fact, have the captives we seek. And if that’s the case,” Peter thought carefully before finishing, “we *will* keep this scout as our prisoner.”

“And we have the shackles,” Heinrich offered.

“We don’t have your humans.”

“Then there’s no harm in bringing us to meet your Stell Farrago.”

After a while Af looked at Zoë and then at Peter, and grudgingly at Heinrich. “Fine. They’re two miles to the north.”

“Well, three of us can’t fly,” Peter observed. “So I suggest we hurry.”



## CHAPTER 8

“Does he have to keep flying off like that?” Heinrich asked. Af had again stopped their progress and jumped into the air, and now Peter could see the Darkling flying about above the trees.

“He’s trying to figure out where we are,” Peter said. “He’s not used to traveling on foot.”

“He’s going to leave us,” Heinrich sighed. Everything that came from Heinrich’s mouth since the Darkling raid on the house had been full of vitriol, and Peter wished that he could reach into whatever part of Heinrich’s head was keeping his anger up and throbbing and just pluck it out. Of course, Heinrich had every reason to be angry, and worried, and horrified. But he was wasting an awful hunk of energy.

“He won’t leave us,” Zoë responded. Heinrich threw her a searing glance that indicated he didn’t particularly value her opinion.

Af reappeared and swooped down in tiny circles until he settled in the snow and looked at Zoë. “Not far now.” The party began to move again.

Peter trudged on in front of Heinrich and slightly behind Zoë, and he reached out and tapped her shoulder. She looked back in the snow, her silhouette a strange gray against the white and black of the wood. “Eh?”

“Why can’t the Darklings hover?”

Zoë adjusted her tunic and slowed to let Peter come alongside. “What are you talking about?”

Peter gestured with his hand, recalling the twisting descent of Af. “You have to circle around as you come down, right? I mean, you can’t hover, can you?”

Zoë shrugged. “Why would you want to hover?”

“Well, it...” Peter thought about it for a second. “Imagine a dark elf swooping down with his sword at a grounded human.” Peter held up his arms, pretending to hold a sword. “I can slash a couple of times, right? And then I suppose I have to whip my wings and take off again.”

“Come around again,” Zoë nodded.

“Well, why can’t you hover? Think how useful that could be.”

Zoë thought about it, her large eyes swiveling around for a moment before resting on her answer. “Yes. But our wings don’t work that way.”

“Are you sure?”

“The wood elves could hover,” called out Af, from the front, and Peter found himself irritated that the Darkling had been listening to their conversation.

“Who?” Peter asked.

“Wood elves. Another race of elves.”

“Did they have different kinds of wings?” Peter said. “I’ve never seen them.”



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Af stopped for a moment, looked back and shrugged. “Neither have I,” he sighed. “And I have no idea.” Af looked at Peter for a while as if he had a few questions of his own but was saving them. He turned and began to walk again, his wings bounding on his shoulders as he stepped over a stone.

“Such strange creatures,” Peter murmured. “Are you cousins to birds?”

Zoë looked at him. “What?”

“No offense,” Peter said. “I was just wondering if you’re part bird. I have so much of the Darklings in me, and yet they’re utterly strange to me.”

“We’re not birds.”

“Or maybe you’re part human,” he continued, “maybe you’re half-human, half-bird?”

Af, Heinrich *and* Zoë shot him the nastiest of glances, that time, and Peter shrugged.

Zoë stepped a little faster, moving away from Peter and the conversation.



As soon as she had moved up Heinrich took her place, and the tall man watched Zoë take a place just to the right and behind Af. “We shouldn’t let them stay too close together.”

Peter merely raised an eyebrow. “She’s got a broken wing, Heinrich. She’s not going anywhere.”

Heinrich’s aura was vibrating intensely, and Peter realized how little of his friend he was actually seeing right now. Heinrich was being irritable, yes. But Peter could tell that his friend wanted to do more: he wanted to lash out. There appeared a shaking, hungry part of Heinrich that to fly forward and tear the two Darklings apart.

“I understand, you know,” Peter heard himself say, and he instantly regretted the words.

Heinrich merely looked at him and shook his head. He opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out but steam.

They were topping a hill, and suddenly Af stepped up on a giant tree root and waved an arm. “Ho!”

Peter looked up, then scurried up next to the blue-Band Darkling. He looked back at Heinrich and said, “There they are.”



## CHAPTER 9

His nightly count of the afflicted in the Nekro huts had troubled Farrago enough, and now Af had returned, and everybody had shouted that he had brought back a Scout with a broken wing and two humans. But it wasn't two humans at all: it was one human and something he thought not to exist except in Darkling legend. Alezan squatted beside him under his tree as he regarded the group. "I'm sorry," Farrago asked, "You're looking for who?"

"Two human females, one nine, the other sixteen years old," said the first human, a giant blond wingless thing with yellow hair on his face. Monkey.

"I don't have any humans," Farrago said slowly. He gestured at the strange other. "You're a changeling, aren't you?"

For all the world the creature looked like a Darkling without wings, save perhaps a slightly narrower chest and a slightly darker cast in his hair. The changeling started for a moment and seemed confused. "You don't know?"

Farrago laughed. "Why would I know that?"

"We're not here to talk about that, Peter," said the bearded one with a glowing irritation. The human regarded Farrago again and spoke his German slowly and slightly too loud, as if the language would be easier for Farrago if he raised his voice. "My name is Heinrich Hauptmann. This is Peter Meinhof. We come from Freiburg im Breisgau. We escorted this scout— your scout, which we can see by the Blue Band— in hopes that you would trade your captive humans for her."

Farrago blinked slowly. "I already said, I don't have any humans." *Don't particularly want any, either.* "No captives, no slaves, no midwives. No humans."

"You must!" Heinrich cried, balling his fists. "Three days ago there was a raid on my house, and your scout—"

"Wait a moment," Farrago leaned forward. "Where did you say you were from? Freiburg?"

"Yes," interjected Peter.

Farrago shook his head. "You have the wrong Band, human. It was Rimmion that hit your house."

"Rimmion?"

The Stell nodded. "Cuk-wo. He's looking for midwives. If you lost young females it was because Rimmion took them as midwives. That makes sense. Yes."

"Makes *sense*?" Heinrich fumed. "You say that as if this is some minor inconvenience, these Darklings tore the house apart.... tore my... my..."

"You want *Rimmion*," Farrago sighed. "Not me."

Heinrich suddenly cried, "Mary!" and Farrago saw the changeling start and look around expectantly. But the yellow human was merely raving, and now he roared into the Lek, kicking snow as he lunged about. "Mary! Christa!" He



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looked back for a moment. “I know they’re here, Darkling!”

“Heinrich, stop,” the changeling shouted, but now the blond human was running through the trees. The roost suddenly filled with chattering as Darklings came down from their trees, Darkling warriors stepping in front of their trees and their females. The human tossed one of the Darklings aside, ripping a blanket from the snowy floor under a tree and Farrago stood up as the Darkling warrior growled.

“Stay away from those eggs,” Farrago shouted. “Af? Tap? Stop him.”

Peter rushed after Heinrich, who was staring in disgust at the mound of eggs underneath the tree. A Darkling warrior standing over the eggs drew a sword and Heinrich ignored him, turning away, running to another tree, another blanket with lumps underneath, howling “Mary! Christa! Christa!” Farrago heard more swords drawn and drew his own as the blond man drew a long, white blade. “Where are they?”

“They’re not here!” Farrago ran after him, followed by Af and Tap.

“He’s headed for the Nekros!” Af shouted.

“Nekros?” Peter looked back. “Heinrich, no! They’re not—”

“They must be! What, are we so minor that this is some kind of *joke*, some *inconvenience* that I would come and ask for my sisters back?” Heinrich babbled, the air blasting in white sheets from his mouth. He moved through the trees on the other side of the Lek and approached a large, thatch hut with a blanket over its doorway. “Ah-ha! Hey! What have we here, eh?” Heinrich turned around, holding out his sword at those who came near. A crowd had gathered around him, all staying back as Heinrich approached the blanketed door. “Mary!” Heinrich shouted over his shoulder, “Christa! You can come out! No more, darlings! No more at the hands of these vermin, no more!”

Af stepped forward as Heinrich reached out to touch the blanket over the door. “Don’t—”

Heinrich held up his sword. “You stay the Hell back.”

Farrago shouted, “Stop this at once! You will not find what you seek here!”

“Oh?” Heinrich ripped back the blanket and stuck in his head.

Farrago could picture it, the first blast of nothing but heat, orange heat from the fire blasting his face and blinding the human so that it would take a moment for him to see, and another moment to register. Farrago had looked in every night, counted them, added more and counted again, and he knew the sound. He had pulled back the blanket even when the Lek was clamoring with song and he still heard the sound when he stuck in his head, the writhing, ripping sound of air forcing its way in and out of ravaged lungs, the awful sound of brittle bones and skin so damaged that you could swear you heard it tearing. A floor strewn with feathers, cleaned everyday with the last strength the poor wretches had and yet there were always more feathers to fall, always more vile filth to cough up, always more cleaning to do than could be done.

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All of these things the blond human was looking at right now, smelling and feeling palpable and floating in the air. The Nekro was taking them apart, marauding them with a wave of stench and debilitation.

Farrago stepped forward to the entrance of the hut next to Heinrich, who had frozen there, his hand on his sword. The human's mouth was open, the name of his sisters still on his lips. Farrago looked past the human at the thirteen Nekros in this hut alone, shoulder to shoulder with the human.

"This is the Nekro," the Stell said quietly. "It kills many of us. We don't know how to stop it. Are you listening, human?"

The yellow human nodded, silently, the tiniest movement.

"We don't need midwives. The eggs you found, they might not even hatch. No one else is laying any. No more eggs to come. And on the other side of life, we have this that you see here. A doubtful beginning, a horrid end. So you've seen it. There is nothing else to see."

"But..." Heinrich stepped back, letting the blanket slide away. He shook his head, as if trying to shake out a filthy image now latching onto the inside of his brain and clogging it up. "My sisters," he whispered. "My sisters." Heinrich looked at Farrago and then backed away. The crowd of Darklings parted for him as he shuffled back to the Lek.

Farrago turned to the changeling and sighed, allowing a moment to pass, thinking everything over. A changeling. "Peter, was it?"

The changeling stepped forward. "Yes."

Farrago sighed. "This Band is going to Wintercamp, in the Alps. All of the Darklings are going there. You returned my scout to me, and I want to find out more about... changelings. You and your human may follow us."

Peter nodded. After a moment, he looked back at Heinrich, who was a small creature in the clearing, his sword dropping, a man shaking on his knees. Peter looked back at the hut and said, "It's horrible."

"Be thankful," said Farrago, "that you cannot hear their auras."

"I can," Peter replied. "I'm thankful I haven't looked inside."



## CHAPTER 10

A different wood, a different Band, though one thinks of the other.

Rimmion left the two human girls sleeping in makeshift cribs and surveyed the roost they had set up. As he entered the Lek, he saw his lieutenants Pennt and Kinnet coming towards him. “Well?”

Kinnet spoke. “The crackle supply is running desperately low, Stell. At this rate we might not make it to the City of Douglas unless we get more.”

Rimmion folded his arms and looked around the trees, where the couples were pairing off. “So many healthy wings to keep pumping. Farrago—would you believe this, Farrago wanted me to take you all to Wintercamp and beg for crackle there.”

Pennt smirked. “Is that where he’s going?”

Rimmion nodded. “Mm-hm. There to sing to the dead father with all the other dying elves. Doesn’t even put his Nekros out of their misery. But he does have a surplus of crackle with him.” Rimmion placed a finger to his thin lips, put his hand on Kinnet’s shoulder, and squeezed. “Kinnet, you’re a brainy fellow. Do you think you can do something for me?”

Kinnet flexed his wings proudly. “Absolutely, my Stell.”

“Farrago is headed for the Alps. I’d like you to the maps and play with the distances a bit. Try to determine where he’d be tonight.”

“As you wish.”

Rimmion watched the two lieutenants hurry off to the storage tent to retrieve maps. They would be occupied for a while, which was fine, because Rimmion needed time to think. The Redgreen Stell whipped into the air; trees dropped around him, bits of snow brushing off as his wings expanded. He lifted over the dark green tops. He flew aimlessly for a mile or so, veering right and then left, feeling the wind, watching the tiny stars as they filtered through the dense clouds.

The Erl-King had flown alone and made his own wings and heard the Darklings. Fathered them, led them, died at the hands of Nornagesta. The Darklings were alone, now. Or almost. Everyone knew there was an Erlkonigsson somewhere. Only the Redgreens actually knew where.

Far below, Rimmion watched the shades moving through the trees, the gray spirits flowing with their shimmering auras, the night creatures that competed with the humans for dominance just as the Darklings did. A glimmer of liquid caught Rimmion’s eye and he followed it for a moment. There was a dark brook, here and there unfrozen, and Rimmion dipped, dropped through the trees and lit beside it.

Rimmion crouched by the brook and watched the dark water passing through ice. He heard the swirling water, and more, the water that was not water



at all. Rimmion drew out his dagger and plunged it into the ice, and the brook hemorrhaged, a stubby spout of sluggish clear liquid surging up. Rimmion ran a white had through the water and said, “Douglas.”

The blue aura of the water trembled and burst from underneath. A tendril of blackness flowed and burst up through the hole in the ice. White water gave way to black, dark liquid pouring out and pooling on the surface of the ice. After a moment the slick black pool rippled, and a pair of lights, spaced apart by a few inches, white and hollow and a thousand miles deep, opened as eyes.

“Rimmion.”

“I have two more humans.”

“I know,” said the eyes. “There is water everywhere. How long until you reach Soulstuff wood?”

“You know,” Rimmion said, “I’ve often wondered why you can’t bring it to me.”

The eyes flashed annoyance. “Don’t waste my time, Rimmion. I built my City here because I like Davert Forest. I think we can leave it at that.”

“Fair enough,” the Stell bit his lip. “Soon. There’s a problem.”

“What?”

“We’re low on crackle,” Rimmion said. “Our wings are drying out. We’re going to have to raid for it.”

“You must use the Holy Plant wisely,” Douglas admonished him. “It takes time to grow.”

“In any event we won’t make it to you unless we have more.”

The eyes peered into Rimmion for a moment and finally said, “Very well. But I want you back before the week is out. Some of your females will be ready to lay, and I need midwives.”

“I know. And I appreciate all that you’ve done for us.”

Douglas made a breathing sound. “It is my duty.”

“Yes, my Lord. Is my Stella faring well?”

The eyes seemed to look away for a moment, and a brief image flashed in the oily black, then disappeared. Douglas might not have wanted to show that, Rimmion thought. “Her Nekro is advancing. But she still remembers you,” Douglas said. “I am working to keep her mind free of the necrotic effects. There is not much I can do for her body.”

Rimmion bit his knuckle for a moment. He slew Nekros every day, put them out of their misery with complete conviction. Yet he sent his own mate to be with Douglas. The scene played out in his mind, he, this proud Stell, begging and pleading, please, you must help her. There must be a way. “I will be there soon, Douglas.”

“Good. The fate of the Darklings rests with our work here.”

“Yes, Douglas,” Rimmion said. He looked away for a moment, then said, “Tell me something.”

“Yes?”



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“Are you the Nornagesta?”

“I am the Dark Prince, Rimmion. The Erlkonigsson.”

“But the legends, the sagas, are so unclear,” Rimmion said. “Some of us think the Dark Prince and the Nornagesta were the same, that it was the Erl-King’s son who slew him.”

“I am the Erlkonigsson,” replied Douglas, softly. “A role I chose and did not choose. The Nornagesta is the same. But he is not the same as me.”

“Where is the Nornagesta?”

“The Nornagesta,” the Dark Prince said, “is of no concern to us.”

“I think you *are* the Nornagesta.” Rimmion smiled. Of course he was.

The crystal eyes smiled for a moment, or at least looked like they did. “Sometimes, Rimmion, I wish I were.”

The eyes disappeared and Rimmion flew back to the roost, where Pennt and Kinnet awaited him with an answer.



## CHAPTER 11

After Heinrich's display, Farrago urged his lieutenants to alleviate the tension in the Blue Band roost by beginning a display of their own.

As Peter and Heinrich stood at the edge of the Lek, Tap took to the air and began to fly. Heinrich asked quietly, "What is he doing?"

"I think this is what the Lek is for," Peter said. Peter's eyes were on the crowd of Darklings that had gathered around. Tap flew by himself in silence, soaring up above the trees and back down, simple maneuvers, while the Darklings began to chant, slowly, at first, a strange ululation, an extended, overlapping *cuk-woing*.

A number of females gathered together in one area on the northern side of the Lek, and Peter saw Zoë among them. Peter felt as if he were seeing not Zoë, but her ghost—a ghost of some future he had glimpsed, thought on, and even, in a way, lived through. He only now realized he had thought on it at all, and now he had packed that future and deposited it into this Darkling ghost woman he saw moving before him. She had an intricate patchwork on her wounded wing and looked considerably fresher than she had just a few hours before. Peter found himself watching Tap's aerobatics and Zoë equally, as she melted in and out of view in the crowd.

The chanting intensified, and Tap displayed more intensely with it, spreading his wings wide as he soared up and then tucking them in, spinning as he dove and pulling out at the last minute. Finally Tap went high and twisted his way down the center of the Lek and held out a hand, silently.

And then, a strange thing: the crowd spoke for the silent flier, calling, "Af, my brother! Join me!"

"*Cuk-Wo!*" cried Af, from the other side of the Lek, and Peter saw Af emerge from the back of the crowd of females. Af was about to spring aloft when he stopped for a moment next to Zoë.

Peter's heart sank as he watched Af reach around and touch the back of Zoë's neck, and she made the same motion, demurely. They pecked one another on the lips and Af soared into the air, a shower of sparks issuing from his wings.

*Damn.*

Peter felt Heinrich's hand on his shoulder and his friend's piercing blue eyes looking at him from his right side. "Don't," Heinrich said.

"Don't what?"

"Don't even think about it."

Peter followed Heinrich's eyes as Af and Tap displayed their warrior prowess, crackling loudly and showering down. The brothers soared and twisted, moving faster and faster to the rhythm of the chanting. They stuck extremely close together, such that they had to control their wings extremely



carefully, and then, soaring high, they broke off and went to separate sides of the Lek. Peter watched in awe as Af and Tap flew towards one another, drawing their swords as they did so. Then, as their blades met and sparked, each flew past the other, inverted in the air, and flew over again, coming back at one another in a perfectly mirrored raven's turn.

"My God," Peter said.

"Yes," Farrago's said as he appeared beside Peter. "Af and Tap. My finest Darklings. Brothers and friends to all and to each other."

"And twins." Peter mumbled.

"Yes," Farrago said.

Peter tried to make sense of the way the crowd had spoken for Tap. "He's a mute?"

Farrago snorted. "He's a *twin*. Second of two eggs lain at one sitting. Very rare, but what *does* one do with him?"

Peter understood. He'd heard of humans who had similar taboos—twins were a troubling idea for a lot of people. Who would inherit from their father? That was an important human question. For those without primogeniture to bother with, there was still the basic problem of twinship. Similarity was dangerous in its extreme. Gods and kings could get confused. Twins might well be some indication of crazy gods making double people. Twins were threatening. Sometimes the people would simply kill one or both as a bad omen. But apparently, Farrago had allowed an out: one spoke for both. They were two elves suffused, in the public eye, into one.

More males took to the air, each performing a simple display, and as crowded as the Lek became, they flew perfectly among one another. Peter could tell the performance was for them.

Af flew down towards the female section once, twice, and a third time, closing in and twisting, reaching out his wing, deftly tossing aside a bit of hair on Zoë's head, then soaring back into the air.

"They're mates," Peter said evenly.

"Not yet," Farrago mused. "But I think Af is making progress."

"Good for him."

"So," said the Stell, raising his voice a bit over the sound of the chanting and displaying. "Tell me about yourself, Peter the changeling."

Peter winced, feeling the lack of wings as if it were a desperate lightness, threatening to lift him far and away, but never allowing him to soar. He shrugged. "What do you want to know?"

"Where do you come from?"

"I'm told I was left on the doorstep of the Meinhofs as an infant. They had just lost a child. How do the elves know of such things?"

Farrago thought for a moment and said, "Everyone hears gossip, I suppose. Do you live with these... Meinhofs?"

Heinrich interjected, to indicate he was listening, "No, the Meinhofs were



killed a few years later in a Darkling raid.”

Farrago looked from Heinrich to Peter. “Ah. But this business of leaving changelings on doorsteps...”

“You don’t do that?”

“I’ve heard of it, but no. What would I leave? A Darkling?”

Peter blinked. “A half-Darkling. Isn’t that the way? Half-human, half-Darkling?”

“Wherever did you get that idea?” Farrago laughed, shaking his head. “Darklings and humans can’t mate. We’ve tried it.”

“What?” Heinrich demanded. “Is that what captives are taken for?”

“I just told you, no,” Farrago insisted. “It’s no use, it just doesn’t work. The children are always stillborn; the Darklings gave up on trying that ages ago.”

“So,” Peter murmured, watching Af and Tap and the rest, feeling the throbbing of the crackle, watching the shower of sparks, the chanting sending vibrations through his spine that demanded that he take off and soar, while he remained stubbornly earthbound. “So... what am I?”

Farrago shook his head. “I was hoping you could tell me. I’ve heard stories about changelings, but to tell the truth, I’ve never *seen* one. You’re a rare breed.”

Peter winced. There was no answer here. Even the Darklings considered him a freak.

Farrago patted him on the shoulder. “Queer creature, Peter the changeling,” he said, as he stepped away. “Who knows, perhaps someone at Wintercamp can help you both.”

Peter turned away from the Lek. He could watch no more of the display. He went among the fir trees, bedded down under their protecting trunks. He determined to dream of Zoë, while the heroes of the Blue Band danced and mocked him in the sky.



## CHAPTER 12

“Leed?” Zoë said, stepping near a fir tree where Leed was bedding down for the night. “My place taken?”

“Not yet, it isn’t,” the Darkling woman responded. She reached up into the fir tree and pulled down a blanket pack, which she tossed to Zoë. She spoke again as she pulled down another for herself. “All this time I’ve been wondering how long we’d be nest-mates, what with you and Af...” She stopped, squinting as if looking for the right word. “And then it looked as though the question would take care of itself.”

“Oh?” Zoë bent down, unfolding her blanket, stepping on it and rolling it out in the snow. Her wing ached, but the salves were working.

“We were worried that you wouldn’t come back,” Leed said. “Scouting can be dangerous, I suppose.”

“I suppose.”

Leed seemed satisfied and plopped down upon it, bringing her wings in close around her. She wiggled about a bit, finding a pleasant position, and immediately leaned forward with a renewed vigor. “You should have seen Af when you didn’t come back the first night.”

Zoë sat cross-legged and winced as she drew in her wings, but she tried to echo Leed’s brightness. “Really?”

“He was beside himself. He begged Farrago to let him and Tap go look for you,” Leed said excitedly. “There was practically a formal debate on it, with Alezan indignantly suggesting that Af would never consider such a thing if it had been, say, Tap out there alone, or some other male.”

“That could be.” Zoë sighed. So far, she was the only female scout Farrago used. She had fought hard for the post, and it frustrated her that Af would denigrate her position, however innocently. Even if she had been captured.

“So Farrago compromised and let Af go by himself. He wasn’t happy about it, either. I think he wanted as many warriors with us as possible.”

“Why?” Zoë’s ears perked up.

“I don’t know. Farrago being over-careful as usual, dead Erl-King love him.” Leed rested her thin face on her hands. “I was worried about you, though.”

Zoë said quietly, “I’m sorry.”

“What happened?”

Zoë flashed through chains at her wrists, the churning jaws of the machine, the rushing water. That voice in her head: *have no fear... have no fear...* “I was captured and broke my wing in the process.”

Leed gasped, slowly. “Oh, Darling, how did you get away? Did Af come and rescue you?”

“Peter,” Zoë said.





“The crazy one?” Leed asked, with a note of horror. “Or the one with no wings?”

Zoë repeated, “The one with no wings.” She laughed inwardly. Heinrich, that oaf, was so flagrantly human, but Peter... Peter was something else. A person with no wings, after all, wasn’t necessarily human, was he?

“Is he really a changeling?”

Zoë nodded. “I think so.”

“These changelings, where do they come from?”

“I don’t know if it’s a *they*.”

“And he rescued you? How?”

“Yes,” came another voice from behind them. Zoë shivered as if she had been caught like Manlover. She looked over her shoulder and saw Af dropping down from the trees, landing softly in the snow. “Tell us how the changeling *saved* you.”

Leed looked up at Af and said, “Af! I was just telling Zoë how wonderful it was that you brought her home in one piece!” But of course, Leed said nothing else, because the two went off alone.



## CHAPTER 13

Heinrich unrolled his blanket over the twigs he had laid out. “This is not where we want to be,” he said flatly. He heard his own words come out raspy and slow. He looked over at Peter, who was humming that elf tune they had heard earlier.

“Hm?”

Heinrich shivered in the cold and decided against pulling his boots off. The winter was falling faster by the day. “I said we’re going to lose time here. These aren’t the right elves.”

“I’m glad you realize that,” Peter said. He had a wistful look about him that Heinrich found irritating. “With any luck, though...”

“What?” Heinrich demanded; he pulled the blanket up over him. Peter lay down across from him and Heinrich spoke from behind his blanket. The cold was tightening his cheeks now, so that it was an effort to talk. “They’ll lead us to the right ones? And what if they don’t? It will start to snow harder, Peter. We’ll lose our quarry entirely. I made a promise.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Peter asked, quietly.

Heinrich slowly shook his head.

“Then as far as I can see, we are doing the best that we can.”

Heinrich grumbled. “Camping with elves. It doesn’t matter to you at all, does it, whether we find them or not? You’re just happy to be tumbling with the elves.”

“Heinrich.” The changeling whispered, shaking his head. “I don’t know how to make you happy here, my friend.” Peter sat up, folding his arms and patting them, his breath a white fog in the night. “What can I do to satisfy you?”

“You know what you can do?”

“Tell me.”

“You can promise me. *Promise* me. That if we catch the slightest whiff of Christa and Mary, we go after them. No stalling. Nothing.”

“What makes you think I’d stall?”

“Peter.” Heinrich sighed. “Listen. We’re not children. That is the best way I can put it. Remember how, when you’re a child, you react to something, and you can’t always predict what can happen? Later, older, you meet a woman, you flirt and smile. Same thing. Maybe you’ll have a love affair. Maybe not. But after a time, you can tell what’s likely to happen. And you can’t pretend anymore that you can’t see what will happen, because people don’t really vary from their usual course. Do you understand me?”

“Not really.”

The Vehm initiate studied his friend’s face for a long time. He wanted his friend to understand, not think he was scolding, or bitter, or crazed. He wanted to be angry, but he wasn’t. He avoided it. He thought of his father, ebbing away

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in his arms, asking him a promise, a distinct command that lingered in his ears through every moment. “What I’m saying is that I can tell where this may lead. Now you have found a familiarity here. I can see it in you; you’re captivated by this Band. But we are on a mission, and I need your help. There may come a time when you forget that mission because you’re too...too in love with this Darkling Band. I want your promise that you won’t forget what we’re here for.”

Peter lay back, looking up at the stars. Heinrich tried to gauge his strange friend, as he had his entire life. That face was strange to any human, but Heinrich could read it, could see that the words were sinking in. But he couldn’t see where Peter was coming down. Even now he knew what Peter was going to say.

“I won’t forget,” Peter said. “You made a vow. I’m going to help you.”

Heinrich didn’t respond, because it was cold and took too much strength to move his tongue. He lay down his head and listened to the hollow wind and worried about the hollowness of words.





## CHAPTER 14

Zoë stood with Af under a tree on a high ledge, looking down on the white and dark green landscape.

“How’s your wing?” Af said. He kept his distance from her, and his tone was out of sync with his question, as if he were getting it out of the way.

“It’s better. I’ve crackled twice since breaking it.”

“Yes,” he said. Af looked at her, biting his lip a bit. “I saw the first time.”

Zoë watched him and felt her eyes swiveling in and locking onto his mouth as he said these words, and the realization came to her. “Ah,” she nodded. “Ah.” She reached over to the tree next to her and pulled away a twig, then peeled off a long, damp piece of bark. She slid to the ground by the tree and pulled out her dagger and began to etch on the bark, sitting cross-legged. She scratched at the bark for a moment, feeling more at ease. “Ah,” she said again.

“You can imagine my...” he seemed to search for the words in the snow as he kicked at it, “my surprise... no, my consternation. What is the nature of your relationship with this changeling?”

Zoë scratched at the bark, bringing out the shape of a body. She scratched out the negatives, a pair of arms, a torso. The wings would be last. “I have no relationship with Peter.”

“That was quite an intimate little display,” said Af evenly.

“Intimate?” Zoë scratched away, and part of her pretended she didn’t know what he was taking about. Part of her wanted very much not to acknowledge any truth in it at all. Part of her was enjoying the drama. “Af, I couldn’t do it myself, now could I?” She looked up from her etching. “Hm?” She had begun to etch the outline of a Darkling warrior, sword out, swooping towards an unseen foe. She had not etched the outline of the wings yet. Wings were difficult, for one thing, to get right in wood. But she realized she didn’t really want to add wings.

Af came down beside her, his knees in the snow. “Zoë, would you stop playing with trees and listen to me?”

“Af,” Zoë lay down the bark. She didn’t try to explain. Rubbing rubbed her eyes, she said, “I’m tired. It’s been a long week.”

“Yes, and we have a lot to talk about. Farrago is going to want to know if Tap and I are going to stay on as escorts.”

“What do you want me to say?” Zoë lay her head back against the tree, feeling more tired. “That it’s all right for you and your brother to remain the brightest stars in Farrago’s Band?”

Af shrugged, rubbing the chinks at his neck. Zoë knew she wasn’t presenting the question correctly. It was obvious that the issue was really whether she wanted Af to pair off or not, but she didn’t feel like answering that

now. She pretended she didn't understand the issue at all and let Af be frustrated. She felt guilt rumbling in the back of her mind, but she closed her eyes and let the rumble fade.

“I just wanted to know if you were still...”

“Af, I've been gone a week.” She opened her eyes and got up to fly back to Leed. “Don't make any more of this than there is.”

She walked away, then, grumbling about getting more sleep.

“How much is there?” she heard Af ask, but Zoë was trying not to listen.





## CHAPTER 15

In a dream, a fire was stoked and sparks flew; a hot iron inched towards Peter's brow. Feeling the burning end sear into his mind, he awoke and sprang up, gasping.

The changeling shook his head and touched his brow in the darkness. Something *had* burned him. Heinrich was asleep in his blanket, and Peter saw with some relief that it was really Heinrich, with his pink face poking out, steam shooting from his nostrils. Peter closed his eyes.

There was a quiet whooshing sound in the air, and Peter opened his eyes again. A shower of sparks fell from the sky overhead. A dark shape seemed to fold in on itself and move on, tiny hot sparks falling in the snow around him as the shape moved on. It was a Darkling. Peter guessed it to be a sentry, but the shadow above, now moving in towards the roost, was too dark for him to see a sash. Farrago worked his men hard.

A moment passed before another shape dropped from on high, dark and whipping its wings once, a shower of sparks, the flap of the wings giving the creature the push it needed to move on into the roost.

Now Peter was awake and sitting up. That would be three. Three in a row, all headed in the same direction, and he may have slept through more. As the changeling came awake he began to feel the cold again, losing the strange insulation that sleep afforded. "Heinrich!" he whispered.

After a moment the pink lips moved. "Hunh?"

There was another shape, another shower of sparks. Peter felt for his bow and arrow. "Something is happening."

"Something is always happening." Heinrich opened his eyes. "What?"

"I think we're being...visited." There was another, moving in, and now Peter saw they were enveloped in black cloth, no identifying Band in sight.

Heinrich scrambled to his feet, crouching low and reaching for a sword as he watched another Darkling come in. "How many?"

"Five so far, I think. Maybe more."

"No sashes," Heinrich whispered, excitedly. "No sashes! These are the same..."

"Maybe. Maybe," Peter nodded, pulling on a coat. His heart raced, but the odds were good. There might be a number of Bands in these parts, but the odds weren't bad. It could be that easy.

No more shapes passed over. Peter and Heinrich moved in silence, heading back into the roost.



## CHAPTER 16

Cracklemaster Blue was the first to have his hut built the evening the Blue Band arrived at this roost, just as he was at every roost. He was allowed to demand the help of at least four Darklings from the Band for this purpose, but he rarely needed as many as that anymore, because he had honed the building of the crackle hut to a fine art. It was necessary that he do so, too. The whole Band could suffer rain until their wings weighed more than their bodies, but the crackle needed protecting. Without it, flight would soon be impossible.

Cracklemaster had asked only one helper- Leed, the Darkling girl who prepaired with the scout Zoë. Together they had the hut built before the rest of the Band had even fallen into place. The sturdy poles had been raised in record time, the sacks of crackle and seed hung, the crevices filled in.

“Thirty stone,” Leed had said, wiping her hands on her tunic. “We’re doing well.”

The Cracklemaster had nodded a noncommittal nod. “That’s because the Nekros don’t need as much crackle.” The Nekros didn’t fly much. When they did, though, the opposite was true. They breathed fast and short and whipped their wings nervously, and they went through crackle like water. Farrago tried to make them fly about once a week, but it was a lost cause. The fact was that many in the Blue Band thought it a horrid waste of crackle to even try.

Cracklemaster Blue was not asleep when the raiders came. He could not sleep, because he was listening to the sacks of crackle, hanging in the darkness, faintly glowing, the strings creaking against the poles. A faint hissing emanated from every bag, whispering of battle and the Erl-king. He lay awake in the dark tent, watching the swinging bags and breathing the rich air of the crackle hut.

With Crackle the Darklings sparkled and flew  
*Through Crackle, the Food of the Father*  
*Let every feather and every pore run and spark:*  
*This do in remembrance of Him.*

Some humans, Cracklemaster Blue was given to understand, prayed for sleep. They reached out to their deity and begged that the deity grant them rest, weigh down their eyes and bring images and the morning at last. The Darklings did not, because the Erl-king was dead. They could do what he had called them to do, fight like so, crackle like so, sleep like so. If they could not do these things, they were left to wish they could. Such is the worship of a dead god.

So when the shadows fell upon the cracks in the lashed-pole door and the two guards outside gasped, briefly and loudly, Cracklemaster was completely awake.

There was a grunt, two shadows coming from either side of the door, glints of metal, and Cracklemaster heard two heavy thuds as the guards fell, black blood splattering down the poles.



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Cracklemaster jumped up, silent. There were two forms standing at the door, Darklings, wings flitting excitedly. He couldn't make out the sashes.

*And Erkonig said, this is crackle. Tend it and treasure it, for by it your wings will flourish.*

The intruders tried the outer binds. Cracklemaster had himself bound into the hut every night. A flash of metal, and those binds were cut. Those were just there to keep Cracklemaster in lest nature get the better of him. There was no leaving until the morning guards came to relieve their brethren, and he was allowed to go and relieve himself. The Darkling priest felt the rear poles sliding along his wings as he backed into the corner, reaching behind. One hand was on his sword. He saw a dark blade punch between the poles in the door, moving down until it found the wooden bolt on the inside.

*Hack.* The sword fell, slamming into the bolt, a few chips flying. The shadow with the sword muttered something in slight amusement as he shoved the body of one of the guards out of the way. By now Cracklemaster had the bell rope in his hand and began to pull.

*This is crackle. Guard it.*

The heavy bell began to ring, loudly sounding out the alarm. The two invaders froze for a moment, then the sword fell again, faster. They wasted no more time. Cracklemaster rang the bell, harder and harder, and in the distance he could hear the perimeter guards prukking loudly. Cracklemaster began to answer them, prukking loudly. "The crackle! The crackle!"

The bolt snapped and the door flew open. Two Darklings burst in. They were so heavily crackled that their wings dripped glistening oil, and in the darkness, their eyes glowed.





## CHAPTER 17

Farrago was up and running through the Lek as soon as he heard the alarm. A perimeter guard swooped in, and he looked up, shouting, “What is it?”

“Someone’s after the crackle!”

“The visitors?”

“No!” There was a thundering of horse’s hooves, and Farrago saw the changeling riding up, followed by his human companion. “I saw them fly in from the south.”

“Who?”

“No marks,” said the human, Heinrich. “They wore black.”

Farrago snarled and leapt into the air towards the wood beyond the Lek. There were Darklings swarming now, coming out of their trees, some of them not even wearing tunics. The Lek exploded in a rush of brilliant sparks.

“My children!” Farrago cried, doubling back through the Lek, looping around. “Protect the crackle! Af! Tap!”

“Here!” came the voice of Af, in the woods near the hut. Farrago hadn’t asked the changeling how many there were. It didn’t matter.

Black. No marks. *Dammit, he just won’t take no for an answer.* Farrago dipped and headed into the trees. “Rimmion!”

“Yes?” A Darkling burst from a nearby tree as if from thin air and leapt, slamming into Farrago with a full body blow. Farrago fell back, flipping into a drift, his wings splaying out underneath and around him. Rimmion lit in the snow, a black-tunicked white-faced demon.

“Rimmion, what in Hell is this?” Farrago jumped up, his sword coming into his hand.

“Just paying a visit.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Farrago spat, and he took to the air after the crackle hut. He heard the rising sound of cries and swords clashing. Rimmion flew under and up, chest to chest, his sword arced behind him.

“Don’t turn your back on me, you pathetic excuse for a Stell.” He brought his sword down and across. Farrago whipped his wings, pulling away and meeting Rimmion’s sword. The metal clanged loudly as they drifted apart, flying up and swooping down again, slamming swords together as they came near again.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said the Blue Stell. “This is no good, we can’t go around killing one another.”

“Then give me the crackle I ask for.” *Hack. Parry. Hack.* The two Darklings lit once more, circling one another in the snow.

Farrago shook his head. “You know I can’t do that.”

“You have a surplus.”

“Not for long. That shipment has a special purpose. Is this the sort of thing



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you're going to be wasting your wings on?"

Rimmion backed off for a moment, stepping slowly sideways, tilting his head as if he hadn't quite understood what Farrago had just said. Then he sprang up, coming down with his boots, kicking at Farrago's face. Farrago feinted back but still felt the heavy heel connect, and he slashed at the Stell's leg.

His voice rolling with anger, smooth and silky and yet full of venom, Rimmion said, "Nothing I do, nothing is a waste. I am trying to look after the *future* of our race. Not living in the *past* like you and the rest."

Farrago jumped into the air. As Rimmion jumped after him, Farrago whipped his wings backward and dropped, spinning and kicking Rimmion firmly in the abdomen.

The Redgreen Stell fell back, laughing.

"There. That's the Farrago I remember," he said.



Af was amazed. Three unmarked Darklings fought their way out of the crackle hut with a handicap that should have been their end: Each carried a long, heavy sack down the center of their backs, hanging on a pair of shoulder straps. By the look of the sacks, they must have weighed a hundred pounds apiece, but the thieves were zipping through the air, evading the Blue Band warriors with ease.

Tap came up next to him. Af nodded, and the two took to the air, high above the thieves, dark fir trees giving way to a gray sky. When they were high enough, Af nodded, and they flipped once, changing direction, then dipped and dove.

The thieves were aligned like tight emigrator crows, one in front and two on the flanks. Af made out the face of the front one, the crystal-like eyes shining, awareness of his attack just coming across the chalky brow, and Af barely had time to breath be knees, and Af clung to his back. Black wings slamming back into Af's face. Af brought his sword around, trying to cut the bloody bastard's head off, but the escort got his legs underneath him and sprang. Af let go, flipped backwards in the snow, breathing deeply, and took to the air after him. The escortfore they were—

*There*, slashing hard across the chest of the front and left thieves. The front thief soared up, slashing back with his own blade. Af felt himself headed for the earth, flipping and finding his wings again. Af looked at Tap, who had tangled up with the left thief. The two tumbled and slammed into the snow, instantly separating and jumping to their feet.

The lead thief looked down at him, and Af had time to note his mangled lower lip before the scar-lip gestured at his right escort, who came after Af. Af brought up his sword in time to meet the Darkling's blade, and the escort sliced past him at a vicious speed. The two-hundred-pound sack of crackle on his back made little difference. Damn, he was fast.

Af leapt at the thief's back, grabbing at the sack, bringing his legs up and around the Darkling's waist. The two toppled into the snow, barely missing Tap.

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The escort dropped to his came around again.

Af and the escort circled one another, kicking and slashing until the trees parted and they were in the Lek, which blazed with the crackle of two Stells.



Rimmion's blade caught Farrago in the shoulder, sending black blood and feathers into the snow. Farrago snarled and flew forward, butting Rimmion in the chest and slashing up. He knocking Rimmion's sword to the side and clipped a piece of his tunic, drawing blood from the Rimmion's rib. Rimmion fell back, and Farrago drove on, bringing back his sword to slash hard across. Rimmion brought up his sword, and Farrago's came down, back, missing the sword. Time came to a stop. He saw the blade, felt it coming towards Rimmion's throat. He pictured the Stell's throat spurting across the ground in an instant. All at once he saw the future, an entire Redgreen Band left without a Stell. The blade kept coming.

Suddenly something black and sharp and long sliced through his side, digging into his external obliques and tearing out again. Farrago howled, his sword dropping from his hands. He looked to his right and saw another black-clad Darkling ripping a drenched sword from his side. Farrago fell to the earth, his eyes streaming with bloody pain, searching for his sword.

He found the sword and nearly had his hand on it when he heard the silky voice of Rimmion say, "No."

Farrago slumped. Rimmion stood squarely behind him, holding a curved, black dagger to his throat.



## CHAPTER 18

Af saw his Stell fall. “No!” he cried. The Darkling he fought zipped away and curved around, looping in the air over Rimmion and the other Darkling where they had Farrago.

A figure moving across the Lek, doing something strange with his hands.

Another stranger Darkling flew past, brushing against Af’s wings, and Tap followed fast, his wings roaring with hissing crackle. Af looked up and saw the scar-lip stealth coming fast at him from above, aiming his blade for Af’s head. Af dropped and flipped, kicking and catching scar-lip’s ankle. Scar-lip tumbled in the air, spreading out his wings to right himself.

Then Scar-lip cried out, tumbling again, suddenly out of control. Af flew after him, and he heard someone shout, “Kok-uk! Out of the way, you fool!”

The changeling! Af looked down in wonder and horror to see the lithe, un-Darkling figure drawing a... a bow, *Erlkonig*, the changeling had brought one into the roost, and now scar-lip was staring at Af, an arrow in his throat and one in his heart. The sword fell from his hands and the scar-lip stealth clutched the shaft in his neck. His wings whipped once, twice, and then twitched, stretching out straight as he slumped to the earth, crashing and cratering in the white powder below.

“That’s enough!” someone cried, and Af turned to see a Darkling with a knife to Farrago’s throat.

Up to that moment, the Lek had been swarming with sound, excited prukking and cawpukking, warriors standing and trying to help and trying to keep their mates safe and trying not to get in the way. Now all that sound was gone. Af dropped to the snow and heard the crunch of his boots like a thunderclap.

“No more,” said the knife-wielder. “I am Rimmion of the Redgreens. I suggest you give me what I want.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Af demanded. He stepped up to the body of the fallen Darkling and placed his foot near the body’s head. Black eyes stared up at him from the snow.

Rimmion kept the knife at Farrago’s neck and spoke slowly and smoothly. “This is not how it was supposed to happen,” he said. “But we need this crackle. And we’re going to take it.”

“You let him go.”

Farrago roared, “Forget it, Af! Take him!”

“I can take him,” came another voice, and Af looked quickly to his left to see the changeling’s bow drawn taut, an arrow aimed at Farrago and Rimmion. His steely, thin arms were completely still, chest moving slowly. Two thin lines of steam curled from the changeling’s nostrils.

Af held a hand up. “No.”

✕ 100 ✕



“I can.”

“It’s not your place, freak,” Af said. “And you might hit the Stell.”

“Trust me.”

“Keep dreaming.”

“No dream,” came another, shakier voice, as the tall blond who traveled with the changeling stepped into the Lek, his own bow and arrow raised. “One of us is guaranteed to hit. Rimmion? I’ve been looking for you.” Heinrich glanced at Peter.

Rimmion cleared his throat. “If you three are quite finished,” he said, eyeing the changeling and the human warily. “We can come to an agreement, I think.”

“Af!” Farrago snarled.

“*Sh,*” Rimmion said sharply. He reached behind Farrago’s head and brought up his hand, showing a smear of chalks on his fingers. To Af it was clear Rimmion was saying, *he is mine, you see that, don’t you?* “Now, Farrago is a fine warrior. I have fought with him myself. It would be a shame to lose him over such a small thing as this.”

“You’ve already slain our cracklemaster,” Af shouted. There was a shocked cawpukking in the crowd. This was news to many, and Af felt the outrage shine out in heightened auras.

“And I will slay Farrago. And all of this could have been avoided if he had merely given me the aid I asked. But since you have to do things the hard way...”

Af looked over at Peter, who stood like a statue, his bow still taught. *I can take him. I can.*

“Pennt,” said Rimmion, looking at his one Darkling not carrying a sack or holding anyone hostage. “Take Dervish’s sack.”

The Darkling called Pennt jogged over to the fallen Darkling. Af stepped back. Rimmion was telling the truth—they could not lose Farrago; they could lose crackle. His eyes flitted from Farrago’s throat to the changeling’s bow. In no time Pennt had the sack off and prepared to put it on his shoulder.

“Rimmion!” Heinrich cried, and he was just releasing his bowstring when Kinnet the Redgreen sprang, whipping his wings and kicking Heinrich’s wrist.

Rimmion shrieked, and Af gasped as Farrago jumped forward, free, as an arrow embedded deep in Rimmion’s shoulder. The changeling had shot!

Heinrich was underneath Kinnet, the two wrapped in a dangerous embrace, the elf’s sword arm held back by Heinrich’s powerful wrist. “Wound him!” Heinrich rasped, trying to get his legs under him. “We need him alive!”

Farrago rolled and got to his feet, his throat uncut. Rimmion yanked at the arrow, cursing loudly. Pennt leapt at the changeling, sword out. Af watched the changeling draw his bow once more, almost shooting. Rimmion shouted, “No! No!”

Rimmion chuckled. Blood streaming from his body, he pointed an almost lazy hand at the changeling and at Af. “We have... what we need. Your Stell is wounded.” He held up his hands in a begging gesture, but there was no begging



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in it at all. “Tonight is not the night... to kill Stells.” He whipped his head at the other Darklings. “Or changelings. Such a treasure.”

All of them save the dead Darkling at Af’s feet took off. Pennt and Kinnet broke away from their intended attacks and fell in. Within seconds, they were glistening sparks of white, shrinking in the gray night.

Lying in the snow was a dead Darkling, traded for one sack of crackle.

Farrago walked unsteadily towards Af and put his hand around Af’s neck. He nodded, touching foreheads, and Af stood there quietly, feeling the warmth of his Stell’s mind next to his. Then the Stell looked over at the changeling, pointed almost violently, and said, “We need to talk.”



## CHAPTER 19

Farrago's roost was packed and on the move in a matter of hours, during which time the Stell deferred the "talk" that needed to happen. As the morning wore on the searchers watched the Darklings scurry to get underway once more, and the changeling became aware for the first time just how vast an undertaking it was to move an entire Band.

Heinrich was still caught up in the night before. "We had him right before us," he said. He turned in his saddle and looked over at Peter, whose eyes were on the busy Lek. "We had him at arm's length. And we lost him."

"He was alone," Peter said. "They weren't with him. It wasn't the same as if we'd found him, or them." *Them*. Peter realized he didn't want to say Mary and Christa's names. *They* were out there. Rimmion had *them*.

Heinrich had every right to be angry. As usual, there was little that could be done. "We could have used him."

"You think so? Do you really think that Farrago would let you ransom another Stell?"

"He was threatening to kill Farrago."

Peter nodded. "You think that elevates us? Heinrich, these elves are loyal even when they're killing one another. Rimmion may be a thief, but I'll wager he ranks higher than a mad human." He felt horrible putting it that way, but he was trying to express the way the Darklings were likely to view Heinrich. The changeling sighed. "Take what you can from the encounter. It wasn't our time."

"*Time* is running out," Heinrich said.

Peter nodded. "At the very least we know more now. We've seen Rimmion. We can recognize him. And we know he needs crackle."

Heinrich shook his head. "The fact that they're all so desperate about a mushroom plant. Where do they grow it?"

Peter thought. "I don't know."

"In any event, I think I learned something else last night." Heinrich said.

"What's that?"

"What you'd do," the blond replied.

Peter digested the words and thought. *If that was something you felt you had to learn, then we're in trouble, indeed. Do you think I'm turning on you?*

As if it meant something, he offered, "I shot him."

"Yes, you did." Heinrich nodded, smiling slightly. He indicated the Darklings before them, as they dismantled the various temporary huts, running back and forth across the Lek with cloth and wooden slats. "Look at them. Just like crows," Heinrich said.

"Are you sure?" Peter replied. But they *were* just like crows: wings flapping, jumping in and out of the air across short distances. A Darkling flew



over them with an armful of rope.

“The whole flock, emigrating steadily.”

“Mm-hm,” the changeling nodded. The horses shifted nervously, and Peter patted his mount on the side of the neck. “But crows don’t have nearly the challenge the elves do. Look at that.” Peter pointed at a large net that was being laid out in the Lek, loops on each end, which seemed designed to fit around a Darkling’s waist. Now several females scurried out from the woods surrounding the Lek, carrying sacks of what Peter took to be crackle, laying them in the netting. After they lay each mound of bags, the Darklings would clasp the nets closed and hook them in place.

Peter went on, “They have to carry a lot, just as we do. Think of the prospect of moving a town of a thousand on a moment’s notice. Think of having a *process* for doing that.” By this time, the wide net of crackle was now a rectangular web-work of crackle sacks with loops for four carriers. As soon as it was completed the whole thing was picked up and moved out of the way.

Another netting dropped in its place, this one even more elaborately constructed. Spaced three feet apart from one another were three heavy netted areas big enough to hold a human. The whole net laid out was thirty feet long, and Peter saw three more just like it lain behind this one. “What could that be for?” Heinrich said.

Now a curious moaning emanated from the wood. Peter watched as Tap moved out into the Lek, leading a huddled mass of Darklings. These were huddled together, chanting aloud to the dead god. “The Nekros,” Peter said.

One by one, the Nekros were gently led by the arm by Darklings and lain down. They lay down in the nets, their face in the snow, their sickly, near-featherless wings twitching as the nets were closed up around them. Once nine had been placed, the carriers for these nets immediately strapped themselves in.

“They’re moving these out of the way,” Peter said. “They have to lay more.” Each carry net had four Darklings supporting it, and as soon as the loops went around the carrier’s waists, they began flapping their wings. The carriers were exceptionally strong-looking Darklings, Peter noticed, and the crackle hissed and spewed as they flapped and lifted from the ground. Within a moment the four Darklings were in the sky heading north. They were followed in short order by four more, and four more, each carrying three bound Nekros.

“They’re leaving early,” Heinrich said, as they watched the Darklings slowly move out into the sky.

“They have to,” said Zoë, as she emerged from the wood with several nets over her shoulder. “They’re going to have a hard time keeping up with the rest of us as it is.”

The whole routine repeated itself; nine and nine and nine Nekros lifted off and carried by four and four and four large, strong warriors.

Peter was amazed. “You do this every time you move?”

“Every time,” Zoë said. She hurried across the Lek. She stopped and





looked back. “Did you see if they secured the crackle yet?”

“Hm? Oh, yes.”

Zoë looked across and nodded when she saw the crackle netting, laid aside. “Good. We haven’t a new Cracklemaster yet.” This last she said with a dull, lifeless sound.

Peter shifted in his saddle. “Is there any we can help assist?” But Zoë had already disappeared, lost in a crowd of scurrying, flitting Darklings.

“Something just occurred to me,” Heinrich said.

“What’s that?”

“Once the whole Band is underway, I don’t know how we’re going to keep up with them.”

The thought sank in, and Peter realized Heinrich was right. There was no way they’d ride fast enough to keep up. The best they could do would be to find out ahead of time where the Band was headed. But they’d be a day late, at best. Another Nekro carrier net interrupted Peter’s thoughts, whisked out and onto the Lek.

“Oh,” Peter said. Zoë reemerged, stopping to confer briefly with the females laying the nets out.

“You two,” she said, clapping her hands.

“What?” Heinrich demanded.

“Get on,” she said. “We don’t have much time.”

Heinrich looked angrily at Peter. “If she thinks I’m going to be bound up and hoisted across the German Lands...”

“I don’t see that you have a choice.” Zoë rested her small fists on her hips. “You can’t keep up with us on those beasts.”

“But we’re on a search, do you think this will be the best way?” Peter looked up, to see Darklings already taking to the air in formation, a heavy stream of black wings moving northward. Were they about to lose the whole scent?

“Come on.”

Peter shrugged at Heinrich and slid down, stepping over to the nets. Heinrich struggled with his decision and finally slid down, too, stepping across the snow as if it were molten lead.

“Lay down,” Zoë said. She spoke a few words in Darkling to the net workers.

Peter lowered himself onto the netting. The snow pushed up into his clothing. Heinrich grumbled, but did the same. He looked sideways, even as the net closed over him, elfin fingers working clasps all up and down his back. “What about our horses?”

Zoë shrugged. “We can’t spare the fliers to carry horses, Peter.”

*So long, Red.* “What about our gear?”

“We’ve got it,” Zoë pointed back at the horses, where Darklings were already stripping off Peter and Heinrich’s saddlebags and taking to the air with them. She crouched next to Peter’s head and laid her hand on the back of his neck. He felt like a pig on a spit, and yet he thrilled at the feeling that he was about to go



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somewhere he had never dreamed of: the sky. “Don’t worry,” she said

There was an empty spot on the net still, and now Zoë lay down in it and was bound up in an instant. The net slid around her wings, which stuck out. Of course. She still couldn’t fly.

Peter was now lying on the snow, bound up between Zoë and Heinrich, three feet from each, his eyes level with the cold floor of the Lek. The net workers were gone. To his right, Heinrich seemed uncomfortable in the extreme, his whole body fidgeting dramatically in the ropes as if they itched. Zoë laid her head on its side in the snow and smiled.

“The only way to travel.”

Peter saw that the carrier loops at the edge were still empty. “Who’s going to carry us?”

“Oh, two I don’t know,” Zoë rolled her eyes, “and Af and Tap.”

“I don’t believe this,” Heinrich said into the snow.

Shortly the two lieutenants emerged, conferring quickly with their comrades. Peter saw them barely acknowledge Heinrich and cast a slight glare at Peter, but they concerned themselves mainly with donning the carrier loops.

Within moments Peter and Heinrich and Zoë were aloft, sliding past the treetops like skates on ice.



A thousand sets of wings flapped smoothly in the air. Stretching out before him Peter saw a column of tunics and wings nearly a mile long, regularly dotted by brilliant blue sashes. It was an awesome sight.

For the first hour or so, the Blue Band Darklings chattered excitedly, the sounds tripping back across the wings and muddling with the wind in Peter’s ears. The net itself was not so uncomfortable, thick enough on the underside to keep from digging into the rider’s clothing and skin. Even Heinrich gradually seemed to relax, lying still and watching the gargantuan procession of the Blue Band.

After the first hour, the chatter gave way slowly to singing, the phrases lost as easily to Peter as the talk had been. He watched the snow-blanketed firs and mountains moving slowly past him and caught images in the songs, the Erl-king flying across—what was it—nothing but the stars? Something like that. The making of his wings when he “heard the Darklings call.” Did that mean that the Erl-king had not created the Darklings? Or that they had called out to be created?

Later came the Nornagesta, the man who was not man, who sent the Erlkonig to his final rest. It didn’t seem clear where Nornagesta came from, or why he fought the Erl-King. So many things in the strange religion of the dark elves seemed as muddled as the sounds coming to Peter’s ears.

Peter turned his head and looked at Zoë, who seemed lost in the trees. “What does it mean, ‘make your own wings?’”

The scout blinked. “That’s what the Erl-King taught the Darklings.”

“They didn’t have wings?”

✕ 106 ✕



“They—we—had High Wings at first,” Zoë nodded, “and we flew as the Erl-king did. But he took those away, gave us lesser wings.”

“Why?”

“Because we followed Manlover.”

“And the High Wings fell to earth, you sang that. They became this plant, the crackle, somehow.”

“Yes.”

*And just how did that work?* Peter jumped subjects. “Did the Erl-King make his own wings?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

Peter sighed. “Why would he need to do that? And where was all this, anyway? Where were the Darklings? Did he make them, too?”

“I don’t understand,” she said, focusing on him narrowly.

“I mean, did he create them?”

“He heard them and came to them.”

“So he didn’t create them,” Peter said.

“You make me tired,” Zoë said. “You mean, like you create a clay pot? What difference does it make?”

Peter backed up. “I mean, God created man in his own image.”

Zoë stared. “Your god, you mean? All right.”

“And the Erl-king....” Peter nodded his head, leading.

“Heard the Darklings and came to them.”

“So he didn’t create them.”

“I don’t know about that,” Zoë said.

Peter gritted his teeth. “Why is this so difficult?”

“Why do you ask?” Zoë smiled. Peter sighed, and she continued, “No, Peter, I mean, what is it you want to know? I don’t understand what you’re asking.”

He looked at the Band, flapping along, singing. “I guess it’s not important. Besides, there are other issues.”

“Like?”

“Like if the Erl-King said, ‘Make your own wings,’ but he *gave* you the wings you have, then what on earth did that mean?”

“I never said he gave us the wings we have.”

“Yes you did.” From out on the end of a tether, Af looked over and registered annoyance that Peter was talking to his almost-but-not-quite intended. Peter felt a rush of guilt, trap, and exhilaration at once.

“Well, not literally.” Zoë frowned, unaware of or ignoring Af’s attention.

Peter stared. “So he didn’t physically alter your wings when he took away your, ah, High Wings.”

Zoë shrugged. “Why could you possibly want to know this?”

“I just don’t understand what any of this means.”



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“Peter, you’re not even a Darkling. Why do you care?”

Peter stammered, looking for an answer. “I was just curious.” After a moment he started over somewhere else. “Why don’t you use arrows?”

“Erlkonig called them the weapons of cowards and humans.”

The changeling nodded. “So you’ve never used them.”

“It would be a Manlover sin,” Zoë shook her head. “Although I think Gol used them.”

This was a new name. “Gol?”

“Golanlandaliay, King of the wood elves.”

“Ah, those mysterious wood elves, again. Did the Erlkonig make them, too?”

Zoë shrugged and sighed. “They’re lost in the trees.”

“Lost in the...?”

“Changeling!” came another voice, and Peter looked forward to see a figure breaking off from the column and wing his way down underneath the thousand, coming fast towards the rear, where Nekros and changelings and humans were carried. It was Stell Farrago.

Suddenly he was there, enlarging in Peter’s view, his wings wide and bringing him to a near halt, until he dropped in underneath Peter, flying inverted. “I said we should talk.”

Peter nodded at the Stell, who was staring up into his eyes. Farrago looked over and nodded at Tap, then flipped, flying out of sight. Suddenly Peter felt Farrago’s hands drumming rapidly down his back. The changeling realized with shock that he was being unbound.

Peter felt himself lurch to the side, his weight rolling free of the straps that held him. Zoë and Heinrich both shouted, “Peter!” He felt the nets sliding forward out from under him as he fell back. He flailed, trying to grab the net, but missed, and suddenly he was falling.



## CHAPTER 20

Peter looked down and saw the snow and trees hurtling towards him. They had been tricked. Heinrich was heading for death, and Peter was being tossed into the forest. He envisioned himself slamming down, brains spilling like egg yolks on a snow-topped Juniper.

He could not close his eyes, but watched the enlarging greenery speeding towards him. *Hail Mary full of grace—*

There was a painful lurch, his shoulders yanking up and forward with his body slinging behind. He leveled out and began to rise.

Peter looked back over his shoulder, his eyes swiveling farther back, and he saw Farrago, his black wings bursting and crackling, the Stell's white hands gripping Peter's armpits.

Farrago slid closer, clasping his arms around Peter, pressing their bodies together as if in a mating. And the Stell was laughing.

"What are you doing?"

"If my wings are going to carry you, we have to be close," Farrago said. "You trust me, don't you?" Farrago's head was practically on Peter's shoulder, so close Peter could feel the cold of Farrago's skin next to Peter's face.

Peter swallowed painfully, staring down at the trees, now shrinking away as the pair moved slowly forward. "I seem constantly compelled to ask if I have a choice."

"Hm." The wings whipped repeatedly, and Peter heard the strange hissing sound they made when the feathers crackled. "I suppose life is often like that."

"What, ah..." Peter looked up and ahead to see the rest of the Band losing them, the rear half a mile away now. "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

"A lot of things," the Stell said. His body was so *light*, Peter realized, even lighter than his own. "Hold on—here—strap this around your ribs."

Peter looked down to see Farrago's hands on either side of his torso, offering him a heavy, buckled strap. Peter took them quickly and fastened the ties. Farrago did not let go, but breathed a bit steadier now, letting more of Peter's weight onto the strap. Peter looked back, watching Farrago's wings work, close up, and he realized just how muscular and strong a pair of wings could be. He could see the white skin underneath the feathers, hissing and glistening with oils and crackle. They looked, for all the world, like a pair of gigantic, heavily veined arms, draped with dense flesh and covered with feathers. These wings were those of the strongest of athletes, had they been arms.

Below them, still far below, a hawk circled, and Peter stared for a moment at its body and its two wings and two talons. Birds had: two wings and two legs. Humans: two arms and two legs. Humans were special creations. Everyone else had special hands, like paws or claws. Or wings? Was a wing like a claw or



paw? Peter's mind began to swim as animals started falling like tiles in his mind, clack, clack, clack. Cat. Four paws. Bear. Four claws. Dog. Four Paws.

Four, four, four.

Ducks. Two wings, two legs.

Darklings. Two legs. Two arms. Two wings. Six.

Six?

"Now," Farrago said. Peter snapped back to the present as the hawk far below spun away. "First off, you saved us a lot of crackle. Thank you."

"You're welcome. You've got a lot of crackle, Stell."

"Cuk-wo."

"Does it really take that much?"

Six?

"It takes a lot, but we have more than we need. For once. We're running this crackle to Wintercamp. It's a favor I owed MacDuff."

"MacDuff?"

"He runs Wintercamp," said the Stell. The wind sliced past Peter's ears. "And we're finally going in. They need crackle, and we're replenishing their stock. It doesn't grow in a lot of places, and most of us don't have time to plant more. They can grow it there, but they also need a lot."

So that was what the surplus was for.

"So those are my thanks. There's more to discuss."

"But if crackle is necessary, why isn't there more of it?"

"You're new to our little community, so maybe you should just listen," Farrago said smoothly. Peter could hear the Stell trying to decide how harshly to carry this off. "You also shot a Stell. With an arrow."

"He had you by the throat," Peter said. "I heard you tell Af—"

"I told Af. Not you. Don't be mistaken; you saved me, of course. And that's... complicated, but a good thing."

Complicated? Then Peter realized what Farrago meant. The Stell had lost valuable face back there, held hostage by another Stell. Af saving Farrago would have been well within expectations, but Peter...

"You don't wish you were dead, surely." Peter said.

"You shot an arrow at a Darkling. I don't think you're quite aware of the depth of that action, Peter. Bows are against everything we believe in."

"But I saved your *life*."

"No arguments, here," Farrago said flatly. "None. You're not going to argue with a Darkling Stell who's likely to get tired of carrying you," he said. It was so gentle a threat that Peter couldn't even be sure if Farrago were serious.

"What should I have done?"

Farrago smiled. "Now you're thinking. 'What should I have done?' I'll answer this much. As long as you fly with my Band, no arrows."

"But I'm not a swordsman."

"Peter, you're not even a Darkling. Now this is settled, all right? I'm going



to have to spend weeks helping the priests teach everybody that what they saw save their Stell is not to be considered a good thing. Do you know how tricky that's going to be?"

The changeling wanted to say, *Sorry for being such an inconvenience*, but he bit his tongue.

Farrago said finally, as if checking an item off a list, "Are we clear on that one?"

"Yes," Peter said sullenly.

"Then on to the next. As you know, the Band that raided us was the Band who took your companion's sisters."

"Is he going to Wintercamp?"

"I don't know. To be honest," the Stell confided, "I'm almost certain he won't, especially now that he's replenished his crackle supply."

Peter wondered what he was going to tell Heinrich. "We have to follow the Redgreen Band," he said. "Rimmion, right?"

"Rimmion. He had a very special interest in you, as do I. And when I said you might find some of the answers you're looking for at Wintercamp, I meant that there's someone there I want to have a good look at you."

"Then what?" Peter asked. "It's been a week Heinrich's sisters have been gone. He won't wait around." *And I shouldn't, either*, Peter scolded himself. *I love them. I have cared for them. And I promised Heinrich.*

"You saved a Stell's life. And you saved a great deal of relief crackle bound for Wintercamp." Farrago said. "I owe you a great debt. I promise, on my honor, I will aid you in your quest."

Peter sighed. "So where do we start?"

"We start by bringing you—and even your friend—into the fold." Peter's looked back to see Farrago's eyes trailing off, as if formulating a strategy. "We start at Wintercamp."

It took a week. A week of flying, of Heinrich moaning, of Peter listening to Darkling sagen. A week, as the skies grew colder, and the ground below changed from deep green to jagged peaks of gray and white.

And then, suddenly, it appeared.



## CHAPTER 21

The thousand could have flown right down into the complex atop the mountain, but under Farrago's direction, they wound their way to the mountainside and settled on the bare flat plain outside a high, wooden gate. The moonlight glistened on the snow as Farrago stepped to the gate. There was no knocker or lever in sight, only the tight, heavy boards, and a gigantic Cistercian cross burned into the wood.

Farrago stood before the gate and opened his mouth, bending his neck far back in a deeply respectful begging gesture. Then he drew his sword, and the sound of his Stellish pommel landing on the wood echoed down the mountainside and in the ears of the weary Blue Band.

Snow scraped and fell from the gate, icicles shattering like frozen wings. Slowly and smoothly, in one long motion, both sides of the gate swung wide.

A man—a priest—stood in the gateway, a dark hood on his shoulders. His beard and hair were as gray as ash, his cloak that of his priestly order. But the arm that held his staff, the chest that rose and fell underneath his cassock, were those of a warrior.

“Welcome,” said the gray man, “to Wintercamp.”





## CHAPTER 22

Different Band. Same Alps. Worse fortune.

Up high, where the air was thin, Tristan grunted, muscles throbbing. His teeth chattered painfully. He looked through clouds and past the darkandwhite jutting teeth of the mountains before him and to the far horizon. Whipping his wings and rising, he focused his eyes on a distant peak. Tristan looked over his shoulder at Azzer and said, "We just might make it."

Azzer looked as if he wanted to laugh, but his mouth barely moved to smile or open at all, his face a horrid blue. Azzer's eyes gleamed, though, as he nodded, tipped, and began return descent.

Tristan followed, cold air slicing over his wings as his body temperature dropped, wings hissing loudly with the sound. His feathers felt stiff, as if they might break off. They couldn't stay this high long, but they had wanted to see. And they had seen.

By dawn's light, Tristan and Azzer of the Grays had caught first sight of Wintercamp on the far horizon, near the Zugspitze. Having confirmed that they were still en route, the two dropped steadily down to the altitude where flew the rest of the contingent.

The two Darklings found the other five Grays moving slowly through the valley below, their wingbeats punctuated by a steady, nasty series of coughs. Lamm, the leader, was coughing now, too.

"Lamm!" Tristan called out, and Lamm looked up, his eyes bleary and a bit shineburnt.

Tristan and Azzer dipped down and came around next to Lamm, who cleared his throat and said, "Report."

"Wintercamp's in sight," Tristan said, reaching out to touch Lamm's chinks. Lamm looked back at the rest of the Band and coughed. "How long?"

Tristan looked at Azzer and tried to decide how truthful he wanted to be. Azzer spoke up. "Three days, sir."

This was less than truthful, and Lamm looked to Tristan for clarification as if he could smell the lie. "Tristan?"

Tristan cocked his head, frowning. "Could be. Maybe four." This was still conservative, but it was closer. Maybe they could make it in four days.

The seven members of the Gray Band who were healthy enough to try the flight had been making poor time across the mountains, and by the morning of the catastrophe, the harsh conditions had begun to take their toll. Tristan was healthy and had no Nekro, but icy wind and freezing rain had brought him to a point where his wings ached as if on fire and he was afraid he'd have to put down in the snow for good, find some tree to crawl into and die.

The rest were doing worse: Lamm, the leader, had shown the first stages of



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Nekro three days into the trip and was losing feathers fast and strength faster, and Tristan found he could almost navigate by the sound of Lamm's coughing. Lark, Riven and Lith, of course, had had the disease at the start, and were still sick but making it. Azzer and the young one, Flint, were fine, but like Tristan, exhausted.

This was the brave contingent sent by the Gray Band to bring back medicine from Wintercamp. At first embarking, they had known that if anyone were going to make it, in the end, it would most likely be the four without the Nekro. But by the sixth day, the number of healthies having dwindled to three, Tristan was beginning to have his doubts. Sure, then. Three days. Four days. Whatever.

At mid-day they stopped to trade in a town called Delfburg, as named on the sign that said, *Elf, don't let the sun set on you in Delfburg*. Tristan led the healthies while the rest waited outside of town. Soon thereafter they were on the wing and headed once more into the mountains. They would see no more human towns for the rest of the trip.

Two days later, they were down to two healthies, Tristan and Azzer. Tristan preferred to fly anchor, keeping everyone's altitude in check a thousand feet over the ground, wherever it happened to be. Azzer took the lead. Feathers fell like slow rain.

Azzer and Tristan and Lamm conferred that afternoon, when Wintercamp mountain stood much larger in their sites. They had come to the top of a mountain range and found the far side of the central mount sloped out towards Wintercamp, leveling off into a passable valley—not actually a valley, but lower than the surrounding peaks—where they knew the air would be more breathable.

“Straight on,” Lamm coughed. Lamm had to beat his wings at least twice as many times as Tristan and Azzer too stay aloft, and the strain was showing.

“Looks good,” said Azzer.

“I'm not sure,” Tristan said. The other two looked at him, and back at the other four, as if to say that hesitation would kill. “Look.” Tristan pointed up at the pseudo-valley. “Look at the snow. That's a lot of wind, isn't it?” The snow seemed to be flurrying, but he knew he was grasping at straws. Something seemed strange.

“Wind and snow we can handle,” Lamm said. “And I'm still leader here. Straight on.”

“Right,” said Tristan.



## CHAPTER 23

At about the time Tristan's Band was meeting its fate and the Blues were getting their first taste of Wintercamp, two human girls found themselves alone for the first time in Davert Forest. Davert Forest was the stuff of souls, of shadows singing and flowing like water. Davert Forest was the name men called it. To elves and those who knew, it was Soulstuff wood. It was the entrance to the place called the City of Douglas.

Mary Hauptmann found herself standing in a path where no snow had fallen, when she had been sure she had seen snow before. In the shadows she clung to her younger sister, alone beside a thick fir tree. All about them were dark mushrooms, swaying gently. The sun had fallen, and the elves, those good elves who had rescued them from the bad, had gone.

"They've left us," she said, her voice whispering.

Christa shook at the words. "Noooo." She shook her head, burrowing it into Mary's coat.

"They've left us," Mary said again, and the words seemed to blast out so forcefully that the trees rippled. They *did*, rippling like dark green liquid, like a of the surface of a deep river.

Then the trees spoke, a thousand voices at once, all of them high, squeaking, timorously flowing across one another and emanating from the trees. "You're not alone!"

Mary gasped. She felt her feet nudged forward, as if the ground had pressed on her heel. Now the great fir tree, so darkly green that it was almost black, seemed so barely solid that it reflected her and Christa's trembling faces in its limbs. The ground sloped, flowing and solid again, and Mary and Christa were sliding gently forward as it moved them along.

"Don't be afraid," the voices sang.

Christa peered briefly away from Mary's coat and said, "What's happening?" They fell slowly forward.

The great, black-green fir rippled and blossomed in finely etched layers, opened up and engulfed them, swallowing them, drinking them down.



Mary found herself standing in an entirely black forest, the light emanating from nowhere and everywhere. There were black leaves flowing, and black trees flowing, too, and a great river flowed, black as pitch, the waves walking in different directions, flowing as they pleased.

"Mary and Christa," said the voices, and every wave spoke, every leaf sang, every tree and every limb turned unseen eyes and said, "Christa and Mary."

Mary screamed, "What do you want with us?"

"They wanted to meet you," came a new voice, pure and silky. In the center



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of the dark river a pair of waves met and entwined, looping around and forming liquid circles. The circles solidified into black orbs that split down the center and opened, a pair of glimmering crystal eyes staring out. The eyes danced on black tendrils that looped and folded, forming lips and jaw and face and head, shoulders and body rising black on the water. Finally there stood a man, all black and flowing. He stepped forward, and his chest seemed to harden into a layer of cloth, covering over arms and legs.

The black, crystal-eyed man said, "I wanted to meet you, too."

Christa pulled away from Mary's coat and looked, her voice trembling but curious. "Who is it?"

Mary said sternly, "The Devil."

"Not the devil," said the man, as he stepped on dark waves until he came to the flowing floor. "The Douglas."

"Douglas?"

The forest sang softly, "The dweller by the dark stream."

The black mouth smiled. "Something like that." Then his face turned white: his crystal eyes shimmered and white strands seem to stretch out from them, flowing like milky veins over his face and neck, until his head covered over with a white shell-like skin, leaving a slick of black hair on top. Mary watched the tall, prince-like figure kneel down and reach out his hand, touching each of the girls on the shoulder, one at a time. "You've never heard of me?"

"No." She shivered, but there was something trustworthy in Douglas's voice, something that made him more like a child than a man.

"You have been brought," he whispered, looking gently from Mary to Christa and back, "to the City of Douglas, the hidden home of the Darklings. I am Douglas, the one son of the Erl-King. You are here that you might help me."

"Help you?"

"You'll see what I mean," the Prince said. "There are others like you here, and you will meet them. There are sick Darklings here, and Darklings about to lay. They need your help."

"Who are these?" Mary looked around, listening to the incessant whispering of the dark leaves and waves and even the ground, which sang, too.

"There is so much to teach you." Douglas looked down at the ground and scooped up a handful of black soil, and the soil seemed to flow in his palm, liquid, then granular again. He shook his head. "This world you see here now is the soulstuff. Flowing in this matter, in this soil, in that water- in my body, even—are a thousand souls, adopted by my father. They were children, once, like you."

Christa gasped. "You want our souls?"

"No!" Douglas' eyes grew wide. "Good heavens, no. No, that's... that's under control. But everything I do I can do because of them. They are my brothers and sisters as surely as the Darklings are, and more so." As Mary watched, the soil flowed into Douglas' palm and disappeared. "They wanted to



meet you, as they do every new helper who comes. Truth be told, I'm more comfortable meeting you in here."

Mary looked around, listening to the forest, which seemed to go on endlessly in all directions. She had no idea how this place could be within the tree.

She had heard of this, hadn't she? Hadn't Peter told them of the human girls who went to help the sick elves, but were they stolen, or were they invited? The walls were singing with life. There was magic here, magic she had felt in dreams so many times before.

But this was wrong; she should be home. She gave a slight curtsy. "I... I thank you for your hospitality. But we're lost, you see. Our home was attacked by Darklings, and Stell Rimmion, who brought us here, rescued us. But we have a brother, and I'm sure he'll be looking for us."

"Oh," Douglas watched them for a moment, his crystal eyes swirling brilliantly beneath the white eggshell skin. "Rimmion was concerned for your safety; I'm sure he didn't know you had a brother looking for you. I'm sure of that. Of course, I'll keep an eye out. But... but," Mary felt Douglas' warm, almost liquid hands on her face, and she felt the blood rush to her cheeks. "But please, I beg of you. Stay with us. Help us. The elves are sick, and we need the help of children like you. There is time for you to learn what I have to teach, and I can give you such a home here. Of course I will send for your brother, but..." He bowed his head for a moment. "You understand, don't you, that your parents are..."

Mary sniffed. "We saw... we saw..."

"Shhh," Douglas said, his hands on her face. "Shh. You're safe now."

"Until my brother comes?"

"Until your brother comes," he said. Mary watched Douglas' crystal eyes, and believed them. "Now," Douglas said. "You two must be hungry."

"Yes," Christa said. Mary nodded in agreement.

"Good. We'll eat, then. And then you will meet the women."



## CHAPTER 24

Farrago closed the flap on the hut behind him and rejoined the monk MacDuff in the snow outside. The moment Farrago came alongside, MacDuff began to walk again, at a fast, steady clip. Farrago had long ago learned that the staff MacDuff carried was not for walking. Sometimes he spoke with it.

“You’re the largest Band to make it in,” MacDuff said. He clasped Farrago’s shoulder firmly, a human gesture, and then his hands fell behind his back. MacDuff spoke German, and Farrago was comfortable enough in that human tongue to use it. There was something odd, though, about the monk’s rumbling speech that occasionally sounded strange and made it difficult for Farrago to understand. The humans had a lot of dialects, and Farrago wondered what MacDuff’s real tongue sounded like.

“I think we brought enough crackle,” Farrago smiled.

“Aye,” MacDuff nodded. Underneath his hood, MacDuff’s eyes were shiny and gray, and he appeared ghostly, a gray image stepping with impossible lightness across the snow. They walked up a path, away from the Blue Band area, away from the communal Lek and the rest of the buildings. When they stopped, Farrago found himself looking down past the Blue Band, where Darklings still scurried, setting up camp for a whole winter, down the mountainside into the valley. Far down the mountain he saw a dark patch of lower snow, the snowy fir tops making a glistening outline around the great shadow.

“Which lake is that?” Farrago asked. “The Eibsee?”

“Aye, the Eibsee,” MacDuff said. “It’s a decent protection on the south side of the mountain. But the real defense is the climb.”

“Who do you expect to attack that might be climbing?” Farrago looked at the monk.

MacDuff sighed. “And not flying, you mean? Just watching our back. I hope. At any rate I’m glad for the new location.” In previous years, when Farrago had rendezvoused briefly at Wintercamp, they had been in Magdeburg.

“I notice there’s still a monastery attached.”

“Aye,” MacDuff said. “But it’s new. These are what they call ‘Elf-Beguines,’ clergy who want to work with the elves.”

“How nice.”

“They want to save your souls.” MacDuff raised an eyebrow. “But be glad of it, Farr.”

“Think I could use a little soul-saving?”

MacDuff gestured at the monastery, on the west edge of the complex, then sighed again, closing his large arms over his robed frame. “At least they think you *have* souls. The fact is the Church wanted Wintercamp ended. Emperor Frederick set us up, but the news is he’s sick. No one else is very supportive.



Having an arm of the church here, even a small, less than popular one, helps.”

“And the Vehm?”

“I don’t know. I used to think the Order of the Holy Vehm liked having you in one place for a predictable part of the year. They even toyed with taking over the camp.” MacDuff shook his head. “I wouldn’t trust that. And I didn’t. So in what seemed to everybody like a compromise, the monks who wanted to work with elves founded a new Order, and we all came up here.”

“I think it’s a better camp,” Farrago shrugged.

MacDuff chewed his lip and then smiled mischievously. “I believe the empire wanted us down on ground level. But I never asked, and here we are.”

Farrago studied the gray man for a moment. Human emotions weren’t much harder than the Darklings’ to read, even despite the small eyes, but MacDuff was a thickly guarded creature. Even his aura seemed muffled, as if he kept a thin gray line around his body. “You’re a curious human,” he said finally.

“Oh?”

“You don’t want to convert us, I don’t think. You’re not afraid of us. Why do you do all of this, convince your emperor to give us a place, find ways to give us medicine? What’s *your* agenda, MacDuff?”

MacDuff blinked, and in the moment his eyes were closed Farrago caught aural images, flitting like wings under his eyelids. When MacDuff opened them he said, “I just want to see that all God’s creatures are taken care of.”

“Right,” Farrago smirked. “Right.”

“I’m glad you finally made it, Farrago. It’s good to have a strong Band on hand,” MacDuff leaned forward, his brow furrowing. “It might bring a little order. A little security. I understand you had a run-in with Rimmion.”

“I wouldn’t be expecting the Redgreen Band to come in.”

“I’m not,” MacDuff said.

“Where do you suppose they winter?”

“Excellent question.” MacDuff stared. Farrago realized he was being studied, as water-wheels churned in MacDuff’s eyes and splashed over with gray waves.

“Are you hungry, MacDuff?”

“Eh?” The monk blinked, as if the question were alien to him, and then he said, “Oh. I guess it’s been awhile. Why, are you hungry?”

Farrago smiled. “So hungry that I can smell the mutton. Besides, I’d like to see the other Bands.”

“Then by all means,” MacDuff said retrieving his staff from the tree against which he’d lain it. “Let’s find something to eat. Of course,” he muttered to himself, almost chuckling. “Of course, you’re hungry.”

*Weird human.* And Farrago had known him for years.

As they walked down the path, into the compound and towards the mess hall, Farrago said, “If you’d care for some company, we have a fellow traveler I’d like you to meet.”



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“Ah, yes,” MacDuff nodded, his staff moving, heavy boots barely making a sound against the snow as he walked. “Your changeling.”



Supper at Wintercamp, Farrago found, was an almost strictly Darkling affair. The mess hall was lit by torches posted at intervals. The shimmering sashes and white and gray hair flashed about the room. Scattered down long, simply laid tables were more dark elves than Farrago had seen in a very long time. It was no surprise that the Bands segregated themselves with little exception. In the far west corner Farrago made out glimmers of orange, with Stell Naran eating quietly with a tiny group of followers. One at a time the Oranges cast glances clear across the room at Farrago, and he felt the conversation in the room trip on itself. The White/Yellow Band made up a much larger contingent on the room’s east side, with what appeared to be at least two hundred, maybe more. Farrago craned his neck a bit as he followed MacDuff, and finally saw Stell Drager’s profile, and a White/Yellow Darkling tapped Drager’s wing, causing Drager to look across, and muster a minute smile.

“I’ll want to meet with the Stells, if that’s possible,” said Farrago, as he counted off the other Bands, some great, some small. Green. Blue/Green. Red/White. Green/Yellow.

“Of course,” MacDuff nodded. “I think that’s a fine idea.” The pair swept through the crowd until they reached the north side, and Farrago felt proud prickles on his chinks as he walked among his own Band.

Now Farrago felt the conversation in the room trip distinctly, a more and more of the Darklings turned to look at Farrago. At first he swore the faces were hostile, then he realized that was just his own nervousness; they weren’t hostile at all, they were...

“High Wings!” cried a voice, and Farrago recognized it instantly as that of Naran, who stood at his table, holding a wooden goblet aloft. His sickly, straggling Band stood immediately and turned, holding up their vessels.

There followed an enormous noise, wood scraping, wings fluffing as every Band and every Darkling stood. “High Wings to Farrago!”

Farrago felt MacDuff beaming. He looked over and saw Alezan, standing at the first Blue table, and the Blue Band was standing as well. Farrago swiveled, spinning slowly to see the whole room, every goblet, every tired face, and heard them shout, “High Wings! High Wings! To Farrago!”

The cry went on twice more. High Wings! They were calling him that which the Darklings were before Erl-King punished them for the Manlover sin and bound them to earth. Farrago’s eyes widened with joy, and he opened his mouth in the begging stance, and as the huzzah died down he turned and tried to take a seat as Stelligly as he could.

Farrago felt himself sliding onto a stool at the head of the first Blue table, and nodded absently at Alezan, at the other end, as MacDuff sat next to him. His mind was racing. Last year Drager’s White/Yellows had numbered nearly





two thousand. And what the Hell happened to Naran's Band? "Erlkonig," he whispered sadly.

"Yes," MacDuff said, and Farrago felt the monk's eyes following Farrago's own. "You hadn't realized, had you?"

"We're the largest."

"With how many?"

"A little over a thousand."

"Congratulations. You've more than doubled the entire contingent."

"These are not matters of congratulations. Erlkonig shimmering, MacDuff, we're dying out, aren't we?" His voice was a whisper.

MacDuff leaned in on his elbows, rubbing his hands, knuckles in his gray beard. "But congratulations *are* in order. These children of the Erl-King put their hopes in you, because of how healthy you and your Band have remained. You're accomplishing a great deal. You're surviving."



## CHAPTER 25

“Can you believe this?” Zoë nudged Peter with her good wing and put down the piece of mutton she had been chewing. Bits of glistening lamb flesh clung to her sharp teeth, and she whisked a dark tongue across them, making the meat disappear.

Peter had no response but a raised eyebrow at Heinrich, who seemed especially agitated to be in a mess hall among two thousand Darklings. He had suggested they start canvassing the present Bands immediately for information on Rimmion’s whereabouts, but Peter had recommended that they at least eat first.

Heinrich’s agitation was a weary one. It was as if Heinrich had grown tired of registering too much discomfort. Two weeks into the search, they seemed as far from a lead on the lost sisters as ever. Peter would have had a hard time keeping his mind if not for the fact that every look Heinrich shot him communicated the same thing: this is interesting, but not what we’re here for.

Leed, Zoë’s nestmate, sat next to Heinrich and across from Zoë, and she and Zoë seemed to chirp and giggle in a rapid dialect that mocked even the complexity of the Darkling language.

On the other side of Zoë, Af ate greedily, sharing witticisms with his brother, who smiled politely at each one. Tap had a life and mind of his own, surely, but damned if anyone knew what it was.

Occasionally Af would lean over and whisper something in Zoë’s ear, and Zoë would turn and speak to him with what appeared to be a pleasantness one lends an annoying but friendly stranger. Peter saw Af look at him directly and crossly and then turn back to his brother and comrades at the table. When Zoë spoke to Peter again, he felt as if he were winning a private war.

Peter had never seen so many elfin auras in his life, and the sensation was so overwhelming, so awash in blue shimmers, that he found the auras blending together, until the whole room sang and glowed as one, and all the sashes meant nothing. Zoë asked him something but Peter found his mind locking in on a strange, gray glow, and he turned, looking down the length of the table, to rest next to Stell Farrago. A hooded face nodded. For a moment Peter saw the face turn slightly, a pair of shimmering eyes sweeping the table like a beacon, resting on Peter and sweeping away. The hooded man turned his gaze back to Farrago.

Zoë went on, “I said, have you seen the quarters?”

Peter shook his head. “No. Well, briefly.”

Zoë was practically ecstatic, and her bandaged wing was moving more, indicating that either it wasn’t hurting as much or that she didn’t care enough to chasten her enthusiasm by limiting her movements. “They’re *permanent*. Strong wood, raised nesting, and we’re near the peak. Erl-King, what a



wonderful place. It's like the Dark Nest!"

"The Dark Nest?"

Heinrich spoke, nodding. "The home the Erl-King built to house his children, and rebuilt wherever he went."

"I find myself awed that you know that." Zoë laughed, and Peter watched her slender neck as she bent forward.

Heinrich kept a darkened, if pink, face. "I only know that it was very hard to attack."

Peter rolled his eyes to Zoë. "It's the kind of thing the Vehm would know."

"Ho," Zoë chirped. "Well, this is just as good."

Heinrich allowed a slight smile. "I'm afraid it just may be."

Peter felt someone tap him on the shoulder, and he looked up to see a Darkling leaning in between him and Zoë.

"Mart!" Zoë exclaimed. "Here, join us. This is Peter, the changeling who saved the Stell's life!"

The Darkling smiled politely, cocking his mouth to beg with a bit too many teeth protruding. "I can't just now." Mart gestured with his head toward Farrago, at the end, and addressed Peter. "The Stell requests the pleasure of your company."

Peter blinked. *What, is he going to rope me to the ceiling and give me another sermon?*

Mart stood still, his palm up and fingers pointing. "If you would."

Peter rose, shrugging at Zoë, who took another sip of grog and smiled. Heinrich followed Peter with his eyes, when Mart looked at the blond man and said, "You, too." As Peter and Heinrich exchanged shrugs, Peter nodded a slight goodbye at Zoë, and of course at Af, who sternly regarded his drink with new and intensified interest.

In a moment they were seated across from Farrago and the gray man. "This is Brother Julian MacDuff," said Farrago.

Peter clasped MacDuff's hand as he introduced Heinrich.

"Of the Vehm, I understand," MacDuff said.

"That's right," Heinrich brightened slightly, happy to be speaking to a human.

MacDuff drummed the table with his fingers. "They'll want to know you're here. You'll dispatch a letter immediately." The words came out sturdy and fast, and Peter was taken aback by the hammering sound of the order.

Heinrich started, "Ah..."

"Won't you?" MacDuff said, immediately softening a fraction. "I don't want your masters to think Wintercamp is hiding you, or in any way impeding your travel."

Heinrich pursed his lips. "I appreciate your concern."

MacDuff smiled. "Where the Vehm figures in, I don't like to waste any time or take any chances."

"I'd forgotten how authoritative Cistercians can be," said Peter.



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“I’m a Beghard. We can be worse.” MacDuff’s eyes crinkled at the side. “Now. You two are on a quest, I understand.”

“Yes,” Heinrich replied. “We’re looking for two human girls. My sisters, in fact, so you understand this is important to me. Lost three weeks ago in a Darkling raid.”

Farrago said, “It was Rimmion.”

“That’s how it appears,” Heinrich agreed.

MacDuff frowned and then looked at Peter. “And you’re the one who... *shot* Rimmion.”

“Yes.”

“You may not get another chance.” MacDuff sighed, his eyes moving rapidly. “Two girls.”

“They were my sisters,” said Heinrich. “Do you have *any* idea where Rimmion may be going, if he’s not coming here?”

MacDuff rested his lips against his large, gaunt hand, closing his eyes. “Heinrich. Peter. I can think of nothing to say except that I am sorry. Very sorry. But you should give up this search you are on.”

“What?” Heinrich leaned back, his hands flailing, “What? Am I hearing this? My God, if that’s your answer, why am I even talking to you? We were told you’d have information.”

MacDuff’s eyes were sad, but his voice came out in a rumbling whisper. “I don’t have what you need, Heinrich. I’m not about to interfere with you, but I am advising you, as a friend: give up your search. Turn back. The answers you seek will not succor you.”

“You’re no friend of mine,” Heinrich said, his voice hoarse with anger. He rose, his hulking frame drifting up in torchlit shadow. “You know, don’t you? You know where they are.”

MacDuff stared, blinking. “Go home, Heinrich.”

Heinrich shook his head, looking at Peter, who remained silent. “We’re wasting our time here. There’s no need to dispatch a letter; we’ll be gone by morning.”

Farrago said, “See here, this man is our—”

MacDuff held up a hand, nodding serenely. “Do as you wish. Do as you will.”

Peter looked up at Heinrich and saw his friend boil with rage, weeks on the cold trail burning through his pink cheeks and rupturing into rosy blooms. Heinrich spat, drops of spittle landing on MacDuff’s cassock. He turned and stormed out.

When he was gone, MacDuff frowned and sipped his ale, looking at Peter. “Will you go with him, in the morning?”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean that,” Peter said, hoping he was right, wondering what he had yet to learn here.

“He’ll go,” MacDuff said. “He’ll go. The question is, will you?”

Peter wrung his hands. “I vowed to help him. His sisters, they were like

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sisters to me, too.”

MacDuff nodded slowly, studying Peter intensely. “As I said, do what you wish, and what you will.” He patted Farrago on the wing and rose, wiping his cassock and beard. He picked up his staff and began to walk out. “And good journey, if you so choose.”

“But sir....”

“Changeling,” MacDuff looked down and back. “You are what I call an *exception*. To everything. I think you’ll find that while Heinrich’s answers are not here, yours just might be.”

“That’s no help.”

“These things are difficult.” MacDuff shrugged, smiling once more, a great, bear-sized grin. “No one ever said being an exception was easy.”



## CHAPTER 26

Starlight beckoned outside the window of Heinrich and Peter's hut. Take this light for your search, it said. Wait no longer. Heinrich looked back at Peter's sleeping frame, slung his bundle over his shoulder, and slipped quietly out into the snow.

Moving towards the stable, Heinrich felt the tingle of elfin eyes following. He stopped near the entrance of a tavern, the Nester, and casually stopped to look inside. In the reflection in the window, he saw a shape leap behind a wall and re-position atop the tiny roof of a well. An elf, creeping on foot. He turned. It was Zoë.

"Scout," Heinrich said.

"I was just wondering where you're going."

Heinrich studied her carefully, indicating his bundle. "I thought I'd get an early start."

"But you're..." she scanned the area. "You're alone."

"For now," He shook his head. "I'm tired of arguing. I'm losing time."

"Cuk-wo," Zoë said. "And Peter?"

Heinrich sighed, and began to walk. "When you go to him, tell him he has all the time in the world."



Peter felt a kiss on his brow, felt warm flesh moving over his own, breasts sliding against his chest. He awoke and heard through closed eyelids an aura he knew so well it was almost painful to him, opened his eyes and saw Zoë, her lips at his brow, her fingertips trailing along his jaw line, her wings slowly flapping over him.

"Z—Zoë?"

"Peter!" she whispered excitedly. Peter's eyes opened in the cold dimness of his hut, and he lifted up on his elbows.

"Huh?" He blinked, his eyes bleary. "What are you doing here?"

Zoë sat up, then climbed off the cot and hovered, it seemed, bouncing on slender heels. "Peter," she said, "Peter! Good news."

The changeling shook his head and rubbed his eyes. The room was dark, and now the cold air intensified as he came fully awake. "What? What news?"

"You're free!" She smiled, crawling onto the cot on her knees. The black tunic she wore slid up so she could straddle him as she laughed. She pounded his chest lightly, laughing. "You're free to stay."

Peter shook his head, staring at her. Zoë's eyes were wide and lovely, her gray hair shimmering in the moonlight that streamed in between the blankets over the windows. "What are you talking about?" The sun wasn't even up. What time was it?



Zoë took the collar of Peter’s nightshirt by her fists and pushed him back as she leaned over him, her angelic mouth emitting blasts of steam. “He told me that you can stay. Can you believe that? He actually told *me* you didn’t have to go with him. A little presumptuous, thinking that I would care. But dead Erlkonig, of course I do.”

“You do? Wait, wait.” Peter held both of Zoë’s arms and looked at her. “Who are you talking about?”

Zoë’s smile faltered a little. “Heinrich, of course.”

Peter shook his head. “What are you saying? Heinrich!” He looked over at Heinrich’s cot and saw that it was empty. “Oh my God.” He sat up, sliding Zoë’s light frame down as he pulled his legs out from under her and leapt from the cot. He slapped his brow as he ran to the cot, immediately seeing the note on Heinrich’s pillow. “When- when did this happen?”

Zoë shook her head. “Well, just now, I was scouting, and when he crept out, he spoke to me. Do you realize it’s the first time he’s spoken to me? But of course I knew you’d want to know.” She spun him around, looking up into his eyes. “Peter, don’t you understand? He *knows* you have a... a different destiny. He understands, and you don’t have to keep your promise”

“Oh my *God*,” Peter snarled, pulling away from her, his mind racing as he snatched up the note. Peter held it in the stream of moonlight, reading the scrawled handwriting:

*Peter—the sun will be up soon and I have much ground to cover. Christa and Mary are bound to be in danger and I feel I have wasted enough time...*

—and on and on. Peter read the note again and saw that nowhere did Heinrich say a word about Peter’s vow or in any way orchestrate his words to make him feel in the least bit guilty.

“Of course he would do that.” Peter looked up, speaking aloud. “It’s the best way to make me feel guilty. I have to catch him.”

Zoë looked as if she had been struck. “I thought you wanted to stay.”

“I *promised* him, Zoë,” Peter said, yanking on trousers, another shirt, struggling into icy cold boots.

“*He* thought you wanted to stay.” Outside somewhere, a horse snorted, and Peter heard the jangling of reins.

“I know.” Peter held her hands for a moment. “Please understand, I want to, but...”

“I don’t care,” Zoë said, rolling her eyes. “I just thought you’d like to know, it doesn’t matter to—”

“Heinrich!” Peter called, running out of the hut into the snow. He peered into the predawn dimness, taking in the whiteness of the land and the Darkling huts that scattered the mountaintop. Heinrich’s footprints were still fresh. There was time. What had he been thinking? “Heinrich!” he called. “Wait!”

Amazing what can happen while you sleep. Amazing what can change when you’re not looking.



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He reached the stables and looked down the path. Heinrich rode out of sight for a moment, then back in, caught in a moonlit clearing between thick patches of trees, heading down the winding road into the valley.

Peter held up a hand, cupping his mouth, and froze. *Call out. Call out.*

He was absolved. He could stay. Find out all about the Darklings, all about his own origin, all of it: Heinrich had let him go. The great, yellow bastard had even made it easy for him by sneaking out while he slept, even told the female that had caught his eye the news so he'd be more inclined. But Mary and Christa were out there...

*Call out. Call out.*

Peter saw Heinrich slow to a stop, a hulking silhouette in the early gray, trying to decide which way to turn. The great frame shifted, and Peter's eyes locked in and burrowed down to see the glint of Heinrich's eyes as he cast a glance back along the path. The snow crunched a few times as the young man turned his horse, looking up. Heinrich could see him.

Peter stood in silence. Heinrich moved his head, nodding, perhaps.

The snow began to fall again. Heinrich turned and rode on.





## CHAPTER 27

While one unlucky person was making his way out of Wintercamp in the wee hours of the morning, yet another finally managed to wing his way in.

“Who is he?” MacDuff swung his long legs over the side of his cot and sprang up as Zolo stood waiting with his cloak and staff.

“Gray Band,” Zolo said. “He says his name is Tristan.”

“Tristan,” MacDuff repeated. His left eye, the one he had lost all those years ago, tingled. How he had gotten it back again was a long story. But it tingled, now, as if seeing something the rest of his senses chose to ignore. “He’s alone?”

“He says the rest of his team is trapped. I think they hit the Wingbreaker,” said Zolo. They stepped out of the dormitory into the snowy path. It was dark, about three hours before dawn. MacDuff shivered in the cold and pulled his cloak around him.

Moments later MacDuff and Zolo entered the mess hall and found the newcomer. He sat with a blanket around him, clutching a hot cup of mead and shaking. The hall was nearly empty, except for a few of Farrago’s Band, drinking with new and old friends of the other Bands. Now they were gathered around Tristan of the Grays and looked up as MacDuff took his place at the table.

“I am Julian MacDuff Scotus. I run Wintercamp.”

Tristan looked him over and said through chattering teeth, “A human?”

“You came alone,” MacDuff said, touching the back of Tristan’s neck and studying his eyes, checking for anything unusual. He was bloodshot, but there was no heavy crusting at the corners of his eyes. No Nekro here. “You’ve been exerting yourself.”

Tristan nodded vigorously. “My team is still out there. I managed to fly the rest the way. No rest in... six hours of hard flying.”

MacDuff sat at the table. “How many, and what happened?”

“We were seven. We were coming to get medicine for our sick in Gray territory. Four of us had the Nekro but we could all fly. We cut across a high plateau, a cirque northeast of here. There were snow flurries. As we got to the center of the cirque we met hard winds, and it became impossible to fly. Then I saw a crevasse in the center of the cirque. I shouted to keep the rest of them back, so we could try to go around on the walls. I was flying anchor, you see. They couldn’t hear me—couldn’t even control their wings. It banged them against the ground, then...”

“It sucked them down,” MacDuff said.

“Yes! I saw them all plummet into the crevasse. I managed to avoid the winds and came back out the way we’d gone in. I flew high along the wall until I’d flown around the cirque, and then I came straight here.” Tristan shook his



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head in horror. “They were screaming! It batted them around like partridges!”

MacDuff looked at Zolo and nodded. “The Wingbreaker.”

Tristan chattered, “Wingbreaker?”

“It’s a real problem for Darklings. Your team has been sucked into a fissure of ice and rock in the bottom of an almost un-navigable space of air.”

“I knew it,” the Darkling said. “I knew it, somehow, the moment we decided to go through.”

“Well, it’s good that you held off, that way at least one of you made it in.”

Half an hour after he had said his silent goodbye to Heinrich, Peter was running through Wintercamp in answer to an alarm bell. He had just lain down once more—pleased to see the scout Zoë waiting for him still—when a metallic clang hit the air and sounded long and loud.

“What on earth?” Peter and Zoë armed themselves quickly and left the hut, Zoë flying ahead for the rendezvous point at the courtyard. Peter followed the rising noise and made his way up the snowy paths, watching with an icy sense of exhilaration as the glistening white bodies and black wings flew over and past him. The crackling flurry of warriors descended upon the courtyard in a wave, and Peter saw MacDuff up the bell tower ladder, his red cloak flapping in the wind. At the foot of the ladder stood Zolo, who Peter had come to think of as MacDuff’s court favorite. After a moment Peter saw Farrago alight.

“Well, would you look at that.” Zoë shook her head, as Peter stepped up behind where she had lit. “Af and Tap are here, and I don’t think they’ve been sleeping.” Across the courtyard, the twins flew in from the direction of the tavern, their flight paths perfectly matched and decidedly wobbly.

Zoë continued. “So between the drunks and the sluggards, we have a fine mess of feathered warriors, all right.”

MacDuff rang the alarm bell for what must have been a quarter hour, and by the time he stopped the courtyard was full.

Looking out, he saw the same looks, repeated over and over in the faces of the agitated warriors, looks of fear and that special rage borne of being wrested from a decent night’s sleep.

MacDuff descended while the sound of the bell still reverberated through the winter air. And while every eye that gazed upon him was surly or weary, his were liquid and clear. He smiled, folding his arms before him, and rocked on his boots.

“Thank you all for responding so quickly! If we’re ever attacked at night,” he nodded, resting his fists at his waist, “you’ll thank me for this.”

Farrago spoke up, his eyes puffy. “What is the emergency?”

MacDuff turned to the crowd, raising his voice. “I know it’s early. But I have need of a team of Darklings. Right away.” The Iron Thane looked around, surveying the crowd. “An expedition from the Gray band has been lost in the



cracked cirque of the Weisspitze. Those of you who have been here for a season know it as Wingbreaker.”

“How many?” Farrago said.

“Six,” MacDuff responded. “Six Darklings looking for help from Wintercamp. Six Darklings who will die now, if we don’t go after them. I need a team.” The monk looked around. “Who will go with me to bring your brothers back?”

“They’re dead already,” spoke someone from the crowd, a voice Peter couldn’t pinpoint. Several more such comments followed, folding in waves of voices through the gathered Darklings.

Stell Naran called out, tilting back his head to indicate that he was sorry to be a bother. “They have a point, MacDuff. You can’t fly in there. When did they disappear?”

“Six, seven hours ago,” spoke a Darkling Peter didn’t recognize, standing near Zolo. This one wore a Gray sash, and Peter realized he must be the one who brought news.

“My apologies, my son, but they’re most likely dead already.”

MacDuff shook his head. “I won’t accept that. This Gray tells me they were coming to Wintercamp for our help. For medicine, for a Band so sick that bringing all of them in was impossible. Now the party that sought my—that sought *our* help—is lost. If there are six Darklings down there, we need to go after them.”

“It’s impassible and impossible.” Naran gestured with his head at Tristan. “*This* one survived. If the Grays need medicine, *he* can bring it back to them, MacDuff. But let’s face it: they’re lost.”

“The Orange Band is exempted, Naran,” MacDuff said flatly. “I cannot ask what such a heavily spent Band cannot deliver.” The monk scanned the crowd for other Oranges and found them, glimpses of Orange sashes blending in with the rest. It was a wonder that they still wore the sashes at all, now that most of them were finding places with other Bands. But MacDuff’s point missed no one. The Orange Band was there because MacDuff had gone out to get them. Slowly, he said, “There were seven elves flying to my camp. They came for my assistance. I need volunteers.”

Farrago spoke up, shaking his head. “It’s too risky. You’ll die. And so will your rescue party.”

“I don’t have wings to break.”

“Well, you’re alone in that regard, unless you want to take a few nuns.”

“Not true. Not true.” MacDuff’s eyes fairly gleamed. “I have a changeling, after all.” Peter’s ears perked up as he saw the Gray man’s eyes flit about the courtyard and settle, resting on him. “He doesn’t have wings. Changeling? I’m volunteering you. Oh, wait.” MacDuff pretended to chew on this thought. “You were leaving this morning.”

Zoë looked back at him, and Peter heard himself say, speaking up, “I had... I had a change of plans.” He would have smiled, too, because of the infectious



nature of MacDuff's jovial, natural leadership, but he became aware of something else—an unease on the part of the crowd when they looked at him, the tiniest fear of him, and discomfort at being confronted with him. And for some reason MacDuff had chosen to draw attention to him, as if calculating to make the problem worse. Peter held his ground and set his jaw, and tied not to feel the sting of the eyes upon him. He turned to Zoë, then looked out. "I guess I don't know any better than to say I'll go."

"Well then I suppose I don't, either!" called Af, whose voice was a bit slurred, but who shot Peter a decidedly nasty look. "Count me in."

"Af of the Blue Band. Welcome." MacDuff nodded, looking around. "That's two. Zolo? You in?" MacDuff nodded again; of course Zolo. "That's good."

"Well, sir," said Zoë, "since you've gotten us all up, I suppose I could."

"You're still healing," MacDuff answered, waiving a hand. "But look at this, Children! Is this what it's come to? The only other volunteer is this wounded scout?" He said, "scout," but everyone knew he meant "female," and even Zoë cocked back here head in almost mock deference. "Three, plus Tristan. Now that I think on it—that should be more than enough. Let's go."

"So early?" the changeling looked around.

"The early Darkling catches the worms," said Af, grimly.

"You'll catch death," Drager said. His yellow Band stood behind him, looking embarrassed.

"Thank you all for responding," the iron monk waved a hand, dismissing the Wintercamp Darklings. "All right, Children," MacDuff turned to the three who gathered near, "you've just joined a rescue party."

As Peter began to follow the monk, he had the strangest feeling that MacDuff had known all along who the party would be.

Peter and the party followed MacDuff's brisk steps into the dormitory where the monk slept. The corridor was austere and beige in color, dimly lit by muffled torches, and MacDuff's boots and staff tapped impossibly softly as he stepped along the stone floor. They reached the end of the corridor, and MacDuff removed a key from his cassock, quickly turning the lock of a heavy black door.

"This is my library," the gray monk said. He let the door fall open and held out a hand, and Zolo walked in, followed by Af. Peter stopped at the door next to MacDuff's outstretched arm, looking in at the dark room.

"This is the monastery library?"

"That's down the hall. This is my library. Please," MacDuff turned to remove a lantern from the corridor wall.

MacDuff's library was a dim world of books that only became more breathtaking as MacDuff came in behind Peter, flames flickering, long shadows illuminating the unseen.

He had had no idea, from the outside, that such a room could fit in the long, fat dormitory. As a consequence of the low configuration of the building, the



library was not naturally tall, but Peter nevertheless was struck by the *illusion* of tallness, of stacks and stacks of books and notebooks that seemed to stretch up as much as they seemed to stretch on.

Peter had been in the libraries of good houses. Those generally had a great, spacious feeling, wrapped on the inside with bookshelves as much for adornment as use. The libraries of the Vehm were more like those of a monastery, and those were still quite oriented towards impressiveness to the casual observer—finely carved shelves and finely wrought lanterns, that sort of thing.

None of that here. MacDuff’s shelves were merely a framework of black, iron bars on which the books stood, black stacks stretching endlessly through a room that might well have been the size of a cathedral. The iron shelves seemed to disappear, leaving Peter the impression of books suspended in midair. MacDuff moved past Peter and began to walk down the aisle, followed by the three. Books zoomed past Peter’s head until they took a left turn, and Peter saw an open area the size of a small cell, complete with a large, simple table, a lamp, and two chairs.

Peter said, “This is the library of a scholar,” but MacDuff had disappeared. Neither Af nor Zolo seemed particularly impressed. A moment later MacDuff reappeared with a roll under his arms and laid them out on the table, and everyone gathered around.

The map made a sharp flapping sound against the table as MacDuff slapped it down and ran his finger along the Bavarian Alps.

“All right,” he muttered, his finger finding the mountain on which they stood. “This is Wintercamp. Peter, Af, you see this mountain to the North of Zugspitze? This is Mount Weissspitze. You’ll notice twin arêtes, these peaks here, and between them a cirque—a flat, sloping plane where a glacier has given way. This is still eight thousand feet up, of course. The surrounding mountains are higher than Weissspitze, so a lot of Darklings flying from the Northeast end up in a situation where they look south from *here*.” He pointed at a spot on the map. “The natural decision is to make their way through the cirque. The cirque,” MacDuff sighed, “is called the Wingbreaker.”

“Why?” Peter shrugged.

“It’s a natural trap. A piece of geographical bad luck. A cirque, as I said, lies where a huge chunk of ice has fallen away. But the cirque itself is not rock- it’s mostly more ice and snow, a moraine of gathered pieces and chunks that have fallen from the arête. It’s a lot more threatening than it looks. It’s about a half mile across,” he traced a fingertip across the flattish plane, “And it looks like a perfect path, for hiker or winged man. Running down the length of it, though, is a great crevasse.” MacDuff ran his finger down the length of the cirque. “It’s not visible from the air because of the wind and snow. The snow is constantly churning here.”

“But why would they fly through the winds?”



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“It doesn’t look that bad,” said Tristan. “We talked about it, but from a distance, it looks highly passable.”

“They won’t last long in there.” MacDuff looked at the other three. “The crack starts wide—twelve, twenty feet across. It thins out as it travels down into the mountain. Here’s the dangerous part. The crack winds down into what can only be called a cavern, or a series of caverns, formed by wind and sediment rushing down and into this mess, this moraine of packed ice and rock.

He touched his lips, as if pleased by the oddity. “Then something really strange happens. There’s one other large opening. Here.” MacDuff tapped at a spot an inch or so away. “The face of the mountain—over the edge of the cirque, down an ice cliff, about half a mile. There’s a great pour-out of this tunnel: a mountainside ice cave entrance to the same caverns fed by the crevasse. Wind comes racing up the face of the mountain and into the cave. At the same time wind is racing down and around the bowl-like cirque and into the crack. The effect is remarkable. Amazing force, sucking air in at the cave, amazing force whipping around in the cirque and sucking into the crack. I don’t know why that happens, exactly. But that’s nature’s trap.

“The unsuspecting elves fly over the cirque and are hit by winds they didn’t expect. They slam into the side of the mountain or the floor of the cirque, sometimes suffering heavy damage. Then, they’re sucked down into the tunnel. They get trapped in there because of the strong winds pushing from either direction.”

“Are they dead?” Tristan asked.

“We wouldn’t be talking about it if I thought they were dead,” MacDuff said. “They could survive in there, if they found some ice to shelter them. But getting out—and not getting lost—can be hard.”

Peter looked at MacDuff. “How do you know all of this?”

“When I moved Wintercamp I thought it would be a good passage.” MacDuff shook his head. “It wasn’t.”

“How much did you manage to explore?”

MacDuff sighed. “These are not caves one explores, Peter.”

“We were a crew of six,” Zolo said quietly. “MacDuff and I were the only ones to make it out.”

Peter let that sink in. “So you did go down in the caverns?”

“I didn’t,” Zolo said. “MacDuff and the others were sucked in. I was lucky; I made it out of the cirque with a sprained wing. MacDuff...” he drifted off.

MacDuff chewed his lip and shrugged. “Eventually I made it out.”

“You’re quite a monk, MacDuff,” Peter said.

“Humph. Be that as it may,” said the gray man, “this is not going to be easy. I recommend Zolo and Af help us reach the plateau and wait for you and me. We’ll have to go into the Wingbreaker alone.”

“I’ll come, too,” Tristan offered, as if realizing his name had not just been mentioned.



MacDuff shook his head. “We only need two Darklings, and you’ve been through a lot. You looked weak when you came in. There’s too much risk.”

“But I can make it, Brother MacDuff.”

“You don’t seem to understand me, Tristan.” MacDuff’s eyes narrowed for a moment, and then he reached out a hand and rubbed it on the back of Tristan’s neck, as if nursing the Darkling’s pride. “There’s too much risk to us. You’re a fine warrior. You’ve already proven your mettle once today. Leave the rest to us.”

Tristan visibly sank inward. “Well, *he’s* drunk,” he nodded at Af.

“Not anymore,” Af said.

“He’s the best Farrago has,” MacDuff said. “And in my experience, that’s the best there is. I’ll take *him* drunk over you exhausted, if *you* don’t mind.” He peered upwards, and Peter noticed a sunbeam filtering through a thin window in the top of the library. “Sun’s up,” MacDuff said, rolling his maps. “Peter, meet me at the stables. Af and Zolo, fly; meet us at the foot of Weisspitze in an hour. Tristan,” he sighed, as he shelved his maps and headed out of the library, “good work. It’s nothing personal.”



## CHAPTER 28

Peter found himself thinking: *But I just got here.*

The Bavarian Alps spread out before the team, white and gray and jagged. Zolo and Af took wing and were gone just as Peter and MacDuff rode out of the Wintercamp gates, out onto the rocky, snow-covered winding path. It was a treacherous ride, and every few yards Peter felt the tremble of the draft horse MacDuff had given him and was sure the beast would slip. He looked ahead at the form of the monk, who rode in silence, expertly guiding his horse down the mountain.

“Not far now to the timberline.” MacDuff looked back. “Don’t worry, she’ll make it.” The horse jangled as MacDuff rode, all manner of gear tucked away in two oversized saddlebags.

“Thanks.”





## CHAPTER 29

Af looked over at Zolo as they flew, feeling much better as the cold wind slapped his face. “So,” he said, “tell me about this Julian MacDuff.”

Zolo looked down as the white blanket bled into the timberline and they moved over spruce and beech trees. “What is it you want to know?”

Af held out his hands in a resigned gesture. “He runs Wintercamp. That’s what everybody keeps saying. Like that’s all there is to say. He runs Wintercamp.”

“That’s a lot,” Zolo responded. “You Blues haven’t needed or wanted to come to Wintercamp in the past, although I think Farrago’s been here, a couple of times.”

“They do seem to know one another.”

“But Wintercamp is a tremendous undertaking, and for a human, well, it’s remarkable.”

“He’s an unusual human,” said Af.

Zolo nodded. “There’s a mystic at Wintercamp, a woman named Mechthild. She sees things, has these incredible visions where she sees the human god.”

Af wondered where this was leading. “Yes?”

“She left her place at Magdeburg to join the elf-Beguines. She’s one of the few people who’ve really gotten close to MacDuff. And do you know what she says about him?”

“Pray tell.”

“You’re not taking me seriously,” said Zolo. “I’ve been here a long time, and I’m trying to tell you what you asked.”

“All right. Go on.”

“Mechthild says that we, humans and Darklings alike, are all close to *unreal*. As if we’re somehow not entirely here. She says it’s because we’re too far from her god. But MacDuff, she says, is the most *real* man she’s ever met. Emblazoned on the earth. Completely *there*.”

Af shrugged. “That’s something to accomplish?”

“It’s high praise from Mechthild.”

“Listen to yourself,” Af shook his head. “You’ve been here too long. You’re quoting a human woman like she’s the Erlkonigsaga. About a man. A man!” he shook his head in disgust. “I don’t know. I’ll follow Stell Farrago to my grave, but something here smells too much like Manlover.”

Zolo whipped his wings and flew on in silence for a moment. “I used to worry about that.”

“And you don’t anymore? He even has the same name as the great slayer.”

Zolo shook his head again. “That’s a cross he must bear, brother. He spends



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more time paying for his name among you superstitious Darklings.”

“By the dead Erlkonig,” Af sneered. “You’re becoming a Christian. ‘The cross he must bear?’”

“It’s just a phrase.”

“It’s just the words of our sworn enemies. And you’re just worshipping the namesake of the Nornagesta.”

“I’m not sure it matters anymore,” Zolo said finally. The Alps rolled by below, black specks of crackle sparking and fading towards the white and gray blanket.

“It matters. It matters. We’re dying, Zolo. It matters who we take help from.”

“So why are you coming now? Why did you come on this mission?”

“Because Farrago would want me to, and I don’t wait to be asked. But it doesn’t mean I trust your *master*. Soon, Zolo. Soon we may have to make a choice.”



## CHAPTER 30

It took nearly three hours for MacDuff and Peter to reach the foot of the mountain, where the two Darklings waited impatiently. MacDuff slid from his horse and reached into his saddlebags, retrieving a fat, worn hammer and a pair of wooden stakes, which he drove into the ground. After tethering the horses to the stakes he stood up, pulled back his hood, and ran a hand through the air, tracing a path up a long, foreboding wall of ice face. “You’re looking at the north face. The cave is on the south side, on the other side of the cirque. We could climb this, but I’d prefer to save the exertion for later.” He now looked at Af and Zolo. “Do you think you can carry us up?”

“If that’s the plan,” Af said.

In short order MacDuff was strapped to the chest of Af the doubter, and Peter found himself once again flying in the embrace of that which he could never be. With a mighty groan, Zolo’s wings whipped, white muscles strained, crackle showered onto the snow, and Peter watched as 10,000 feet of ice began to fall before his eyes, over two yards at a time.

When the ancient Athenians approached the battle of Marathon, the army stopped at the top of a great hill, and looked down to see the encamped forces of Sparta. And when the war cry was given, they ran for a mile.

They ran for a mile.

In full gear, swords swinging, armor rattling and chafing at thighs and necks, feet tearing in the rocks and dirt, a mile. Enough time to scream in rage, let out that elephantine war whoop, and what did the screaming Athenian know?

Zolo’s breath was steady and deep at the back of Peter’s head. The cliff lurched slowly downward, flowing like a frozen river of ice as they rose. Peter was struck by the sheer immensity of the thing, how very insect-like he was, while Zolo whipped his wings and lunged upward, over and over, rising seven more feet, and seven more, and seven more.

There were etchings in the ice face, not human, elf or bird etchings, but earth’s etchings, God’s etchings, thousands of tiny grooves, bizarre and remarkable designs never to be seen again and impossible to remember. The ice held secrets, and Peter heard it shouting them out in tiny pieces, as they rose, and rose, and rose, and for the longest time Peter could look up and see nothing but more ice to fly. But those wings were pumping so steadily he could almost feel them in his own body.

“Erlkonig,” Zolo grunted, and Peter could feel the sweat streaming down the Darkling’s face.

“How are you holding up?” Peter said, looking back, trying to meet his host’s eyes.

“All right, I think,” Zolo managed to say. “Luckily you’re not all that



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heavy. You must have elf bones. I'm sure Af wishes he could say the same for MacDuff."

About ten yards above, Peter saw Af valiantly ascending the cliff with MacDuff in tow, crackle showering brilliantly with each movement. The Darkling's face was a mask of pain, and Peter could tell that the strange monk must weigh *at least* twice what Af did.

What did the Athenians know?

A mile is a long way to run, or to rise. Enough distance, enough time to look away and look back, and the task was still there. Peter had often thought of those daft Athenians, reading of the battle in the Cistercian library at Freiburg—at the end of that mile, the battle still waited. And probably, the end of the mile had seemed to be forever coming, and then, in the end, swooped in.

He must have drifted off, watching the icy grooves flow past, because all at once he found himself dropped in the snow, Zolo panting over him, and he was sure no time had passed. Peter groggily stood and looked back, saw a snowy edge, and the snowdrifts ten thousand feet below.

Af and Zolo fell into the snow, exhausted. They had reached the cirque.



## CHAPTER 31

“Rest for half an hour,” said MacDuff. “We can spare no more time than that.” He handed Zolo a pouch of crackle.

“That should be fine.” Zolo nodded, exhausted, and crawled towards Af. The two Darklings immediately set to spitting and covering one another’s wings, replenishing them. As they did this Peter heard them murmuring prayers.

MacDuff turned to Peter. “How do you feel? Is this air affecting your mind?”

Peter wondered for a moment if he had heard the question correctly. Then he recalled hearing of the delirium that sometimes overcame people who ventured high in the mountains. “No,” he said, hoping he had answered quickly enough to be believed.

For the first time, Peter now looked out across the cirque that the elves called Wingbreaker. It was as if he were standing on the bill of an upturned helmet, the white flat stretching out about fifty yards before gradually sloping down into a bowl nearly half a mile wide. The cirque was lined on either side by the twin mountains. As MacDuff had warned them, a steady miniature storm churned in the bowl, wind and snow whipping around, thick and fast. Peter became aware of MacDuff standing at his shoulder, pointing to the east wall. “There,” said the monk, “you see the shelf of ice?”

“Yes.” Traveling the length of the bowl was a shelf of packed snow and ice, perhaps half a foot wide, sometimes more, sometimes less. Peter was not sure he trusted it.

“That’s our way to the far face,” MacDuff said. Peter looked at the monk’s face to verify that the man was serious. He was. MacDuff reached into the saddlebags he had slung over his shoulder, retrieved and set aside four medium length, pointed hammers. Surely these things hadn’t made Af’s job any easier. Then he drew out something else and said, “Here.”

Peter held out his hand and received a pair of boot-spikes. MacDuff was already bent down, sliding a similar pair onto his own boots. Peter slid the loop over the front of his boot, felt the teeth dig into the ground as he set each foot back down again. MacDuff was already bringing spikes to the two Darkling’s.

“Welcome to Wingbreaker,” Peter heard the gray monk say to the exhausted Darklings. “Those winds in the bowl are so strong that they’ll dash you against the ice before you can say *Golanlandaliay*. If you’re going to get across to the far face, you’re going to have to do it like a human.” He tossed the boot spikes down; they landed with a crunch in the snow next to Af and Zolo’s feet. “And more: like a worm.”



They were rather like a worm, moving all as one, Peter reflected, as he held his head and shoulders against the ice wall and felt the sting of snow swiping



past, whipping around in the vicious winds of the bowl. Down there, inside the bowl, impossible to see for the blinding flurry, was a crack, deep and white. He stepped, one foot, then the other, stepping sideways along the shelf, eyes staring into the whipping vortex. Now and again he felt the cord at his waist tug sharply, and he was sure one of the other three had slipped, but he looked up and saw Af, Zolo, and MacDuff traveling steadily.

On the party snaked, on they wormed, Peter's boot spikes sliding out and in as he moved along the mile-long shelf.

After a quarter of an hour of the sideways hike, Peter found his mind numbing, his fingers finding no difference in the monotony of the ice wall, his brain perceiving no variation in the snow and wind that twisted past his face in the Wingbreaker. He was numbing out. It was about then that he became aware that MacDuff had begun to sing.

"It is my eye, it is God's eye, it is the eye of the Son of God," sang the monk, his voice a rich baritone, the words varying in length and pitch as he went on, "that shall repel this." Peter listened to the song, concentrating not on the words, but on the variation in them, the change of sound and note, anything to remind him that he was awake. His legs were getting colder, and his brain was going as numb as his limbs.

When MacDuff had finished singing his Holy Eye song, Af began to sing. At first, Peter thought it was a verse from the Erlkonigsaga, but of course the Darklings had other songs.

"Come, I will tell you, of the sisters and me," started the verse, and Peter listened to the words. He did not understand all of the song's words, but it seemed to tell some early story of the Erl-King and his adventures with what Peter took to be the Norn, the German fate-goddesses. Altogether this was a strange topic for an elf song, and Peter found himself listening intently. The song worked its intended magic: his brain awoke; he heard variation in the wind; he felt again his boots rising and falling, his feet finding place-hold. The more he put his attention on the song, the more safely he stepped.

Zolo started, and Af joined in a song about the Nornagesta, as well, but MacDuff must not have known that song, because he did not join them.

The mountain groaned and howled as they slunk, MacDuff and Af and Zolo and Peter, sideways along the narrow shelf. The mountain sang its own song, leeching energy and warmth, aching in hunger for more bone and blood.

Peter looked up and could not find the sun. Af and Zolo's song died down, and Zolo looked back at Peter, grinning. "Halfway there!"

It was true. They had managed to creep nearly half a mile already along the narrow shelf. Peter dislodged his boot and moved it again, *chunk*, and the other, *chunk*.

*Chunk*. And Zolo was still grinning, pressing his head back against the ice wall as a heavy wind slapped them with pellets of ice and snow, and on, *chunk*.

*Chunk. Chunkkchunkchunk*. Peter saw Zolo look down in horror. At first



Peter thought Zolo had slipped, but then felt the ice crumbling beneath his own boot, the spikes driving in next to holes left by the boot spikes of the others, and the shelf was giving way.

Peter gasped, reached out, felt the ice shelf slamming against his chest as he went down.

Slow motion, now, Zolo's mouth moving, crying out his name. Peter saw MacDuff and Af look back at him and he was still moving. *Where am I where am I...*? He reached out, spinning once, ice scraping his back and ribs, and he was around again, taking his hammer and slamming it into the ice shelf, grabbing on with his free hand. Ice and snow crumbled in his fingers. Peter fell back, his weight pulling the hammer free, a pocket of ice exploding, and suddenly he was flying in an arc below the other three, the rope pulling taut at his chest.

"Hang on!" he heard MacDuff cry, far away, and Peter realized the monk was calling out to the two Darklings. Zolo shrieked, the rope yanking at his waist. The Darkling nearly fell, before he spun around, slamming his own hammer into the ice wall, digging in his heels.

MacDuff shouted something. Peter careened wildly underneath the three of them, unable to focus, feeling his lip burst as his face hit the wall. He could see their legs and faces. Zolo tried valiantly not to get sucked down the wall. MacDuff yelled, "Slack!"

The monk's hands moved, letting rope out from a roll at his waist, and Af was spinning to let the rope slide through his harness. Zolo pulled the rope through, and Peter felt himself drop a few more yards, swinging.

Peter panicked, kicking at the wall, his face and feet numb, hands twisted in the ropes. Through the panic, he heard MacDuff calling to him, a deep, steady voice, soft, yet cutting through the falling ice, "Calm! Calm!"

Peter closed his eyes, opened them, and froze.

"All right," said MacDuff. Peter looked up to see the monk standing over him with the two Darklings. Zolo panted; his boots dug into the ice shelf. Peter swung slowly, like a pendulum. For a moment, save for the distant howl of wind, it felt a peaceful scene.

MacDuff leaned on his knees. "Peter? How do you feel?" The monk gestured at Peter's left eye. He realized he was bleeding.

He looked up the sheer wall. The rope dug into his sides, while his forehead began to throb and sting. He spat some blood on the wall and said, "I feel like maybe I should have gone with Heinrich."

"That's the spirit. If you get out of this, I'll send you straight to him." MacDuff's iron eyes were serene, even jovial. The bloody fool was enjoying this. "I want you to climb up, using your boot spikes. Zolo, lean back and let him come up."

Zolo looked at MacDuff, and shouted, "Maybe I or Af could fly him up!"



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“No!” MacDuff shook his head. “The wind will take you!”

Peter nodded, letting his boots rest on the ice, looking up at the shelf where they stood. “Zolo, you ready?” he howled over the wind.

Zolo seemed to wonder for a moment before nodding. “Yes. Come up.”

Peter felt the ache in his brow sing louder, and he was glad for the pain to remind him he was still alive. He slowly pulled on the rope. Zolo leaned back and nodded again. Peter removed one boot from the ice, raised it up.

Zolo gasped, falling forward and nearly toppling over. Peter quickly jammed his boot back into the wall. Af reached out, catching Zolo’s shoulders, anchoring him and himself back. Peter breathed hard, still standing perpendicular to the wall. “I’m too heavy.”

MacDuff nodded, understanding. “Well, that’s not going to work, then, is it?” The gray man rested on his knees for a moment, and Peter watched his eyes, taking in the rope, the party, and the ice. Wheels were turning. After a moment MacDuff reached into his bag, saying, “I have it.”

“Eh?” Af called.

MacDuff drew an iron spike from his pouch and slowly turned around. He held the spike up over his head, placed the tip in the ice wall, and began to tap the head with his hammer. After a moment he stopped, leaving about an inch and a half protruding from the ice wall. Then, to test it, he slung his hammer over the spike, tugged it once, twice, seemed satisfied, and began to draw a rope from his bag.

MacDuff tossed the new rope over the spike, and then let slack until the rope fell to Peter. “Tie that under your arms,” said the iron monk. Peter took the end of the rope, slowly pulled it out until he had enough to run underneath his arms, behind his back, and tied at his breastbone. “I see,” said Peter.

“Loose yourself from the other.”

Peter nodded, removing the first rope from around his waist. He saw Zolo relax, above him, almost losing balance as Peter’s weight was taken away. Now Peter hung by the rope that pinched against his underarms and traveled up, over the spike, and down again to MacDuff. The monk had wrapped the rope around his thighs and now slowly lowered himself down past the ice shelf. MacDuff leaned back, pulling, digging his heels into the ice and allowing himself to fall back. His weight helped Peter climb. It took six steps for Peter to climb to the shelf, while MacDuff hung below and drew in the rope.

Peter laughed aloud when he reached the shelf, setting foot again on reasonably solid ice—although he would be careful not to trust it so again. MacDuff laughed, as well, when he began to stand once more, using the rope to right himself.

He was laughing still when the spike burst from the ice wall, and MacDuff began to fall from the shelf.

All in slow motion, yet so fast that Peter barely believed what he saw.

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MacDuff drew his dagger from his belt. Peter barely registered the tug against his ribs before the monk's dagger sliced through the rope, and MacDuff was gone, disappearing into the howling wind and snow.





## CHAPTER 32

Peter wasn't sure how long he'd stood on the shelf, his back pressed to the arête, staring at the severed rope that dangled from his chest. He looked at Af and Zolo, who were now behind him in line. After a moment he swallowed painfully. He gestured with his head, in the direction they had all been going. MacDuff was gone. They began to move, gingerly, letting the howling wind speak for them.

A quarter of a mile more they stepped until they reached the far flat of the cirque, and still none of them had said a word about the sudden death of MacDuff.

Finally they made it across and emptied out onto the flat, the three of them standing like ghosts. A hundred yards farther up, the cirque dumped over and disappeared, and the effect was that of a white sheet disappearing into a sheet of gray air and distant clouds. Peter still had no idea what to say.

"What now?" Af asked. The Darkling unhooked the rope from his body, gathering it in after he'd received it from Zolo.

Pete shrugged. "When we return I'll send a letter to his family. He has family, Zolo?"

Zolo shook his head. "I know of none."

"For that matter," Peter said, "MacDuff seemed to think the Darklings could have survived. I suppose we owe him the same faith." The words echoed hollowly along the cirque. MacDuff had surely taken into account the Darklings' ability to fly against some of the winds, to somehow soften their fall into the crevasse. He could not expect the same from a monk, even an exceptional one. Zolo was staring at Peter, a strange, faraway look. Peter wanted to apologize, wanted to launch into some long, hair-tearing invective, *I'm sorry for taking away your spiritual leader*, but he knew nothing that wouldn't sound as hollow as the Wingbreaker itself. "I'm sorry," he finally said.

"It was his choice to save you," Zolo said. Peter considered that no one had ever given himself for him before.

Af spoke up again. "I wasn't asking what now about the monk. I was asking what we plan to do now."

Peter turned away and strode across the snow, towards the cliff. "He said the cave, the pour-out, was half a mile down, did he not?"

"Aye," Zolo nodded.

"Hey!" Af called. Zolo began to follow Peter, and Af was forced to keep up with them. After a moment Peter had reached the cliff and stood near the edge. He peered over, kicked a few bits of snow, watched them tumble far, far down the face of the glacier.

The changeling got down on his knees so he could look over without fear



of falling. He scanned the face, the gray and white ice, down and down.

There. “I see it!” He pointed to his left, rose to walk about thirty yards, then got down again, gesturing for Af and Zolo to join him. Soon Zolo was crouched next to him, and Peter pointed out the sliver of shadow in the ice. “There,” he said. “Look.” He knocked several gallons of snow over the edge, watch it fall and spread. As the snow past the shadow it exploded into a white cloud, caught in the wind that blew fiercely about a dark shadow on the icy face. “That’s our cave,” he said, looking at Zolo.

Af was still standing, looking impatient. “You see it, do you? And how far down did MacDuff say it was?”

“About half a mile,” Peter said. “That looks about right.” He got up, brushing the snow off his knees, and tossed MacDuff’s sack to the ground. He reached in, pulled out a small hammer, some stakes, and a huge roll of rope. For a moment, he stood there, staring at the items as they lay at his feet.

Af cleared his throat. “You don’t know what to do with them, do you?”

“Give me a moment.”

“It was suicide with MacDuff leading you,” the Darkling said. “It’s twice suicide on your own.”

Peter snarled. “I can’t see how you’d care, Af. You’re not coming, anyway.”

“Peter,” Zolo said gently, “Af has a point. MacDuff was going to lead you down because he needed help. I don’t think he intended for you to go on alone.”

“I don’t think that’s true. He cut me loose, after all.”

“He cut you loose to save your life,” Af snapped petulantly. “Not that I see why.”

Peter shrugged. “You carried me and MacDuff all the way up here. I appreciate that. I’m not going to see that go to waste. I’m going to continue this. Now, I’m going down. I’ll continue this plan. All you two have to do is wait for me, and when I tug on this rope, you’ll haul up the survivors. All right?” He looked at them both, knelt, placed a stake a foot from the cliff and poised a hammer over it. “All right?” Part of him acknowledged that this had to be frustrating for two proud Darklings, knowing that they’d be so hindered by their wings in the tunnel that they stood even less chance than the lone human. So instead, they were taking it out on Peter. He began to pound the stake into the ground.

He stood up, holding the rope. Then he bent down again and began to tie the rope to the stake. He was about to throw the rest of the rope over the cliff when Zolo caught him. “Wait!”

“What?”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to climb down.” What did it look like he was doing?

Zolo shook his head. “If you were half as clever as you were headstrong—”  
 “ said the Darkling. “Look, if you climb down—what, hand-over-hand?—”



you'll tire out after a hundred yards. Then you'll fall."

Peter cursed, throwing the rope at his feet. "What do you expect me to do, fly?"

"Not... not fly... but I've seen this... I've seen MacDuff do this," he said, holding a finger to his white lips. The Darkling's eyes roved from the rope, to the stake, back to the cliff. "If I can just recall..."

"You've seen MacDuff do this?"

"Yes."

Peter nodded. Af turned his back, shaking his head, apparently counting the seconds before Peter threw himself over the edge. "Go on."

"All right," Zolo said, after a minute. "All right... wrap the rope around your legs..."

Gingerly, gingerly, Peter crawled backward off the cliff, clasping the rope in his hands. He felt it tug, pinching at his clothing and skin, the cord running twice around his left leg and held tight by his right, running once under his buttocks, up over the cliff, around the stake he had hammered in the ground, and back to the knot at his breastbone, where he had run the cord under his armpits and around his shoulder blades. He winced, relaxed his hand and right leg, fell a few feet and tightened once more, feeling the rope slide caustically, winding past his body. Peter looked down, saw the rope dangling from his foot, disappearing into the gray forever.

The idea was to use the friction of the rope moving around his body to slow his descent, so that he could feed the rope out gradually. Peter realized he was shaking with fear, and checked it after a moment, his mind following the rope once more around the stake. It made sense. It would work. Zolo said he had seen MacDuff do this, once.

What in Hell kind of monk did things like this?

A piece of snow fell from above, catching in Peter's eye, and as he blinked, he reached up, forgetting himself. He slipped, falling a good yard, feeling the rope burn at his clothing, then clamped his legs, jerking hard, feeling the pinch. He swung wide, spinning, the ropes wrapping around one another, and felt the ice smack into his back. He bounced off the cliff, swung back around.

The ropes were twisted. This was crazy.

No. Not crazy. He looked up, rocked slowly, letting the rope and his body spin around, until finally the ropes had unwound themselves into their proper arrangement. But he had noticed something, when he had been spinning. As if it were easier to let the rope out, when he bounced.

Peter reached out with his legs, pushed back from the cliff wall. Down below, the snow was a blanket of death, waiting, probably enjoying the show.

He bent his legs, straightened, swinging out. Loosened his leg and hand, paid rope out, clamped down as he sunk back. Yes. He had dropped a full yard, without that frightening slide he had felt when he had been dropping straight down.

Not bad. Not bad. The Darklings were wondrous in that they could fly, in

that so tiny a thing could climb such heights. Peter would show how so tiny a thing could defy the fall.

What was it the Darkling's song, the Erlkonigsaga, said? Make your own wings?

Peter tilted back his head, suddenly filled with mirth, as he sprang once more, fed rope, dropped back to the wall, and more, and back, bouncing down, and down, and down. The absence of MacDuff filled his head again, the guilt coming back, but he knew, somehow, not to mourn too much. He stopped, allowing himself to float, turning around.

The Alps stretched out, majestic and gray and purple and white. No mourning. Somewhere, somehow, he knew the odd monk was laughing.





## CHAPTER 33

Deep in the recesses of the mountain, MacDuff moved, broken and unbroken. The ice around him warmed and flowed with his blood.

He could not recall all of his descent. His mind numbly poured with images of various icy ledges and formations smacking against his skull, his arms and legs twisting beneath him. MacDuff barely remembered coming to a horrific stop, doubled over backwards on himself, crashing through a layer of ice and snow and landing in a two-inch-deep pool of water and rock.

MacDuff had fallen before. Once, long ago, he fell for nine days. Fell so far that the gods spoke to him, and he froze, then unfroze, immortal.

There were voices speaking over him as he lay in the inky wet darkness, saying things idly about his arms, and his back, hands like those of Odin, perhaps, or perhaps that was his imagination, voices like that of God:

*It is my eye, it is God's eye, it is the eye of the Son of God that shall repel this...*

Warmth pouring from his eye spread over his body like holy hands, and when the dimmest light came to his eye, he lay in one piece, in his bloody coat, like a swaddled babe.

“I barely remember Urur,” came a voice.

MacDuff sat up slowly, looking around. The room he was in seemed lit from somewhere he could not place, as if the pool of water in which he sat—which should have been freezing—were lighting the room itself. The water was black, and the light it gave off so purple as to be almost black itself, gray dapples dripping on the icy walls and formations.

The dark water flowed and bubbled, filling the room with a hollow, babbling sound that MacDuff had heard before. He backed up, moving to a rock behind him. The black water was exactly as he remembered it, and now, yes, there, he could hear the quiet whisper, the life that came up in that black liquid, pooling and thriving.

The surface of the dark water moved and broke. A form rose slowly, like something poking up underneath a shroud. Slowly the form grew, smoothing off into contours and divisions, arms and legs that at first dripped, solidified, and took palpable shape. Behind the tall, black form with the crystal eyes and chalk-white face, a black rock formed, and the Prince of the Dark Stream sat down cross-legged, leaning against it.

MacDuff put his hands around his knees, resting on his haunches, almost lazily. Of all the places. “Why do you speak of Urur?” he asked.

“I thought I heard her pass this way.” The surface of the Dark Water burbled slightly, and a voice that was more than a voice filled the air. “She was looking after you.”

MacDuff closed his eyes, feeling them well up. He felt gloriously light. The



Norn, the fate who had made him so much more, the one who had made him Nornagesta, had passed. He had been touched by eternity, again, again.

“She fixed me?”

“She watched. She said it was not her place. I fixed you.” The Prince smiled, leaning back. Although his body was made entirely of soulstuff, it slumped. He was tired. “I don’t know how many times I can do that, MacDuff.”

“Are you well, Prince Douglas?”

The Erlkonigsson waved a hand. “Just a little spent. Besides, this is the closest to a visit we ever get. You die. I come fix you.”

“It is good to have an immortal, magical friend.” MacDuff laughed a little, scratching his beard against his knee. “Any semblance of thanks would be grossly understated.” He tried to soothe the lightness in his head and looked across at the one true son of the Erl-King. “How have you been, Douglas?”

“I suppose I have thrived.”

MacDuff nodded. Up above, the changeling boy was probably turning back. “What do you say to a visit from me? You are in Davert Forest, I hear.”

“The recesses, the liquid dark, anywhere the water flows, these places are mine,” said the boy prince. For he *was* a boy, MacDuff recalled: forever a boy, five years old when he took the place of the dead father.

“How fare the Darklings you watch?” MacDuff asked.

“Dying,” said Douglas. The boy reached down, dipped a chalk-white hand into the liquid pool, lifted it, and set a circle of black water spinning, the circle spinning slowly into the air before him. He brought aloft another dark liquid ring, and another, and spun them, floating in the air between the two immortals. “How are yours?”

“Dying as well.” MacDuff watched the black rings spin, wet and solid at once. “And gradually dragging the humans towards war, I fear.”

“I’ve heard that,” Douglas nodded.

“I have met a changeling,” MacDuff said. “Perhaps you know this. He is on the mountain now.”

“Aye,” said the Prince. “I am heartened by the success of Peter.”

“Why have you not sought him out?”

The circles spun, and the crystal eyes closed. Douglas whispered, “We are not linear, you know, you and I. We see the circles in life, the beginnings and ends are but illusions, are they not? The mortals imagine they see beginnings and ends. *We* know it goes on forever, every end a beginning, a line of events so long it must meet itself, a line of events so wide it is no line at all. A mesh, if you will. A circle, a mesh.” He smiled. “Silly, isn’t it, to try to put labels on these things? I envy you, MacDuff, choosing to live in that world where you are so often reminded of the illusions of beginnings and ends.”

“Why have you not sought Peter out?”

“All in good time,” Douglas said. “Peter must make his own way with the Children.”



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MacDuff folded his great arms, leaning back against a rock. “It’s good to see you,” he said.

The Prince nodded; some form of acknowledgement. MacDuff slew the Erl-King. Douglas watched. Perhaps even helped. Long ago.

There was something MacDuff had to ask. “I have heard that you still take souls. Don’t you?”

There was a long pause, the circle slowing, as if Douglas was concentrating on too many things at once to keep them spinning. “The soulstuff is all I am, now. I must.”

“So much for being blasé about beginnings and ends.” MacDuff shook his head. “You kill to live.”

The circles fell, splattered in the pool. “I kill—I adopt souls—that the *children* may live! I am trying to.... to solve it...”

“So,” MacDuff’s eyes lit up. “You *are* working on a cure for the Nekro.”

“The Nekro is nothing.” Douglas dismissed the suggestion with a wave of his black hand. “There may be something else again next year. The Darklings are laying weaker and weaker eggs. They have a shorter flying range than they once did. And there’s more. MacDuff, I cannot simply let them die because I refuse to recruit new souls to keep me going.”

“Oh. Well.”

“I take no one by force.”

MacDuff closed his eyes. “Spare me.” He opened them and saw that Douglas was shaking, uneasy, almost liquid again. The Dark Prince was doing what the Erl-King had finally been killed for.

“It will end soon. It must. You must believe me, Thane, there is no joy in it for me.”

“I believe you.”

“It will end soon. Two will become one, again, and again. Life from death. You’ll see. Trust me.”

“You speak *in* as many circles as you speak *about* them.” The gray man grimaced. “You care deeply for the Darklings, as your father did. Yet you claim to see past death, take it as part of the circle. Then you want to fight to stop it. Which is it? Or are you just acting out of guilt?”

“Aren’t you?” Douglas tilted his head. “You’re the one who took away their god.”

*And your father.* “Aye. Aye.” MacDuff stared at the Erlkonigsson. It was true. He had left them with a dead God, even seen the death of the god become part of their culture. Seen the death of spirit that came when a god died. “I don’t know. Maybe they *are* lost without the Erl-King.”

“We both know,” Douglas shook his head, “that they were lost, even with him.”





## CHAPTER 34

*Hang on hang on hang on!*

The gaping cave howled, reached out, grabbed hold of Peter's ankles, and yanked him hard.

But Peter was ready when he hit the cave. Ready with the hook, which he embedded deeply in the side of the cliff, ready with the fresh coil of rope with he began to feed.

As ready as he was, it still took the breath out of him when he was sucked into the icy tunnel and slamming into the roof. The back of his head smacking hard against the ice. He thanked God for the hood he wore and bit back the pain. He was still moving.

He was plummeting straight down through narrow cave. Noise. God, such a howling wind, like unholy music blasting in his ears, a howl so loud it reverberated in his bones. Peter held to the rope, sliding down (back? along?) with his gloves hissing furiously as he moved, gripping, relaxing, gripping. Peter twisted around and looked down the cave, past his boots, which whipped in the wind like brown banners.

He saw a howling esophagus of blue and white, flecks of snow and condensation racing past him. Saw it in a second, stopped looking, flying down the tunnel, grip, *relax hang on hang on...*

Slam! Peter's leg smacked against an ice formation that jutted from the side of the sucking Wingbreaker's throat. He was moving faster than he'd ever moved before, flying, skirting and sliding. *Flying.*

The rope was feeding up his body and past his shoulder, still plenty to go, he hoped. He hoped. Peter gasped, couldn't even hear the sound, saw the throat narrow ahead, three ridges, one below, one above, one to the side. He kicked off the roof, flying feet first, ripping through, throwing back his head and feeling the ice tear at his coat. He breathed out, slowly, looking down, yes, down was where his feet were. *Hang on hang on...*

He spun, now, bouncing off roof and floor, trying to stay in the middle of the Wingbreaker's throat, and now cursed to the howling wind as he saw another blockage, smaller this time—no more than three feet across, by the look of it. He wouldn't make it.

Blood drummed in his ears. He reached down to his belt, grabbed his pickaxe, and bent his body, setting the head of the axe between his feet. Peter straightened out, aiming for the hole, gloves burning as he howled along the rope, the hammer and his boots tearing the opening wider as he smashed through.

Peter allowed himself a laugh, short and lost in the howling wind. He felt a smart ache from his ankles to his waist. The howl changed, and he blinked,



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saw the dim light revealing the throat growing wider, tilting. He bent again, taking back the hammer with one hand, sliding with the other. His gloves burned, the heat blazing through leather to his fingers. He must have been sucked a half mile at least, by now, and in his distraction he lost control, spinning, slamming against roof and floor and *hanging on hang on hang on...*

The narrow tunnel sloped, smoothing out, and he was running out of rope, and there was a howling room below, opening up, and space, and snow churning, and new, strange, different winds.

*Hang on hang on.* His gloves burned, and the rope disappeared, run out, and Peter cried out in frustration, heard the cry dwindle into the howling wind...

And sailed, hitting the ice, flailing across the room as it opened up, scrambling and tumbling, grabbing his pick axe and digging in, sliding.

Ice flew and the wind howled and Peter came to a stop.

Peter gasped, breathing, looking around in the semi-darkness. Light poured in through the cracks up above and from the huge, ugly rip in the ceiling of the cavern. He had flown down the throat of the Wingbreaker and landed in the stomach.

He allowed himself to breathe a bit more before inspecting himself. His face was numb, but he felt intact. His hands ached but his gloves had not torn through. He felt bruised in the legs but had not broken anything.

“Well,” came a voice from behind him. “What took *you* so long?”

Peter spun around, grabbing for his hammer. There, in the dimness and the whipping wind and snow, stood the gray monk, MacDuff.



## CHAPTER 35

In the gray swirl the changeling regarded the iron monk and said, “Oh, I see. I’m dead.”

MacDuff shook his head, chuckling over the wind. “Why would you say that?”

“Because I *know* I’m not seeing you, standing there without a scratch.” He couldn’t believe it. Was this possible? “Especially after you came in the hard way.”

“I think we could debate over which is the hard way. I see rappelling didn’t give you much trouble.”

“But how did you...” Peter pointed at the opening, staring at the hard surfaces, the perfectly intact man in front of him.

MacDuff held up hand. “There isn’t time. Come,” he gestured. “I’ve found our quarry.”

MacDuff led Peter to a small pocket off the main “hall” where Peter had landed. Peter heard the moaning of the survivors. MacDuff had to raise his voice over the howling wind from above. “You may think,” he said, “that the wind doesn’t seem so bad down here. And it’s not. But the wind they flew through was enough to do this.”

Of the Gray party, four still lived, all of them with badly damaged wings. Three of these were delirious, murmuring to Darklings not there and singing, occasionally tilting their heads in the begging pose. One of them was sitting up, trembling but alert. MacDuff put his hand on this one’s shoulder, saying, “Lamm, this is Peter the changeling. He is here to rescue us.”

The Darkling called Lamm look Peter over, blinking bruised, bulbous eyes, taking in Peter’s elf-like form. “Heh. You’ll get no argument from me.”

“Thank you, cousin,” said Peter.

“He shows some signs of Nekro,” MacDuff warned. “They all do. Very early stages.”

“What about that one?” Peter gestured at one of the two dead Darklings lying to the side. “That looks like a wound.” Blood was drying on the elf’s breast.

“That one had a broken back,” MacDuff nodded. “Lamm had the... mind... to put him to death.”

Peter nodded. He wasn’t sure if it were a sin or not, but he felt guiltily relieved that they had only four to work out of the Wingbreaker.

“Their wings are dry,” MacDuff added. “I think even Lamm won’t be able to fly.”

“And we didn’t bring any crackle,” Peter said.

“Back at camp we’ll fix them up.” MacDuff stopped, his right eye blazing for a moment, as if focusing on something. “You should listen to the crackle, you know.”



“Eh?”

“Here,” MacDuff said. He reached into the bag Peter had taken over when the monk had fallen to his apparent death. “What on earth did you do with my sack?”

“It was a rough ride.”

MacDuff pulled out a bound roll of blankets, sliced the rope with a dagger and let the blankets fall open. From the middle of the roll fell a bundle of rope.

One by one they lay the Darklings out, wrapped them tightly and bound them head to foot. MacDuff looked up while they were doing this and said, “We’ve got to hurry. We’re going to lose the light.”

Peter made the first trip up the tunnel, climbing the rope slowly against the wind, dragging the living mummy behind him. All the way the Darkling murmured nonsense, and Peter decided to converse with him over the howl of the wind, trading nonsense for nonsense. He spoke of the Nornagesta and the Erl-King, and Af and the beautiful scout Zoë, and Heinrich and his lost sisters, wherever they were. When the Darkling answered back in gibberish, he pretended it was a meaningful response. It took half an hour to bring the first one to the howling inner ledge, where he staked the mummy down and painfully hammered his way back down the same growling throat.

Weary, he rested while MacDuff made the second pass. By the time they had brought up all four, Lamm last, the sun was going down.

“Now,” MacDuff sighed, looking out the cave and up the high wall. Peter’s rope still hung there, looped around the stake far, far above. MacDuff caught both ends and tugged at them. “We climb.”

Peter clung to the rocks and mumbled dully, “*Now* we climb?”

“You’ll go first,” MacDuff said. “Wrap the rope about you... like so... I’ll haul the rope here, pulling you up. Once you’re up, feed the rope back with a hammer on it for weight. Then we’ll start hauling up the Grays.”

Peter was still nodding, feeling his muscles ache as he ascended the cliff. From time to time, he looked down to see MacDuff’s powerful arms pulling, hand over hand. The monk’s face looked contorted and pained, but there was solemnity still.

“By Erlkonig,” said Af, when Peter reached the top. “You made it.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Peter grinned. They fed the hammer and rope and began to haul the Darklings up, one at a time, painfully and slowly. Peter held the surprise of the day until Af and Zolo prepared to rest before the long trek back, when he told them there was still a monk to drag up.

It took until the midday meal of the following day for the full story to filter through the Darklings. Peter was accompanying Tristan to visit his wounded comrades in the sick tent when the changeling was toasted the High Wings. He wasn’t even there to hear it.

Peter spent the next four days in the recesses of Wintercamp, hidden but for the occasional presence of Zoë or MacDuff. He was too weary to engage

anyone else, too fresh with the icy clarity of the snowy wind in his lungs to want anything more than the private, personal joy he found after the Wingbreaker. He spent time listening to the snow, and down at the timberline, to the trees. He even listened to the crackle.

He spent time sleeping, and casting the dreaming forward. He was looking for an aura, one that would crackle and sing as his own.

Peter the changeling re-entered the society of Wintercamp a hero, if an odd one, whom even Af viewed with a new, sullen respect.

Peter had his High Wings. He had made them.





## PART III

### CHAPTER 1

In the months after he left Wintercamp, Heinrich Hauptmann began to pour himself into his search with renewed vigor. If Rimmion had not come to Wintercamp, then he was either camped somewhere equally equipped to handle a large number of Darklings, or he remained on the move.

By night Heinrich would drop his bones into a ball before his fire, and studying the fire, listening to the breathing of his horse, he would review what he had learned. Every day he asked himself: what do you know today, that you did not know yesterday? Tomorrow night you will know yet more. Tomorrow night you will know where they are. These Darklings you met today knew nothing. Tomorrow you will find the right ones.

Tomorrow.

In early December, Heinrich was headed back for home, to stop in, see how his father's affairs had been tied up. Two days out of a stop in the Vehm camp at Munich he found his way into a Black Forest Lek.

He had seen great, black feathers here and there in the trees on the road to Freiburg and decided it was worth a trek into the wood. One could never tell.

The Darklings he met were a sorry lot, stragglers. Heinrich simply rode into the perimeter, seeing no escorts or scouts to fend him off. He followed his nose to the fire. Gathered around a central fire in the paltry Lek were about twenty-five Darklings wearing sashes of reddish-gold. A few of the young, strong ones hopped up and brandished swords when the blond man appeared.

"Ho," Heinrich said, throwing back his head and opening his mouth. "I am no threat to you."

"What do you want?" The Darkling who addressed him was thin and wiry, about fourteen years old, and he immediately moved away from the rest, drawing Heinrich's eye.

"I want to trade with your Stell."

"I am Stell here," replied the Darkling boy. None of the fluid German of literate Stell's like Farrago. This was the stilted half-speech of the lower orders. "Crim is my name."

Heinrich sighed and reached up his hand, flicked the hairs at the back of his neck, the at-a-distance version of caressing that of the Stell you are meeting. "Stell Crim, I have two blankets and a metal pot."

"We need no metal pot."

Heinrich surveyed the Darklings gathered, the wings rising and falling. He couldn't see any lesions, but they all stared at him with a horrible, defeated look



he was growing accustomed to. He shrugged, “I didn’t hear you say you don’t want the blankets.”

“We are warm enough,” the Stell said. The boy’s sharp teeth glistened. Heinrich noted that the boy’s muscles were thin but strong; if there was food, he got more of it than the rest. He was Stell, all right.

“You can slice up the blankets, use them for bandages,” Heinrich said. He swirled his hands around in the symbol for *bandaging*. “If the sickness comes strong, you may need many bandages.” He stacked his hands atop one another, for *many*. He was referring to the worthlessness of bandages once they had been used to patch lesions; they had to be burnt and replaced.

“True.” The boy relaxed a bit. “What do you want?”

“Information,” Heinrich said.

“Show me the blankets.” Crim said.

Heinrich reached behind him, opened his saddlebag and pulled out a roll of two blankets; these he tossed on the swept Lek floor. He watched Crim pick one of them up and crept to the group around the fire. Crim took a moment to crouch behind a young Darkling girl, not quite six, and put the blanket over the one that was already about her shoulders. Crim looked away and up at Heinrich, and the two locked eyes briefly, before Heinrich looked away.

“I’m looking for my sister,” Heinrich said. Crim was touching his own sister’s cheeks, then he rose and calmly strode back to stand before Heinrich’s horse.

“I have no humans here,” Crim shook his head.

“I know,” Heinrich nodded slowly. “In fact it is two sisters I seek. One nine, one sixteen years old. They are with Stell Rimmion, of the Redgreen Band.”

Crim snapped back his head in respect. “Nornagesta in that one,” he said, referring to the immortal who according to legend had slain the Erl-King. “He is like us. Strong. Living free.”

Heinrich had heard all of this before and had learned not to launch into a bitter invective about the living free that availed itself of taking human captives. “So he’s a hero of yours. I would like to trade for his captives, my sisters.”

“He needs nothing,” said Crim. “You have nothing he wants.”

“That may be true,” Heinrich said, growing wearier still. He blinked. Snow was beginning to fall. “Do you know where they are?”

“I don’t know.” Crim’s eyes were naturally huge; it was so much easier to see them creeping to the left.

“I gave you blankets.”

“I cannot give you what I don’t have any more than you can give Rimmion what he needs.”

“You know something,” Heinrich said, leaning forward in the saddle. “Listen: I want you to imagine something. That sister of yours, over there, shivering. Imagine that a human, like me, a big, yellow human, came and took her. Took her away.”

Crim’s eyes jiggled in their sockets. “I don’t like imagining this. It sounds



like a threat to me.”

“No threat.” Heinrich shook his head. “I would do no such thing. Because I know such a thing’s power. Rimmion is out there with my flesh, my blood. I seek him. I want to talk to him. Get them back.”

Crim shivered, and his wings wrapped around his body.

“My God, you people are freezing,” Heinrich sighed violently. “You need to go in.”

“Go in?”

“There’s a place called Wintercamp, in the white mountains to the south. The Darklings gather there for winter.”

“I have heard of it. It is not for us.”

Heinrich tugged his beard. “That’s ridiculous. You’re going to die out here. Where is your Stell?”

“I am Stell—“

“Yes, yes, I am Stell here. I can imagine what happened. Whoever they were, they’ll come back if the cold doesn’t get you. Listen, Stell: protect your Band. Go in.”

“Rimmion tells us we are right not to go.”

“Ah. So you *have* seen him.”

Crim shrugged, still shivering. “I don’t know where he is.”

Heinrich looked over his shoulder. “I have, in my bags, two more blankets. One of them is lined with goose feathers. Those are safe, you don’t have to throw them away for fear of Nekro. We sew them into the blankets; it makes them very warm. Some of you will die. Some of you, with such a blanket, will not. Are you listening, Crim?” Heinrich studied the eyes of the young Stell and watched the certainty of mortality sink in, just as he felt the cold wind sinking into his own shrinking shoulders, his own aching bones. “Yours. Where is Rimmion?”

“All right.” Crim said, “I am not certain, but I have news.”

“Yes?”

“The River Streu. We flew near there two weeks ago. At Stell Malto’s camp we heard of trading involving two girls.”

“Streu... that’s near Baden,” Heinrich mumbled. “You’re not making this up?”

“I am too cold and tired to make anything up.” He shook his head. “And my sister is colder.”

Heinrich nodded. Crim was prepared to kill the whole Band out of pride, save one. If they were lucky, it would save all of them.

The River Streu. He would have to turn back, head for Baden. He’d just have to post a letter now and go home in the summer. If there was trading going on, they might even be with a different Band now.

Heinrich took a moment to produce the blankets. Finally he said, “You know, you must save yourself if they are to live. There is no heroism if you get yourself killed.”



“I know. I eat more.”

“Go in. Rimmion doesn’t care for you.”

“Never,” Crim said defiantly, his sharp teeth bared. “We care for ourselves.”

Heinrich shrugged. “Then dead Erkonig be with you.”

“Nornagesta be with us,” Crim said, “for we are stronger than all that.”

*Cuk-wo*, answered the rest, when they heard this. Heinrich turned and headed for the roads as the snow salted the Black Forest.





## CHAPTER 2

Not far away, in Freiburg, a Vehm Freischoffe was meeting with those who had the power to order him around. “It’s useless. I can use him back here.”

“If he comes back, send him out again,” replied Schwartzkopf.

“For one thing,” Mueller sighed, “I don’t think he *will* come back. He’s in this past his neck. But we need men here.”

“Mueller,” answered Schwartzkopf, “Keep him out. He’s learning. He’s learning.”

“You’re destroying him.”

“He’s destroying himself,” replied Schwartzkopf. “But whatever we get back will prove useful.”



## CHAPTER 3

In Baden, Christmas was upon the town. There was an oak tree decked out in metal reflecting the fires of the main square, and Heinrich beheld a parade presided over by a man whose whip pointed the gatherers the way to Hell, and Saint Nicholas, who wore gnarled horns and a coat that looked to be made of moss, and rode in the company of a small, enslaved demon who smiled and gave out gifts in the name of risen Christ.

In the woods Heinrich had seen other tree services, now, among what he was coming to regard as his people the humans. His eyes were being opened to gods he did not share, sacrifices he could not understand, nailings to trees for which he had no context. He understood sacrifice, though. More every day.

Heinrich winced at the brilliance of the candles in his eyes, barely heard the songs being sung. Crackle falling through the air, elves murmuring the Darkling sagen, these were the sights and sounds that were familiar to him of late, and entering Baden at the time when humans most revered their God—Heinrich’s god, the old father god, He that exists and makes everything exist—made Heinrich uncomfortable in the extreme. He felt at every moment the desire to slink back into the woods, until he had circled the town completely, until the roads once more felt natural. At any rate, he comfortably remembered, his task was in the woods: the elves weren’t exactly going to be celebrating Christmas with the town humans. But he had to talk to the Vehm here.

“Initiate Hauptmann.” Kristoff, the jovial Freischoffe of Baden, met him in front of the Vehm courthouse. “Welcome. Please come in.”

Heinrich found himself in the foyer of Kristoff’s hall and wondered how the Vehm could stand to have such a rotund, happy creature in its ranks. Kristoff was Saint Nicholas’ chipper little slave Zwarte Piet himself (save that Kristoff was pink, whereas—as the mummer festival going on in the Baden Square would remind Heinrich—Father Christmas’ gift-dispensing slave was black as the devil). The Freischoffe waddled over to bring Heinrich a hot brandy, plopping himself in front of a fire. “Will you be staying with us for Christmas?”

Heinrich shook his head as he removed a letter from his coat. “In fact, my family is waiting for me,” was his non-answer. “Please have this letter posted for me. It expresses my apologies for my lateness.”

“You won’t make it back to Freiburg this winter, son,” Kristoff said, his cheeks glowing. “Stay a while. We can always use the help. Darkling raids and all that.”

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to ask you about,” Heinrich responded, once again avoiding any commitment. He felt uncomfortably warm; his layers of leather and cloth were chafing him. He could not see his breath, and felt as



though his words were meaningless for their lack of visibility. “I heard in the Black Forest that there was a pair of girls traded around here. Captive girls.”

“Traded?”

“Traded, or traded for. Maybe the elves wanted clothing to put on them. I have no idea. I didn’t get a lot of information.”

The reddish man sipped his cup and leaned towards the fire, enjoying the heat that flowed into him. He sighed deeply. “There was a raid three weeks ago; we took back some captives...”

Heinrich jumped. “Who? What band? Live captives?”

Kristoff shrugged. “What do I know of Bands? Yes, yes, they’re live captives. You can see them if you like.”

“Girls? I’m looking for two, nine and sixteen.”

Kristoff ran his through his head and shrugged again. “We have a number of them. You can have a look,” he shook his head, “but I’m not sure you want to see them. You know, son, you don’t look well. You should take the waters while you’re here.”

*Not sure I want to see them? How can you say that? You know who I am. Everyone knows why I’m looking, how can everyone be so blasé about this?*

“I want to see them, yes,” Heinrich said. Was it possible that he’d find them? “Are you sure you don’t know what Band it was you stole them from?”

“Hell if I know,” Kristoff said. “But I think their sashes were red and... red and green.”

A quarter hour later, Kristoff was leading Heinrich down a path behind the Baden Vehm house, near the entrance to the woods. The structure they came through was, Heinrich saw, a converted bathhouse, and the front door was guarded by two Vehm Frohnboten. They nodded as Kristoff led Heinrich in.

The Christian singing died down to a distant, melodic sound leaking through the thick, clay walls of the entryway. Along the walls, Heinrich saw that the Vehm had painted stars everywhere, using paint mixed with bits of silver, so that the walls shimmered like crackle. Kristoff whispered while Heinrich stood in the entryway, before the next door, where he lifted a torch from the wall.

“Now, you understand, some of them have been with the elves for a long time,” the Freischoffe said.

“All right.” Heinrich pushed on but Kristoff stopped him, his bulbous visage growing stern.

“They’re not used to us, many of them. You... I just want you to be prepared for what you see.”

“All right.”

Kristoff opened the door and the last sounds of Christianity disappeared, replaced by a slow chanting, bits and pieces Heinrich recognized, in this side of the room, the raspy Erkonigsaga, in that, the dramatic Nornagestasaga. The chanting came from the rocking heads, matted hair, painted faces of the women



and girls who had been stolen back from the Darklings by the Baden Vehm. They sat in a semicircle on the floor, some of them making symbols with their hands. The noise was maddening.

“Normally the Darklings slay their captives when they know they’re losing,” Kristoff said, even as Heinrich barely heard him. Heinrich crept forward, taking Kristoff’s torch and moving towards the first, a small brunette. “But we got the drop on this Band.”

It was her! He couldn’t see her eyes, but he could see her jaw line, the mouth, underneath all that matted hair. She was wearing white paint, but—

“Christa?” Heinrich said hoarsely. “I’ve come to take you and Mary home.”

The girl looked up and Heinrich moved her hair out of the way. The girl began to shriek as soon as he had said the word, home, and now even as Heinrich saw that it wasn’t her they all shrieked, *Ik-ik-ik-ikiityye!*

A girl of about ten came from nowhere, pouncing, tearing at Heinrich with her nails, and Heinrich struggled to get her claws away from his face and put her down, gently as he could. He spun around, shutting out the screaming, *My God, what have they done*, and this was not Christa and this was not Mary and this was not either. None of them.

Heinrich saw a glimmer of red cloth and snatched a sash from a shrieking girl’s waist. He held it up, shaking it at Kristoff. “Red-yellow. Red-yellow.” He threw the sash down, its owner pouncing on it the moment it hit the floor.

Kristoff followed him out. “I told you I know nothing of Bands.”

Heinrich stormed past the guards, his mind crawling with disgust, stomach churning. “You should at least know something of color.”

“Listen, boy,” Kristoff said angrily. “I showed you what I have. So they’re not the concubines you were looking for, it’s not my fault. We have to figure out where these children go! They probably would have been better off if they and been killed before we brought them back.”

“No,” Heinrich said, heading for his horse. He had to cover ground. This trip had been a waste. He had lost time coming here. “They shouldn’t have been taken in the first place.”

And as he hit the rode, leaving Christmas and madness behind, he wondered which set of kidnapers he was chastising.



## CHAPTER 4

In Davert Forest the midwives worked, and learned the songs, and brought forth Darklings young the likes of which the race had never seen. It was important work, Christa reminded herself.

Christa the near-midwife padded hastily down the whispering soulstuff steps, passing through black doors that opened and closed behind her with organic precision. She was wiping her hands, as Mary had shown her, with a white cloth, and pressed down her gown. “Mary?” she called, as she entered her sister’s room. Mary was seated on her cot, her head against the wall, a pillow under her neck. Beside her was Kirsten, another Midwife.

“What is it Douglas calls them...?” Mary was rubbing her eyes as she spoke, “Vi...viviparous?”

“Yes,” Kirsten said. They had had three births that day, none of them easy. Two of them had produced perfect, if single, clutches- one egg each, each one healthy. “It just means they lay eggs.”

“When they can,” Mary frowned. Christa saw her look up and acknowledge her. “Yes, sweetheart?”

“Gloria is ready.” Christa said, eyes wide. “She’s waiting.”

“Gloria?” Kirsten asked wearily. “I thought she’s not due for a month or more.”

Mary hopped up from the cot. “That’s Glori. This is Gloria.” She patted her bunkmate’s hand, then pulled an apron about her. “You rest. Christa can help me with this one.”



## CHAPTER 5

“What am I looking at?” MacDuff asked, surveying the ground. Zoë had come in with her daily scout report and had drifted off midway. Suddenly she had said, “Brother MacDuff, would you come with me?” And with that she had dragged him out to the west corner of the monks’ dormitory. Before them, half-buried in snow, lay a long, lonely tree.

The scout suddenly had more energy than MacDuff had seen her display in weeks. Zoë flitted over to light on the fallen tree. “Why is this here?”

“We dragged it up when we knew we’d be building more huts. I guess this one never got used.”

“Mm-hmm,” Zoë tilted her head, “and do you think you’re going to be using it?”

MacDuff studied Farrago’s scout intently as she perched on the stump. “Why?”

She looked excited and embarrassed at the same time, as if close to victory but wary of losing it. “I would like... I would like permission to use it.”

The monk stepped over to the stump and kicked it lightly with his boot, then sat down upon it, brushing some snow out of the way. He drew back his hood so he could look up and sideways at her. “Let me ask you something, Zoë,” he said.

“Yes?” Zoë bounced on her heels, but sounded discouraged.

“Please,” he patted the bark and Zoë seemed to consider it for a moment and then came to rest like a human on the stump beside him. He smiled despite himself while she studied his pose and tried to affect it, even going so far as to fold her hands at her chin and lean forward, elbows to knees. “Zoë, you’re not happy with your post.”

“I just asked for an old tree.”

MacDuff grimaced. “I’m talking about your reports. You wander into my library every day like the sun comes up and give me the same report. The south is clear. The north is clear. All clear. And out you go.”

“It’s a pretty solid camp you have here, Brother MacDuff.”

“Do you like scouting?”

“I love it!” she said. “Tracking men and even elves; it’s an honor.”

“An honor, yes. That’s important. And you do it well. But you’re right, you know. We have a few scouts. Zolo covers the evenings and you the mornings, and there are replacements when you get sick. But you don’t get sick. You’re just... exhausted.” He looked at her, watching what little blood there was rush to her face. “Like you’re staying up all night carving.”

“You’ve seen them.”

“I have,” he stroked his beard. “Extraordinary. But you’re a scout. And of course you can fly as well as Farrago’s escorts. So I understand why you keep the post—you earned it and don’t want to give it up.”



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Zoë shook her head, “I think you misunderstand me, I—look, never mind...”

“It’s hard, isn’t it,” he peered at her deeply, watching her eyes swivel and lock in on his. “Being very good at one thing and knowing you could be brilliant at something else.”

Zoë looked away. “I never said anything like that.”

“Take the tree,” said MacDuff, rising. “I think we can do without it.”

“I’m not giving up my scout post,” she said.

The tall man turned and folded his arms. “Whatever you say. Listen to me, Zoë. I’ve known the dark elves for a long time. I’ve seen warriors come and go. But you know what they are, what you are? Nomadic. And now here you come: you, Zoë the Scout. And you’ve excelled in your nomadic world and I see you reaching every night for a piece of something more.”

“More?”

“I’ve seen poets and swordsmen among the Darklings, Zoë. But I’ve never seen an artist. Perhaps there have been many of them, but there was never time or the necessary supplies for them to thrive. It shouldn’t be that way.”

Zoë searched for words. “Maybe it doesn’t have to be that way. Maybe even the Darklings can change.”

“I don’t think it’s a matter of changing. I think it’s a matter of bringing out what’s already there.”

As MacDuff turned to walk away Zoë said, “Ah—thank you!”

“Don’t thank me,” said the Iron Thane, evenly. “Amaze me. Like you said, it’s a solid camp. I’m more interested in what you do with the wood.”





## CHAPTER 6

Spring came to Wintercamp and the place got lonelier by the wingbeat. Peter walked across the glistening snow, watching as murders of Darklings poured from the high perch, stronger than when they had come. Each carried bags of crackle dutifully doled out by Cracklemaster Leed. The hot sparks of crackle fell like rain on the courtyard as Peter watched them go, heading across the Alps for their respective preferred homes, whatever might be habitably left of them. Peter wondered vaguely how many Bands never came in.

He rounded the tavern and saw the tall curtains of Zoë's enclave, nestled behind the dormitory, the white cloth flapping in the wind. The same wind brought the sound of Zoë's voice, humming away as she worked. Peter opened the flap and looked up to see her perched on a small tower, cutting away at the old tree. The form he saw rising from the ground, still a nearly nondescript obelisk, was vaguely taking on the shape of a person.

Zoë was peering intently into the wood, at an upper spot where she had carved out a large, flat section. Now she was making tiny, delicate swipes with a carving instrument Peter had seen her design and cast herself. After a moment she rubbed her eyes and looked down. There were flecks of wood covering her tunic and mixed in her hair, and she idly ran her fingers through, tossing a handful of filings to the dirt floor. "Peter!"

"What are you working on?"

"Eyes," she said. "They have to crackle."

Peter considered this. "How do you make wood crackle?"

"You'll see," she said, dropping down to throw her arms around him. When he kissed her, he tasted the sweaty wood on her lips.

Peter backed up and smiled. "Farrago has decided he's going to stay on."

"Stay on?" Zoë swept back her hair with one hand, looking around. "Oh! That's good."

The changeling shook his head, sizing up the emerging sculpture. "It hadn't even occurred to you he might not."

She shrugged. "I guess I preferred not to think about it."

That would be like her, Peter reflected. She really did seem to be in her own little world when she was working on the sculpture. They could be walking together, and suddenly the elf would fall to the ground, sketching some shape out in the snow, some piece of her mind that had to be recorded and reflected *now* before it left her. Peter had no such thoughts, and knew no one save Zoë who did. It was utterly unique about her.

So the fact that she had run the risk of having to abandon her sculpture had simply flown right over her feathery head. The artist Darkling, like the birds of the fields, wants for nothing.



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Zoë's embrace relaxed and she moved towards her ladder, a finger to her lip. When she opened her mouth again, Peter recognized the sound of her voice as the tone she got when she had already disconnected most of her brain from the outside world. "Was there something you wanted?"

Peter smiled. "Actually, I thought we'd accompany one another."

"Hm?"

"Farrago and MacDuff want to see me, and they called for you as well."

She fairly trembled when she looked at him and Peter raised a hand. "I don't think they're related."

"Of course," she shrugged. "Why would they be?"

Why, indeed? Peter's relationship with Zoë was a fairly popular courtship, as it were, or at least a popular subject. The relationship had achieved this status by being something popular not to comment on, in that the elves made a point of not commenting on it, over and over again. Peter the changeling, the heroic, high-winged and wingless changeling, and the artist who until recently was Farrago's scout, recently pre-paired to one of Farrago's twin escorts. Somehow this interested everyone in some morbidly curious way that made everyone insist they weren't interested. "I'm quite relieved," Peter told Zoë at one point, "to report that there is hope for the elves and the humans yet. They're very much alike."

But of course, anything the Blue Band did was news. Farrago had taken his place as the head of an ad-hoc counsel of Wintercamp Stells, and was practically running Wintercamp with MacDuff. And now the Blues were going to stay on through the spring, at least. They were a powerful Band, so the things the Blue Banders did were by extension powerful, even the innocuous things. All of this was new to Peter. He was almost comforted that his own popularity was still mingled with a certain amount of distrust. Otherwise, it all would have gotten downright smarmy.

"There they go," Zoë whispered, as they walked hand-in-hand down the path, and gestured with her head at the departing Darklings who streamed out over the Alps. Over the past months, even after her wing had healed, she had grown accustomed to walking for longer periods with Peter, and in such a way that it was not a novelty, but a joy, placid and everyday in nature. Peter tossed back his head in agreement. "We'll see them all next year, I imagine."

When the two arrived at MacDuff's chamber, the monk and Farrago were busy poring over some map MacDuff had removed and rolled out on his desk. The bearded man looked up and said, "Ah, Peter. Zoë. Sit, please."

As the two sat, MacDuff leaned on the side of his desk while Farrago took a seat in MacDuff's chair.

"You called for us?"

"Actually we called for each of you; that you came together is your own affair." Farrago seemed to study his fingernails intently while he addressed her. "Zoë, how is this sculpture of yours coming?"



Zoë raised her eyebrows, looking at Peter, who shrugged. “It’s coming just fine,” she said. “Would you like a detailed report?”

“I’m not sure that would do me any good,” he said earnestly. “I don’t really know anything about sculpture. They say that Golanlandaliay of the wood elves had sculptures at the Great Tree. Vast walls of sculpted stories. But no one knows where those are.”

Zoë knew it wasn’t important but she ventured a guess anyway: “My suspicion is that the Great Tree was in Scotland.”

“My point is that I don’t know the slightest thing about what it is that you’re spending all your time doing. And that’s—if MacDuff is right and this thing is an important thing, like songs are important, then it is wrong that I not know. Cuk-wo?”

Zoë pondered this. “You couldn’t possibly expect me to have an answer to that.”

“No, I suppose not,” he said.

“Would—“ she looked at Peter with a look that said, *we are in uncharted territory now, boy*—“would you like me to teach you, Stell? About sculpting? Or perhaps, how to sculpt?”

Farrago coughed, “Oh, Dead Erlkonig, no, I’m too old to learn anything new. But I’m not too old to see its use. I’d like you to teach some of the young ones. We can set up a large hut—enough for, say, thirty students? For starters? Teach them. Yes,” he said. Cuk-wo. Teach them.”

Zoë stared. “Ah—I don’t think you under—I don’t know the first thing about – I’m still learning myself.”

“Learn, then,” MacDuff spoke up. “Keep learning. But learn by teaching, as well.”

“Can you do this?” Farrago said, and Zoë realized just then that it was no joke, no frivolous thing, but something Farrago honestly didn’t have the first clue about and nevertheless was dead set on being sure that Zoë not only continue it but that she spread it like Nekro.

“Of course, my Stell.” She tilted back her head, very slow and far, “Cuk-wo.”

“Of course there is the matter of your scouting,” MacDuff said, “but I think we can fill that position.”

“Oh—“ Zoë said. Oh, hell. “Certainly. Would you like me to choose one of the reserves?”

“Actually,” Farrago said, “We were thinking perhaps the changeling would fit the bill nicely. You were a scout for the humans, hey, Wingbreaker?”

Peter the changeling fairly blanched that the Stell had called him *Wingbreaker*. He had heard from some of the Darklings that such a moniker was going around, but it somehow seemed... vulgar... for the Stell to use it. Nevertheless he said, “Absolutely.”

“Of course you’ll report to MacDuff, since this is his camp.”

“Be glad of that,” said the monk, “if this were Farrago’s camp you’d be



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reporting to his escorts.”

Peter smiled at MacDuff’s good-natured acknowledgment of the general awareness that Af had little interest in dealing with the changeling. “Ah, of course I’d be honored. Of course.”

“So there we are,” said Farrago, as he stood up behind the desk and leaned forward on his man-hands. “You both have new assignments.”

Peter sent Zoë the slightest nervous look. But it was clear what was going on. The leaders wanted Zoë to turn her attentions to teaching. Sure, the changeling might make a stupendous scout, but the main point in choosing him was that Zoë wouldn’t likely make a large issue of it. And as proud as he had been of his part in *Wingbreaker*, of saving Farrago, of any of that, Peter was all the more proud now—of being an instrument, in the slightest way, of what just might be greatness. A new kind of Darkling.

“Now, Peter, before *you* get comfortable,” MacDuff stood straight, “you and I have an errand to run.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re going to see a friend,” replied the monk. “A friend who’s been waiting to meet you for some time.”



## CHAPTER 7

Deep within the City of Douglas, Mary and Christa are sitting and telling stories, surrounded by elfin women great with child.

How to find it?

Davert Forest itself is alive with spring, but tumble in, twist over the trees and fall between the branches, dive down, seeking out the dark water.

Find the trail of soulstuff there, follow the thousand singing voices, slip between two trees and into a shadow. There, through soulstuff curtains, there, between hard places, there, where human souls sing and human midwives work with Darklings, there, untouched by wind, under the ground, impossibly large within and impossibly small without, lies the City of Douglas.



Douglas the Erlkonigsson was tired. He felt the wavering of the walls around him, but the thousand tremors of life gave him no peace. They asked for games, but the games gave him no joy.

*Oh Erlkonig, Erlkonig, what have you wrought,  
What pain have you brought? What creation...*

Douglas sailed down the soulstuff steps, his feet becoming one with the substance, and he heard in the distance the sounds of Mary and Christa Hauptmann telling their tales. He moved through the walls and came out in a room where he found them, each braiding a Darkling female's hair, their tiny hands moving fluidly.

Douglas knew he could move through walls because his body was no more—once, it had been human, and he had made from that human body this. And for nearly a hundred years the old body held on, the skeleton growing inside of the fabric of souls he took on as his flesh-cover. And then, one day, he felt it all gone, the bones inside of him turning to dust, the soulstuff flowing though, holding his shape only by habit. He was one with the thousand, then.

And he needed more. He could feel it even now. He needed more souls if he were to keep the City alive and if the changeling Program were to continue. He needed more souls because, like his old bones, the soulstuff was made up of them, but ate them up: gradually the old souls filtered away. Douglas felt the need to replenish. Even now and then he heard the boy Johann, taken so recently, still questioning, but already fading into the fabric, becoming another inextricable part of Douglas and the City and the stream. In fifty years, Johann would be gone.

Mary and Christa's faces were pale and white, and covered with makeup that made them paler still. Mary was telling a tale of a human priest who looked for his daughter. When she reached the part about the long search, and the father finally finding his daughter in a mountain, and leaving her, Mary threw Douglas a glance. It was not an ironic look at all. Mary was as much a part of the system



here as he was. He could tell that now. She told the story because it made her happy to fit herself into an old tale. And because the pregnant Darkling, Glori, listened, enrapt, holding her abdomen and the unwinged fetus inside. And the human voices and the cuck-woing Darklings mixed with the distant chanting and sweet music of the City of Douglas.

Something within Douglas, in the place where he remembered bones, ached with hunger. He couldn't. Not anymore.

And deep within, Johann was fighting, now, crying, wanting to go home. *Hush*, he heard the thousand say, *hush*, Douglas heard himself say, *it will pass. Soon there will be another.*

Douglas felt the hunger and held his head, his false, self-made head. There would not be another. No more. No more.

*But you don't have enough.*

*I have enough.*

*I'm just telling myself I don't have enough because I know I love to take them.*

"Douglas?" came the voice of Rimmion the Darkling. The Dweller by the Dark Stream turned, moved through a wall, and up, forming up through the floor next to the Stell. Rimmion was leaving the room of his Stella. Douglas watched Rimmion's eyes roving, his head shaking. Douglas already knew he could not save her.

"She is dying, my friend," Douglas said. What else could he say?

"You... you said you could..."

"There are things I can do," the Prince replied. "And things I cannot."

"And the..." Rimmion held a hand to his mouth. "The child..."

Douglas thought for a moment. "I do not know."

"But so many others, those below," Rimmion stuttered his words. The Stell was scared. "You could save *them*."

"I'm trying," Douglas said.

"I'll bring you anything you need," Rimmion snapped back his head. "Anything. More midwives? I'll find them. More children? I'll point them out for you."

Douglas closed his eyes. "I don't need you to pick out my victims for me, Rimmion." He caught himself, for the first time, using that word: victims. He was human once. He would have thought of them that way. Or would he? Had not his father the Erl-King said, "*Zie sind kein mensch!* You are not human!"

Douglas found himself turning away, his body warping into the walls, leaving Rimmion without a word, because the walls were telling him something. Someone was coming. A man who was hardly a man, and a Darkling who was not a darkling. Douglas' eyes soared without his body up through the soulstuff walls, finally out, looking out the shadow between the two trees.

A gray man who had lived far too long looked at the crystal eyes that floated in a shadow and said, "Douglas. I've brought you a visitor."

At last. At last.



## CHAPTER 8

Peter had followed MacDuff into Davert Forest, and the man had spoken hardly a word over the two-week-long trip. At one point Peter asked a question and the monk had turned to Peter and said, “This is a pilgrimage. Ask only one question: ask yourself and God how open you can be.”

After that, silence again, for days, except when necessary. They stopped and hunted, they slept, they rode, and it all became one trip of snow giving way to greenery, of distant auras and strange towns passed by, of Darklings flying overhead and missing them.

They passed a battle, no, just a skirmish, a raid gone bad and recently ended, Vehm soldiers dying and Darklings dead. They passed wordlessly, keeping to the path only MacDuff knew.

Soon Peter felt geography pleading with his mind to hold on, he felt as if they’d turned back, saw every tree as if he’d seen it before, felt every wind as if they were one. For twelve hours he had no idea where he had gone, and MacDuff led him until he felt as if all places were the same.

And finally: the trees, and acres and acres of bulbous, hissing crackle growing in shadow. And the shadows themselves, and the glowing eyes that talked.

Now, in a room with a reddish tinge, Peter stood before a man entirely made of black, who seemed to melt into the walls.

And Peter said, “I know you.”

Douglas held his hand up, touching Peter’s face, gliding down to touch his shoulder, inspecting his back where no wings grew. “Of course you do. Of course you do. I go everywhere.”

“Why are we here?” Peter turned to MacDuff, who watched in silence.

“You’re here because I wanted to see you,” Douglas said. “And I understand there’s something you want to see.”

Down a staircase that Douglas looked more inclined to swim through, down to the singing circle, Peter watched in wonder as a door opened up like an iris.

Voices, knocking him back. *Oh, my god.*

“Peter!”

The changeling could hardly believe his eyes. There, among what must have been twenty other human girls, among surely fifty or eighty Darkling women, were Mary and Christa Hauptmann.



## CHAPTER 9

Mary had been the one to cry out, and now she rose behind a Darkling. Peter shot a shocked look at MacDuff, who merely nodded.

And Christa and Mary, faces painted, were running towards him, and he was crouching down. "My God," he said, feeling the tears rolling, "what have they done..."

"No, it's..." Christa shook her head in a coquettish way, wiping a bit of glimmering paint off her face with a tiny finger

"What are you doing!" Peter demanded, turning to hiss at Douglas. The Darkling women shuffled nervously, yammering in the elfin tongue.

"No, no," Mary had him by the elbow, her palm at his chest, "no," she said softly, "It's all right. Peter. It's so good to see you."

"We searched..." he was saying, but even then he knew it wasn't true. Heinrich searched. Heinrich searched still.

"I know," Mary said, and in her eyes was something Peter had never seen in a child, a peace, a seriousness. It was even there, if less slightly, in Christa.

"We hear about him," Christa said. "He's so sad..."

"But..." this was too much. Too much at once, Peter swirled around, staring at Douglas and MacDuff, feeling the room pitch and swerve. He wanted to shout, grab them both, run out, up the stairs and into the natural world.

A pilgrimage...

"I should take you out of here," Peter said aloud. He had meant to think that, but he said it aloud because he knew it was a desperate idea. And then Mary looked at him with a strange, calm look, an almost pitying look.

"Oh, Peter," she shook her head.

And the changeling felt small, and powerless, before her.

"You should come with me now," Douglas said, behind him. Peter turned around, feeling the slow horror of the whole situation drip over him.

"Go on," Mary said. "We're not going anywhere."

Peter stood in the chamber of the Dark Prince, searching for words. "I want to know what you have done to them."

"I have done nothing to them," came the answer. "I wanted you to see them. I couldn't show them to their brother, but at least, I could show them to you."

"You have bewitched them!"

"No," Douglas said. "they're under no spell. They have never tried to leave. Look: look at this," said the Prince as he cast a hand over the black wall behind him. A red film grew over the wall, thinned out, and there they were, Mary and Christa working, and the picture split, and he saw them again, Mary and Christa at a birthing table, with Douglas standing there as well. "This is what they do. And this is why."



Nekro. The disease flashed on the wall, fading in and out in pictures of falling feathers and coughed-up bile. Humans. Crowding, growing, sweeping the Darklings back. So many images. Then, something new. A stronger child, a baby held high, a white Darkling baby with gray, shimmering hair, and *no wings*.

“Changelings,” Douglas said, “are the way they will survive. But it’s so different. It’s not a kind of birth any elf can understand. We need midwives, and we need lots of them. And we need them now.”

“What are you doing?” Peter shook his head in disgust, “mating humans with Darklings?”

“You know that doesn’t work,” the Prince said wearily. “No. This is magic, as the humans would call it.”

“Who are you?”

“I am the son of the Erl-King,” he said. “Next question.”

“Who...” Peter shook his head. “Who am I?”

Douglas smiled. “All those legends, stolen children, all those changeling stories, but *never like this*. I have taken legend and made it real. And this will save the Children of the Erl-King. You, Peter, are the first changeling. The very first to survive.”





## CHAPTER 10

“Why don’t you go in?” Heinrich asked the question of every Band he encountered as he moved along. By spring, he knew the question was less relevant, but he asked it anyway. Heinrich had discovered that in his search for his sisters he had acquired a thirst for more knowledge, anything that might help. Why did they not go in? The answers would be useful, he was sure.

It was the first thing he asked of the Gray Band, when he came upon them, the first vocalizations Heinrich made after the head-snapping and chalk-touching that was a common opening in larger, more dignified Bands. And the Gray Band was a dignified one, indeed.

He just wandered into *that* camp. But that time he was losing count of the Bands out here, always amazed at the number of sick. Gradually admiring their tenacity.

There were new human towns everywhere but Heinrich saw less and less of them; his answers lay with the Bands. The Bands were being pushed back, farther and farther into the wilderness. And so was he.

The Grays had known Heinrich when he rode up.

“You are the bull-shouldered yellow man,” the Stell of the Grays said, after complementing Heinrich on the Darkling language he had gradually acquired. Stell Corrin was a strong and proud Darkling, and he was growing crackle, now. But he had lost many to the Nekro.

“Why don’t you go in?” Heinrich had asked, as he looked around the camp. Already, though, he saw good black wool blankets, and he knew these had come from the elf-Beguines.

“To Wintercamp? Maybe next year,” the Stell had answered. It turned out, in fact, that the Grays had received their season’s worth of crackle from Wintercamp. Just hadn’t chosen to go in. Wasn’t their way.

Asking about Wintercamp was also how Heinrich heard about Peter. The story of *The Changeling and the Wingbreaker* was mythic news in early 1251; so much so that Heinrich even heard it later at a Vehm camp. The changeling, the changeling... Peter was helping convert Wintercamp into a year-round alpine encampment, although apparently the name wasn’t changing.

Heinrich, who for so many months had been on his own, sometimes wanted to think this Peter was some different creature, not his own friend and blood-brother. But no. Peter had been this changeling from the beginning. Sometimes Heinrich felt angry that Peter had left him, even though Heinrich had encouraged him to. And despite it all, he felt pride. People were talking about Peter: that freak from Freiburg, what do you know, was a hero among the elves. But while Peter was finding his place, Heinrich was finding nothing.

Some of the Darklings, including the Grays and that freezing child-led



Band he'd met, weren't going in because they had been in contact with Rimmion, the Redgreen Stell. That was where Heinrich's ears would perk up. Where did Rimmion go? Every Band had suggestions.

Stell Corrin of the Grays was so pleased to encounter Heinrich the searcher that he even volunteered a guess as to Rimmion's whereabouts.

"Davert Forest," Corrin said. "Try there."

Heinrich was fed and sent off, having traded nothing and having received a lead he wasn't sure he could trust. But it was something.

The night he left the Grays, he flicked back his head in a salute, and saw that even some of the Nekros had been allowed to come out to see him off. Wonderful, he reflected grimly. He was a walking story. He had the faintest feeling that the elves found Heinrich amusing. But this he had to hand to them: unlike the humans, Darklings never, ever even suggested he should give up.



The moment Peter learned of his origin at the City of Douglas, he poured himself into studying the changeling Project. Not that any hope of a "rescue" existed. What hope did he have of taking the girls out, when every wall and door in the City of Douglas responded to its master's wishes?

He was given to understand that the walls and Douglas were made up of the same stuff, and that its chief component was souls. Souls from where? He had received no answer.

Fascinating, though, the work Douglas was doing. Peter even watched a birth.



Glori was looking up, dazed, far from the world around her. She saw the stars, flying past, saw the Erkonig flying in the early void and meeting the starts, making his own wings.

"We're ready, aren't we, Glori?" she heard the soothing voice of the Prince say, far off. Douglas had no wings but flew. Douglas made his own wings. Her child would make his own wings.

"Ready," she said, drifting, her body floating faraway. Mary was bent over her, her painted white face pleasant and strong, her silver hair pulled back tightly. That was the last thing she saw, before she drifted into whiteness and the sound of Douglas' voice spoke, faraway and unclear, talking to the egg.

*Wronged you have been, wronged you are, but I take that away and replace it. Do you hear me, child who will be, who quickens now in the egg, you move, now, your bones light, your lungs large, your eyes roving? Already the reversal of the wrongs done you has begun, but there is yet more.*

*Your journey... do you hear?*

*(I hear.. I hear..)*

*Your journey will be long and your soul is light, and I now grant it this boon, this voice you hear, behind me, this whispering second voice that echoes my words, this voice that has seen light and has been part of me, made me live, I now grant you. Together you will grow as one, forever, new and free, and no*



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*wings will grow on your back but your soul will be strong, and wise, and you will make your own wings. Do you hear?*

*(I hear... I hear...)*



Glori was awake when the egg was shown to her. Its shell was thinner than those lain by her mother, but Mary, the godsend, was pleased.

Douglas laid the egg before a glowing orb, so that she could see through it, and within moved the child, a male. They were making excited sounds, even she was, but she heard nothing but the silent sound of tears dappling on her face, saw nothing but the beautiful wingless child before her in silhouette.

The hatchling would come from the egg, she was told, not after another three months, as in the old way, but perhaps tomorrow, perhaps even today.

“That’s fine enough,” Glori coughed, “I’ve had that egg eight months already.”

Mary was laughing as if invigorated from some long battle, but Glori recalled nothing; there was nothing but this egg, this healthy egg. Mary’s hand was upon it and she looked at her with her tiny human eyes and asked her what she would name the child.

“Heinrich,” said Glori. “For your brother who searches.”



## CHAPTER 11

Peter was watching through a film of soulstuff when Douglas appeared at his side, forming from a reed that burst through the floor.

“Well?”

Peter shook his head. “You’re... are they really going to survive better?”

“I hope so,” Douglas said. “They should. Of course there’s a cultural problem when it comes to Darklings with no wings, but it was the least I could do to try to make it easier for them to integrate with society.”

“Easier,” Peter shook his head. He couldn’t begin to pour out what he wanted to, that it was either too much or not enough, that this freakish aspect he had carried all his life had in no way made it easier.

“How many did you make?”

“When?”

“When...” he could barely ask it, “when I came along.”

Douglas cleared his throat, which Peter reflected the Prince had no reason to do, since his throat was made-up. “There were a number. None of them made it. I... learned.”

“Why are you doing this?” Peter demanded. “They’re whole religion is based on not being like humans... like worms. Taking their wings away...”

“It’s not just that,” said Douglas. “They’re stronger, and smarter by nature. And religion can change.” Douglas leaned in, whispering into Peter’s ear. “The Erl-King said, Make Your Own Wings. What could it have possibly meant, but in a symbolic sense?”

Peter shook his head. “But it doesn’t mean you get to take their feathers away. This is... what gives you the right to tamper like this?”

Douglas touched his head. “Peter, I’d hoped that I could get you to understand. What gives *me* the right? What on earth gave *him*...” The Dark Prince sighed. “This program... might be the only chance they have.” Then he swooned visibly, rocking on his heels, his legs warping with the walls about him.

Peter stared. “Are you all right?”

“Just... a little hungry,” Douglas said, and both he and the walls seemed to take a moment to collect themselves. “Peter,” he said finally. “I had to bring you here. You had to see. This is important, vitally important work. If the Darklings can change, they must. If I can help them in this way, as son of their... god... then I must.”

Peter shook his head, staring through the film and the wingless baby in its mother’s arms. “What do you want from me?”

“Nothing, for now,” the Erlkonigsson responded. “I just wanted you to see.”

Peter spent another day in the City of Douglas, watching in silence as Mary and Christa and the rest of the midwives worked with their charges. He watched



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MacDuff and Douglas walk together, talking, and wondered what it was they spoke about. When Peter asked MacDuff the same thing he had asked Peter—why had he been brought here—MacDuff merely shrugged, “I think he’s tired.”

MacDuff received news in the second week that Frederick the Emperor was dead; suddenly the iron monk was eager to return to Wintercamp. Apparently the army and the church and the Vehm—everyone, apparently—wanted the place shut down.

When they left, Douglas said, “Make your own wings. Make them over and over again.”



## CHAPTER 12

At Davert Forest, Heinrich found the Redgreen Darklings he had heard about: they were Nekros, the lot of them, a tiny murder abandoned in the woods by Rimmion. He gave them blankets and food and asked them where their Stell had gone; they wept and pointed him northward again.

It did not occur to him until a day or so later, as he stopped to water his horse, that Rimmion always killed his Nekros. But by that time Heinrich was on another lead, and he considered and accepted the idea that perhaps Rimmion had had a change of heart, or at least policy.

And perhaps, just perhaps, Heinrich was getting tired, too.



## CHAPTER 13

### FREIBURG

“It’s been a year, Heinrich.”

“I know.” The young Vehm felt his great shoulders slump, rolling like heavy logs atop his back. Margaret sifted her hands in her apron, leaning against the counter in the Grossmann family kitchen.

“A *year*.” Margaret looked down and back up at him, several times, her eyes sweeping up and down his person as if searching for something that would indicate he heard her.

Heinrich stared blankly, unsure of what to say. He hadn’t seen many humans recently. *Our eyes are so small.*

She went on, “Papa got your letter at Christmas.” She reached into a pocket of the apron, pulled out a crinkled parchment tied with string. She weighed it with her hand. “He read it in front of the fire. You said you were coming back in the summer.”

Heinrich nodded, reaching for a cup and pouring himself some beer. He brought it to his lips, blanched a bit at the taste. “I’m sorry,” he coughed aloud. “I’ve been drinking nothing but water... yes... the summer.”

He set down the cup, wondering where to begin. Christmas... when he wrote that letter, posted it at the Vehm camp in Baden, he had been following a lead he was sure would pay off in a month or two.

Either the Darklings were wrong, after Heinrich went North, to Munich, or South again, through the Bayern—he had even passed near Wintercamp again, careful to give the Wingbreaker wide berth—or they were all lying to him.

Maybe both. The Darklings seemed to regard Heinrich, once summer had come and begun to cool into fall, with some measure of respect. He stayed with the Bands longer, trying to be friendly, trading whatever he could pick up, hoping for a good lead.

Where was Rimmion?

Mary and Christa, out there.

In Peter’s story, Heinrich recalled, the man who searched for his daughter had the sense to eventually go home.

“Would you care for some water, then?” Margaret asked.

“Cuk-wo,” Heinrich tilted back his head, absently. Then he smiled, despite himself. “Yes.”

Now she was handing him a cup, her hand on his face, looking into his eyes. “You’re so thin,” she said, trembling.

He nodded. “I’ve been eating when I can...”





“You’ve been eating like a bird,” she said dully, releasing him. “I thought for awhile, when you didn’t come back in the summer, that you had settled somewhere. And the *Vehm* won’t tell us anything; they regard this search of yours as their business. So you might have given up or moved into another territory, even married, I wouldn’t know. I thought you might... *might*... be dead.” She smiled. “Somehow I knew that wasn’t true. It wasn’t death that was keeping you from me.”

“I have to find them,” Heinrich said. “They’re my sisters.”

“I could have gotten married, too,” Margaret said, staring into space. “Hans Kipper wanted me to marry him. He was coming around a lot when your letter came.”

“Oh?” Heinrich looked up. He felt as if he were listening to this conversation from the woods, as if he didn’t belong here. He had been sleeping on leaves. He felt as if he shouldn’t be with these... *clean* people.

“He’s married to Sara Jansen, now. Remember her? I think Peter liked her.”

Heinrich nodded, thrusting his hands in his coat and staring at the floor. Herr Grossmann should be coming back with a feast, about now.

“None of this is getting in, is it?” Margaret sighed. “You’re aching to get out of here and back into the Darkling woods.”

“They’re my sisters,” he said again.

She shook her head, wringing her hands. “And I’m *nineteen years old*, Heinrich. I have, what, fifteen, twenty more to live? A year is a *long time*. I can’t *do* this.”

“I never...” he mumbled, hearing his voice catch, spoke up again, “I never asked you to—”

“Don’t you realize what they’re saying? Your house is still a ruin; no one wants to tear it down. Robbers ran off with your stock. The only person who doesn’t think you’re insane is old Horst, and that’s because he feels guilty and keeps running off on the same search. But at least he comes *back* every now and then. Even the *Vehm* think you’ve played it out—and I get that from Swann, and only because he’d like to marry me too.”

“Swann?” Heinrich snapped. “That handsome idiot—”

“He is not an idiot, he’s Frohnbotte like you, and he’s posted here. Heinrich—”

“Yes?”

She frowned. “What do you want?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m saying, what? Is that it? Do you *want* me to marry Swann? How long are you going to keep this up?”

“Please,” Heinrich rubbed his face, “I’m home now, let’s just—”

She whispered, shaking her head, “Let’s what? Let’s just what? All right, I’ll say it: Heinrich, don’t you see, they’re... you have to consider that they’re very likely dead now.” She sighed. “Listen to me. A year is a long time for them, too. If they’re alive... don’t you think they might be... part of them, now?”



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“Stop. Please.” Heinrich felt the blood drain from his face, raised his hands, clawing at the air. Dropped them. “Please,” he said, opening, putting his hands on her waist, where the sash would be if she were a Darkling. He wondered absently if Darklings wondered why humans didn’t wear identifying sashes. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

He held her, then, smelling her hair, so close, the feel of her breath on his neck. “Maybe... maybe it’s over.” He felt her melt against his body, a rush of relief, a sigh of triumph. He wasn’t lying. Maybe it *was* over.

There was a sound, then, someone coming in below. A call revealed it to be Frau Grossmann, coming up with dressings for the feast. As her mother began walking up the stair, Heinrich heard Margaret whisper into his ear, “I can come to you tonight, I think. If you leave the stable unbolted I can come to you.”

Heinrich was staying in a loft over the stable. It felt like Heaven already. He nodded, pulling back to look in her melting brown, tiny eyes. Maybe it was over.

They had dinner at the Grossmann home that night, and Heinrich tried his best to match the mirth of the family, who flitted about, pampering him and asking him to talk about his travels. He found that they didn’t really want to hear about the search itself. “In Jodun, they have a clock that moves backwards,” was a palpable hit. “On the River Streu there are beasts called slit-ears that steal children.” Oddly, even that was good for entertaining his hosts.

But when he turned the tales to what the past year had really been about—a letter here, a patch of clothing traded there, their eyes would glaze over, or worse, reveal what Heinrich almost interpreted as a lack of sympathy. They were sympathetic *with* him, he could see they wanted that known, but it was becoming clear that they didn’t think he should still be out there. He told about hearing the Wingbreaker tale, and they looked down at their plates, and so on he would go, to more tales of nice clocks, and festivals he had managed to glimpse when he moved through human towns.

“So what now?” Herr Grossmann finally asked, as he tore a hunk of bread in half and chewed on a piece of it. “Are you going to reopen your father’s shop?”

Frau Grossmann nodded. “Margaret was telling me you used to have plans for what to do with it; we’re all eager to help you get underway. Herr Baumann at the cloth merchant’s guild, he loved your father so. And he is willing to extend credit. All you need.”

“And you will need that,” Margaret’s father smiled, “if you’re going to be fully stocked in time for Christmas. And you’ll need the house rebuilt, new horses.”

“A family home has to be planned,” Frau Grossmann continued, eyeing Margaret, who rolled her eyes, but not much.

Heinrich sat back, drumming his fingertips on the table. They were inviting him back in excellent style. He could see it all, the meetings they must have had, the plans he barely knew of yet. They wanted him back in the town and married before he went snow-blind and insane in the wilderness. Heinrich



looked down. “I need to see...” he drifted off. What was he going to say? Was it over? Was he finished searching? Surely there were still angles to be pursued, but... surely...

“See here, boy,” Herr Grossmann finally said.

“Sir?”

“These chickens aren’t going to say what they’re thinking,” Grossmann set down his knife, “but I will. You need to come home and get married. That is what we want, yes. But it’s what you need.” The man leaned forward, pointing at Heinrich, who stared blankly, trying not to look sullen. “Now, you’re a good son, Heinrich. You’ve done your father proud. But now you must make your own way. The right way. Stay here and get this searching nonsense out of your head.”

Heinrich heard a room of clearing throats, Margaret’s younger brother fidgeting. “I hear you.”

“You’re not listening. You’re getting too old for this. And, I’m sorry,” Herr Grossmann shook his head, “but if your father were here, he’d say the same thing.”

Heinrich looked away. He sipped his drink, set it down, placing his fingertips on the table. The wood grains traveled off beneath them, paths leading elsewhere. He would follow one, but it meant abandoning the others, didn’t it? He sighed, scooting back, and stood. “I’m sorry, but I’m really quite tired,” he mumbled. And he was. “If you don’t mind I would like to be excused. Excused. I would like to be excused.”

As he was walking down the stairs he heard Herr Grossmann say, “I think we’ve excused him entirely enough.”

In the dream, he traveled by boat, across a black lake, while the priest remained on the other side. The mountain rose in the distance, moving from side to side as the boat rocked. He drifted to the shore, gliding out and onto strange burbling land. In a mountain, he found his sisters, all painted white. And Mary and Christa looked up at him, and said, “too late.”



A door was opening below, footsteps gliding up the stairs, soft feet padding into the hayloft, finding him. Heinrich awoke, but not entirely, and Margaret was sliding in next to him, kissing his brow, hands gliding over his chest. As they kissed, and held one another and moved together, he was thinking of credit and horses and cloth he would need, and the new house that would have to be built. And he sighed and heard her voice in his ear, her smell filling his mind.



When she crept away and he drifted to sleep, the smell was still there, fresh and promising tingling newness.

*It was not over; life was just beginning.*

The search was over.

Or so he thought.



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At dawn, Heinrich was standing in the road outside the stable. He had heard the horses in his sleep and was dressed before the Vehm arrived, hauling him from bed and dragging him in on order of Freischoffe Mueller of the Vehm.

*Oh, Heinrich thought, did I forget to check in?*



At the Vehm house, Heinrich took off his coat and sat on a stool by the central fire and warmed his hands as the Freischoffe of Freiburg summoned drink. He knew he should have checked in, but how much help had the Vehm been, anyway? At least he had posted a letter from Geltberg a month hence. That was better than he was doing with Margaret. Knowing Geltberg to be a Vehm stronghold, the proper signal or two had brought him forthwith to the Meeting Hall there, and he had even traded notes with Freischoffe Torka. Heinrich had felt at home when he saw the Virgin over the trapdoor. They were all alike.



Now, in the hall in Freiburg, Heinrich rubbed his hands by the fire and breathed, slowly, feeling the cold dissipate, looking around at the tapestries of the Holy Order.

Mueller was not alone. “We’ve been expecting you back” sniffed the Freischoffe. “The Geltberg Vehm sent us a letter informing us of your progress.”

Heinrich frowned. “Yes. Well.”

“This is Stuhlherr Schwartzkopf,” Mueller said, and the man behind him nodded. Heinrich snapped back his head instinctively.

Schwartzkopf cleared his throat. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Hauptmann.” As he stepped over and sat down next to Heinrich, his robes folded, and Heinrich became aware of how perilously thin the Vehm officer was.

Mueller leaned on his desk, watching them. Heinrich felt as though he were being set up for something, but he had not the slightest clue what. “I understand you ran into trouble?” His voice was still as eggshell-grating as ever. But there was softness in even this man.

Heinrich shook his head. “My leads... didn’t lead me enough, I suppose.”

“We heard about the changeling,” Schwartzkopf said. “His defection is disturbing.”

Heinrich watched the fire. “I heard a lot about him, too. And I wouldn’t say he defected. He just... stayed when I moved on.”

“What happened?”

Heinrich sighed, flexing and closing his fingers on his knee. “The captive plan turned out to be a dead end. She belonged to the wrong Band. She was useless to us.”

“So the scout stayed at Wintercamp,” Stuhlherr Schwartzkopf mused. “I suppose we could get you another,” he raised an eyebrow, “but I hear you’ve become quite the tracker. To look at you, I’d suspect you of having a hollow back.”

Heinrich glanced sideways at the Master. Mueller was referring to the stories



that elves had hollow backs they could hide their wings in. It wasn't true—they could withdraw their wings, hide them under cloaks, but not very well.

Mueller turned away and took a pair of tankards from a servant who appeared and disappeared like a ghost. Heinrich took the offered mug and sipped the hot drink, finding it a perfectly adequate cider. Schwartzkopf, for his part, waved a hand, declining. "That could be useful, to have a friendly in the Camp."

"Oh?" Heinrich found the thought unlikely.

"The Vehm has had trouble keeping an eye on those Wintercamp people and their... elves."

Heinrich sipped his drink, nodding. "They're poor and sick."

"They're armed and encamped in a mountain fort, Initiate."

"Yes, sir." Heinrich noted that Schwartzkopf said *initiate* as if it were a homonym for *idiot*. In a way, he supposed it was.

"So then you tell us: if not to spy, why did you leave the changeling there?"

"Because he's my friend," Heinrich replied, quietly. "My only friend."

"Sir," Mueller offered, "with all due respect, Heinrich is an initiate in name only. He's spent the last year in constant contact with the elves. If anyone knows the Darklings, it's him."

"Oh," said Schwartzkopf, "don't I know it. I just don't think we should feel sorry for those who might kill us."

"At any rate, though, your timing is perfect." Mueller opened his dark, scarlet coat and retrieved what appeared to be a letter, which he handed to Heinrich. "This came for you three days ago."

"Hallo," Heinrich noted that the seal had already been broken. Naturally, they had read his mail. He opened the crinkled parchment and read:

*Heinrich-*

*In an effort to find the betrothed of my son and bring some salve to my conscience, I have set out in the same search as you. My note will be brief, as I must leave here, for I have become unwelcome and there may be no other opportunity to post.*

*Davert is a very healthy town; its citizens well looked after by forces seen and unseen. There have been children here, brought in by elves at night; I have seen it. Your sister may be among them. I cannot be certain. But this is my paltry offer of help to you and your Holy Order.*

*Your sad and hopeful servant,*

*Horst*

Heinrich pursed his lips. "Three days..."

"Horst," Mueller muttered. "He was the shepherd, yes? The one who lost his sheep?"

Horst had been searching out of guilt, Heinrich knew. Heinrich reached



deep within himself to try to find the pain the man must have felt, and all he could think was that it was good to have the help.

“He’s an unlucky man whose son was betrothed to my sister and because of whom I was not near my house to prevent their capture.” Heinrich rattled off the words as if they were news from abroad, as if Mueller had not been there. But in his mind were flashes of steel and blood, and the dying words of his father. *I vow. I vow. Even if Peter doesn’t vow, I vow. But for how long?* “Who brought this letter?”

“A passing coach carrying supplies for us. There was no word of the shepherd Horst; we must assume he merely begged or bribed the coachman to deliver it for him.”

Heinrich shook his head. He had a lead. Sleeping in the cold for weeks and suddenly, a lead. He felt foolishly elated. “Davert. I knew it.”

“A week away. You’ve been there?”

“I followed a lead to its end there. This is... a strange letter,” Heinrich said. “What can *you* tell me about Davert?”

Mueller folded his hands, a dark look crossing his brow. “Only that every time the Vehm has tried to set up shop there, everything goes wrong. Supplies are late and bridges fail. Food rots.” He chewed his lower lip, and continued, “But the town itself is a jewel. The council seems to be composed entirely of idiots, but there is no disease to speak of, no failing crops. The occasional drowning in the river seems to be the only ill that plagues them. But *we* can’t seem to build a house there that doesn’t fall down.”

Heinrich was staring at the fire. “That... that could be magic.”

“You think?”

“But Darklings aren’t magical,” Heinrich observed.

“Magic makes strange bedfellows,” Mueller said. “The Darklings once were led by a magical being.”

“The Erl-King. He’s dead.”

“There could be a wizard, perhaps,” Schwartzkopf said.

“Why haven’t you tried to find out?”

Mueller coughed. “Oh, for Heaven’s sake. It’s an annoyance, but it’s not the threat the army building at Wintercamp is. But you’re right—it’s very much worth a second look..”

Heinrich nodded vigorously. “I’d be happy to, sir. Just give me a garrison. If this is where my sisters are, I *have* to go, but if there’s evil to be judged, we have a valid interest.”

“Yes,” Mueller scratched his chin, thinking. “Yes, we do. This is the first inkling we’ve had that the strangeness at Davert is connected to the elf problem. I think we can arrange a contingent. Are you prepared to lead?”

“Just a small garrison. I don’t know what I’m looking for, but I don’t want to walk in with an army and scare them into hiding.”

“They’re already in hiding,” Schwartzkopf said. “In truth, I think the Vehm

have been less than diligent in the past in getting to the bottom of Davert. If your interest is this passionate... some good could come of it.”

Heinrich felt his heart flying with the licks of flame he watched. “Just tell me when we can leave.”

“Immediately,” Schwartzkopf said. “You and Mueller. And your men.”



Margaret came up to the kitchen in the morning to find her mother turned away, fidgeting over the stove. She said nothing, only shrugged and pointed to the letter on the counter from Heinrich, which started, “My love, in interest of the Vehm...”





## CHAPTER 14

Three weeks later, in Davert, a light snow filled the air like falling, soft stars. Undermaster Heinrich Hauptmann bent over the pail and splashed his face, standing up to pace once more about his room. Outside, in the hall, the din of the frolicking Vehm Garrison had finally died down, and he found that after tossing and turning for the hours that they drank and caroused, the ensuing silence had brought no measure of release. He stopped at the window, leaned on the wall and bent back the curtains, looking out on the sleeping town of Davert.

His “garrison” consisted of about twenty-eight Vehm, and together they had succeeded in little more than giving the innkeeper what was surely the heyday of his financial life. Freischoffe Mueller had insisted on putting them all up, and his word had gone, titular leader as he was of the mission. But it was Heinrich’s game, even Mueller acknowledged that. Heinrich’s official promotion to the rank of Undermaster had happened on the way to Davert. The short form. And there was talk of more for him if he served useful enough in the elf problem.

Heinrich was proud, of course, except for the lack of usefulness about it all that he now felt after a week’s presence.

These people were happy, he mused, looking out past the darkened houses, into the forest that lay beyond. Spirits moved there, it was said, but bothered no one. In the trips he had made into the forest, this had in fact been true.

“Herr Hauptmann,” came a voice, and Heinrich looked back at the door. There was a brief knocking, followed by silence. Heinrich strode to the door, opened it, and saw no one. He looked out, up and down the narrow hall. No one, not even footsteps. The crinkling at his feet brought his eyes down to the folded paper there. It was a note: the first break of the month.



“I came alone!” Heinrich called. He sat on his horse in the clearing, forty yards east from the main crossing near the entrance to the forest. This was a Lek, he realized, with a large tree at the north edge. The snow had been swept into thick banks around the perimeter, and now the powder that fell in the center seemed to Heinrich to be forming a great bed.

He wanted to sleep. He felt his shoulders sagging forward, his blood coursing through his veins and tugging at the back of his eyes, the animal sleep a growling presence that roamed into the Lek of his mind, threatening, seducing, and slinking away when he blinked. He saw Mary and Christa, laughing at him, then singing, slowly. You were right, the images sang, as they faded to gray

There was a flit of wings, a heavy breath, and Heinrich shook, his eyes





blinking open once again. His hand went to the pommel of his sword as his horse shook, backing up. Heinrich toed the horse's flanks, easing the creature to a halt. He stared. "Who are you?" he asked, finally. He knew he sounded weary, and found he didn't care.

The Darkling that had lit on the other edge of the Lek was a female, who stood with her hands clasped in front of her. After a moment he saw that she held them that way because she was supporting her abdomen, which swelled so that it appeared to be dragging her thin shoulders forward. She was pregnant. Through the filtering moonbeams that cut swaths through streams of falling, snow, he saw the female bend back her head, hurriedly, her large eyes swiveling and locking onto Heinrich's sword, her mouth opening. It was called the begging stance. It meant submission. "Cuk-wo," she said, hurriedly. "Cuk-wo." She was moving forward, stepping awkwardly across the snow.

Heinrich lifted his hand, suddenly sickened that he would make a pregnant female fear him, even an elf. She came near, the mouth still held back, and Heinrich waved his hand from the saddle, "No, no, please. I have no intention of harming you." He tilted his head as she stepped back. The female—the woman, he now thought—had fine features. Her eyes were intelligent, he saw, one of them remaining on his sword even as he pulled away from it, the other following his hand. He tried to smile, then felt wrong about it. "You brought me out here, after all."

"You are Heinrich," she said, nodding. "I know."

"You speak German." Heinrich blinked. A little German, anyway.

She tilted back her head rapidly, agreeing. "Yes. I know you. Mare described you as a huge yellow man."

"Mare. Mary?" He was off the horse in a second, taking her shoulders, staring into her eyes. "Mary Hauptmann?"

She tilted her head back again. "Cuk-wo. They speak of you all the time. We ask them about you. Her stories keep us entertained."

Heinrich smiled. "Entertained. Where are they? Can I see them? Are they captives?"

She held up her thin hands now, pressing at him, patting him, as one would calm a child. Her eyes darted around. "Please. I am not supposed to be... out." Her wings flexed, crackling a bit, and her eyes went to her abdomen. "But I am still strong. Please. Listen."

"Why..." Heinrich shook his head, then released her, turning to grab a blanket from his saddle. This he spread in the snow and begged her sit, produced another, which he placed around her shoulders and wings. Someone was keeping pregnant Darklings captive and they had Mary and Christa. What did that mean? The Darklings were supposed to be having trouble with births. Midwives. That was a common theory thrown around lately. He had seen eggs at Farrago's camp, long ago. But none of the Bands he'd visited had had that many children.



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“What is your name?”

“Step.”

“Step.” He sat across from her, in the snow, because there were no more blankets. “I need to get them,” he said, hoping her German was as good as it seemed. “They were stolen,” he tapped his chest, “from me. From my father and mother.”

Step shook her head. “They help us. I only come to you because... we know you are looking. If anyone knew I came to you... maybe it doesn’t go well for me,” she said pleading.

Heinrich’s heart sank at the thought. Then he felt a renewed anger, *wait, this is not your race, these are not your people, this is not your sisters’ place.* “Maybe I can help you. You opened the door when you came to me. All right? Now where are they?”

“I have come to tell you they are well,” she said. “Please ask no more.” She nodded her head back twice. “This is what you want, yes? To know they are well?”

“I want them with me.”

“This I cannot do. I break enough rules just coming to you.”

“I... I don’t understand why we’re having this conversation. I’m not asking you to do anything; you’ll do enough just telling me where they are.”

She whispered something that sounded like a frustrated curse. “It is you who do not understand. I wanted to tell you they are well. That is all. They are gone now, a long time from you. Tomorrow, longer,” she said slowly. Her eyes were faraway, and Heinrich saw in them the future she was spelling out for him. “Next year, longer still. But treated well. Thriving and helping.”

“But—”

Now the Darkling took her hand and put it on his face, cold against his skin. With her other Step took his right hand, brought it down, placed it on the shimmering cloth over her round belly. “You ache for them and they wanted to heal that. They wanted you not to ache. And I tell you, we ache. Ache very bad. And they help. They have a place. Don’t you? Don’t you?”

Heinrich wanted, all at once, to throttle her, demand that she tell him their whereabouts, threaten... But it was the same as always. He wanted to hate, but instead reached down, and found no more hate waiting. He was tired. “How do I know,” he asked, “that what you say is true?”

Step released his hand and let drop the blanket from her shoulders. She reached into a pocket near the silver sash at her waist, brought something out. She stood, letting the item slide, and Heinrich watched a chain roll into his lap, tiny and silver, and on the end something wooden, something he recognized.

Heinrich picked up the wooden heart-shaped amulet, the crude but still promising carving of an H on one side, the P on the other. The two closest to Christa’s heart. The one that Peter and Margaret told him Christa had worked

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on for weeks.

“But how do I know...?” he looked up to hear the sound of flapping wings, and the crackle of Darkling feathers, and the pregnant Step disappearing into the snowy sky.





## CHAPTER 15

Rimmion held the hand of his Stella, biting his lip. She was so... aged, he thought, so weakened, and when she swiveled her eyes to look at him he coughed, choking back tears. She bled when she moved her eyes, the skin flaking and crackling from the movement.

"I lost it, Rimm," Raina whispered, "I am so sorry, my Stell, but I lost it..."

"You did not lose it," he whispered, bending close to her, "shh, don't move." He wiped her brow, why, Erlkonig, dead Erlkonig who hears nothing and to whom there is no cause to pray, *why does this happen?* "You did nothing wrong. There will be another."

Raina held his gaze, her mouth cracking as she tried to smile a bit. Her voice was a painful rasp, Erlkonig, this vital Stella, this huntress and fighter... "There will be no other. You know that."

The egg had cracked in the womb, destroying the child within. It happened more and more, even with Douglas help. Rimmion's mind told him he should not have hoped a Nekro could lay, but he had hopped, he still hoped, he saw her cracking and bleeding featherless before him and knew this would pass, that Douglas could fix this, too, he could, the Prince could, the Nornagesta could, yes...

"Stella," he sobbed, burying his head in her side, his hands gingerly stroking the chinks at the back of her neck. He felt her tired arms rising to touch his own neck, and he sobbed like a hatchling, and he knew why, even as he denied it.

"You are a Stell," said the dying Darkling. "You must be strong."

"The humans have done this," he said, biting his lip, shaking his head, "this Nekro is not to be. The Erl-King knew they would destroy us and here we are, *dying...*"

"No," she shook her head. "Douglas has told you..."

"What... does Douglas... know?" Rimmion seethed. "What... can Douglas... do?"

"Shh," she said now, "Rimmion, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but you must believe..."

He looked at the floor for a time, then spoke, whispering, "I have believed... I have... in the Nornagesta, who fights, and in the Prince, who saves, and I have received death, and more death, and more. Oh, Erlkonig. Look at you. Look at you..." Twisted inside, bleeding, and no child, no future, and Farrago prolonging things by siding with the humans and yet not siding, when there was an answer: it wasn't here, why had he wasted so much *time*?

"*Shh*," she whispered, "please," pulling him close, "please, grant me this... I want to see you," she smiled, painfully, "peaceful. As I remember. Remember?"

I remember we were young, and there was never enough crackle, and—  
“I remember,” she rasped, “we were young, and love filled the Lek, and even when it was hard we laughed, and the young ones flew, and how your wings beat so loudly, crackled so grandly. Remember,” she said.

And he howled when she shut here eyes, and cawed to the dead Erlkonig to whom there was no cause to pray, and to the Nornagesta who showed him how to fight. He clawed his clothes, beat his wings, and cried.





## CHAPTER 16

The clay pot struck the tree as Zolo whipped back and flew away. There was a cracking report as the pot burst, reddish liquid flying out. The tree bursting into flame. A wave of heat caught the elf's wings as he flew up and around.

MacDuff threw up his hands as he made his way to the bottom of the path to the tree line. What was Peter doing now?

Near the tree that had become a fiery cone, there were six monks padding about in their sandals, throwing pales of water on the fire.

"Brother Alan," MacDuff called, walking quickly. The Elf-Beghard turned as he emptied his pale, stepping through the snow to meet MacDuff. "Keeping busy?"

"Trying to keep your protégé from setting fire to the whole mountain," laughed Alan. MacDuff patted his shoulder and looked up to see Zolo flying back to meet Peter, who was kneeling next to a stack of gourd-sized, reddish pots.

"Peter?"

Peter was hoisting one of the pots, tying a knot through the handles on each side, and he looked up as MacDuff approached. "Eh?"

"Trying to wake the dead?" MacDuff nodded to Zolo as he touched down and took the rope from Peter's hand.

"Go up, loop around, see how far away you can get and still hit it," said Peter. As Zolo took off again the changeling stood, wiping red dust from his hands. "We're making progress."

MacDuff turned, sighing, as Zolo hurled the pot. He missed the tree this time, and the pot tumbled, disappearing into the snow not far from the six monks with water pails. The brown cassocks scurried as a tuft of snow exploded from underneath, bits of smoke and flame hissing up.

"What do you think?" Peter said excitedly.

"I think you're going to kill someone."

Peter looked back at him, and MacDuff watched the care descend on the changeling's brow—Peter was making sure MacDuff was still sympathetic to him. "I think it's under control," he answered.

The pots were an innovation Peter had come up with after spending a day or so in MacDuff's library. He had disturbed the Iron Monk's brief slumber with the excited discovery of igneous pots used by the Greeks. He was absolutely certain he could train the Darklings to carry and drop them.

"You see it, don't you?" Peter had asked, when he had finally stopped to take a breath.

"Aye," MacDuff had nodded. "I see that you're becoming a war chieftain." He had not said more about it.



“What amazes me,” Peter said now, as he gingerly handed Zolo another bomb and watched him go, “is that the Darklings helping me haven’t had any difficulties with using these.”

“You mean aiming them?” MacDuff asked. He blinked as another tree exploded, listening to the monks yammering and tossing water.

“I mean using them at all,” Peter shrugged. His large eyes turned towards MacDuff while he faced the newly burning tree. “They usually reject technology, yes? But these clay pots are something else again. It’s such a *leap* that it seems like, I don’t know, will or magic. It doesn’t seem like a Manlover thing.”

“Maybe that’s because they haven’t seen men use them,” MacDuff offered.

“Farrago’s even gotten word from the keepers of Erlkonig law that they’re okay. Something about them being a power of the divine.”

MacDuff tried to stow the creepy feeling that gave him.

“I wish they’d hover, though. I don’t see why the old lost wood elves could hover but the dark elves don’t.”

MacDuff cleared his throat. “Still trying to extend your teachings to arrows?”

“Hm?” Peter shook his head innocently. “They reject arrows.”

“I was wondering what these were,” MacDuff said, as he drew from his cloak a handful of long, black arrows. He turned them over in his hand, looking at the delicate carvings of lines from the Erlkonigsaga etched into the shafts. In his peripheral vision he saw Peter turn, holding up his hands.

“Those are...”

“Is Zolo in this too?”

“Where did you get those?”

“From one of your ‘Wing Disciples,’” the gray man said coolly. He eyed Peter carefully. “I don’t have to tell you that Farrago would be less than thrilled that you’re training his men to use these. I should have destroyed them the moment I got them, but I suspect there’s more where these came from.”

Peter was watching Zolo’s progress with the bombs. As the mountain shook with another concussion, he said, “It’s a ridiculous rule.”

MacDuff nodded, taking Peter aside. “It’s a rule nevertheless. Listen,” he put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Don’t get in over your head, changeling. You have a powerful ally in Farrago. Don’t cross him.”

“MacDuff—”

“Peter,” MacDuff was looking at the boy, remembering, far back, so far back it seemed like a different life, a son he had, once... “Here. Take them. But be wise. Be wise beyond your years, as I know you can be. Don’t rush. Don’t push to *rule* these people before... “ He trailed off. “Don’t try to change them too fast. Are you listening?”

“I’m listening.” Peter was looking down as he put the arrows in his coat, his large eyes moving around, nervously. “I just want to see them survive.”

“I know.” MacDuff scratched his beard. “And they will. But you must learn



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to crawl before you can walk. And it takes more than making dangerous toys to be a war chief. If that's what you want."

"With the emperor dead," Peter said, "This on-and-off war is bound to heat up."

"I know that. Better than you. But you must make sure your allies stay friendly. You have to trust me about this one, son. I know my way around a war. All right?"

"Are you telling me to stop the Wing team?"

"I'm telling you to be careful." MacDuff turned around, walking back up the path.

The percussive crack of another bomb filled the air, the enjoyment of the monks plain as they ran about, dousing the fire. MacDuff heard the sliding of wood on snow.

A young Darkling named Rikkel, one of the strongest of the few children at Wintercamp, came racing down the hill on what had once been a dilapidated ox-cart. MacDuff remembered it—Peter had insisted he buy the cart off a kindling heap in nearby Garmisch. Peter had sliced the wheels in half and nailed the wooden half-circles to the sides of the cart. The front wheels, MacDuff saw in the split second that he jumped out of the way of the careening vehicle, were attached to a swiveling cross-board. The whole contraption steered with reins.

"A perfect sled," MacDuff said, as he began to walk back up to the Wintercamp. Behind him, Peter shouted to Zolo as trees exploded and monks put out fires.

The changeling was winning the hearts of young and old. And more, he could take the old, and make it new.

Peter was changing everything.





## CHAPTER 17

“That’s good,” Zoë clasped the back of the young female’s neck, surveying the girl’s progress. “But what’s next?”

The young Darkling looked up at Zoë, chewing her lip as she looked back at her sculpture. It was a rendition of the Erl-King, a bust in the traditional style, the large, pleasant eyes, the hair almost articulated, bursting at the tips to symbolize the crackle of the dead god.

“I need sap,” she said finally. “I have to treat it.”

“Right,” Zoë said. She moved on to one of her other students, a pair of pale leather gloves covering her hands. Out of the corner of her eye stood her own statue, which she knew people were beginning to whisper about. She was constantly shooing non-student young Darklings away. She idly reflected that she hadn’t worked on the sculpture in at least a couple of days, and the lack of progress mocked her. The figure that slowly emerged from the block of wood seemed to be imploring her to return to the business of its birth. She’d get to it.

Outside the sculpture tent, there was a crackle and flap of wings, and she looked over to see Af and Tap alighting. Zoë sighed.

“Zoë?” Af called, looking in. His brother lurked in the background, and Af looked as if he were trying to seem nonchalant and knew he was failing.

“Af.” Zoë smiled, pulling off her gloves as she strode to the front of the tent and moved outside, letting the flap close behind her. “What can I do for you two?”

Af shifted from foot to foot. She’d seen the twins practicing a lot lately, so much so that Af seemed uneasy to be walking on the earth too long. “How are your classes?”

“Wonderful,” Zoë said. “I never thought I’d enjoy teaching, but there it’s been a... what do the wingless say? A godsend.”

Af nodded politely. “Farrago is planning a presentation two days from now,” he said.

Zoë blinked, scowling. “For Nornagestanacht? Does he need something sculpted? That’s not a lot of time.”

“No, I...” he looked annoyed, now, briefly, “no, I’m not here to *order* something.”

“So he won’t be wanting—”

“I have no idea about that, Zoë,” he flicked his hand. Now he was annoyed, Zoë realized, but it wasn’t her fault if the Escort couldn’t get to the point. Finally he said, “Of course there will be the presentations.”

“Yes, yes, Leed is going to be pairing with Zolo, did you know?”

Af nodded, looking at his boots. “Yes. And Tap is going to, ah...”

“Tap’s not pairing off, is he?” Zoë shook her head. “Wait, isn’t there that girl from the Greens? Mel, the medic. I’ve seen them together.” She waved



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briefly at Tap, who hovered far enough in the background that he could pretend not to be within earshot. Tap was studying the snow as if it were talking to him. Zoë thought about Mel—that woman kept to herself so much that Zoë had almost no inkling into her personality. Yet the medic had somehow reached out and fallen in love with the Tap, the silent twin of the Escort Pair. What was it like, being them? Did they talk? “Have they made arrangements yet?”

“No... not yet. Tap seems to have left it up to me.”

“Whether he pairs off.” Zoë sighed, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

“What’s keeping him?”

“He’s... well, he doesn’t want to break the escort pair.”

“Well, these things happen, you know. But you have made magnificent escorts,” she said.

“I know,” Af agreed. “I know. But anyway, it’s up to me, he says.”

Zoë sighed. Her sculptures were clearer than this. She hated the fact that she had lost patience with Af. It wasn’t his fault, after all, none of it. “Af, why are you telling me this?”

“I guess I’m asking you...”

She waited an eternity. “Hm?”

“I’m asking you if I’m right. The escort pairing, Af and I—that isn’t going to be broken anytime soon. Is it?”

Zoë looked down, shaking her head in calm, slow disdain. That was it. Af couldn’t just come out and ask if she cared to pair off with him, finally. That was too close to inviting a rejection. Instead, he was bludgeoning her with the threat of his voluntarily mute brother’s unhappiness. Zoë sighed and said, “Af, I don’t have any control over that.” She turned to go.

“You know that you do,” he insisted, touching her cheeks, briefly, then pulling back when she glared at him. “You know that you do.”

“Not anymore,” she said, as she slipped back into her tent. “You two be your little pair or don’t be. I have nothing to do with it. And if Tap wants to pair off, you can figure that out. But just because you can almost dictate your brother’s every move doesn’t mean you can dictate mine. I’m out of this story, Af.”

As she looked back, Af was still standing there, apparently going over in his mind what he might say next to save his pride, or forestall the inevitable, even forestall the past. But he remained mute. Surely he had known how this would go.

Zoë wished she had more to say, but how clear did she have to be? As Zoë slipped back into the workshop, she felt something that had been clear for a long time sink in like a thick blade, and stay.

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## CHAPTER 18

### NORNAGESTANACHT

Drums began to beat as the sun went down, and Wintercamp square was lit with fire, yellow flickering light bathing the swept ground. The Erlkonig sun, a red-painted shell around a bright torch, rose high above the square, streaming light through the gray smoke that danced to the beat of incessant drums.

*In the beginning, there was nothing,*

—sang MacDuff, as the Darklings and the Beghard Monks sat around the perimeter, smoke curling out over them—

*Neither sand, nor sea, nor cooling surf.*

*There was no earth, nor upper heaven,*

*Only the great void.*

A Darkling choir whipped its wings, making a slicing, crackling sound.

*And in the void, the Erl-King flew, and heard the call of the Darklings,  
Children, you have waited...*

All of them, in unison: *We have waited long.*

“Tonight,” MacDuff cried, as he stepped into the center of the square, holding his staff, “is Nornagesta Night. And this,” said the monk, “is what it looked like that day.” His deep voice carried through the smoke, the red light bathing his gray beard.

“In a land far away, the battle came: there, where such love had the Erl-King for his children that he remade the earth for them. As he bore down on the humans, he bathed the sky in darkness, lit it with his own red star, and made the humans run in fear.”

There was a great cry, “High Wings! High Wings!” and MacDuff looked up to see the figure that now appeared on a high stand, a Darkling all in black, his hair blazing, his eyes brilliant orbs. Af was the Erl-King this night, and had had so dosed himself with crackle that his entire body glowed. MacDuff whispered to the crowd, “All of us, all of the humans, were afraid.”

Now a number of Darklings took the field dressed in human clothing, their wings bound down, and carrying swords and the evil bows. “The humans gathered their paltry army and fought, though sick at heart.”

Now came new forms, Darklings wearing black, tight cowls and bearing long black streamers on their wings, “And the Erl-King unleashed the Scythe children, whom he created from his own power, and they were many.” Chanting, and actors falling, and far away, almost unheard, the real cries, the cries of men falling in battle long ago. MacDuff’s face remained stone all the while, as about him the humans fell.



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“But greatest of all, my Darkling sons,” cried Af in his Erl-King guise, “was the gathered Darkling force, all the elves, all the Dark children! A great, Darkling Band!”

Into the square now came a new contingent, Darklings in black, their wings crackling, flying up and around, making war with the humans.

*High Wings! High Wings!*

“But do you know enough?” continued MacDuff, “do you want to know more? Among them the Erl-King flew, and fought, as a Father and king!”

Now Af dove into the square, and dramatically parted the swirling army, sparks showering down through the filtering red light.

Now there was a new form, as the humans ran hither and thither, crouched among them, and as his brethren fell about the newcomer he rose to stand firmly on the ground. MacDuff held out his arm and pointed at an image not unlike himself, a tall figure with gray beard and large chest, strong arms. But this one carried an iron sword.

“There rose among the humans a champion,” whispered MacDuff, “who knew the secrets of the Erl-King.” This was Peter, in his gray disguise, holding out his arms, looking into the crowd, meeting the gaze of Farrago in the congregation and of Af, who was the Erl-King. Finally Peter looked back at MacDuff. “The one called the deed of fate: the Nornagesta.”

“I have no words!” cried Peter/Nornagesta, “my voice... is in my sword!”

And now the Nornagesta set upon one Darkling after another, moving through them, tearing at them with his iron blade. “Show yourself, Erl-King!” cried the Nornagesta, “show yourself!”

Now a black pot exploded in the center of the square, sending dark black smoke throughout the courtyard. As tendrils of black smoke receded, only Af and Peter, the Erl-King and the Nornagesta, remained.

Behind them above stood Zolo, his hair blackened, his body covered in black shining material.

MacDuff spoke: “And Nornagesta had a guide, the Erl-King’s own son, who led the humans’ champion to the Erl-King’s home. Into the dark, secretmost world of the Erl-King the Nornagesta found his way, and there they did battle. And the Erlkonigsson did nothing, for he knew his Father’s power.”

As Zolo stood back, Peter and Af set upon one another now, slashing and hacking at one another furiously. The duel took them across the courtyard, back and forth, swords sparking in the dark smoke, and sometimes all that could be seen was the furious crackle of Af and others. At times Af would disappear, and the grim, determined visage of the Nornagesta would appear from the smoke.

“And then—” MacDuff spoke, his voice a loud, projected whisper, filling the courtyard, “and then, it was over, this Father of all Darklings, this protector of his children and conqueror of races, this eternal being who made his own wings, was finally slain.”

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The smoke cleared and there lay a headless body on the ground, stuffed to look like the Erl-King, and Peter stood over it, gray, chest heaving.

*Respect Nornagesta, for he has overcome,*

*Hate Nornagesta, for he has stolen our father...*

*His voice is in his sword.*

“Seek ye yet more? The Erl-King was Father and God, but nothing now can he give us. His gifts have been given, his energy spent.”

Now the black smoke cleared off, replaced by white smoke, and Nornagesta paid homage to Douglas before the fallen god.

“Out of the darkness the land returned, and Erl-King lay still. Erlkonigsson is in the woods; perhaps he plans revenge.”

“Nothing can the Erl-King do now, he neither hears prayers nor grants boons. Our father is dead,” MacDuff whispered, his eyes watery, as he stood, reciting from the Short Nornagestasaga from heart, “the Nornagesta has made us alone.”

“Now, there is calm on the field. Nornagesta is gone. Douglas Erlkonigsson is gone. And we must listen, and remember, make our own Wings, as did he. Beware our Nornagesta.”

The smoke cleared, and the body remained, and now MacDuff stood in the courtyard near the Erl-King. No more props, save this one, no more tricks, just the voice of the Iron Thane.

“And there lies old Erlkonig,” spoke MacDuff. “There he lies, and lies.”





## CHAPTER 19

Lift up, now, come, soar across the German lands, leave the fallen Erl-King with MacDuff and not MacDuff standing over the headless form. Rise, and see icy alps give way to dark green firs blanketed with snow, feel the land pass under us, and MacDuff's words still ring in our ears as we come down in the shadowy womb of Davert Forest.

A Darkling stands before his people. Before him in the Lek are the players of the pageant, the fallen Erl-King, the standing gray Nornagesta.



The Lek was clearing, the reddish light giving way to the whiteness brought with the death of the father.

"My brothers and my children," Rimmion cried, as he stood atop a pedestal, "who do we remember tonight?"

*Nornagesta. Noooooorrnaageessstaa.*

"Before us the Erl-King our father lies. Never to rise again; he neither answers prayers nor gives boon.

"And we are alone. The Nornagesta has made us so. But remember his lesson: the clever mind is as wings are, and wings may not be enough."

Nornagesta! Woe to the Erl-King, our Father!

"For the hunt goes to the strongest, and worship to the worthy."

*It is Nornagesta we worship.*

"For he grants no boon and answers no prayers, but he lived, and our God died. And what sort of God is that?" Rimmion paused, looking out on the Redgreens. His eye traveled to the place of his Stella and he saw she was not there, and his eye traveled there still, and then he watched the rest. They were tired, all of them. His Darklings looked sickly, although he strove to keep the sickness out. No Stella tonight. No child coming. Not for me.

Rimmion shrugged. "I don't know," he said casually, and he sensed the relaxation of the congregation, "perhaps I, too, failed to see the way until it is too late. Perhaps I, too, can follow the wrong trail when the scent has been cold too long. Tonight I have... I have something to tell you, and it is fitting on Nornagestanacht that I do so. Children, we have waited."

*We have waited long.*

Rimmion tapped his shoulder, where a red Bandage still clung to the changeling's wound. "We are dying, my brothers. Dying. Our eggs crack before they are born, our young catch the Nekro before they can fly. Our families... are failing. I see these things, and I ache.

"We sing our songs- do we hear them? I think so. I think we hear them all too well. We fly when we can, we avoid the Manlover things, use no man's tool. And still we die. Oh, *what horrible accidents of fate.* Hm?"



“It is *no* accident!” Rimmion howled. “Somewhere, someone has betrayed us! In the time of the Erl-King there were no Bands, we were all one, and even as one Darkling Band, where disease can spread fast, we had no Nekro! And our young did not die! Why is this, I ask you? Why is this? Could it be the humans, who have spread across our land like vermin? Could it be? We have been forced farther and farther back into the woods, could this be a coincidence? They hate us, the humans, does it not strike you that this death of our race might not be their doing?”

The Darklings were looking at one another, then looking back at the Stell, waiting for his next word.

Rimmion fell to his knees, drawing his sword and placing his man-hand upon it. “Here and now,” he whispered, “I call on you that follow me to listen to me, and watch as our world changes. Strange things will be happening, and I demand your attention!

“I declare my rejections.

“I reject the laws that keep us from our fullest strength.

“I reject the influence of Darklings that would sell us to the humans who are destroying us.

“I reject the old ways, I make my own wings, I *will* see us thrive. Dead Erlkonig and missing Nornagesta, I swear, I have seen us follow the old ways too much—no more!”

Rimmion stood. “I have been your Stell, and what am I about? Peace. Midwives. Appeasement. Now,” he said, reaching behind his back, “I am about this!”

Rimmion thrust his hand into the air, with something in it. A shocked, vibrant cawpukking flew through the crowd. In his hand were six arrows, painted black.

“This is our answer. Manlover becomes man-hater!”

Silence across the Lek, but nodding, a few of them, understanding and eagerness shining in their eyes.

“The Erl-King is dead!” cried Rimmion. “Take up your arrows!”



## CHAPTER 20

Peter looked down the mountain and saw the Zoë had started without him. Her small, winged frame zipped and curved down the mountainside like a falling star, turning fast, her skis held close together and straight.

Peter had never seen anyone ski so fast. Zoë had become a marvel on the snow, her wings held back behind her as she swooped and shot down the side of the mountain as if she had been doing it since birth. Peter smiled, dropping onto the slope.

“Zoë!” He saw her turn her head, and she held up a pole hand to wave. She was laughing. She looked forward again and Peter saw her pivot as she gradually eased her descent. A wave of powder erupted and Zoë ground to a halt, looked up as Peter came down the mountain towards her. When he finally reached her he sprayed her with snow, the white flecks raining down and clinging to the gray hair that fell around Zoë’s face. “What is it?” Peter asked. “What did you have to tell me?”

Zoë’s face was trembling with excitement as she threw down her poles. “I finished it!” She flexed her wings and took to the air, lifting her skis, falling upon Peter. Peter rolled back, powder flying up around him.

“Finished...” he was laughing, their skis enmeshed, her face pecking his cheeks.

“My sculpture, Peter!” she said. Then she brought her skis around, rolled off and sat next to him, her body bending like a cord. “And Farrago loves it. He loves it! And MacDuff, as well. He said he’ll put it in the Lek.”

The statue of the Erl-King had been Zoë’s project since they’d come to Wintercamp, and everyone talked about it. “Zoë, that’s wonderful,” Peter said. And he meant it. Even if he was wondering why she hadn’t...

“You’re wondering why I didn’t show it to you first,” she wagged a finger, leaning forward to scratch at his chinks for a brief moment. “I never figured you for the jealous type, but it’s encouraging... the reason is I wanted to tell you out here. And besides, Farrago and MacDuff wandered into the workshop. And I’m so grateful, Peter, Cuk-wo? To have a place where I can build something that big.”

Peter watched the artist Darkling basking in a warm glow entirely inner-derived. She had produced a work of which she was proud. He didn’t have to see it; he was happy enough with the look on her face.

Peter scratched his chin. “So why did you want to tell me on the slopes?”

Zoë snapped her head back, indicating he should follow. They began to descend, bobbing along the snow as well as Af and Tap did in the air, and Peter found himself watching the way her wings lifted and fell as she swooped down. The skis were loud, grinding over the powder, and Zoë was still smiling as she gained speed, falling faster and straighter. The volume rose and he shouted.





“What is it?”

The hit a small slope, taking to the air and landing, and Zoë shouted something Peter didn’t hear.

“What?” Peter asked, and now Zoë had widened her skis, slowing as he zipped past her and down, nearly falling as he looked back. She seemed to be stopping, so Peter pivoted, sliding around and resting, leaning up the hill. His ski was loose, he realized, and he looked down, shifting his boot. He heard something sliding down the slope and looked up to see Zoë swooping down upon him, her wings large and whipping, her skis nearly lifted off the ground.

Peter gasped as she skied straight into him, wrapping her arms around him, and he fell backwards, skis flying off. His face pressed against her breastbone and he prepared for the snow scraping against his back, ready for the pain.

Then he realized he was rising. Peter looked up at Zoë as she lifted him up and she was laughing, her wings wide and crackling mightily as they took to the air. He wrapped his arms around her, looking down at his dangling boots, and her skis, which still held to her feet. “Zoë—”

“Oh, hush, you’re featherlight,” she said. He straightened up until her face was against his, and she was kissing his cheekbones and chin, eyes and mouth, pecking like a hen.

“So,” Zoë whispered into his ear.

Peter looked around, the Alps drifting lazily below them. Zoë was a strong Darkling. All that work with heavy blocks of wood, he supposed. “So?”

Wintercamp was now over her shoulder at the top of the mountain, a gorgeous home. The air was thin and lovely in his nostrils, mixing with the scent of Zoë and the faint phosphorescent burn of the crackle. The hissing of her wings and skin when she exerted herself was pure music.

Zoë craned her neck, biting his earlobe briefly and saying, “I’m pregnant.”

“What?” Peter gasped again, letting go and feeling himself falling, and Zoë was chirping, holding tightly too him, and he relaxed and clung to her once more, felt them rising and then leveling off.

“Pregnant? But I—I didn’t think it was poss—”

“Shh,” she said, snapping back her head. “It’s true. It’s true.”

“My God,” Peter said, as she carried him across the treeline, her face glowing. “I—ah, I suppose we should—” She was laughing at him, burying her thin face in his shoulder, her wings still hissing and crackling. “I suppose we should pair off now.”

And laughing loudly, the pair were one, soaring like great ravens over the Bavarian Alps.



## CHAPTER 21

Farrago heard Alezan stir, and he looked over at her, his eyes opening and closing again. He nestled himself in his wings, sleep dragging him down. He thought he smelled sulfur, adjusted his head, and forgot about it.

He felt pressure on his lips and tried to open his mouth.

“Shh,” a voice spoke in the darkness as cold elf metal touched Farrago’s throat. He felt a hand clamped down hard and opened his eyes once more, perfectly still. By the moonlight filtering through the window he saw the towering figure of Rimmion, the Redgreen Stell. “Come with me,” Rimmion said.

Outside, near the unconscious—and thankfully not dead, Farrago noted—guards, Rimmion replaced his dagger, folding his arms before him. Farrago sighed deeply as he stepped forward, and as if suddenly remembering himself, Rimmion joined him in touching the chinks. “You came alone?”

“I did. I only want to talk.”

“You look awful, Rimm,” Farrago said. “Still haven’t recovered from that arrow wound?”

“On the contrary,” Rimmion said, his hollow cheeks barely moving as he spoke. The Stell looked nervous, as if his mind were racing past his words, past his present and into the near future. “The changeling’s wound... opened my eyes a bit.”

“We should get away from the guards before they wake,” Farrago gestured towards the hut wall and the two Stells walked, stopping around the corner. Farrago took a seat, leaning his wings against the wall. Rimmion paced a bit before Farrago begged him, “Please. Sit. Erlkonig, you make me tired just looking at you.” When Rimmion finally took a seat Farrago went on, “What? You want to come in?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Farrago rolled his eyes, yawning. “What can I do for you now, Brother Stell? It isn’t often I’m cordially removed at knifepoint.”

“I have a proposal,” Rimmion said. He had his dagger out again, and was drawing lines with it in the snow.

“I’m listening.” Farrago sensed that Rimmion needed someone to listen to him. Then he looked at the Stell’s eyes again and said, “How is Raina?”

“Dead,” Rimmion said flatly.

Farrago closed his eyes. “Nekro?”

“Yes. The humans will have us all, yet.”

The Blue Stell shook his head. “I’m sorry. Really. But the humans can’t make Nekro.”

“They caused it. I know it. We only started dying from it when they started pushing us back.”



“That’s a coincidence,” Farrago said slowly.

Rimmion shook his head, speaking shortly. “No. No. And the more you try to convince yourself we can have peace with them, the more of us will die.”

“I thought you had... help... where you are. Looking for a cure.”

“The wizard. The one I thought was the Erlkonigsson. He’s as naïve as the Wintercamp monks.” Rimmion stared at the snowy ground.

“How can I help you, Rimm?” Farrago asked again.

“You can join me.”

“What?”

“Join me. One Band. One great Band, like before. All your Wintercamp Darklings, all of mine, and I’m sure that the rest, those still out there, will follow.”

“And do what?”

“War. Real war. On the humans, once and for all.

“Impossible. There’s too many of them.”

“No, its not impossible. The Nornagesta was able to defeat the Erl-King because he did not accept, ‘impossible.’ We must. We must.”

Farrago coughed, folding his arms. “And you’ll lead this great Band, will you?”

Rimmion stared. Of course he would. Of course.

“Go home, Rimm. You’re listening to grief. Go home, brother, and find peace in those that live.”

“None of us will live if we do not fight,” Rimmion said, rising, putting his dagger back in his belt. Farrago stared up at the grieving Darkling and knew he was showing too much pity on a proud Stell.

“I see. I see.” Farrago said, finally. “You have a plan. And what will you do if I do not join you?”

Rimmion shook his head, shrugging with his wings and shoulders. “This alliance of yours with the humans must end, Farr.”

“Alliance—you mean Wintercamp?” Farrago stood. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I could use your *help*,” Rimmion hissed. “But if you’re not *for* me—”

“You stop right there,” Farrago swiped his hand across the air in front of him. “You watch what you say, brother.”

Rimmion pursed his lips, nodding vigorously. He whipped his wings. “I don’t have to say it,” he said, as he lifted into the air on massive, crackling wings.

Farrago watched him go, the sulphurous rain of crackle falling and burning rivulets in the snow. Farrago stood in the snow for a long time. He shook his head, seeing the future, watching the dangerous Stell recede against the clouds and stars. *War*, he thought.

*War.*



## CHAPTER 22

Four days after the rituals of Nornagestanacht, the Darklings of Wintercamp gathered once more in Wintercamp Courtyard, this time for a celebration.

Zoë stood in the front of the courtyard, a great gray column of cloth behind her. A rope was running from the pinnacle of the column, and Peter was holding the end of the rope. Farrago, Stell of the heroic Blue Band, came forward.

“My brethren and children, Beghards and Beguines, today we have much to be proud of,” said Farrago. Thousands of Darklings stood about on the edges of the courtyard, straining to here. MacDuff, who stood with the mystic Mechthild, could see Farrago trying to make eye contact with all of them. It was interesting to note the symbolism of Peter being up there with his hands on the rope, so that the changeling scout occupied a place in service of the former scout. Certainly as many eyes were upon him as upon the Stell or the artist, but his placement elevated Zoë’s new station in an instant.

“In the time that we have been at Wintercamp, I have seen greatness grow among the Darklings as never before. I have seen pride grow, as well. It is good that so many of us, so many Bands, have made this home together. For the first time since Nornagestanacht the first, we have come together. We have honored our fallen father.”

Mechthild whispered to MacDuff, “The Darklings don’t produce many sculptors, do they?”

“No,” MacDuff said. He felt as though he were glowing. New art from a dying race, it was everything- everything he could hope for from the children.

“But Zoë just may be changing all that.”

“Today,” Farrago continued, “we remember the Erl-King in a new way: a permanent way, as permanent as the sagen we carry in our hearts.” Farrago turned towards Zoë, and snapped back his head, begging. “Cuk-wo, it is because of you, sculptor.”

Zoë blushed, a thin lacing of black filtering across her white face. She snapped back her own head, her eyes streaming.

“Wintercamp,” cried Farrago, “I present the Erl-King!”

Peter leaned back, yanking the rope, and the cloth fell. As it fell around the ankles of the figure there, a hush fell about the crowd.

Zoë’s *Erlkonig* was thirteen feet tall, cast in stained wood. He stood with his sword held high, and long hair flying out behind him, sparkling at the end. The wood was polished with traces of crackle, so that he seemed alive, wooden eyes so suggestive of crystal that he seemed as though he might blink. His muscles were taut, one leg back, so that the figure itself seemed about to move and enter the crowd.

But Mechthild noticed the strangest thing right away. “MacDuff, he has



no wings!”

MacDuff nodded thoughtfully. “Zoë said she had been thinking of the Erlkonigsaga and came to the conclusion that ‘he didn’t need wings protruding from his back to have wings.’”

“And she that sees the divine will suffer greatly at the hands of the believers,” Mechthild murmured. She herself had been run out of at least three convents for her own divine visions, and had been threatened with excommunication.

“Oh?” MacDuff folded his arms before him, shifting his weight, “Listen.”

It was starting, then, the murmurs, distinct and excited, wings agitated and crackling even among those standing still. The courtyard brightened as the crowd shimmered, and the voices opened out, altogether, “High Wings!”

“Cuk-wo,” MacDuff sighed, and Peter made eye contact with him, then looked back at the great sculpture, blinking back tears. Zoë was snapping back her head, her hands raised in supplication, as the crowd roared. “High Wings! High Wings to Zoë!”

MacDuff watched Zoë and Peter and Farrago, and for the first time in a long while, felt hope for the Darklings. “This is a moment,” he whispered to Mechthild, “a real moment. This moment will have a ghost.” It was the first memory of the Darklings he felt burning into his brain pleasantly, to reside in the holy reaches of his fondest recollections.

“Is it me,” Mechthild said, “or is that a familiar face on the Erl-King?”

MacDuff unfolded his great arms and scratched his beard, studying the face. He barely recalled the gnarled face of the real Erl-King, who was liar and thief and father and protector, all those.

“Well, he should be familiar; he’s the divine, isn’t he?” he said finally. “But yes. Yes, it’s the changeling, all right.”



## CHAPTER 23

Two days before the Wintercamp unveiling of Zoë's statue, Stell Rimmion lit on the ground outside the Vehm Hall in Freiburg, looking back briefly at his escorts. Kinnet and Pennt set down with the heavy, squirming sack between them. Rimmion jerked his head towards the house of the Vehm, at the torches burning over the door carved with mysterious human symbols. The sound of a water wheel lapped beyond the building, which he saw was built out over a river. Somewhere inside that building a machine was grinding out a confession, he was sure, and sifting the witness into the river beyond. But he had agreements of his own to be ground.

The snow blinked at him, the voice of Douglas rasping at him, perhaps for real, perhaps only in his mind. (*Rimmion, you're wrong. You've got to give me time. To give us time.*)

*(There is no time left.)*

*(I can't let you take them.)*

There will be others. Pennt and Kinnet had been fast and efficient, moving into Douglas' midwife cells and taking the merchandise.

Rimmion strode across the snow and stopped before the door. He knocked once, and when the door opened, the initiate who stood there stared for just a moment, and ran.



Heinrich turned away from the machine in disgust. "Mueller, this is a waste of time."

Over his shoulder, a merchant from Davert twisted above the gaping maw of the thrice-split Virgin. The razor blades had already taken the man's shoes, which he had kicked off as he squirmed, and he had begun to howl.

"Oh, Heinrich, you lack the heart to get the job done."

"He doesn't know anything," Heinrich yawned. "I told you. None of them know. Or in any case, they're not going to tell."

The machine master looked up from the lever. "What do you wish to do?"

Heinrich waved wearily. "Let him go," he said. "Jesus. It's over. Let him go." He sat down in a heap, hands on his pounding temples, while the machine master closed the machine and set about freeing the merchant.

"It's not always right to show mercy," Mueller said, in his eggshell voice.

As the merchant was led out, whimpering, Heinrich lifted a goblet from the table next to his seat and frowned. "Hell, the story he tells will be of tremendous use to us alone. Consider it strategic mercy." He looked up to see Mueller sigh, accepting this.

"Herr Hauptmann?" A voice came from the door of the confessional.

"Eh?" Heinrich looked up. It was a new initiate, Herr Kloesel's boy.

“What?”

“Darklings.”



Rimmion waited quietly in the snow outside the house as his escorts drew their swords, the sack squirming behind him. As soon as the door opened and he saw the great, yellow man fill the doorway, he spoke.

“I can disappear in a moment,” he said. “Don’t do anything rash.”

The yellow man looked furiously past Rimmion. “I can have you killed where you stand.”

“Don’t threaten me, Heinrich Hauptmann of the Vehm,” said the Stell.

“What do you want?”

“A fair question,” Rimmion answered. He gestured with his head at Pennt and Kinnet. “Because I have brought what *you* want.” Behind him, the sack opened, revealing the two girls, Mary and Christa, huddled together. Rimmion knew the look of horror on Heinrich’s face was because of the midwife’s makeup that still covered their faces.

“All I propose,” Rimmion said, “is a short, tawdry alliance.”





## CHAPTER 24

The Nester Tavern at Wintercamp swarmed with Darklings of every Band, but the focus was on Zoë the sculptress.

Zoë basked in the glow of her success, drinking less than her brethren so that she might remember more. MacDuff and Farrago were telling tales to Mechthild, passing bottles of grog around like water. Zoë was touched on the cheeks by every Darkling she had ever known and many more she did not even know by sight. *Why doesn't he have wings? Is that Peter's face? Is it true you and the changeling...?*

Zoë leaned her shoulder on Peter and breathed when she felt she had a moment, tracing images on the wooden table with a fingernail. Peter looked up and sighed quietly as Af took a seat across from them.

"Peace," said Af, offering two goblets. "Here, a gift from the appreciative masses."

"You're in good sport," Zoë said, nodding as she took the drink Af offered her. Peter did the same.

"Cuk-wo," Af said. "It's high time I told you how much I appreciate your work."

Zoë threw a glance at Peter and shrugged just enough for him to notice. "I see that you and Tap have remained the Escort pair."

"For now," Af said, turning in his seat to look for his brother. Tap was off near the bar, speaking—maybe—to Mel, the medic. "I'm not sure how long I can keep him."

Peter sipped his drink. "Perhaps you should set him free. There's got to be another you can pair with."

Af smiled a bit darkly. "You would think so, wouldn't you?"

"Tristan of the Grays will be bringing his men in next summer," Peter continued. "If you don't find a suitable escort here, you know Tristan can fly."

"Enough," Af rolled his large eyes. "I'll think about it." He leaned forward, looking at Zoë as he cleared his throat. "You have done a great thing, Zoë. I knew you had it in you, but I was glad to see it come out."

Zoë folded this over a few times and said, sincerely, "Thank you." She reached out her hand and clasped Af's, and the touch seemed to sting him painfully. She wanted to say something banal, *sorry everything worked out so badly*, but how was she supposed to say that? Yet Af stared at her white hand, awkwardly, not sure how to respond. She *wasn't* sorry how things had worked out at all. Wasn't it obvious, hadn't she made it plain, that she had never intended to hurt anyone? What on earth could she say? Why did she feel cruel for touching him?

Peter shook his head, blinking. "My God," he murmured. He seemed lost





for a moment, then looked at Af and Zoë. “I’m sorry. Really. But it’s been...” he yawned, almost dramatically, “it’s been a long day. Zoë, these are *your* worshippers.” He smiled and stood, “and I think I’ll leave you in their capable hands.”

“Peter,” Zoë looked up. The changeling had a slightly sour expression alternating with his friendlier aspect. “Are you all right?”

“Just very tired,” he sighed. Zoë understood; Peter had been up all night with his secret arrow training. The thought made her shudder, but they didn’t talk about it. Once they were paired, she knew, she would have to confront this nightly barbarity directly; it was the one thing to which she wasn’t looking forward.

“All right,” she said, reaching up from Af’s prone hand to touch Peter’s neck. “Be well. Sleep well.”

“I promise,” he said. The changeling looked terrible; he really was pushing himself too hard. And in all the excitement, she hadn’t even noticed.

After Peter was gone Af turned to her and smiled again, a charming smile that came across a little too charming. He had made a turn in her eyes, she realized, from which he knew he couldn’t recover. And yet he would keep trying.

“So,” he said.

“So.” Zoë stared blankly.

“You’re going to pair off with the changeling.”

Zoë cleared her throat. “We’ve talked about it.” She looked down at his hand, clasped it again. “Yes, I think so.”

“You’re... you’re going to have... have his...”

“Oh, Af,” she whispered, “oh, Af. Please.”

“It’s a disgrace,” he said, snatching his hand away.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s ridiculous.” He shook his white head violently. “And don’t think you’re so high and mighty that people will approve.”

“I don’t care...”

“They won’t.”

“I think,” Zoë said, looking around, lowering her voice, “that they will approve, and a lot of them already *do*. Not that it matters.”

“That can change,” Af snapped. “Sculptress. Sculpt the Father of all Darklings to look like a damn *freak*.” His teeth were nipping at his thin lips, the tendrils on his neck threatening to burst.

“Af, please,” Zoë pleaded. “Please. I’ve been patient, haven’t I? Do you really think so little of me as to believe I’d make a mistake about how to spend the rest of my life? Do you? How can you value me so much and so little at the same time?”

“Come back. Now is your chance,” he said. “We can pair off, before you begin to show. The rumors can change; no one ever knows the whole truth about anything. So maybe we have a freak child, but Zoë, he’s...”



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“Af.”

“Tell me what I can do.” He pleaded. And Af *was* pleading, this warrior, this brilliant escort flyer, pleading like a hatchling, whatever strength remained used solely to keep his voice at a low hiss. “What do you want? I’ll leave the escorts. What do you want me to do, do I have to cut off my *wings*?”

Zoë huffed. “I can’t believe you’d even say that.”

“I... I can take care of you,” he said, quietly.

Zoë shook her head, slowly. So that was what it came to. “I don’t need taking care of.”

“You know what I mean,” said Af. He seemed to back up, flexing his wings, starting over. “It’s just that I thought—I’m sorry... This hasn’t gone the way I’d hoped... It’s just that I thought that if I gave us this chance...” he drifted off, searching for the last words that would finally make his case.

But Zoë was watching him now, as if through a window, watching how she had destroyed this Darkling as surely as she’d put Peter’s face on her divine statue. She saw her hand reaching out to touch his, but it felt cold, a useless gesture. “Af, I—”

*This hasn’t gone the way I’d hoped...*

And he was looking at her, large eyes still pleading, and she was still thinking of how to comfort him, for she did still care for him—

—*just very tired*—

—*freak*—

—*here, a gift in appreciation*—

“Af,” she whispered, shaking her head, her voice weak, pity dissolving into a slow, seeping distaste that rose in her throat and made her stomach curdle. “Oh, Af.”

—*I thought if I gave us this chance*—

She stood up, holding up her hands, shaking her head, wanting to vomit. “I can’t believe you,” she spat, “of all the... of all the *idiotic nerve*.” He had poisoned him. Af had poisoned Peter, right in front of her. “I have to go to him,” she spat, wiping her mouth. “You idiot. You disgraceful idiot.”

As she left him flying through the crowd in the Nester, she heard Af laughing nastily.

“It’ll wear off,” he shouted. Then, quieter: “Not that I care.”



## CHAPTER 25

In the night, Mechthild twisted and turned, and the golden light of divinity thrust itself across the earth, and flooded her mind. And there was screaming, and horses on water, and shining over the lake, a great, crackling cross. The cross showered sparks, burning her forehead and lips, and she felt time warping and burning with the sparks—*now*, wake, *now*, move, *now*!

“MacDuff!” Mechthild tore open the monk’s door, and MacDuff shot up in bed, instantly awake.

She stared at him, breathing, feeling the burning sparks, the evil unity, and above all, the immediacy. “I—come with me.”

However, the skies were empty, and MacDuff and Mechthild walked around to the east cliff, and even stopped to look at the sculpture of the High Winged Erl-King.

MacDuff even bowed to it, slightly, chuckling to himself. Then they reached the east cliff, and looked down.

And the world clouded over with gray.

Crackle in the distant sky. A white cloud coming fast.

MacDuff ran for iron, and rang the alarum bell.

And for the second time, Peter the changeling slept, and learned how much can happen when you do that.



## CHAPTER 26

Peter saw the dreaming above him, an elf with great black wings and a changeling body. The dreaming hovered, and drew arrows.

“What color is my aura?” Peter whispered.

“Green,” said the dreaming, “but not for long.” Behind the dreaming, a silver aura rose and enveloped it. Peter reached out to touch it, and the silver aura seemed to burst, and then filter into a snowy gray.

Peter lay back, smelling the disappearing aura, hearing it sing into the distance. Then he swore there was shouting, someone shaking him, but he looked around and saw nothing, heard nothing but the beating of his large changeling heart as the black night stretched over his eyes. A gray shadow moved in and out of his vision, disappearing as it had come.



“Peter! Peter!”

Peter’s eyes snapped open and he winced as the light struck him from behind a fuzzy winged figure’s shoulder. He rubbed his eyes. God, what was wrong with his head...?

“I missed training!” he said as he sat up. The blood seemed to be sloshing around in his brain, and he sat still for a moment, staring at his feet. He looked up again at the Darkling who had awakened him. It was the cracklemaster, Zoë’s friend, Leed. “Christ, what time is it?”

“Peter, they tried to wake you... Af gave you something to make you sleep...” Leed looked around and snatched up Peter’s pants, throwing them on his cot. “Here.”

“What are you talking about? Af gave me something to make—”

“Never mind that now, Erلكonig, the trouble it took to wake you! I should be watching the crackle for when the flyers come back. Peter! Zoë shouted at you all night!” Leed yammered furiously. Looking over her shoulder and out into the camp, Peter saw the grayness of day, but heard no voices, no monks singing, no Darlings going about their business. “Peter!” she said, looking at his face to make sure he was scanning. “Peter!”

“What?”

“We’re under attack!”

“Oh, no,” Peter shook his head, pulling himself out of bed. He nearly swooned as he tried to put on his pants, and he stumbled out into the snow, spinning around to see the empty Wintercamp. Af had drugged him. And they were under attack.

Attack where?

Peter ran back in to Leed. “Where are they?”

“On the lake below,” the Darkling answered. “MacDuff saw them gather

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on the lake. An army of humans—the—Ve—”

“The *Vehm*?”

“Yes. *And* Darklings. Rimmion’s Band.”

Peter stepped through the doorway and reached back, grabbing a cloak, pulling it around him. He realized he was barefoot when the frozen ground sucked the heat from his body through his naked heels. Peter sat down on a bench, reaching for his boots. “When did this happen?”

Leed’s wings flexed nervously as she spoke. “They’ve been gone an hour.”

“Wonderful,” Peter growled. He shook his head, throwing himself onto the bench long enough to wrestle on his boots. He rose impatiently and turned to the door. “Farrago against Rimmion and the *Vehm*, that’s...” he trailed off, looking back at Leed and then down at the bare patch of wall. “Where the Hell are my skis?”

The Darkling was agitated, jumping slightly, wings rapidly flexing and relaxing. “Skis? I... no idea.”

Peter was hurriedly pulling on his gloves and spun around, now, running along the front of the cabin, had he laid them down? He bent down by their usual place and ran his hands through the snow, then cursed aloud as he stood up, feeling the blood rush to his head. For a moment he stumbled in the snow before the cabin, feeling woozy. The lattices were bare, and now, as he studied them, he saw the signs of a hasty departure. Farrago and MacDuff had moved everyone out in a hurry. And Peter had slept through it all. In a flash, Peter remembered the strange gray aura of the dream. And he couldn’t even find his damn...

“Christ!” Peter swore, kicking the snow as he ran to a nearby tree. He had been skiing with Zoë. They had come back for the celebration, pawing one another, hastily throwing off their skis.

A fresh snow had fallen. The things could be anywhere. Of all the times to be an idiot... The changeling dropped to his knees, running his arms through the snow, grunting with disgust. He felt his body sink in on itself as he realized the odds of finding them were as good as finding another changeling.

“They’ll die,” Peter spat, standing up. “Where is Zoë?”

“She’s with them...”

Peter covered his eyes, feeling them pushing against his fingers underneath his lids. He ran to the stable, reached his hand to the peg at the top of the door. His skates were there. What luck: at the top of a mountain with a pair of skates. Peter tied the skates together and slung them over his shoulder, then quickly turned to untethering his horse. “On the lake?” His head was clearing, the blood rushing to his extremities and making him feel more alert. *All right. All right. No skis. Have done with it.*

“The Eibsee,” Leed nodded.

“Leed, under my bed is a large sack. It’s full of arrows. Get them, I need them.” He shook his head. “I forgot, I’m sorry.” Leed disappeared as Peter turned to one of MacDuff’s horses, patting its neck. His archers would be needed.



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Peter frowned as he chose a bit and pulled the harness over his horse's mouth and Leed reappeared.

"It'll take me an hour to get down the mountain," he said, shaking his head. "Where's my sack?"

"It wasn't there," she shook her head.

"Wasn't there; did you *look*?" Peter snapped. No—of course. Of course. Zolo would have thought to get them. And probably the bombs, as well. Hopefully.

"Leed," he turned to her. "Fly down there. Tell them I'm coming." What was he saying? What could he do? Peter heard the words coming out of his mouth and wanted to stop and laugh, to feel the ice of the wind and laugh at the sheer delirium—as if he could possibly make any difference. But he could. He knew he could. "*Half* an hour—I can make it if I hurry. Farrago versus Rimmion, half an hour, they'd still be circling one another.... But Rimmion with the humans, he'll tear them all apart."

He looked across the clearing to the beginning of the tree line. The white slope disappeared past the trees, plummeting downward in a white-and-black pattern that went on for miles.

"I could carry you," Leed said, "I think."

Peter shook his head, his eyes going to the woodshop. "No. You'd be exhausted, and you'd probably not make it any faster than if I rode. Damn it!" He felt his mind slamming into place, like a rope on a pulley finally coming unstuck and falling into the groove. There was a mound of snow by the wood shop, and he heard Leed follow him as he ran to the wall of the shop and fall to his knees in the snow. He dug around furiously.

"What are you doing?"

"Where is it... told him to keep this thing clean..." God, Rikkel, the child he had made the sled for, was down there, too, probably trying to fight a war. He felt the bits of snow sliding into his gloves as he dug in the snow. Finally he felt the polished wood and tugged at it, pulling upward as he stood. The toboggan came up, snow and ice flaking off, and Peter hoisted it before him as he walked back towards the tree line.

Leed shook her head. "I came to warn you, not to ask you to kill yourself."

"It's a straight shot to the Eibsee," Peter said. "On horseback it'll take an hour. Straight down I can do it in a quarter of that, maybe less." The rope was moving in the pulley of his mind, and he was running forward, gaining momentum, the skates thumping against his chest. "You go ahead, I'll catch up." Running, now, snow crunching, trees jaggging back and forth as he ran, his breath coming faster. He wrapped the reins tightly around his gloved fingers and picked up speed.

"You've got to be joking," Leed said. "You'll never make it."

"Watch me."

And in one long, fluid motion, Peter met the edge of the mountain, felt the slope begin, felt his body springing up, spinning in the air. His fingers let go of

the wood and the toboggan floated forward, falling lightly on the snow, the tiniest moment before his feet slammed into the front edge. Peter watched the reins roll out and catch, taught, and he felt the hard jerk against his fingers.

Snow compacted and flew as the half-circles of wood on the sides of the old cart crunched in and picked up speed. Peter stared ahead and felt his eyes come to flight speed, pupils rolling in his eyes calmly as his head bobbed, trees coming into focus and flying towards him. He felt his weight fall forward, his buttocks settling in on the wood, knees bent, leaning back slightly, hanging on the reins. He could steer. A little. He hoped.

Down the mountain on a sled the changeling flew.





## CHAPTER 27

At first, it was just snow, the powder of the morning, the toboggan racing smoothly as the treeline loomed, a mile away. Peter allowed himself to breathe, slowly, listening to the wind in his ears as the trees loomed. He bounced over a slope, down, curved, and then time to breathe was finished. He tipped the reins, making for the first space in the trees he saw.

Down, trees dancing past, black streaks of bark and high roots erupting from the white blanket, tearing past the toboggan. Peter stared ahead, feeling his eyes wide before him, focusing deep and close at once, focus flying back and forth so fast he couldn't keep track, until he let go control, let instinct take over. This is what it is to fly.

To fly! Obstacles soaring, trees tearing towards and past you, threatening, one wrong move and you'll fly apart, joined in holy wedlock with a gnarled fir.

And it was almost slow motion, the trees roaring past one by one, unblurred and massive, limbs tearing at his shoulders and hair, but it *wasn't* slow, it was fast, faster than any had ever moved, and he didn't need to slow it down in his brain, his brain was faster, his eyes were faster, his body was speed itself.

Peter jerked on the right rein and front wheel and let it scrape over the side of a jagged rock, falling forward to let the front of the toboggan fall back down, puffs of snow exploding. A low branch came swooping out from nowhere and Peter ducked forward, almost stabbing himself with the skates that still lay wrapped around his neck. He felt the branch tear at his hair and whipped back up in time to see tree in his path, coming fast. Peter bobbed hard right and felt the left side of the toboggan lift off, still catching a black root that spat bark and green splinters as he roared past, slamming again into the snow. He began to bounce, shifting his weight, going with the bounce, guiding towards a light snow bank to break his descent.

Flying! Peter saw a wolf bark and jump across his path, snarling as Peter flew by. He ducked to avoid the tree limb that sprang like a dancing ghost from nowhere and clawed at his cheek. Peter snarled and felt the dark blood flow on his face, freezing almost instantly.

*Make your own wings*, he heard Douglas say. *Make your own wings!*

And he was: on wings of ice and snow, on wings of determination and strength, he was flying.

Peter felt the ground drop out from under him as he took a natural curve and he knew he'd hit a ledge about half-way down the mountain- he knew that point, could recall it even on the sloping path one rode to get to the top, halfway there, halfway there. The sled slammed into the ground and snow flew into the air, a heap of it coming off a fir limb and landing on Peter's head as he flew past. Peter jerked the reins on either side and kept the toboggan in control,





moving on, moving down.

As he came around the next turn, the trees opened up a bit more and Peter caught a glimpse of the lake, far below, a vast expanse of gray and white, far beyond this sloping stark whiteness and the racing blurred trees. He could make out the shapes of men and elves, bodies sliding on ice and flying through the air.

Peter was focusing on the battle, far below, when something lit the air and filled Peter's ears, a piercing *Ik-ik-ik-ik-iiiye!*

*Redgreen.* Peter gasped, looked up and saw a Darkling swooping down from the treeline, a black sword drawn. Peter jerked hard right to avoid a tree and then grasped both reins with one hand as he reached back for his bow and arrow.

The elf must have been chasing someone on retreat and spotted him tobogganing down. Peter watched the creature fly over his head, swiping and missing, the sword flying behind Peter's head. The Darkling howled its call again, zipping past the toboggan and rolling halfway to slide between the trees, *God, you're a good one, aren't you?* The Darkling leveled off and rose, banking and flipping so that in another moment the creature was flying towards Peter's toboggan, sword held up and ready to slice across Peter's neck. Peter jerked the reins once more to lift the toboggan's nose over a high root and then dropped the reins, feeling his body slide forward slightly as he stopped the lean back. He drew up his arrow as the Darkling closed in.

The Darkling did not cry out again, but flew forward, in slow motion, now, in a split moment between moments, fluid and cold, and all around was the sound of the ground flying past, the tiny ice crystals reflecting sunlight through the tops of the trees.

Peter watched the creature fly towards him, watched the smile, those gigantic teeth, those wings, flapping high and wide, chest muscles straining and the crackle and causing the feathers to shimmer magically.

*You're beautiful,* he thought. *And I have to kill you.*

Peter breathed slowly and drew back his arrow, felt his glove scrape against his cold cheek, as his left eye closed, watched the narrow shadow of the arrowhead line up with the breast of the creature, just under the pointed jaw. He drew a breath.

*Ik-ik-ik-ik-iiiye!*

Peter exhaled, releasing the arrow, and saw it shrink—

*Ik-ik-ik-ik-iiiye!*

And missed, the shaft tearing through the Darkling's left wing, a few feathers flying, the thing's face grimacing as it lowered its head, speeding up, another tiny moment and he breathed in and out with a new aim and let the shaft go *closing fast you can feel his breath now—*

*Ik-ik-ik-ik-iiiye!*

—watched it catch the Darkling in the throat as the toboggan hit another root and he felt it go out of control, his body lurching forward. *Who gave that second yell that was another Darkling* and the Darkling Peter had shot



screamed and flew backwards, trying to climb and slamming into a root, flipping into the snow. Peter yanked up the reins, leaning back, trying to get the speeding former cart under control again as it rocked violently and threatened to spill him out. The fallen Darkling rolled head over heel and the toboggan hit him in the shoulder, launching over the creature's wings, the sound of thin wing bones cracking. The toboggan hit the ground and Peter cried out, ducking and swerving to keep from obliterating himself, and still the second cry came, *Ik-ik-ik-iiiiye!*

Peter felt the moment's respite of having a good visual on the next hundred yards of trees and looked up and back whence the scream had come. There it was! Another of Rimmion's Band, swooping down behind him. Peter reached back to draw another arrow from his quiver as he dropped the reins again, hoping the trees would stay still for a moment. He turned slightly in the toboggan and looked up as he brought an arrow out and into place, but the creature was out of his visual field. Peter looked around and saw a flicker of black feathers in the corner of his eye, heard the flap of wings over the sound of rushing snow and ice and saw the blade come down. He tried to fire but instead wound up aborting the shot, the shaft falling limp, as he yanked his arms out of the way of the sword that came flying down as the Darkling swooped over and back and was on his other side. The black blade missed Peter's fingers and tore through his bow, tearing it to pieces.

*No time. Forget it.*

The Darkling, having disarmed Peter, now flew forward, soaring up between the trees and rolling into a turn, heading back at Peter instantly. An Af turn. Peter reached back for his axe immediately and brought it forward as the blade came down at him again, the Darkling holding it to one side ready to swipe it hard across. Peter saw a heavy root jutting out ahead and grasped the reins again, ripping to the right, snow flying, the toboggan lifting off and then slamming back down again—

*Ik-ik-ik-iiiiye!*

—as he swung the axe in his right hand just in time to glance the sword aside. The Darkling kicked him hard in the face and Peter felt his nose burst as the elf performed another Af turn, soaring back at him.

Peter's eyes swiveled and locked onto the approaching Darkling, and a thousand shapes in his view locked into place, the fast enlarging shape of the approaching foe, the trees around him, the sheer white slope, the back hurtling trees, the gray lake far in the distance. He looked down the trees ahead for bumps on the ground and up for low branches he would have to avoid.

Low branches.

The Darkling flew in hard and fast and Peter slammed its sword out of the way expertly again. This time he was ready when the elf went for another kick, he grabbed at the Darkling's boots and held on. Peter felt his body ripped backwards and had to pray he'd keep missing roots, and he felt his stomach



muscles burning in agony as he sat forward, bringing the Darkling body up. The creature's wings were flapping wildly and Peter thrust up with his axe, catching the creature in the ribs, and the sword clattered from its hand and bounced on the toboggan between Peter's legs.

Closing... closing...

Peter held fast to the Darkling's ankles and saw the creature look down at him in horror. The two locked large, swiveling eyes. The creature howled in fury as the low limb tore the top of his head off, a chalky scalp flying throughout the air. Peter let go the boots and looked back briefly to see the body fly behind him—his axe still firmly embedded in its torso—then looked forward in time to veer around another tree. He picked up the black elfin sword from the floor of the sled, glad not to have cut off his own leg with it.

The changeling breathed again, feeling the icy air filter into his lungs, stretching out his arms for the tiniest moment, regrouping mentally. The lake was getting bigger, below, he could see the Darklings and humans more clearly now through the latticework of black wood and dark green foliage.

Peter jumped a root and soared, the precipice becoming suddenly steeper, and when he hit the snow again he was going faster and the terrain had changed for the worse.

Forty yards. Closing.

The trees were thicker, roots and water-eaten trees lying across one another, the snow thinning as he skimmed along it. He saw Darklings flying, someone falling with an arrow in his chest.

Thirty yards, he saw the last opening, the jumble of roots ahead, and ripped the skates off his shoulders, clenching the reins in his teeth.

A jumble of limbs smacked at him and he smacked them away with the sword in time, nearly tumbling out, catching his skates between his thighs. Peter's teeth ached with the pressure of the reins as he moved the skates to his feet, bending forward, slipping them over his boots. Fifteen yards, and he was yanking the skate cords around his feet, holding on. Ten yards and he jammed his skated boots into the front of the toboggan and grabbed the reins again, soaring. Peter saw a thick, gnarled trunk and aimed for it.

Five yards. Breathe. Time slowed to a crawl. Ice and screaming and three armies coming up fast. Somewhere he heard Zoë screaming, a guttural, attacking sound. Go. Go. Go. Peter gripped the Darkling sword firmly and let go of the reins, gravity slamming him forward as he raised himself onto his skates, balancing. The toboggan smacked into the trunk at full speed and Peter was airborne.

*Airborne.*

Sword out, Peter howled, legs flailing as he sailed through the air over the last few yards of gnarled bank. He closed his eyes and stretched his legs and felt a pounding shock race through his legs as he hit the ice. Peter opened his eyes and spun, slashing out and tearing through a pair of humans,



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howling, slamming into another Vehm and sending him spinning. Peter ducked and raced past a pair of Wintercamp Darklings, drawing in his sword, looking for the Redgreen Band.

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## CHAPTER 28

“Surrender, monk!” cried the Vehm soldier running across the ice. The man was youngish, with a trim black beard and blue eyes MacDuff could see from ten yards away. The Vehm slowed, his sword before him, tilting his head and sizing up MacDuff.

MacDuff wiped the sweat off his brow and let his cassock fall to the snow. He kicked it out of the way, to reveal the great, red cloak he wore underneath. He held his sword before him. “You misunderstand my position,” he said, steadily. “You have invaded a protectorate of the Pope himself! Run, now, and urge surrender. Or die.”

“Times change, monk,” said the Vehm. “What, is the church taking up swords against the Order of the Holy Vehm, now?” The Vehm looked past MacDuff at two of his fallen comrades. Still he held back. “Come, monk, if it’s war you want, we have elves to kill.”

Softly. “I am a friend to the Darklings. Wintercamp is my home. By invading it, you’re destroying the last hope for peace.”

The Vehm spat, shaking his head. “Enough, old man. To Hell with you.”

MacDuff swore under his breath as the Vehm sprang and he ducked, letting the blade slash at his cloak. He spun around after the man on the ice, finding his footing with his boots again, and slashed up, catching the man in the shield arm. The Vehm howled, spinning, and slashed back once more, and MacDuff threw his buckler before him, catching the blade and batting it away.

“For longer than you can know I have fought with hired *kerns* like you,” MacDuff spat, plunging his sword into the man’s chest and burying it. He let the man fall on the sword, MacDuff dropping to his knees, so the man fell forward, blue eyes blinking and staring at him as the Iron Thane spoke.

“I have said,” MacDuff hissed, “that I would never raise my sword against a Darkling again. And I have kept that vow, you imbecile, and in doing so I have *helped* you and your people. I gave these noble creatures a home and urged them to avoid war with you.” He brought the human towards him, closer, hearing bone scrape on metal. The man was grabbing at a dagger and MacDuff brought his knee down on his hand “And my voice has been in my staff. I offered them sustenance. And I offered you *peace*. All of you!”

“I am MacDuff!” he cried, standing and letting the man fall as another Vehm came screaming a human name to his fallen friend. MacDuff looked up, leveling his blade. As the man ran in MacDuff slid, dodging the blade and catching the newcomer in the ribs. He slashed away arm and buckler, spun with the soldier and sent the man’s head tumbling away. MacDuff began to slip, bent down and slashed thrice at the sole of each boot, leaving thick marks on the bottom. He stood firm again and felt the thump against his shoulder of his old,



old, iron badge, the mark of the Law Clan MacDuff. He stared at the iron in his hands and the red blood spreading across the ice. “My voice is in my sword.”

The Iron Thane spun around again at the sound of whipping wings, instantly seeing the blue sash of Stell Farrago slowing and dropping. The Darkling lit next to him, breathing hard, and the two looked out on the lake.

“He warned me,” Farrago shook his head. “Cawpuk! Rimmion warned me he was going to do this.” The Stell wiped his mouth, which was bleeding. He had an arrow sticking out of his right wing.

The lake was a ballet of men and elves, and black and red blood. The army of the Vehm numbered near two thousand, with about seven hundred Redgreen Darklings in the air on their side. Flying up around them all were the just over two thousand Wintercamp Darklings.

MacDuff shook his head. “You couldn’t give in, Farrago. How are the Darklings faring?”

“We’d be doing better if Rimmion hadn’t changed the rules,” Farrago snarled, indicating the arrow sticking out of his wing. Farrago brought his right wing around, placed his dagger against the shaft against his thumb, snapping off the feathers. Then he winced as he yanked quickly on the head, pulling the arrow through and letting it drop on the ice.

“Times change,” MacDuff said. “Don’t think about that now. How many of them have arrows?”

“About half,” answered the Stell. “I don’t think Rimmion was able to train them all in the vile things.”

“You’ll have high wings before the day is out.” There was a Redgreen Darkling in the air, coming around, another sword-bearer, dropping and aiming for them. MacDuff shouted, “Head’s up!”

Farrago took to the air, meeting the Darkling on his way up, trading blows. As he battered the Darkling back MacDuff slid underneath, waited for Farrago’s foe to touch down and leap once more, and he yanked on the Redgreen’s wing, spinning him around. He bashed at the creature’s sword with his buckler and let Farrago do the rest.

“Imagine,” Farrago panted, “what you could do to us with a sword.”

“I’m busy enough with the damn fool humans,” MacDuff said, as he looked up and saw Zolo, soaring down, arm streaming.

“Zolo!” MacDuff slid out on his boots, “where are your pots? Where are the Archers?”

Zolo lit and stammered, “They’re using arrows—Peter’s not here, how can we—”

MacDuff grabbed the Darkling by the shoulders. “Zolo! All rules off! Get the bombs and use them; find seven Darklings and pass them out. Go!”

“But Peter has been—”

Suddenly there was a howl from across the lake, and MacDuff looked up



to see humans scattering, Darklings taking to the air, giving wide berth. A figure hit the ice, screaming, *Ik-ik-ik-ikiiiyye!*

MacDuff smiled as the figure skated out, spinning, sword moving and slashing as he went. “The changeling is here.”

There was a burble in the ice and MacDuff looked down, lifting his boot. He swore he saw a tendril of pitch black under the ice, saw it warp and thin out, and disappear.



Peter the changeling swept around, his right leg swinging wide as he kicked a body out of the way. He scanned the ice, found what he was looking for—a dead Redgreen archer. He skated by and snatched up the bow, shoved it into his quiver, kept moving. He looked down as an arrow caught the ice next to his foot and looked up again to see a Darkling, disappearing behind two more, then reappearing and drawing a bead on him.

“So you’re using arrows,” Peter called. “The sacrilege is broken.” He sheathed his sword and drew the new bow from his back, notching and shooting. The elf was just letting go of his own string when Peter’s arrow caught him below the jaw. Peter dodged the arrow as the Redgreen archer flipped back and slammed into one of his sword-bearing fellows, plummeted to the ice below.

Peter breathed, then heard someone call his name. Peter spun around and saw Swann Fort of the Freiburg Vehm racing towards him.

Swann had his sword low, not in an attack position at all. “Peter! What are you doing here?”

Peter backed up, studying the beautiful youth who, in a year, had become an equally beautiful man. It was just sinking in, the depth of what this battle meant. The Vehm had declared war on the Darklings. But some of them didn’t know where Peter stood. “What are *you* doing, Swann?”

Swann slowed, reaching out as if to embrace Peter and the changeling backed up again. “We’re taking Wintercamp,” Swann said. Then a light seemed to dawn on the German’s brow and Swann said, “Peter, are you fighting the Vehm?”

Peter skated backwards more. “Tell them to call it off.”

“What are you saying?”

“Is Heinrich here?” Peter scanned the field. Of course he was. Of course he was.

“Of course he is,” Swann said, incredulous. “It’s his operation.”

“Tell him to call it off. There might still be time.” He notched an arrow before Swann had time to realize it and leveled it at the soldier. “Please. I don’t want this.”

“Peter—” Swann stared at the arrow, and Peter swallowed, feeling the string tugging at his fingers. Swann was bringing up a sword as a blue-sashed shape closed fast behind him. “You won’t shoot me.”



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Af the Darkling ran Swann through, the tip of the black blade erupting through Swann's chest. Peter lowered his arrow, watching the man fall to the ice.

"Changeling," Af said, as he lit. "I'm pleased you could make it."

"Don't talk to me," Peter snarled. Af shrugged, took off again, disappeared. Peter was left with a childhood face at his feet, staring up at him and growing cold. He had made his choice.

"Peter!" the voice of Zolo sliced through the crashing din and Peter saw his friend flying in. "You came!" Zolo had three clay pots hanging from his arms.

"What are you waiting for?" Peter said, looking around, "use those on the humans! I have to find my archers; we have to take these Redgreen archers out. That's the first priority." He wrung his hands. "Where are my arrows?"

"East edge." Zolo flicked his head. "They wouldn't use them without you."

Peter nodded. "I understand. If you see the archers, send them there to meet me. Kill humans on the way. Go!"

Zolo swooped once, swiping Peter's chalks with his bare hand, and disappeared. Peter looked around, pumping his legs, swinging his sword as he went.

"Jek!" Peter saw one of his archers, skated in behind him before the Darkling took off again. "East side! Get your arrows!" Jek flicked his head and soared, and Peter pumped on, slicing across the lake, dodging a blow from a human. He spun around, taking an arm almost as an afterthought. *This is the moment. No doubts. Make your own wings.*

Peter found that as he skated through he could catch soldiers by surprise, slashing behind them, and he alternated between catching the limbs of those on the ground and moving on, tearing at the legs of Darklings alighting or taking flight.

The problem with the elves was that they didn't hover. Not that they couldn't—he was sure of that now—they were just accustomed to swooping down, and if they got caught in any entanglement, they'd alight, then take off for another round. It was a habit. That had to change, but for now it was a weakness that he could exploit. If only it weren't a weakness the Wintercamp Darklings shared...

Peter jumped over a pair of writhing wounded blues and hit the ice again, nearly falling as he rammed into a pair of Vehm humans. One of them recognized him, shouting his name before he took the man's throat out. *We've all made our choices.*

A higher Darkling voice carried across the wind and Peter strained to see through the flailing limbs and flashing swords. He had been right. Rikkel, the boy he had made the sled for, was here.

The ice opened up again and Peter saw Rikkel more clearly, fifty yards away. Smaller size seemed to have served him well, as he darted once over a human foe and slashed at the Vehm's back, but Peter flinched when he saw a sword sliced along the edge of Rikkel's wing, shearing out a section of feathers, then slashing into his thigh. Rikkel hit the ice, struggling to stay up.





The lake shook with a heavy concussion as Peter looked North and saw a pair of Vehm flailing about, on fire and falling into a hole in the ice left by one of Zolo's bombs. Finally.

Peter felt a Vehm ram against him and he spun sideways, slashing, feeling the top of a sword slicing into his shoulder. He swore, dropping, kicking out, catching the Vehm in the knee with his skate. The man tumbled and Peter tore through his throat and rose again. "Rikkel! Get off the ice, boy!"

Rikkel was struggling up again, slipping on the ice. He confirmed the dead Darkling before him and seemed to rest for a second. The boy looked at him, right through him, for a moment. *My God, my God, please, no.*

Rikkel didn't see two Vehm moving in towards him from either side, sliding fast. Each had a sword raised as they bore down on him. Peter pumped his legs, closing, and he saw Rikkel's eyes grow wide and his mouth move in a smile as he recognized him.

The men on either side closed fast, within six feet of Rikkel. Peter raced, pumping faster. "Get down!" he cried, and he didn't hear him, "get down!"

Peter dug in the toe of his right skate and soared towards the boy. He reached his hands out flat, keeping the sword blade pointed away as Peter struck the boy's shoulders with his palms, sending Rikkel flailing back.

Peter turned, digging in his left skate and spinning, slashing one human across the chest with his right skate while tearing running the other through with his sword. He snarled as two men he once would have been proud to call brothers fell to the red ice.

Peter turned to the fallen young Darkling.

"You'll have to teach me to skate," the boy said, wincing.

Peter looked up to see the archers zipping over him towards the camp where Zolo had left the arrows. On the east side were monks with boiling pots, and he realized they were treating wounded. "You're badly hurt. Let's go." Peter got up, dragging Rikkel with him, a Redgreen arrow slicing past and embedding in the ice next to him. He looked in the boy's eyes, seeing them glaze over, and ran his arm under Rikkel's shoulder. As he began to skate, dragging him with him. "Did you kill many?"

"Not enough," the Darkling child said. "Give me another chance."

"Right." They neared the bank and Peter called for a monk. "Brother!" One of the monks bravely padded out, grabbing Rikkel and hauling him back. "Take him. Please do what you can." He looked down the bank a few yards past the monk. "The arrows." There, in the snow, lay the black sack of Erlkonig arrows. Jek, the archer Darkling he'd sent, stood nearby, slashing at a pair of Vehm.

Peter began to skate towards the sack. He saw Hik, another of the Wing Disciples, alight next to Jek, and another, Kep, as the ground shook and ice exploded in the center of the lake. "Good enough," Peter murmured as he skated towards them and two more arrived.

"My archers!" cried Peter, as he found the black sack. "Jek!"



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Jek the Darkling appeared before him, flying up and spinning to meet him. “Peter?”

“Jek.”

“Peter, Af apparently poisoned—“

“Forget it. Wing Disciples! Stop staring and get your equipment!” Peter called. “Our first priority is the Redgreen archers!”

And it was poetry, then, as Jek and Hik and Kep reappeared, followed by Skor, Bat and Led, all pulling out their arrows. They were childlike, in their use of these weapons. He would have to train them to use them as tools, not religious items, not profanity, but tools. As it was, though, they needed him.

Peter held up his bow and waved, “follow me!”

Up, up, past the clouds the Wing Disciples flew, all in a line, and Peter skated below them, his quiver before him, and he felt as if they were anchored to him by an unseen tether, as he swooped across the ice and they flung themselves in and out of the sky. He shouted orders as they went, banking and rolling, one after the other swooping down, Peter guiding them, *there, archers! There! There!*



MacDuff watched the icy field and listened to the din, and for a moment, he was in another place. Hundreds of years ago, now. On a field soaked in reddish light and smoke, in a country filled with darkness. Then he had fought against the Darklings.

He shook his head in disgust. Nothing had changed, had it? All my work, and it does no good. These people, my people and these elves, they will chew at one another until one of them is gone.

“MacDuff!”

It was Zoë. He had almost forgotten she was here, he realized. Shouldn’t you be sculpting? But of course, no, we couldn’t have that, could we? You’re a warrior race. Why have enough peace that you can grow and change when you can be chipping away at yourselves out here?

MacDuff sighed deeply as he watched Zoë whipping her wings. Her eyes were gigantic and now he saw that she was waving at him.

“MacDuff, look out!” MacDuff turned, saw nothing.

And he didn’t even hear her shout, “above you!” or at least by that time the words were lost in the feel of hot crackle catching his cheek. He looked up in time to see a powerful Redgreen in a vertical dive, sword ready to slice across MacDuff’s torso.

MacDuff grunted, sliding, moving his body, feeling steel sliced into his shoulder, feeling a cold arc of pain rip across his collarbone. He hit the ice as the Darkling, to his shock, whipped his gigantic wings and pulled out of the dive, not six feet from the ground. *Good lord. You’re Rimmion.*

Pain shooting through his arm as he pushed himself up. MacDuff gritted his teeth, bringing his feet under him, feeling his teeth slicing his tongue and grind

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together. Bite it back. Use it.

He was bleeding badly. And if what he surmised about Douglas back at his City was true, with all that swooning the Erlkonigsson was doing, he had a feeling that relief would not come in any way but the most natural. Well. That would be an adjustment.

*So for the love of Christ, pay more attention.*

Zoë screamed out and whipped upwards, slicing at Rimmion. The Stell looked at her, smiling, dipping down, kicking at her. She swept his boot away with her left hand, swiping at his torso as the two began to drop. When they hit the ice, MacDuff watched Rimmion spring.

MacDuff was racing towards Rimmion when the Redgreen Stell's sword came down, and he saw the sculptress shriek as he sawed into her left wing. She growled mightily, slashing him across the chest, not going deep enough. Rimmion moved like lightning, Zoë whipping back and taking to the air, but there was now blood streaming down her face, in her eyes. She had to set down. She couldn't see.

And MacDuff had said he would not raise a sword against them.

And she was the future.

The Iron Thane roared, "Rimmion! Turn!"

Rimmion looked back a quarter head-turn, his eyes swiveling the rest of the way. "You again, old man?"

"Come see what it really means to make your own wings."

Past him, Zoë was standing on the ice, and MacDuff could see the wing she had broken the year before had been badly mangled, the wound reopened, dangling feathers and flesh. She was wobbling, and now lunged at Rimmion, seeing her opportunity. But the blood was too much below her feet, she dropped to a knee, clawing at the ice.

Arrows showered chuk-chuk-chuk in a line before Rimmion. MacDuff watched as the Redgreen Stell scanned the lake, locking in on the zipping, skating figure of the changeling, with his line of archers following him. He turned back to MacDuff and curtsied his head. "Sorry. A better target has arrived." Rimmion took to the air immediately. "Freak!" Rimmion cried. "Kinnet! Pennt!"

As the rest of Rimmion's shouts lost themselves in the din, MacDuff and Zoë hobbled together to the edge of the lake.



Rimmion lit on the ice next to one of his archers. His wings were sore; he was running low on crackle. The archer threw down his bow, cursing, and unsheathed his sword instead. "What are you doing?" Rimmion cried, "we are Nornagestans!"

The Redgreen Darkling snarled, stamping on the bow. "You fool. You don't just pick up a weapon and master it." He wrung his wings, "we're *losing!*"



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Rimmion boiled, seeing his Stella, dying, seeing Douglas, doing nothing, Douglas, and he wrenched his dagger from his belt and hurled it. The Redgreen archer dropped dead and Rimmion snatched the blade back, sneering. “Never.” He looked for and joined Kinnet and Pennt, and they locked in together on the changeling.



Peter was still shouting, dodging falling and fallen foes and friends alike, when he heard the whip of wings and a burst of crackle low over his head. He looked to his left and saw two Redgreens swoop past him. Time stopped as he saw the face of Rimmion, looking back at him, gigantic wings crackling as he and Kinnet, his lieutenant, came up and around. Peter spun to face them and breathed, holding his sword before him.

*Auuugh!* Peter felt himself thrown forward as a human slammed into his back, and Rimmion and Kinnet were swooping down, and his sword clattered from his hand onto the ice. Peter looked up to see Rimmion’s grinning face closing in. “Hello, changeling. Remember me?”

With stunning, bone-crunching force the pair rammed into him, catching him under the shoulders, lifting him backwards. Slow motion as the two Redgreens carried Peter up and back over the lake, flesh hissing and crackle pouring down from their great wings. Peter looked down to see his skates dangling over the wounded ice, one of them dangling from his boots and falling away, clattering into the din. They had slowed, and below them smoke was pouring from a broken patch of bombed-out lake.

Slow motion, and breathing slow, now. Elfin black metal plunging into his ribs and into his throat and stomach. Peter felt a wave of black-red blood pouring from his mouth, and he heard Rimmion laughing, as if far away, his mouth so close Peter could feel the Redgreen Stell’s breath on his bloody chin.



MacDuff saw it, not far off, mouth open in horror, and Zoë saw it, on the bank, reaching out her arm and screaming. Something underneath the water saw it, too.

Something under the ice made a decision, and began to move.

The din of battle was far away, the human and elf cries a distant buzz in the back of Peter’s skull.

Slow motion, and they were letting him go, and Peter was falling, arms and legs stretching out, and the sky was far away when he felt his back strike hard against the breaking ice. Peter felt his flesh tear and heart stop as waves of ice and frozen water embraced him with a savage roar.



## CHAPTER 29

Gray water and ice flowed over dying eyes and Peter gasped and found that he had no breath, only icy water seeping into his skull.

I am Peter the changeling, and now I die...

Images flashing, the exploding crackle of the Redgreen Band, circling the Hauptmann's house, Heinrich asking him, *swear to me, Peter, swear to me—*

*Sorry—*

Blood flowing from his body into sludgy pools against his limbs, a thousand cracks and tears and his bones, roaring and shattering,

*Peter*

And something else, pounding, a heart beating, echoing his own, which was roaring and pumping sludge as he sank

In the deep, dark recesses of Peter's mind, a voice echoed, *Peter, you must choose...*

His body floating down, chunks of ice flowing this way and that under him, the water dark and inviting, and he looked with his dying, frozen eyes, and saw black.

And the blackness moved.

Tendrils slicing through the ice and sludgy blood and water, touching him, and he closed his eyes at the touch, and felt them freeze shut, and knew, knew, they would never open again.

Black tendrils touching his body, a cloud overtaking him, and that voice, *Peter the changeling, it has been so long for me,*

A thousand voices echoing the black tendril voice, swelling blackness seeping into his wounds and filling him, ripping through his body, racing down his busted veins, tearing through the slices in his back.

*And this I grant, and if you had your wits about you, I do not know if you would say yes... but I must ask...*

Who... was speaking...

Tendrils of solid blackness flowing in, wrapping him, flowing and absorbing his blood and stitching his veins together as they went, his eyes flowing with shining blackness that stitched together a thousand imperceptible tears and rips...

*Make your own wings, Peter, since the dawn of time the Erl-king flew, and he made his own wings, and so did I, and I ask you...*

*Do you want it?*

Yes...

*I offer life, and more, I offer you ascendance, greatness, new life, and more...*

Yes

*I offer you...*

Yes!



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Distant roars above the ice, and here below, black water and blood boiling, icy chunks beginning to fly, and something was happening, something was growing, something was bursting from his back and ripping feathers from itself and he had two more arms but they were not arms at all...

*Apotheosis!*

A pair of eyes burst open in the dark water and glowed, crackling energy spewing from their crystal form—

*Apotheosis!*

*This the dweller by the dark stream grants you, this the old, dark prince and Erlkonigsson gives.* The voice was distant, weakening, throbbing within more than without, and Peter felt a thousand beings moving within him, the Erlkonigsaga pounding as he had never felt it before, and he felt the water rushing past as Peter flexed his black wings...

*Bring them together... lead them, as I have and should have... champion them... as Erlkonigsson.*

...bones not-bones, skin not-skin eyes not-eyes singing, crackling, bursting, and Peter was flying up through icy depths, the distant gray day shining down through the surface... Douglas, screaming his last breath, *I grant you...*

*Apotheosis!*

MacDuff was watching, feeling Douglas pass away, as the middle of the lake exploded. Chunks of ice and water flew, a geyser mounting dark gray, and from center of that frozen cauldron burst a new form.

The form hit the air and soared, flexing gigantic wings of black feathers that seemed to flow like banners, frozen water flying about him, and his white skin crackled, his flowing black tunic hissed, his black wings roared, and his eyes shone like crystal stars. From nowhere, from his very sleeve, he drew a great, crackling sword.

MacDuff thought, *Douglas, what have you done?*

Peter the changeling. Peter the Dark Prince. Peter the Erlkonigsson.

Swept out his wings.

And roared.



## CHAPTER 30

“Rimmion!” called the Dark Prince, surveying the field. His vision was brilliant and strange, a mixture of the vision he had known all his life, and a new, auric field that shone like no aura read he had ever before experienced. Now he scanned the lake, looking for one Darkling whose aura he did not have to recognize to find.

The lake was silent, he realized, and Peter whipped his wings, forward and back, forward and back, hovering, as he knew they could, all along. The Vehm army had stopped fighting the Darklings; the Darklings had stopped fighting each other: each and every creature on the field merely stood, gawking at a birth.

And Peter felt his vision swirling, locking in and diving to the individual faces, even as he kept his eye on the rest: he saw Zoë, shaking her head, without the slightest clue what had happened. He saw Heinrich, finally, sword in hand, holding up a glove to calm his troops, *there you are, old friend, it is you brought this, didn't you?* And he saw MacDuff, who merely watched, and waited.

And Zolo dropped to his knees upon the ice, and the word he cried out burst hot in the freezing air:

“Erlkonigsson!”

A chant, then, beginning: *Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson.*

Peter surveyed the silent field and cried once more, whipping his wings, “Rimmion!”

“I don't know what happened to you,” came a voice with an aura that warped the air around Peter's ears, “but I can kill you again if need be.”

Peter flipped over and flew back a few feet as Rimmion descended, flying towards him. The Stell was sneering. On the ice below, the murmur was growing. *Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson.*

Peter soared up thirty, forty feet, then whipped his wings and began to descend, ripping towards the Redgreen Stell. The sky began to fill again with Darklings, as if a spell had been broken.

Peter rammed into Rimmion with his boots, catching the Stell in the shoulder, and as Rimmion flipped backwards, Peter banked forward and swiped down with his sword, shearing the tip off Rimmion's left wing. The Stell yelped in pain and twisted in midair, slashing at him, only to be blocked by Peter's blade. “Once a freak...always... a freak.”

“Rimmion, listen,” hissed Peter, “you're a Nornagestan.” Peter swiped again, tearing through Rimmion's buckler and sending it flying from his hand. As the buckler clattered to the icy floor, Peter brought his sword down and up, feinting a blow for Rimmion's neck and then catching Rimmion's wrist, dislodging the Stell's sword. Rimmion watched his sword fall and drew up his wounded hand, instinctively, immediately drawing a dagger with his left.



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Peter dove for him, taking the dagger and turning it sideways as he pressed in, holding Rimmion close to him so they could talk. “You understand that the rules can change.”

“What are you getting at?” growled Rimmion.

“Turn over your army. We can turn back the humans. Convince them to use arrows—you’ve already accomplished that, I see. There’s more. Rimmion, look down! One Band. One Darkling Band. We can drive the humans back. Together. It’s not the battle you came for, but it’s your best plan.” Peter watched the Stell’s eyes carefully. “Are you listening?”

“And who would lead this... Darkling Band?”

“Listen to them,” Peter said, and above the clash of metal and cries of men and elves there was the chant, *Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson.* “There is a place for you in my army, Rimmion. But we have to rout the humans. It’s me they’re chanting for.”



Heinrich Hauptmann swore as he batted a Darkling away, tearing away the elf’s foot and ducking as the creature swiped at him. Heinrich caught the creature in the wing, watched it crash into the ice, and fell upon him, tearing out his throat. He stood, looking up. Peter—what in Hell had happened to Peter?

Mueller came running up and shouted out a broken eggshell curse. “There’s a new force on the field!”

Heinrich wiped his brow, looking up to see a team of archer Darklings tearing all Hell out of Rimmion’s archers. He got out of the way as one of them came flailing before him, an arrows sticking from an eyeball. “Christ, that’s Peter,” he said, as if to convince himself.

*Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson.*

“Your old scout is a traitor,” Mueller said, and that was the last eggshell piece of wisdom uttered, because a Blue Darkling had just torn his head and right shoulder from his body. The carcass crashed into Heinrich and he rolled back, slipping and springing up again, sword ready as the Blue creature came around again. When the creature was close, he saw it was Farrago.

“So it’s come to this,” Farrago said. “And to think I helped you.”

“You never helped me.” Heinrich snarled. “You helped Peter.”

“The Erlkonigsson will help all of us, boy,” Farrago said, as he slashed and parried. Heinrich looked down in horror, as his sword was knocked clear, smashing into the ice. Crackle fell upon it from Farrago’s wings, and Heinrich prepared to die. Farrago flew forward, grabbing Heinrich’s neck. Then Heinrich felt the Stell’s fingers at the scruff of his own neck, sliding up the blond hair where his chinks would be if he were an elf.

“You’re the searcher,” whispered Farrago. “There will be no death for you today. Not by my sword.” And with that, he let Heinrich go and flew away.

Louder by the second, so loud that even the Redgreens were joining it, *Erlkonigsson, Erlkonigsson, Erlkonigsson.*

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Pennt and Kinnet had learned their archery well, or so they thought, in the week that Rimmion had been working with them. And now they swooped, banked and dove, notching and shooting, and Farrago's Darklings were falling from the sky like raven dung.

Two Darklings they had seen before crackled madly and came fast towards them from below. "Af and Tap," Pennt said, "Farrago's escorts."

Af saw the two Redgreen escorts and did not have to look at his brother to get Tap to follow him. They moved as one, like winged oxen on the same plow, whipping their wings, flying up towards them.

Pennt and Kinnet drew their bows and shot. Af swiped his right wing down and let the arrow pass, and Tap did the same, as the brothers turned sideways, face to face, and dove through the air at the escorts, their swords held at their sides and pointed backwards. Rimmion's escorts were busy notching more arrows when the Blue escorts slammed between them, slicing wings and ribs.

Pennt and Kinnet howled and Af and Tap banked away from one another, straightening out, inverting, and coming up and around again in perfect Af turns. Pennt and Kinnet were looking back, trying to turn as the twins ran them through. It was the stuff of song. Even the sound of bursting hearts was in time.

*Who's the whip-crack Band, now?*



Satisfied with his dressings, MacDuff grabbed a horse by the edge of the lake and began to ride around to the other side, taking in the battle. The horse started several times as Zolo's bombs exploded, and he heard the cries of soldiers struggling in the water.

A cluster of Darklings fought ahead, and soon they dispersed, flocking up, looking for other targets. Several dead humans lay behind, but what caught MacDuff's eye was the single wounded Darkling. A familiar gray head bobbed as the wounded elf hauled himself up, leaning against a human corpse.

MacDuff jumped off his horse, his badge thumping against his wounded shoulder and smarting nastily. When he reached the side of Stell Farrago of the Blues, the Darkling was still breathing.

"MacDuff."

"Oh, no—" the Iron Thane inspected Farrago's chest and found a ragged hole the size of a man's hand. Farrago was stammering, his eyes glazed, and he looked from his chest to MacDuff and actually let out a short, raspy laugh.

"Look at that," Farrago said.

MacDuff was in no hurry. There was no need to hurry. "What am I looking at?" he asked sadly.

"It's just the first time I've seen... my heart."

"I have seen your heart many times."

"And I yours." Farrago looked around, at the humans and Darklings, and fixed a foggy eye on MacDuff. "Tell me," he asked weakly. "Was it like this, when the Erl-King fell?"



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MacDuff nodded. “It was a lot like this.”

Farrago closed his eyes, saying, “Nornagesta.” Then after a moment he opened them and seized MacDuff’s arm. “The sculptress! She was wounded. I saw you...”

“She’ll make it,” MacDuff said. He was a bit worried about Zoë’s egg, though. He kept that to himself.

Nearby, a clay pot fell upon a trio of Vehm and burst into flame, the men howling and running into the snow.

And in the sky, Rimmion facing off against a strange, new creature.

“MacDuff, what happened here?” Farrago asked, gesturing with a Bandage at the new Prince.

“Erlkonigsson happened,” MacDuff said.

Farrago looked up. “Listen to that.” *Erlkonigsson, Erlkonigsson, Erlkonigsson.* “That’s the changeling they’re talking about, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I have never seen the divine,” whispered the Stell. “Is that it?”

“I’m not sure,” MacDuff honestly replied.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Farrago, as he died.



Peter watched as Rimmion spat in his face, felt the air blown out of his new body as Rimmion kicked and pushed away, his gigantic wings crackling wildly. “Never.”

Peter nodded. “You’ve made your choice, Stell,” he said.

“So have we all,” roared the mighty Redgreen, as he hefted his dagger and hurled it. Peter saw it and moved in the air, and Rimmion’s giant eyes went red and maddened as the blade tore through Peter’s wing, *and the black feathers parted like water.*

“So have we all,” Peter agreed, as he ran the Stell through.

*Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson.*

As the Redgreen Stell fell from the sky, Peter turned his blazing crystal eyes on the Darklings. “Now, Redgreens and blues and yellows! Darklings!” emanated the rumbling, eerie voice, as Peter the Prince flapped his wings, levitating in the air above the lake, “Hear me! This is but the beginning! We have waited long, have we not? We have scattered, but in the time of the Erl-King there was but one Band.” Was he sure about this? Yes, this was what Douglas had offered him, this was his destiny, *swallow your fear, now is the time...*

They were fighting, still, but they were chanting, seeing him up there, he could tell they heard him, he could see their auras perking up, Redgreen and blue and human, too, and the last were afraid. Even the dead, the growing, piling dead, listened.

“Now, my Darkling Band. Follow me! Redgreen and Blue and Green and Yellow! Rout the humans!”

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And the Bands rose, Af leading the blues, howling his assent, and the other Stells, too, and as Peter held his arms high they rose. Farrago was nowhere to be seen.



Heinrich Hauptmann looked up into the sky, and saw the Darklings taking to the air, swirling as they had around his house. Even his elfin allies joined them, and the sky darkened and spewed crackle, a great, swirling ring of thousands of winged elves. *Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson. Erlkonigsson.*

Heinrich stood still, and he swore he saw Peter's unfamiliar eyes look down from on high, in the center of the Darkling tempest. As the circle gained speed and intensity, his arm raised, and in a moment, he would drop it. And unleash them all.

"Oh, God, what have we done, Peter?"

Far away, somehow, he swore he saw Peter's eyes lock in on him. *Run. Please.*

Heinrich dove for Mueller's body and tore the Freischoffe's horn from his belt. He jumped up, blowing into it, cold wind cracking his cheeks. He blew thrice more, and ran for the bank. "Retreat!"

And as the Vehm ran, Heinrich was sure he heard Peter's new voice, or perhaps it was his imagination:

*This is only the beginning for us.*





## CHAPTER 31

Peter looked out the window of the Dark Roost he had built and listened to the children in the walls.

*Where is Douglas?*

Peter winced, watching the faces burble in the black walls. The soulstuff at his command, the stuff that Douglas had controlled, was his now—and he had no idea what to do with it, other than to build a home for the Redgreens who had stayed at Wintercamp after the routing of the Vehm. MacDuff had been promising to try to explain it to him.

The Iron Thane had already explained a bit, before rushing off to court, still aching from *his* wounds.

“You’re powerful,” MacDuff had said. “But you’re not invulnerable. You’re not the healer that Douglas was—at least not yet. Maybe your body has to rot away inside you before that. But while you still feel that soulstuff-patched heart beating, I’d try to avoid getting run through again.”

And the same, apparently, went for MacDuff. Peter watched as the old man, with dignity and grace on his side, slowly exercised his shoulder, baring the pain, speeding his recovery in the human way. There would be no more miraculous recoveries at the hands of magical surgeons. And Peter had some inkling as to how long that had been going on: As Peter had received new and awesome power, MacDuff was rediscovering mortality.

Peter had barely scratched the depth of Douglas’ sacrifice.

So he’d better make the most of it.

Now, outside, Peter could see more Bands pouring in by the hour, as they had for weeks. The Erlkonigsson was gathering an army.

That there *was* an Erlkonigsson was enough to bring the Bands. The Erlkonigsson had even slain Rimmion, and somehow, the Redgreens hadn’t killed him for it yet. Peter reflected that the benefit of the Nornagestans belief system was that it allowed them to fall in behind whoever was winning.

“Erlkonigsson?” Peter looked up to see Zoë and tried to dampen the mewling of the souls in the walls.

“Please don’t call me that,” he said.

“I don’t know what to call you.” Zoë leaned on a black soulstuff chair, stared at it a moment as if it had not been there before—which it had not—and took a seat anyway, groaning with the weight of the growing egg inside of her. She looked ill. Her wing was bandaged again, as it had been when he had first met her. She leaned forward, elbows on her knees. “Maybe I should call you ‘Dark Prince.’ Or perhaps, ‘General.’ That seems to be your most constant role of late.” She looked around the room, the smooth nothingness of it all plainly abhorrent to her. “Where’s MacDuff?”



“Trying to save Wintercamp,” Peter said, watching Darklings land. Tristan of the Grays was down there, greeting newcomers with Zolo as if he’d been here for years.

*Are you the new Douglas?* sang the voices inside of him.

*I’ll explain it later,* Peter thought. He wasn’t yet used to so many voices in his head, much less coursing through every vein. Every wall. Everywhere he went.

Peter shook his head, turning back to Zoë’s question, flexing his wings nervously as he spoke. “The Church is under pressure from the Vehm to close down the Elf Beguines. MacDuff and Mechthild went to make a last-ditch argument for keeping it around.”

“Will they succeed?” Zoë asked dully.

Peter shook his head. “I wouldn’t count on it. All these Darklings pouring in. I’m adding floors to the Dark Roost every night. And I think we’re all going to have to move.”

Wherever we go,” she answered, “I suppose you can snap your fingers and build another castle.”

Peter sighed, sensing her aggression. “There’s one already there. I do wonder what we’ll do with your sculpture.”

“Thanks for thinking of me,” she shook her head, “but it doesn’t matter.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because,” she stared at the floor, emotion softening in her voice, “it doesn’t look like... the subject... anymore.”

Peter heard her begin to sob and stepped over to her, crouching before her, taking her hands in his. “Zoë? What’s wrong?”

She tore away a hand and wiped her eyes, “What do you mean, ‘what’s wrong,’ Peter?” Her lower was quivering, “what are you *doing*? What is this, what are those, those *wings*?”

“I—I made them...”

“You,” she growled at him, “you *made* your wings before this. You were the changeling. I fell in love with the changeling. The smart half-Darkling who could invent things and save the day and make me smile. I don’t know those wings.” She sniffed. “I don’t know you.”

“Zoë, I—” Peter bit his lip, his crystal eyes spinning for something to say. Then he thought, closing his eyes. The wings on his back folded in on themselves, retracting, sliding into his soulstuff tunic. “There,” he said, innocently. “Does that make you happy?”

She sat up in horror. “You bastard. You know that’s not it. Peter, Peter, they’re still *there*, don’t you understand?” She indicated her own, ruined right wing. “They say I’ll never fly, Peter. I’ll walk the rest of my life. I had such... dreams... of walking with you.

“*I’m* still here,” he said softly, touching his chest. “Zoë,” he leaned in, whispering, trying to make eye contact with her. “We can walk... all you wish. And ski...”



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“God, your eyes, what have you done...”

Peter thought, felt a film of blackness cover over his crystal eyes, felt white color come around them, all with the same thought, as thousands of souls trapped within him did his bidding. “Zoë,” he bent close, sure he looked the way she wanted, “Zoë, all my life—listen to me. All my life, I wanted wings. I watched you beautiful creatures fly, and I knew I wanted that. This is more than I ever wanted, this is the *reason* I was made. Don’t you see? This is my destiny, Zoë, I can’t turn my back on it now.”

And she was crying, a muffled, “My child will not know his father,” and Zoë was getting up, running from him, as Peter opened a hole in the soulstuff wall, and closed it behind her.

A thousand children’s souls throbbed singing behind Peter’s eyes, and he could swear they asked, *Peter, are you in over your head?*



## CHAPTER 32

“No,” Heinrich shook his head, resting on his palms as he leaned on the table. “The subterfuge known as Wintercamp has gone on long enough.”

Bishop Ruthven leaned back in his high seat, looking at the two tables that stretched out before him in the Frankfurt Court. He had his fingers pressed together, and seemed to be contemplating his ring. The Bishop looked up to the other table, where Julian MacDuff Scotus sat, wearing not his Beghard cassock, but a red cloak with an unexplained badge at the shoulder. Next to him was Sister Mechthild, late of Magdeburg, even later of Wintercamp. “What do you say to this, Brother MacDuff?”

“There is no subterfuge,” the gray man said. “The hostilities to which my brother of a different order alludes were born of internal elf strife. I cannot explain why the Vehm happened to be involved.” MacDuff was treading a thin line, here. It would not do to come down too hard against the Vehm, not when they brought so much protection to the German lands, especially when dealing with “the elf problem” had become their primary purpose in the Holy Roman Empire. So as with Heinrich, new Freischoffe of Westphalia, he would politely look forward, and address the court alone, and be careful about it.

The Bishop frowned. “Yes, why were they involved? Hm, Heinrich? Didn’t you ally with the attacking Band?”

“It was a... a Vehm decision, perhaps ill-advised.” Heinrich said slowly. “Perhaps a mistake. But that does not change the fact that now, Wintercamp is an even greater threat than before.”

MacDuff rolled his eyes, but still kept them on the Bishop. “Only because the Vehm made it so.”

“See here, MacDuff!” Heinrich scowled.

“*You* see here, boy,” MacDuff looked away from the Bishop at the young Freischoffe. “I founded Wintercamp on the authority of Emperor Frederick. He personally wished the elves to have a home, he *personally* visited and hoped learning would come of the experiment.”

“The late emperor’s experiment’s were not as successful as he would have liked,” said the Bishop, almost mirthfully. “Frederick II was known for... ‘creative’ projects. *I* recall that one of them involved discovering the original language of men, which he sought to discover by founding an orphanage where a small city of brats would be left to themselves rather than be taught the vernacular by their interfering nurses.” The Bishop raised an eyebrow. “We buried the lot of them, poor things.”

“Frederick was a good king.” MacDuff said, quietly.

“Frederick’s been dead a year, MacDuff. His rule no longer holds. The irrelevant wishes of dead kings have no bearing on the church’s interests.”



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“What of Conrad, then?” MacDuff replied. “What are the wishes of the new emperor?”

“The new emperor is a child. If in fact he *is* to be emperor.” Heinrich of the Vehm waved a hand. “We’ve spoken to him. He agrees with us.”

“Let me see him,” MacDuff demanded.

The Bishop laughed curtly. “Just who do you think you are?”

“I had the ear of Frederick. I should speak to the boy.” *And what are you going to say?* MacDuff chastised himself. *Here, have a tart, little one. Mind if I keep my elf-camp open?*

“What are you planning?” Mechthild spoke up, obviously tired of listening to them. “What do you propose we do with the monastery?”

“The Vehm has no problem with the retention of the monastery,” Heinrich said.

Mechthild spat, “There’s no *point* to the monastery without Wintercamp. My divine host, don’t you see what you’ll be doing?” She shook her head, exasperated. “There’s nowhere else for them too go! We’re pushing them back at every turn!”

“Man was meant to have dominion,” the Bishop said coolly.

“And there are places of men, and places men were not meant to be, even within his own dominion. They are creatures of God and deserve their place.”

“They are *not* creatures of God, Sister Mechthild,” the Bishop roared. “And I’ll thank you for avoiding your mad theology in my court. You’ve nearly been excommunicated twice before, don’t try for a third time. Or have you been talking to *God*, again, and he *told* you to try me?”

Mechthild bit her lip as MacDuff touched her on the elbow. He cleared his throat, leaning forward. “Bishop, this is a mistake you’re making. You know that. I cannot imagine what will happen to the elves if we take their home away.”

“If you care so much,” said Heinrich, again breaking the face rule and looked at MacDuff with something like derision. “You can find them another home. I hear there’s one somewhere already.”

“Is this true?” the Bishop asked, “is there another place for them?”

MacDuff cursed inwardly. Heinrich had been put off Davert while MacDuff was in the City of Douglas. Peter said he could sense that the City still stood. It had its defenses, but it was flat and easier to surround. And if they *all* had to go there, they’d have the Vehm on their tail the whole way. “It is rumored.”

“It is more than rumored,” Heinrich said. “It’s just hard to find.”

“Then it’s settled,” the Bishop said, rapping his staff. “If there is another place for them to go, then this church need no longer provide its assistance.”

“But your eminence—“

“Wintercamp will be closed,” said Bishop Ruthven flatly. He stood, brushing his robes. “Good day, Brothers. Thank you for consulting me.” The Bishop smiled at the Iron Thane. “Oh, MacDuff, if you’ll be remaining in Frankfurt—it’s been awhile



since we've had one of our debates. A purely hypothetical one, this time, eh?"

MacDuff shrugged. He would not be remaining.



"Heinrich Hauptmann, you sniveling brat," MacDuff whispered as the Bishop made his exit. "You have no idea what you've done."

Heinrich shrugged. "I think I do."

"The question," MacDuff asked, "is how many of your own people do you want them to take down with the elves."

"Are you—" Heinrich looked around, "are you threatening me? Is that a threat of war? On whose authority do you make it?"

"I'm not threatening you," said the Iron Thane. "I'm warning you."

"Heinrich!" came a voice from the door, a woman with blond hair MacDuff had seen arrive with Heinrich the day before. "Please, come quick, it's Mary."

Heinrich stammered his ascent and turned to go in a hurry. He looked back at MacDuff, shaking his head in disgust. "Whose side are you *on*, anyway?"





## CHAPTER 33

“Pleeeeeease!” Mary was screaming, her body writhing and bouncing against the leather straps that held her to the bed, “Pleeeeeease, Heinrich, please, I have to go *back!*”

Heinrich turned to Margaret, exasperated. “The brats want to go back,” she shrugged. Next to Mary’s bed in the Frankfurt monastery, Christa was similarly bound, whimpering, reaching for her sister.

“Mary,” Heinrich knelt by the bed, putting his hand gingerly on her shaking shoulder. His sister was pale and thin, her voice a hoarse rasp. “Mary, please, please stop.”

“Heinrich, they’ll *die*. They need me!” She cursed at him, loudly, and Margaret turned away, shaking her head.

Heinrich shook his head. “Listen to me. Listen to me.” He reached out and held her head in his hands, a palm on each pale cheek. “You are home, now. Home. With me. The nightmare is over.”

“This isn’t *home*,” Mary spat. “You have me prisoner.”

“We’re in Frankfurt,” he said calmly. “Remember?”

“I’m not an idiot, big brother,” she scowled. “Get me out of here.”

“No.”

Mary screamed, then, trying to pry her arms loose, “I’ve got to get back, there isn’t time to train more, God, Heinrich, don’t you understand?”

“You are not a prisoner.” Heinrich shook his head, standing, “You are my sister. And you are *bewitched*. And you’re staying where you belong.” He was shaking uncontrollably, seeing them there, the both of them, pleading with him and hating him and loving him at once.

As Mary screamed on, Heinrich thrust his hands in his pockets and turned to Margaret, who was staring at him hatefully. He touched her on the arm and they sullenly moved towards the door.

“I can’t take this, Heinrich,” she said.

“I know this isn’t what you had in mind.”

She scowled at him, pulling away and storming out. “You’re in over your head.”

Heinrich kept his hands in his pockets, staring at the floor. Nothing was working the way he had hoped. Nothing. He turned around, his sister still writhing and threatening to do damage to herself if she weren’t sent back to the elves, and he shook the sound away from his ears, bent down, and gently kissed her forehead. Then, he did the same for Christa.

The youngest sister was quiet, and he saw her say, “please.” Heinrich shook his head, fished out a wooden amulet, and lay it on her pillow next to her. As they implored him, he left; shutting the door as if he hoped the world would shut with it.



## CHAPTER 34

Peter looked down the mountain, felt the soulstuff tendrils zipping over the snow. No sign of MacDuff yet.

He stuck his head in the crackle hut and found Leed hanging a long, damp sack from the rafters. The Cracklemaster looked at him and practically fell over herself, wiping her hands on her tunic and snapping back her head with respect.

“Please,” Peter waved, “I’m seeing entirely too much of that.”

Leed kept her head back, but relaxed a little. “Of course, Erlkonigsson.”

“Peter.”

“Peter.”

He looked at the sacks of crackle. “How goes the harvest?”

Leed turned around, surveying her domain, appearing all the more at ease.

“The grays brought three root beds,” she said. “That helps.”

“Three beds?”

She smiled. “They managed to plant them from the crackle Tristan carried back after your Wingbreaker episode. The crackle grew fine. When the Grays came in, they brought theirs and replanted them with ours.”

Peter approached one of the long, hanging sacks, droplets of brown water dripping from them. The crackle was harvested and washed, blessed, sliced and hung to dry. He could hear the plant within, hissing, and a slight layer of bubbles covered the sack. “It’s amazing how fast this stuff grows,” he said.

“Cuk-wo. It has to, though. We use it up too fast as it is.”

Peter nodded. Wintercamp had one of the few known crackle crops in Germany, perhaps in the world. The Grays were supposed to have started a new crop, and of course, they had—but now they had re-mingled it with that of Wintercamp. There were inevitable problems with reforming a great Band.

“Leed,” Peter cleared his throat. The leaves continued their hissing, giving off a steady silver aura. Mash this with saliva and cover your wings with it, and you could fly. It was unlike any plant Peter had ever seen. “Who taught the Darklings to crackle?”

“The Erl-King, of course,” she said, “but you know that! We crackle in remembrance of him. We crackle that we may fly. Thank Erl-king. He gave us that after he took our High Wings, that we may still remember him.”

“Yes, thank him.” Peter put a fingertip to his lip, tried not to watch the black pools that formed beneath his fingernails. He was hungry, but he wasn’t certain what for... “Are you... I’m sorry, but I’ve never seen Darklings born and grow, do you start out, crackling?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, mashing this stuff together from the brittle hairs on your neck... is that an instinct?”



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Leed stared at him, and at first Peter thought she was uncomfortable that the Erlkonigsson was admitting how little he still knew about his people. Then she clapped her hands and said, “Oh, *I* see. You’re worried about when to teach your child. How exciting! First year. About the time they start to chew their own food.”

“This do in remembrance of him,” Peter whispered, listening to the crackle.

A voice broke his concentration, and Peter turned, saw the green aura of a Darkling flying down before Zolo tore open the flap over the hut. “Peter, come quick—Zoë.” Zolo looked over at the cracklemaster. “Leed, you might want to come too.”



“*Erlkonig*, it hurts,” Zoë gasped. She was lying in a cot of feathers in the hatch hut, and when Peter burst in, he found two female Darklings scurrying around her. One of them, whom Peter recognized as Mel, looked up at him as she dabbed Zoë’s brow with a cloth. “Erlkonigsson, I can’t see you’ll be much help, here.”

“What’s going on?”

“There it is again!” Zoë gasped. “What in Hell—”

“What?” Peter insisted, running to her side. The other Darkling was running her hands over Zoë’s belly, shaking her head in exasperation. “Isn’t it too early—”

“Way too early,” said Leed, behind him.

“Zoë came in howling in pain because she felt something smash into her bowels,” Mel said. “There’s something wrong with the egg.”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong,” said the other, as she moved her fingers over Zoë’s belly. “Movement, like a snake, or something.” She shook her head, sighing. “What’s wrong, Peter, is that there *is* no egg.”

“*What?*” Zoë looked up, “what are you saying?”

“I’m saying there’s no egg,” the Darkling shook her head. “I feel the hatchling, all right, I feel... legs... kicking. And a torso, arms... no wings.” She bowed her head for a moment. “And worse, the egg’s broken down or something, there’s just this sac flowing around the hatchling. I can feel the limbs sliding underneath it.”

Zoë wiped her eyes, “Oh, Erlkonig, no...”

“Wait,” Peter said.

“I don’t know what to do,” the Darkling medic shook her head. “What’s supposed to happen when she lays? There’s no way we can warm a hatchling with no *egg*.”

Peter sighed, “Wait. Zoë?” He bent over her. “How do you feel. Hm?”

“Peter, I—I feel fine now, it’s stopped, but this is even worse th—”

“No, it’s not,” he said, and he smiled, kissing her. “No it’s not! Don’t you realize what this means?”

Mel was looking at Peter, sizing him up. Then she tilted her head, looking



sideways at him. “Are you suggesting...?”

“Live birth,” Peter said. “It’s a changeling—more than that, it’s a *son* of a changeling. Or a daughter. Whatever. But this, this kicking—Christ, you’d think a few Darklings would work as human midwives every once in a while! This kicking, I’ve seen it. It’s a human thing. It means the baby is alive.”

“It’s a baby?”

“Right. Not a hatchling, exactly—a baby. Not a human baby, but a baby nonetheless.”

Mel stared. “Do you know what this means?”

“Yes,” Peter stammered. “It means changelings and Darklings can have a healthy...”

“No,” Mel scowled. “It means we have no idea what to expect. How many months does a human gestate?”

“Ah—eight, ten months? I don’t know.”

“Darklings lay after six. Then it’s three months incubation. You’re talking about incubation inside.”

“Ten months?” Zoë sat up.

“That’s just it,” Mel sighed. “We have no idea. Congratulations, Peter, you’ve reinvented birth. But I have a patient to worry about.” Peter’s smile dropped away as he realized Mel was accusing him of disregarding Zoë’s health. They had no idea what this strange new child would do to her body, nor how much a Darkling could handle the mangling that might come from the kicking. No idea at all.

“What are you saying?” he heard himself say.

“I’m saying,” she said, her head swaying from side to side, “that it might not be such a good idea to let this go on.”

Peter let that sink in for a moment, then said, “Get out.”

“What?”

“Out! I—I want to talk to my—to Zoë.”

The two medics shrugged, and walked, leaving, Zolo and Leed disappearing with them. Peter knelt by Zoë and shook his head. “How do you feel? Really?”

Zoë sat on the cot, her hands on her knees, staring at her belly. “Scared, Peter.”

“I know,” he nodded, taking her hand. He began to retract his soulstuff wings and she stopped him.

“No—no, don’t. It’s okay. I know you,” she smiled, tears rolling.

“Zoë, you’re the scout. You can find the path. And you’re the sculptress. You can see what isn’t there. That’s a fine combination. You don’t need me for this, but I’m here. Your call.”

“I’m scared, Peter.”

“I know.”

“No wings,” she said.

He nodded.



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“Our child will look like my sculpture,” she said. Then she laughed, beside herself, wiping her eyes. “Even if *you* don’t. I guess we’ll have someone else to walk with, too.”

He nodded, obediently, then awareness dawned, smacking him for her. “This means you’re going through with... it.”

“Yes,” she said. “We’re all going to learn some neat tricks.”

“I hope so,” came the voice of the Iron Thane, as the gray man filled the doorway.

Peter turned and said, “MacDuff! You’re back! You won’t believe what we’ve discovered.”

“And I think you expect what I have to tell you, Erlkonigsson,” MacDuff said gravely. “Zoë. Congratulations. Peter, come with me.”

Through the labyrinthine library the Erlkonigsson and the Iron Thane moved, until they came to MacDuff’s central chamber. There he uncorked a bottle of brandy, and by torchlight poured a pair of goblets full. “We have to move.”

Peter let out a long, slow whistle, then nodded. “You’re right. I expected that.”

“Good,” said the old Thane. “I think we should start by...”

“Wait,” Peter said. His mind made another pass over the details of the move, then settled back. “Wait. Before that, there’s something else we should talk about.”

“Eh?”

“Here I am. Endowed with power I haven’t the slightest clue about. Let’s talk about me. Because I want to know the truth.”



## CHAPTER 35

*I want to know the truth.* The words echoed through the chamber, whispering through the army of books.

Julian MacDuff Scotus turned his head toward Peter, and seemed to be melting into the gray shadows of his books, half his face hidden, the other side lit brilliantly by the filtered light. He slid a hand along the bookshelf near him. “Everyone wants to hear the truth, don’t they? It’s so much easier than finding it out for yourself. Eh?” MacDuff stepped away from the shelf and his massive arm swung down, the red cloak flowing around him. He moved fluidly, without the slightest wasted energy, and Peter stood still as the man’s two hands swung up to rest on Peter’s shoulders, thumbs on his collarbone. For a moment, Peter felt as though the gray man were about to strangle him, but instead he merely let them rest there, a semblance of an embrace. Peter felt the steel gray eyes burrowing into his as MacDuff tilted his head. “But you’ve learned it all, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” Peter said. “For one thing, the Nornagesta is you. You are *the* MacDuff, the Iron Thane. *You* slew the Erl-King.”

MacDuff nodded gravely, and the corner of his mouth turned up in the tiniest of smiles. He sighed and took his hands off Peter, and settled into the chair before his writing table. MacDuff rested his palms on his knees and continued his eye-lock with Peter. “But that’s not all. There is more, I think.”

Peter nodded again, thinking of Nornagestanacht, when MacDuff told the story. He had been talking about himself. “When you slew the Erl-King in his own world, you saw the beginning, saw what he was.”

MacDuff’s lips moved, his eyes closing gently. “He was alone at the beginning.”

“What was he?”

“What was the Erl-King?” MacDuff chuckled slightly. “What are the heavens? What is a God; what is that which makes a God? He was... a *being*. Alone in the cosmos, and powerful, and angry.”

“And he heard the call of the Darklings.”

“And made his own wings,” MacDuff continued. “That’s right.”

“But that’s... that’s not all,” Peter said.

“You are not asking what you want to, Peter, because you know the answer. You know but you want me to tell you, so that at least you’ll feel a victim; this knowledge will have been thrust upon you.” MacDuff smiled again, slightly. “What is it you want to know, Peter? What is it you’re afraid to ask?”

Peter Erlkonigsson flexed his self-made wings once more. “The Darklings are dying off.”

“Yes.”



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“Why? Because you killed the Erl-King?” Peter felt the words come out of his mouth and instantly regretted them, here he was, laying the fall of the Darklings on this man’s feet. But it was true, wasn’t it? That was the source of MacDuff’s guilt, the decapitation of an entire race?

MacDuff waited a moment, his eyes disappearing and then crinkling brightly again. His head swayed sadly. “No. I might have hastened it; it’s possible that Erلكonig would have managed to keep them around longer, but no. I merely made their last centuries all the more... horrible.” MacDuff tilted his head. “They are dying off on their own.”

Peter paced, staring at his white skin, which he felt singing to him, laced as it was with soulstuff. He wondered how long his old body, the last bits of it, would remain. “Douglas. The being who made me... this... the real Erلكonigsson.”

“You are the real Erلكonigsson, as much as there can be one.”

“Why did he sacrifice himself to save me? Why would he do that?”

“I think he was tired. You’ll see.”

“Douglas could have helped them, couldn’t he?”

“Perhaps,” MacDuff said. “But you have Douglas’ power now. So tell me. What ails your new subjects, the Darklings?”

“There are more humans than there used to be.” Peter shrugged.

“That’s true. Ten times as many towns in Germany in the past seventy years. Mechthild thinks that humans are moving into areas meant to be kept to God’s other creatures, by which she means the Darklings.”

Peter chewed his lip. “But you don’t believe that.”

MacDuff sighed. “You’re wasting time, Peter. You’re moving around the edges. You don’t believe that, either.”

“I don’t,” Peter said flatly. “I want to believe Mechthild, everything she says is so beautiful, but I don’t believe her. There are wolves and birds in those places where we’ve built towns, and they haven’t died off. We’ve killed a lot of Darklings in war, but that shouldn’t be enough. That wouldn’t make them lay smaller and smaller clutches; it wouldn’t hasten their death by disease. There’s something else going on. And it’s not the Nekro. That’s just another symptom.”

“You think so?”

“Yes,” Peter said, “and you’ll have to bear with me on this, but I have to go around the edges if I’m going to understand the shape and size of it.”

“All right,” came the deep, vibrating answer.

“After I went to be with the Darklings I kept watching them. I was so jealous of them, because of those wings. I kept thinking how beautiful they were, how like birds, how independent.”

“But it didn’t take long before you started building things for them.”

“Bombs. Sleds. I had to,” Peter said. “After a few weeks of staring in wonder I had to prove my usefulness. They have a fear of making things, it’s





part of their religion to be self-sufficient, completely, making things is to cling to the earth and be like a human, like—”

“Like a worm,” MacDuff said. “We’ve all heard that.”

“But do you know why they need the things I make for them, MacDuff? Because they’re *so much like men*.” Peter stopped and made a clicking sound with his tongue. “And not enough like birds.”

“Go on.”

“I *watched* birds. Darklings have wings like ravens, everything about them that is different from humans is like some kind of giant raven or crow. Everything. The song, the flight style, the communal roosts and couple pairings.”

“And yet,” MacDuff said, “they’re not crows.”

“No, they’re too *big*,” Peter said. “The largest crow is maybe three feet long. The largest birds are big, but not very big, really, not six feet tall. Not man-sized. Do you know what would happen if you had a bird six feet tall?”

“I have a feeling you’re going to tell me.”

“I’m really not sure, but I suspect it wouldn’t fly. I don’t really know how the body works, MacDuff, but I know that there’s nothing man-sized that flies. Nothing. And you know what else I notice?”

“What is that?”

“People who live in the mountains have bigger chests, but they’re not born with them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean humans,” Peter said, “those humans who live in higher areas, where the air is thinner, they’re born looking like the rest of us but soon enough their chest are puffier, they breathe more, they use their lungs more. The human body needs more air just to get around in higher areas. We’re so heavy we need a lot of air to carry ourselves around. Ever felt weak from lack of air?”

“Yes.”

“Now, admittedly, the Darklings have hollow bones- they’re not really hollow, by the way, just thinner and meshier. So they’re a thin, light lot, but they still weigh pretty close to man-weight.”

“And they live in the mountains,” MacDuff said.

“Yes! They do. And they have big chests, so they get around pretty well. But *flying*. That’s different.”

“Why?”

“It’s like when we try to get stronger swinging weights,” Peter said. “Waving those wings against the wind, can you imagine what kind of work it takes to get off the ground, to even stay aloft? You can’t glide all the time, and even gliding takes a lot out of you. So fine, these Darklings have lungs like mountain men. But it’s *not enough*. You want to know how I know that?”

“How?”



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“Because of the crackle.”

MacDuff was not smiling, but his eyes were on fire with exhilaration. “Go on.”

“All my life I wanted to be like them,” Peter said, shaking his head. “I looked at my face, half human and half Darkling. I had no wings, and they could fly. But I had bulbous eyes to remind me of how far they could see when they flew. I had light bones like a bird. I had hair that came off at the tips and turned into a gray mash.”

“Chalks,” MacDuff said.

“Right. Horrible. Horrible, I thought. Do you know what it’s for? The Darklings take the mash and mix it with saliva and crackle and they cover their wings with it.” Peter waited for MacDuff’s polite nod; the Nornagesta knew this. “And the crackle,” Peter continued, “This tenacious, black, mushroom-like plant is hoarded by them. Apparently since you lopped off old father Erlkonig’s head, the most powerful Bands have always been those that control the largest amount of crackle. And the largest amounts of *crackle* are in places that not too long ago were *never* traversed by man.” He shook his head, as if disbelieving, “the Darklings aren’t even farmers, MacDuff. They hardly plant new crackle. They guard the old patches, of which there are only a few. *Just like there are only a few Darklings.*”

MacDuff whispered, nodding, “Yes.”

“They have to crackle. They have to. If they go two days without spreading the stuff on their wings, they can’t fly. Did you know that?”

“I know that they gamble for the stuff at Wintercamp,” MacDuff said.

“Yes. But I’ve looked at their wings; there’s nothing wrong with those wings if they don’t crackle. The elves just aren’t strong enough. They can’t beat their wings as fast if they don’t crackle. And at Wingbreaker, it suddenly occurred to you to tell me to *listen* to the crackle. So I did.”

“And what did it tell you?”

“I thought you meant something poetic, listen to the light, whatever, but you meant it literally. I *did* listen to the crackle, and what it told me is that it was breathing. *Breathing*. That little plant expels more air than... words fail me, what expels a lot of air?”

“The Order of the Holy Vehm.”

“Very well. Some people say that plants expel air, air for breathing, but nothing like *this*. Air hisses out of that plant in a constant, popping stream, forcing little bursts of wind. The Darklings spread it all over their wings because it crackles and sparks, and they want to be like the Erl-King. But the really remarkable thing is the *air*.”

“Good,” MacDuff said. “Very good.”

Peter leaned forward, the words pouring out, “It *breathes*, MacDuff. Right into the body. Like an *extra set of lungs*.”

MacDuff stared. “All right. But what of it? So they found a way to fly.”



“That’s just it. They shouldn’t *have* to find a way to fly. They’re *Darklings*, remember? Can you name another being on this earth that can’t get its own limbs to be useful without covering itself with some sort of concoction? A concoction that’s built into their religion?”

“Ah,” MacDuff said, “but we need food to walk, after all. Crows cover themselves with ants to kill the insects that might give them diseases.”

“Yes,” Peter said. “Yes they do, but we don’t *have* to cook our food. And the crows *ant* out of instinct. The Darklings have to be *taught* to make their wings work. They have great eyes and wings, and thin bones, but MacDuff, they don’t really have any more instinct than we do.”

MacDuff licked his lip, slowly. “So what are you saying, Peter? They’re dying off because they lack instinct?”

“They’re dying off,” Peter scowled, “because they shouldn’t be here in the first place.”

“Here in Germany?”

“Here at all,” Peter waved his hand dismissively. “Have you ever seen a bird with arms? No. A bird has wings. Two arms and two wings is like four arms, have you ever seen anything with four arms? With six limbs?”

“Sleipnir had eight legs,” MacDuff offered.

“The eight-legged horse is a Viking myth.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

Peter waved the statement off. “A singularity if it exists at all. If Sleipnir exists it’s magical, and if there’s anything I know, it’s that despite the magic of Douglas and the Erl-King, the Darklings are not, in any strict sense, magical.”

“No?”

“No,” Peter said. His voice dropped, and he watched the dust falling through the moonlight. “They’re majestic and wonderful, and poetic. They’re utterly unique. But they’re not magical. They have to get by with what is in their bodies and what is around them on the ground, and in the air.”

“They’re natural, then.”

Peter swallowed, thinking of Zoë, lying there in the mud, the chicken poking at her, that broken, non-crackled wing trailing behind her. “No, I don’t think so. I don’t think so. I wish... but wishing doesn’t make it so. They shouldn’t be here and they don’t fit, that’s why they’re dying off...”

“But if they’re not magical, and not natural, then what are they?” MacDuff said, seated like a statue of a prince or god. He did already know. But he wanted Peter to arrive at it. Just as Peter did.

“Soaring through the heavens was the Erl-King, through the stars, alone. He heard their call,” Peter whispered. And it poured out in his mind, the pieces and parts flying and tumbling through the spacious starry reaches of his mind, pieces of humans and pieces of crows, disgust at the wingless creatures but jealousy for their brains, the parts coming together. And in the back of his mind he saw Douglas accomplishing things, in such a way that he almost



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remembered *himself* doing it, *Peter* reaching in, Peter talking to the tiniest portions of life. Because Douglas was trying, desperately trying, to fix what his father the Erl-King, that mysterious god-being, had done. Douglas had inherited from his father a family of souls that even now Peter found himself thirsting to add to, and an army of elves with no place. “In the beginning, Erlkonig was alone,” Peter repeated.

MacDuff’s eyes flickered in the darkness. “He made his own wings.”

“And somehow, he made their wings. Somehow,” Peter said, thinking of Zoë, the beautiful, the brave, the artist, the scout. Outside, the sun was going down, and Peter could hear the chants at Caroline fill the halls of the monastery, and the Darkling sagen spilling through the frozen trees.

“Out of crows and out of humans,” Peter shook his head, letting it drop. “He built them.”



## CHAPTER 36

Freischoffe Heinrich Hauptmann was still new enough to his post that everyone harbored pre-conceived notions about him, and each of the Vehm put those notions to work as soon as Heinrich returned to Freiburg with his mad sisters in tow. They watched the young Lord struggle with his burden, and wondered what to do, when they were so busy planning the war with him, preparing for the next raids that may come.

“I remember him as a boy,” said some, “from before his search. He is quiet and decisive; leave him be.”

Others said, “I do not know him from then. He is young. He needs advice. We should advise him. Or at least we should bring in advisors.”

Still others said, merely, “He knows the Darklings like no other. Watch him and learn.”

He was left alone. The ravings of the lunatic girls fell on deaf ears, surprising to no one who had seen the captives taken from other Bands. It was whispered that perhaps they were unbearably mad, even for their Darkling captors, since the elves had seen fit to return them.

Night and day they screamed, and Heinrich head their shouts even when he was out of earshot, he saw their reddened, tearful eyes in the morning sun, he heard their screams in the scrape of a knife against a sharpener. And he knelt by them, and prayed by them.

It was three weeks after the Order to close Wintercamp that a visitor came to Freiburg, moving in the night like a scythe. No one saw the Erlkonigsson, of late Peter, the Freiburg changeling, perch on Heinrich’s windowsill.

Heinrich looked up from his desk, his eyes dull. “Hello, old friend.”

Peter folded his legs up and his wings in, and sat in the windowsill, more like a cat than a bird, now. He looked in, surveying the office. “This was Mueller’s office, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” Heinrich sighed. “I should call in the guards, you know.”

“I won’t be here long,” Peter said. “So you’re closing Wintercamp. I couldn’t believe you’d do it.”

“I can’t have this conversation with you, Peter,” Heinrich said quietly. “You know I have no choice.”

“Heinrich, please. This is personal for you. They killed your family. But don’t use that as an excuse to exterminate an entire race.” Peter watched Heinrich and went on, “and now you’re thinking, what is the response to that? Nits turn into lice? But you won’t say anything like that. I know.” Peter wagged his finger. “That’s not how you are. You understand them. You were out there.”

“What of it?” Heinrich looked up. “Who gave you this idea that understanding would lead to peace? Understanding might settle *some*



arguments, but I don't see why it should settle all of them. Is it so hard to believe I could see your side and still move against you? You sealed that camp's doom when you gathered the elves into one army. And don't pretend it's not personal for you, too. *Prince.*"

Peter shook his head. "This isn't how we should talk. This may be the last time we speak, my friend."

Heinrich stood, leaning forward, his hands on his desk. "That may be." He looked up. "I miss you, brother."

Peter closed his eyes. Heinrich could see the visions running through Peter's head as clearly as they ran through his own. They were young, and they raced, and skipped rocks.

"When we were children," Heinrich said, "and we split up for the day, I going home, you to the dormitory, what was it we said, each night? We'll meet up—"

Peter looked up, running his large eyes across the air, and said, "Oh—yes. It was, 'I'll see you at the crossroads.'"

"Yes!" Heinrich laughed. "Well. Well. I'll see you at the crossroads."

Peter nodded. "It's all crossroads, Heinrich."

As Peter turned to slip away, Heinrich said, "Peter?"

"Eh?"

"I think you need to take them."

Warmth and love glowed on Peter's white face, putting Heinrich at ease. "I will keep them safe."

"I know."

That following morning, it was common knowledge that Mary and Christa Hauptmann had disappeared. A search was made, but they were nowhere to be found, and even the searchers put to the task were a little unenthusiastic. Their screams no longer haunted Freiburg.

Heinrich Hauptmann remembered the screams, but they ran over in his ears with laughter, gentle and sweet, as he rubbed his thumb across Christa's amulet.

*It's all crossroads.*



## EPILOGUE

*And it is so cold, so very cold up high: even the immortals feel the cold.*

*Peter, I see through your eyes, now...*

*I see you, flying, your bride harnessed to you, and you look at her and wing your way southward, and I can feel her heart beating rapidly against your chest. And you clasp her hand and hold it, and breathe the icy air. I see the shadow that follows you, the souls that wind their way, even as the Band casts its winged shadow miles long, moving like pitch over the ground.*

*Oh, Peter, I was tired, and so are you. I see the frost on your brow and your freezing gray hair, see you look back, spurring on the thousands that follow you, the one Darkling Band, as in the old days, and they are cold, huddled and shivering as they cross the frozen mountains. I see the bleary eyes of the sick you carry, and ache for them, with every feather that falls. I hear the cry of the hatchlings.*

*Peter, I feel your hunger, even if you do not, yet, I feel your confusion, your fear.*

*Pull away, flowing through sleet, I see through your eyes, MacDuff, even now, as you lie in the cords, held aloft by your charges. I love the time behind your eyes, MacDuff, I sing with you the old songs, remember your life, such pain, such peace. I know the joy you feel at new, daily fear. Such hope. Your eyes twinkle like the stars the Erl-King knew, you cannot but feel, cannot but strive.*

*And the sun is falling as you cross the mountains, and the souls are a flowing shadow below you, ready to be reborn. I miss them, Peter, I do, and I am here, aching with them, in the back of your mind, in your blood, in your meshy, flowing, soulstuff bones.*

*Erlkonigsson I am, Erlkonigsson you are, and what a role it is to play, for the sins of the father are visited on every son, and these sins are great, indeed. And with them come possibilities, Peter. Look down at Zoë, see her love, and see her look back whence you fly, still looking for the shrinking statue behind her.*

*It is not the same, now, for me, but the water still runs, and the dark stream is still there, to carry my eyes. I see, in the vessel rising to the lips of the Vehm, I see the plans, I see the grim preparations. You are cold, so cold, Peter, even in this new body, that your teeth chatter, even as you shout for the Band to hurry, whip your wings, sing the songs, push on, push on.*

*I see the brothers, Af and Tap, as flying oxen on one plow.*

*I see the sisters, Mary and Christa, ready to serve you, Peter, and oh, how you will need them. Your own child will need them.*

*Your home lies before you, hidden away, but not for long. You fear too many will freeze before you arrive, but I see through that fear, I see displays and celebration, I see settlement, however brief. I see your relief, I see your hunger*



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*growing, I see your fear for their survival. There are drums beating in your future, drums and hearts, fast and slow.*

*I see it all.*

*And I fade from your eyes again, Peter, and pass through Mechthild, who sees the divine, I see the glowing light of Love, I see the cosmos, flowing back and back. I see the beginning, I see my father, so alone, so angry, so hopeful.*

*My father, my father.*

*Erl-King, Erl-King, what have you wrought?*

*What pain have you brought, what creation...*

*What hope?*

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