

Magdalena Kempna

WASTELAND

translation:

Maria Jaszczurowska

Of all the hiding places, he had to choose the one that was nothing more than a hole in the ground, only slightly larger than necessary to hold two people. Had it not been for the glow of the Ingmarian torch from under the snow, it would have been absolutely impossible to notice. No wonder he left it alight – nobody would want to die in cold and darkness. Especially someone who was once near the same kind of death.

It's not easy to enter a shallow cave under the snow. For the Nortans, such hiding places are the last resort, which they choose only when death of hypothermia is a matter of time. I think hiding in such holes was basically supposed to be a one-way journey – you can dig in, but hardly anyone hopes ever to get out. What will be the case with him? I expected many things when setting out towards the Wasteland, but I never thought I would have to wonder whether to persuade Linnamen to get out of some infernal hole *{31}*, or to drag him out by force *{32}*.

‘Get out,’ I said aloud. ‘I know you didn’t come here to die.’

My only reply is the silence so deep that it almost sounds like a cry.

‘Get out. Even if you don’t feel strong enough to move, get out. I didn’t walk half the world only to say a prayer on your grave.’

Not a word. Not a single movement. Each second is precious. Something will have to be done. Damn! It’s usually him who makes such decisions, not me. And he hardly ever changes his mind, let alone when I try to talk him out of something. What if this time he has really decided to die? How could I persuade him to change his mind?

I think about the letter I have in my pocket. Maybe someone else could persuade him... ***33***. But do I have the time? Would it be safer to try and drag him out of the hole ***32***?

I reach under my cloak and pull a creased envelope from the pocket of my habit. The starry sky and the moonlight reflected in the snow don't provide enough light to read something as minute as the *Songs of the First King* printed in a small font. I don't have to read the letter, though – I know the content by heart. After all, how often does a plain monk from a provincial convent receive news from no one else but the princess of Ingmar? I clear my throat and start reading:

*'Dear Friar **Rafael Gabriel!** I hope this letter finds you in good health; and I also hope Linnamen is fine, if he has already returned from the journey to the Kaer-nar-Nort Wasteland. This is where he set out a week ago, isn't it? I believe he didn't share his plans with anyone, including you. We both know what is drawing him there and why this force is so strong that he would readily abandon everything only to return there, hoping he would be able to redeem the evil that – as he believes – he has been the source of.*

I peer towards the hole. Nothing moves as yet. I feel my voice is arrested in my throat not only because of the cold, but I keep reading **Liln's** letter:

'I hope, Friar Rafael, that as you're reading these words, Linnamen is sitting right next to you and is telling you one of the complicated riddles he has recently solved. Remind him, please, that he still has friends who needs him just as much as he needs them.'

You don't have to be a detective to see that although the envelope bears my name, the letter itself is not for me. The last sentence produces the effect I've been longing for: the snow starts to shiver slightly and then a bit more. The situation is dramatic. Linnamen may try to get out of the hole now, but he dug himself down so deep that he may not be able to succeed on his own. But if I try to help him now, my actions may result in a tragedy, once the snow cave collapses. What shall I do? Wait **{34}**? Or do I try to help him **{35}**?

‘If you can hear me, do something to help me. I’m coming for you,’ I say, adding to myself: ‘If it’s not too late yet...’ But somehow I know it isn’t. And this is the only thing that matters.

As I dig deep in the thick layer of the hardened snow with my bare hands, no sound can be heard from the cave. Nobody is helping me, but nobody’s hindering, either. The glow of the Ingmarian torch is becoming more and more intense. I slow down a bit – this is the toughest part: I need to get inside, so as not to disturb the structure of the cave. The cavity may be shallow, but if you cut off the few narrow tunnels that supply the air, we will both die. The snow is evenly gathered on both sides, forming walls. It was from one of these sides that Linnamen slid into the cave some time ago – if I try to uncover this way, I will probably cut off his air supply. The other side should be safer to dig out. But which is which? Should I dig in the snow on the right **{34}** or on the left **{36}**?

‘Do something to help me. I’m coming for you,’ I say.

As I dig deep in the thick layer of the hardened snow with my bare hands, the movements inside the hole are becoming more desperate. It could mean that either Linnamen is trying to get out, or – as I was afraid – my actions disturbed the structure of the cavity and my friend is now being crushed by the falling mass of snow. Suddenly I see that the glow of the Ingmarian torch is becoming more intense. I slow down – this is the toughest part. The cavity must be shallow – if I cut off the last few tunnels which supply the air, we will both die. The snow is evenly gathered on both sides. One of these sides is the direction from which Linnamen probably slid inside the cave some time ago – if I try to uncover this way, I will probably cut off his air supply. The other side should be safer to dig out. But which is which? Should I dig in the snow on the right **{34}** or on the left **{36}**?

Everything drowns in the darkness, in cold and in silence, which is soon broken by my loud swearing. The more I feel I can't hear anyone breathing, the louder I swear. A minute before, the movement inside the cave died almost completely. I find the Ingmarian torch. A moment later, I touch the edge of the coat. I pull it with all my might, until I notice a motionless hand.

Having quickly dragged Linnamen out, I wipe his face of snow, especially his mouth and nose. After a while so long that it seems like eternity to me, I hear him swallow a gasp of cold air. The first breath must be incredibly painful – doesn't every first breath hurt like this? I sit on the snow and let him find his breath. It's time for me to rest.

We cannot stay here. But Linnamen is still unconscious. So be it, I will have to carry him. For how long? I don't know. I only hope I'm walking in the right direction.

When it's not windy, memories come flowing in – this is an ancient Nortan proverb. Many wanderers have found themselves deep in trouble once they plunge in thought while walking through the Kaer-nar-Nort

Wasteland. In the flask hidden deep in my habit, I still have some strong liquor that will ease my mind *{2}*. But maybe it's not worth reaching for it, after all... *{3}*.

At last I see something I've long been hoping for: Linnamen shakes off the hardened snow, turns towards me and says:

'Rafael. How did you find me here?'

Once a detective, always a detective, right? Even if he hasn't eaten anything other than snow for a few days and has been freezing in a cave in the middle of nowhere – always will he find himself a riddle to solve. Well, if that keeps you alive, keep thinking, man.

I push a bit of dried meat in his hand. For a while he looks at it, as if he didn't know what to do and then – very carefully – he starts to chew it. Once he's done, I give him some more. I don't know how long he's been starving; we can't risk him throwing up now, especially that it's the last ounce of food I have. Linnamen doesn't say a word. He looks emaciated, but his eyes are conscious.

'We can't stay here,' I say. He doesn't reply. Furious obstinacy appears on his face. 'I know where you were heading.'

'I am still going there.'

‘Not today. Not without food and not in the middle of winter,’ I take advantage of the fact that of us two, I am in a better shape. I catch his arm and I drag him along with me, hoping I have chosen the right direction. At some point Linnamen offers resistance:

‘More to the east,’ he says. I wonder. Before, he never asked me where I was taking him. If he managed to guess, then is he trying to help me, or rather pushing us both towards the hated Kaer-Nort? I have no option: either I listen to him and walk the way he showed me **{6}**, or I resist and head in the direction that is, in my opinion, the best **{2}**.

So it was a mistake, I think, before I fall down on the snow, stunned and unconscious (and without really knowing when). Stars whirl above me and take me straight to Loch Scarland.

‘...without any food and not knowing whether he will have a place to hide?’ Ogli doesn’t even try to whisper. At this time, there are only three of us at the inn: himself, Senf and me.

‘When he was six, king Glibannen banished him from the palace,’ Senf recounts Linnamen’s story, which has been told by the local people since the prince appeared in the neighbourhood.

‘He was sent to the Kaer-Nort monastery, where... Well, I don’t know. It’s better not to know.’

‘There is no monastery in Kaer-Nort!’ observes Ogli.

‘Not any more,’ admits Senf lowering his voice. ‘It exploded. Or... was blown up.’

‘By him?’, if Senf did answer this question, it was not with words.

‘He ran away. He made it through the Wasteland and then he took one of the boats left by Inhuman –

vampires or werewolves – at the Lid-ar-Nort Strait and sailed to the Free Island of Kart.

Ogli absorbed this information along with the rest of wine.

‘Why is he here?’ he asks fearfully. ‘King Glibannen loses his temper for reasons more trivial than offering shelter to someone he hates.’

The door squeaked like an ancient gate should. Ogli and Senf lapse into silence.

‘Is Friar Rafael Gabriel here?’ asks the guest. Nobody says a word. Maybe one of the men nods his head towards the place where I am half-lying on the table, and maybe the guest manages to identify me seeing my habit. Next to me, a chair scrapes the floor.

‘Go away, whoever you are,’ I mutter after a long silence.

‘I am Linnamen,’ he replies and I can sense laughter in his voice. This is a strange voice for someone who used to be *persona non grata* in Nort and has hardly any reason for joy.

‘Good for you,’ I’m not sure he can understand my gibberish.

‘Abbot Jaromir asked me to look for the missing friars from the monastery. I’ve heard you could help me. But maybe first I can help you.’

Brief laughter, with which I was going to comment on this, is arrested in my throat, as if someone grabbed me by the neck and said: 'Look, you idiot.' So I raise my head.

He is sitting as if this filthy inn is a natural environment for a Nortan prince and laughing at me, as if we were long-lost friends.

'How exactly do you want to help me?' I ask trying to focus my eyes on him.

'I can help you get out of this inn, to start with,' he replies and grabs me by the arm, as swiftly, as if he were a nurse. After a while, he adds in his young, light voice: 'Get up, friar Rafael. We have a job to do.'

I remember that. He carried me all the way to the convent. Now I have a job to do. But what is it? Somewhere deep inside my dream I believe I know the answer. But then some force drags me away from it, despite my resistance *4*.

‘More to the east!’ Linnamen castigates me again. I didn’t notice when he woke up, but he speaks at the right moment: I have realised that the route I have chosen is not the best.

‘I can go on my own,’ he adds.

‘No way!’ I protest and I step up my efforts. After a few long minutes, he says:

‘We have already walked this path, remember?’

I don’t reply. Maybe I remember, maybe I don’t. Maybe I don’t want to.

‘How many times did you walk here on your own?’ – asks Linnamen. ‘You know, before...’

Before what? – I want to ask. Then I realise Linnamen has a fever. And I have just listened to him and turned east! If I want to change the route, this is the last moment. In two hours I won’t have the strength to carry on and from that point it’s only a few minutes until we die. Stick to the road to the east – this is one possibility ~~{6}~~. Otherwise, I would have to adjust the route and head south ~~{2}~~.

I wake up in **friar Augustine's** cottage. I don't know how long I've been here – it could be a few hours or a few days. I feverishly try to remember how I came here. The monk is sitting by the fireplace. He shakes his thick, grey beard and says:

'You owe him a lot,' I follow his sight and notice Linnamen sleeping soundly on a mattress nearby.

'He still has a fever, but he's hanging on. I don't know how he managed to get you two here,' judging by the tone of his voice, he would like to add something, but stopped at the last moment. It seems that the monk is willing to talk, which I find rather surprising; when I was here the last time and plundered his precious liquor cabinet, he implied that he would never ever want me as his guest again. The locked cabinet informs me that Augustine has made ample provisions and that he hasn't forgotten my recent frolics. When I start to chat with him *5*, I run the risk of hearing something I'd rather not hear. The alternative is to sleep *8*, but dreams sometimes also bring me things I would rather not know.

Against the snow and the starry sky, friar Augustine's cottage is the darkest of shadows. The hermit's hut drowns in the darkness, but the narrow wisp of smoke from the chimney and the sledge propped against the wall show that the monk has not gone on one of his long journeys for the provisions.

I bump my fist against the door. The hermit keeps us waiting. He is probably trying to peek through a slit and see if his guests are humans. At last, his bearded face appears in the doorway, accompanied by a gust of warm air. Augustine doesn't hesitate and lets us in, before he's had a closer look at us. He helps me put Linnamen on the floor near the fireplace. When we take off his cape and hat, Augustine loudly inhales.

'And who are you?' he asks me and his face says: 'I pray to God it's not him!' Well, for once his prayers will not be granted.

'Friar Rafael Gabriel,' he mutters reluctantly. I'm sure that if it was me lying unconscious on the floor, Augustine would have helped me only for fear of eternal damnation. The hermit's suddenly looks towards the corner. One

glance is enough for me to see that the liquor cabinet is open and – to my delight – it’s well supplied. I want to hurl towards the cabinet and empty its contents, regardless of the consequences ~~{8}~~. At the same time, the remnants of decency (or maybe it’s something else) tell me to wait until I’m sure Linnamen is safe ~~{38}~~.

‘Do something,’ friar Augustine takes a bottle of weak wine from my hand and looks over his shoulder to where Linnamen is lying huddled on the floor.

‘Why? He’s sleeping,’ I shrug. Augustine looks at me meaningfully: he knows as well as I do that Linnamen is only pretending. Nobody knows when it started. For the first two days I think he was really asleep – it was difficult to wake him up even at mealtime. Then he started to open his eyes more and more often and he listened to us talking. When we try to involve him, though, he dozes off. He spends most of the time lying on the floor. Minor things prove that he does indeed get up when nobody else is in the hut – washed up dishes, swept floor... When we ask him, he pretends he doesn’t know anything about it.

‘It’s bad,’ says friar Augustine. ‘Worse than before.’

Behind the wall something is ruffling silently, as if from below. Some snow must have fallen on the ground. Friar Augustine jumps up, as if a thunder struck next to him.

‘What should I do?’ I ask.

‘Soon he will be as silent as the Wasteland. Have you ever tried to talk to the Wasteland?’

“What kind of answer is that?” I thought. I reach for the bottle of wine he took from me, but I stop mid-reach. Of course, I could leave it all as is **{39}**. Linnamen has survived many critical situations and he coped with all of them on his own. I find Augustine’s anxiety telling unsettling, though. Maybe I should follow his advice **{40}**.

‘I am going out, because, ekhm, I need to check out the snowpig traps,’ says Augustine, much too loudly. ‘I will be gone for some two hours.’

‘You’ve been going out rather often lately,’ I mumble, but he only shrugs. After a while, the screeching of his shoes on the snow slowly dies away.

I pour some coffee in two mugs and I sit beside Linnamen.

‘Come on, drink it up,’ I say. He doesn’t move.

‘Drink it,’ I repeat. ‘It’s coffee. It will do you good, because I’m going to talk to you until I have figured out what to do to make you do something.’

Silence. Speak to the hand. The bottle on the table reminds me I could find a more pleasant way to spend the two hours until friar Augustine’s return ***39***. The last thing that comes to my mind is appealing to Linnamen’s curiosity ***41***.

‘I’ve been thinking why I was looking for you in the first place,’ I say, daring him to react. For a moment I think he wouldn’t answer.

‘You’ve been sent,’ he replies. Why do I think there is a hidden meaning to this sentence?

‘You’re thinking about Liln,’ I declare instead of asking.

‘Very often,’ he unexpectedly admits, clearly aware that this is not what I meant. The Wasteland has a weird effect on Linnamen – he is becoming more straightforward and direct here; more honest towards himself.

I think about the letter from Liln, which I still keep in my pocket. I don’t know where the discussion about the princess of Ingmar would lead us ***{11}***. Maybe I should talk to him about friar Augustine ***{12}**.*

The next day passes without significant changes: Linnamen still seems uninterested in the world around him. Augustine is restlessly hovering around the cottage and I keep wandering here and there with a bottle in my hand. In the evening we all lie down to sleep. Loud snoring lets us know that Augustine is the first one to fall asleep. Soon Linnamen's composed breath becomes regular and I know he is also sleeping. It seems that only I have trouble sleeping, which is weird, since I've already drunk so much that I should be fast asleep by now.

There is something that keeps me awake, though. It's nothing specific, just some kind of irritation. I feel I must have felt like this before, but I can't recall when and where. I have two options: either I try to drink myself to sleep with more wine *{65}* or I wait until sleep comes to me *{66}*.

Half a bottle of Lid-Urian wine later, I fall asleep. The sleep is rough, though. I dream of the Ingmarian town of Loniln, where Linnamen helped solve **the riddle of Pol Ants** – a Nortan spy who poisoned water reservoirs used by Inhuman from the colony with silver. The details of the investigation are mixed up in my head, I can hear fragments of sentences, I can see bodies on biers in the centre of the town, but most of the image is blurred by the strong glow of the Ingmarian sun. I can almost feel its scorching light, so different from the Nortan coldness. What scares me most are the creepy screams: horrible cries of the vampires and howling of the werewolves dying in pain after being poisoned with silver. I remember that those days, Loniln was never quiet – during the day and at night the Inhuman colony was throbbing with terrible wail and agony caused by an evil so deep that I felt like joining in with the collective cry.

I am woken up by a sensation of being watched. On the border between a dream and reality, I have an impression that this creature has no face. But it's not only the face. It has no soul. When I realise this, I suddenly leap to my feet.

I discover it's already daytime. Friar Augustine finished brewing some tea. From the place where I'm lying, I can watch him pour the steaming liquid in three mugs. He places one of them next to Linnamen's mattress, but he never moves. Then the hermit hands the second mug to me and puts the last one on the table. Hangover splits my head; I feel as if a thousand cathedral bells were ringing inside. I wonder what could help me more: Augustine's healthy tea drunk with small sips *{71}* or a handful of cold snow from the porch *{72}*.

The snow is so frozen that it feels as if thousands of sharp needles pierced my gums. Instead of the headache, I can now feel pain in my throat and jaws. Anyway, I manage to quench my thirst. As I sit in front of the cottage and look at the monotonous landscape in front of me, I experience a strange feeling – I sense that something has changed here, as if I saw something that shouldn't be here. But what is it?

As soon as I answer my own question, I can hear a loud thump inside the cottage. I run inside, nearly breaking the door, only to find Linnamen helping Augustine lie down on the side, in a position in which the hermit would not choke on his own vomit.

'What is...?' I ask, but Linnamen gestures towards me and shows this is no time for explanations.

'I need water. Lots of water,' he says. I instinctively start towards the cauldron, in which Augustine keeps drinking water, but Linnamen stops me.

'It's poisoned. Just like the tea,' he nods towards the bucket in the corner and the snow outside the cottage.

As I fill the bucket with snow, I keep wondering about what might have happened. Poisoned water? Who

could have poisoned it? Of course, it would be someone who crept inside the cottage at night. I remembered my dream. Poisoned water. Pol Ants. Maybe, if I hadn't been so drunk, Augustine wouldn't be lying on the floor in a puddle of his vomit now.

'Will he be all right?' I mouth to Linnamen, who patiently waits for the next bout of bloody torsions to end.

'I don't know,' he replies, also silently. As I look at the old hermit, writhing and screaming in pain, I wonder how Linnamen can have any hope.

'There are some traces. Outside, on the snow,' I explain chaotically. 'I suppose that's where the poisoner escaped. Shall I stay here with you or follow the trace?'

'You decide,' said Linnamen, wiping Augustine's sweaty forehead with a wet cloth.

I want to add that if I follow the poisoner **76**, I might repent for being drunk last night, because this is why I failed to notice that there was a stranger in the hut. But maybe if I stayed **77**, I would be of more use to my friends.

I am no tracker, but in the Wasteland it's enough to have a good sight to be able to follow anyone's trace. The poisoner's footprints are perfectly visible on the plain covered with snow. It's been a long time since anyone set their foot here. It is obvious that this person is not travelling on their own. Some time passes before I manage to isolate what I need from the mixture of various traces, but I finally manage to determine that the whole group includes four individuals – an adult man and three unearthings. I could guess that the poisoner's companions are not humans, as their footprints show they were walking barefoot – no human would ever be able to walk barefoot through the Wasteland for more than a couple of minutes. The footprints are also relatively small, so they can't be werewolves or vampires, either.

I walk briskly, but I have no idea how far ahead the poisoner could be. After three hours I realise that it may be of no importance whatsoever, because my journey was pointless: the fugitive's footprints joined the footprints of a larger group of individuals. I look at the traces, not really knowing what to make of them. I follow in

the direction where the group must have come from and after a while I realise that there were no random wanderers – the footprints are too regular and were left by the same type of shoes.

Nortan soldiers.

Somewhere in the Wasteland King Glibannen's troops are walking. Once I realise this, I want to return immediately **{83}**, to warn Linnamen. His brother is not officially hunting for him, but Linnamen is still *persona non grata* in this country. We don't know how the confrontation with the troops might end, but it would definitely not be good for my friend. Of course, I could follow the troops and the poisoner to see what they are up to **{84}**, but it is a risky idea.

‘How is he?’ I ask, looking at Augustine, who is now sitting near the fireplace, weak and pale.

‘He’ll be all right,’ replied Linnamen. The hermit is strangely quiet. ‘We’d better check you out now.’

When Linnamen looks at my face and fingers, trying to find traces of frostbite, I tell him what I saw in the Wasteland. He listens to me attentively and then says:

‘You need to rest.’

‘And then?’

‘And then we will think of how to get out of here. All of us. If there are troops nearby, they will sooner or later find us here.’

‘Are you sure friar Augustine...’

‘I’m fine,’ mumbles the hermit, nearly grumbling. He slowly stands up. I would give anything to know how he managed to overcome the effects of the poison so fast, but I don’t think he would like to tell me. Judging by his behaviour, while I was away chasing the poisoner, I might have missed something important. I’m afraid I will never know what it was ***{179}***.

Linnamen pushes some food towards me and something to drink. Finally Augustine feels well enough to provide some explanations:

‘The man who did it to me is called **Mid Guns**. At least that’s the name he gave me. He came here before the two of you. He had three unearthings with him. They escaped from the colony in Barnes...’

Linnamen raises his eyes.

‘Glibannen sets up colonies in the Wasteland,’ it’s not really a question, although maybe it should be. The idea that someone could bring people to live in this freezing hell seems insane.

‘The colony where Guns came from was established on the ruins of the former werewolf settlement. The settlers found underground tunnels dug by unearthings. They got an order to exploit them, but...’

‘People can’t survive in tunnels like these,’ guessed Linnamen. ‘That’s why they needed unearthings. Where did they find them?’

Judging by Augustine’s face, we wouldn’t like the answer.

‘They bred them from those among themselves who were nearing death.’

Heavy silence fell amongst us.

‘They were children,’ said Linnamen quietly.

‘You saw them?’

‘I heard them,’ he rubbed his forehead. ‘There were voices from underground.’

‘Children,’ admitted Augustine. ‘A small kid will fit in a crevice where an adult can’t go... Guns said he took these children and escaped with them from Barnes, because he couldn’t stand what was going on. That’s how they made it here. When you came, he begged me to hide him. First he was afraid of the king’s men, and when it turned out you were Glibannen’s brother... He wouldn’t believe when I said that you would never denounce him.’

‘Rubbish,’ I say. ‘In this country everybody knows that Glibannen has banished Linnamen.’

‘Guns was very convincing.’

‘And he was so afraid he decided to poison us?’

‘I can’t imagine what else might have induced him to act the way he did.’

‘Part of this story must be false,’ says Linnamen after a long while.

‘Yes, but which part?’ I ask.

‘I’m afraid we will never know,’ he replies and I think we might actually have found out, had I acted more reasonably. ‘We know nothing of Guns’s intentions or capabilities.’

‘I will wait in the Wasteland,’ announced Augustine after a long silence. ‘Provided you leave immediately afterwards.’

‘Happily. I can’t wait to reach some safe place,’ I reply.

‘Where to?’ asks Linnamen.

‘Not to Kaer-Nort. This man will probably go there.’

Linnamen nods.

‘Ingmar? Lid-ur?’

Funny he should mention this. On the one hand, the country looks like paradise on earth. We could definitely both relax in Lill’s cosy palace... On the other hand, this is the place where Linnamen spent some time in his youth and he might have some old friends there...

‘Could I think about it for a while?’ I ask. Linnamen laughs quietly.

‘It will be three days before we reach the Free Island of Kart,’ he replies. ‘Take your time.’

THE END

☞ *back to the beginning*

In the Wasteland everybody is visible, even at night, that's why I hope I saw the troops before they saw me. I have the advantage, because I knew I would meet them, while they have probably not expected me. I lie down on the snow and I quickly try to determine how far I can go from here.

The soldiers unexpectedly made my task easier: they stopped in a circle and lit up a lot of Ingmarian torches. They could do it for one purpose only: to confer without freezing to death. Ingmarian torches provide lots of heat, if their glow is directed towards the centre of a circle. They also make whatever is outside the circle less visible. This is how I manage to crawl close enough to catch fragments of their conversations.

'...the hermit and his hut?' somebody asks. His accent suggests that it's one of the soldiers.

'I took care of him. For the time being,' replies someone else. This must be the poisoner. 'The problem is either solved forever, or... the people who are in the cottage at the moment will be busy enough not to consider a quick escape.'

‘And you’re absolutely positive prince Linnamen is one of these people?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘We should be on our way, then.’

‘Did His Highness order you, captain, to pursue prince Linnamen?’ the poisoner’s voice becomes unpleasantly sharp. The reply is too quiet for me to hear. ‘That’s what I thought. Right now our priority is to solve the Barnes case and to provide transport for my cargo.’

Could he mean the unearthlings?

‘So you will return to the settlement with me and destroy the mine. Then, you will escort me to Kaer-Nort. And then you can go back to the hermit.’

‘What about the settlers from Barnes?’ the question is asked after a moment of meaningful silence. The response is quicker, though:

‘Kill them.’

‘Roger that.’

That was enough. I walk away in silence, and when I’m out of their range, I leap forward and run. I’m not thinking about the colony that I didn’t even know about, or the people who are going to die there. I only want to warn Linnamen and Augustine *85*.

‘We have to run!’ I shout as soon as I step through the door. Only then do I look from Linnamen to Augustine, who is sitting near the fireplace, pale as death.

‘How is he?’ I ask.

‘He’s fine,’ replies Linnamen on behalf of the strangely silent hermit. ‘We’d better see how you feel.’

As Linnamen examines my fingers and face, looking for traces of frostbite, I quickly repeat to him what I have learnt. When I mention Barnes, Linnamen raises his eyes.

‘Glibannen sets up colonies in the Wasteland,’ it’s not really a question, although maybe it should be. The idea that someone could bring people to live in this freezing hell seems insane.

‘Yes,’ murmurs Augustine from his place. Judging by his behaviour, I must have missed something important. I don’t have the time to think about it, though. ‘I don’t know what is true anymore... That man... Mid Guns... he said that Barnes was built on the former werewolf settlement. The settlers found underground tunnels dug by unearthlings. They got an order to exploit them, but people can’t survive

in tunnels like these. They needed unearthings, so...’ Augustine clears his throat, as if the next part of the sentence stuck in his throat. ‘They bred unearthings from those among themselves who were nearing death.’

‘They were children,’ says Linnamen quietly after a moment of heavy silence.

‘You saw them?’

‘I heard them,’ he rubs his forehead. ‘There were voices from underground.’

‘Children,’ admits Augustine. ‘A small kid will fit in a crevice where an adult can’t go... Guns said he took these children and escaped with them from Barnes, because he couldn’t stand what was going on. That’s how they made it here. When you came, he begged me to hide him. First he was afraid of the king’s men, and when it turned out you were Glibannen’s brother... He wouldn’t believe when I said that you would never denounce him.’

‘Rubbish,’ I say. ‘I saw him with the soldiers. They listened to him, as if he were the highest-ranking officer!’

‘It doesn’t matter who Guns really is,’ says Linnamen. ‘Somewhere in Barnes there are people who don’t realise their death warrant has been signed.’

I’d rather he didn’t continue. But he does:

‘I’ll go there.’

‘That’s insane,’ I protest. Augustine opens his mouth to support me, but Linnamen won’t listen to us:

‘Everybody deserves a chance,’ he say. Uh-oh. They exchange glances and I know that while I was absent, something... momentous happened here.

‘I know more or less where this settlement could be,’ mumbles the hermit. ‘I saw... the lights.’

Linnamen looks at me:

‘I can’t go there on my own. I need help. Friar Augustine cannot assist me. He’s too weak. If you refuse, I will run to the Wasteland with you *(117)*. But I’d rather you went to Barnes with me *(118)*.’

Drinking tea doesn't help. I'd even say it's worse with every single sip. The bells pealing in my head are now resembling a cannonade, and the gurgling in my stomach becomes unbearable, as if the alcohol I drank last night literally boiled in the heat.

I try to get up, hoping I will be able to make it outside on time, but my legs are made of lead. I collapse to the floor and vomit on my own bedding. Augustine, who was just starting to sip his tea, grumbles with disgust. Right now I couldn't care less about his reaction. I feel as if I were going to throw up my intestines. In between the torsions I raise my head and I meet Linnamen's anxious stare. When I follow his sight, I look at the floor in front of me – remnants of slightly digested food drown in a puddle of blood.

My dream. Pol Ants. Poisoned water.

Linnamen runs to me and knocks the mug out of Augustine's hand. I feel that he puts me down on the side, so that I won't choke on my own vomit. He quickly exchanges some remarks with Augustine. Their voices become more and more distant, as I feel another

painful spasm in my guts. The next portion of vomit flushes from my stomach like a bloody stream. The pain is excruciating. And then it gets even worse. And worse.

And then there is nothing. No time, no place. Even I'm no longer there. There is only the silent, painless void pulsating with the question: do you want to stay ***73***? Or do you want to get out ***74***?

‘Do you think we will manage to get out?’ I ask Linnamen. The library in the Loch Scarland monastery may not be the largest in the world, but in the middle of the night it seems to be hiding lots of awful secrets.

‘Do you think I would like to?’ laughs Linnamen. The glow of the Ingmarian torch falls on one of the desks. Seeing my face, Linnamen adds soothingly:

‘The librarian, friar Celest, starts work at four in the morning. If we don’t manage to get out, he will let us out in three hours. We have ample time.’

‘For what?’

‘For examining a few clues related to the **smuggling of white coriander**,’ smiles Linnamen.

‘What could we possibly find here? An ancient recipe for drugs?’

‘Maybe something much more important. First, I would like to show you something, though,’ he places a large volume on the desk. It’s the illustrated copy of the *Songs of the First King* from more than a thousand years ago. ‘The name of Rafael appears a few times, always with reference to the angel who sides with people more

than others. He is the angel of compassion and support, but also of suffering. There are some fragments that indicate that he's often in trouble for his attitude. Rafael frequently wanders around the world, often in historical moments – before or after great wars, during genocide or Inhumancide, disasters... It's not clear whether he's trying to prevent them or mitigate the results, but he is certainly on a mission.'

Linnamen turns a few pages. We are now looking at an impressive image of an angel with spread wings whose golden feathers shine in the glow of the Ingmarian torch.

'Is that him?'

'No, that's Gabriel. The *Songs of the First King* portrays him as a messenger and counsellor. He's an intermediary, someone who can facilitate the communication between the two worlds – ours and... the other side.'

'Do you really believe I could ever be one of them?'

'One of them? Maybe both?'

'Do I look like an angel? Look at me,' Linnamen stares at me, but he doesn't look like he's about to say 'No'. He says something else.

'You look at him,' he taps the book with his finger.
'Have you seen his eyes?'

I look at Gabriel's green eye. And then I see his other eye, the blue one. Now I know why Linnamen showed me this image: I also have eyes of different colours. For a moment I feel dizzy. A thought or a distant memory vibrates on the edge of my mind.

I would like to remember, but I'm not sure if I can ~~(75)~~.

All the times and spaces are present where there is not time or space.

‘I believe you’re here for a reason. An important reason,’ says the bishop Tuli in Portes-des- Noires.

‘Have you fallen down? Have you flown? Or maybe you’ve been pushed?’ asks an old priest in Dromme, who looks more like a wizard than a clergyman.

Ur-li. A ten-year-old boy sets out on a journey to Raga. If he manages to complete his plan, his beloved uncle may survive. I glance at them, busy with my own affairs, but a moment later I look more carefully. The other one also returns and looks back at me. We want to know more. We stand in the boy’s way.

This is the reason.

The reason why I’m in Portes-des-Noires.

The reason why I go to Loch Scarland.

The reason why the painless void keeps pushing me away.

Nothing is solved as yet *(75)*.

Linnamen is silent, but I can hear his prayer anyway. He doesn't notice, when I open my eyes. I can see him standing in the Nortan position for prayer, with his face covered.

'Save the prayer for the dead, for later,' I mumble. 'And now help me sit up.'

We can hear Augustine screaming in a distance. Linnamen takes a step back. A minute or so passes, before he starts to take my pulse, as if he didn't believe his own eyes.

'He's dehydrated,' he tells Augustine, once the latter has stopped screaming.

For the next hour they make me drink, they keep me warm and take turns examining me. Once I manage to push them away, I demand explanations. My friend looks at me for a while and then slowly, carefully says:

'What happened here should have killed you. And it did, at least from what we both saw. You had no pulse, your heart stopped beating, first symptoms of rigor mortis set in. And now you're sitting here with us, alive.'

I burst out laughing, but even to me it sounds insincere.

'Do you remember anything of what happened to you?' enquires friar Augustine.

I have an impression I used to remember a while ago. The more I think about it, though... Discouraged, I shake my head.

'Will you please tell me what actually happened here?' I ask *179*.

‘Will you please tell me what actually happened there?’

‘I don’t know,’ admits Linnamen and places the cup of blue tea on the saucer.

‘Is it a punishment for not going back to the Wasteland with you back then?’

‘Of course not,’ he thinks for a while and says: ‘I gave someone my word.’

‘Who was it? Who could you meet in this ice-bound desert?’ when he doesn’t reply, I keep on asking: ‘Did you find out what happened to Augustine?’

‘Yes.’

‘You are killing me. I do wish I had gone with you back then.’

Linnamen looks at me closely and after a while says in a serious voice:

‘I think you shouldn’t.’

And then he adds:

‘Since the last war with Inhumen, Nortans have tried to manage the Wasteland somehow. My grandmother, Akalinta the Cruel, tried to set up military bases there; my father, king Aribannen, hoped

he would find precious raw materials there, and my brother, **Glibannen**... let's just say that he treated the Wasteland as an experimental field for his peculiar interests. Each of these actions ended tragically. What is left is the City of Tall Ruins and thousands of dead bodies: Inhumen and people, soldiers, explorers, monks and victims of terror. I think the Wasteland should be left to its own devices. At least for the time being. What has happened there – what may still be going on there – should remain there.'

I pretend to consider his words and then I sneer:

'So this will be your policy?'

'Regarding the Wasteland – yes.'

'You're going to be the first ruler of Nort who does nothing with Kaer-nar-Nort. Ingenious accomplishment.'

Linnamen doesn't respond. He only smiles sadly. I can't torment him anymore. It's been nearly two years since our journey to the Wasteland. In the meantime, my friend lost his whole family and unexpectedly became king. I guess other business is of greater importance to him now than my curiosity. I change the subject:

‘Have you already discovered **what killed king Glibannen?**’

‘Doctor Søren is looking into this as we speak. Maybe you would like to join me and visit him?’

‘Of course. Even I would like to participate in solving such a riddle.’

THE END

 *back to the beginning*

As I am frantically wondering how to behave in this conversation, Linnamen suddenly says:

‘You know I am not in any suicide mission,’ he says. ‘Liln must also know that. It’s not that I don’t appreciate your care. You risked a lot by looking for me here.’

‘If you have nothing, you risk nothing,’ I reply wisely.

‘You can always risk your life.’

‘Look who’s talking? Listen, friar Augustine’s provisions are running short and...’

‘I know. We can’t stay here. If we set out tomorrow, we would be in Kaer-Nort by...’

‘Are you insane? Haven’t you been listening?’

‘Of course I have. You believe there’s no point carrying on. Rationally speaking, you’re right. I understand you. It’s just that I disagree.’

Oh, no. It seems he’s so determined he will go there with or without me. If I insist on holding him back, he will either escape or we will keep on discussing it for the next few days and who knows what the outcome will be. Maybe – for his own good – I

should agree with him. If I did, we would set out to Kaer-Nort right now ***7***. Maybe I should try to draw his attention to the strange thing I noticed about friar Augustine's behaviour ***12***?

Three months after I found him in the Wasteland, Linnamen and I are sitting in the garden of **congressman Ian Links** in Kamielnu. My friend is shamelessly browsing through the correspondence of the Ingmarian statesmen (maybe it will help us solve a big smuggling scandal), and I'm trying to drink myself to death as quickly as possible. When Linnamen finishes going through the letters, he ponders for a while and then notices a pile of mail I received in the morning.

'Any news from Nort?' he asks.

'This?' I close my blue eye, to look at the world less soberly. 'Complaints of old priests. The abbot calls me a devil and the bishops threatens to excommunicate me.'

'Nothing new.'

'Indeed.'

'Do you have any newspapers there?'

'Are you interested in Glibannen's propaganda?' I hand him the latest issue of the 'Royal Information Bulletin,' which he browses with interest. Only after a long while do I realise his silence is somehow different.

‘Have you read this?’ he asks.

He shows me a short article by Alister Graham squeezed in the corner of the last page:

On this day, the community of the Albertan Order said farewell to friar Augustine in Portes-des-Blanc; he was a hermit from Kaer-nar-Nort. Having lived on the hostile frontier for twenty five years, friar Augustine died three months ago due to hypothermia. His body was found by a fishmonger, who – worried after having no news from the hermit for some time – decided to look in his cottage. ‘He looked as if he had just fallen asleep in the snow,’ said the man. The hermit’s body was taken to the Portes-des-Blanc monastery and his belongings were disposed of in accordance with the law.

‘Fallen asleep in the snow... ? No way! His belongings were disposed of... This means the cottage was burnt to the ground after having been looted by Glibannen’s police.’

‘What did we miss?’ asks Linnamen. ‘When we were leaving him?’

‘Do you want to go back?’ I ask, not knowing what else I could say.

‘Yes. How about you?’

I think there’s no point. Everything is burnt down and covered with snow. Augustine was dying in

silence and in darkness. I don't want to go back there, Linnamen can go on his own, if he wants to *10*. But maybe I should accompany him *95*.

‘Think about friar Augustine.’

Linnamen looks at me expectantly, maybe even with distrust.

‘He’s not himself,’ I choose my words carefully, so as not to betray what I’m thinking. ‘His hands are shaking, the slightest ruffle makes him tremble...’ something resembling curiosity appears in Linnamen’s dark eyes. I make hay while the sun shines. ‘Besides... I think he’s drinking more than usual. Since we arrived, the content of his liquor cabinet has considerably diminished. I helped, of course, but you know... I may not remember what day it is, but I always know how many bottles of wine are left on the table.’

Linnamen looks at me with genuine fury. He probably wishes he had never let me get to know him, so that I could take advantage of his weaknesses (or maybe strengths?). Got you – I think and smile to myself. ‘You can’t leave a friend in need. This is not like you. I wonder if I should add anything that would eradicate all his doubts **(42)**, or maybe just leave him alone with his thoughts **(13)**.’

‘Nobody at his age should be left alone, especially if they have a problem they don’t want – or are ashamed – to discuss,’ I add.

Linnamen looks at me sharply.

‘You don’t know much about him do you?’ he asks. I realise I was off the track. I don’t know how, but my argument worked against my own intentions.

‘What else is there to know?’ I reply irritated, because I already know where it’s going.

‘More than you think, Rafael,’ says Linnamen with a mysterious half-smile. ‘Whatever worries friar Augustine, I think he will best cope by himself. He doesn’t need us to disturb him.’

‘Don’t you even want to...?’

‘No. If friar Augustine wanted to talk to me, he would have done it long ago.’

Speak to the hand. He offered me no choice *(7)*.

Over the next few hours Linnamen is still mainly sitting or lying down in the cottage, without saying much. Judging by his sight, though, I know he started watching friar Augustine very closely. Once I caught him as he was fumbling in the corner of the hut. When he saw me watching him, he nodded towards the door, as if he asked me to stand sentinel. When I did, he lay down again on the floor, this time on his stomach. He seemed to be listening to something.

Now all three of us are sitting at the table, and Linnamen suddenly says:

‘Unearthlings will be better off in the basement. But you could invite the man who is with them to join us here. He’s starting to cough; I’m afraid he’s caught a cold.’

Friar Augustine goes pale and then red in the face. Linnamen keeps staring at him and I have no idea what it’s all about. Unearthlings? A man? And in the basement, for God’s sake?! You don’t build a basement in a place like this, where only a madman would decide to live – the ground is frozen and hard; in order to dig

in it, you need to drill through a few metres of ice first! As if he were reading my thoughts, Linnamen explains:

‘This cottage is older than we think. Look at the stones it’s made of. It was constructed by Inhuman. Unearthlings dug the basement. One exit is outside, possibly near the latrine, where you’ve been going rather often of lately, friar Augustine. The other one must be somewhere in the cottage – I believe it will be under the thick rug, in the corner.

Augustine is silent. For a long while they exchange glances with Linnamen. At last the hermit gets up and goes to the corner. He pulls away the edge of the thick rug, moves his fingers along the floorboards and finally opens the hidden trap door.

‘Wait a minute,’ he says. ‘He’s afraid, because you’re the king’s brother.’

Then he disappears under the floor. He makes us wait for quite a while. I feel like I should ask Linnamen for some explanations ***14***; I know there might be no time for this later. On the other hand, I am so curious that I want to run to the basement myself ***16***.

‘How did you guess?’ I ask.

‘Mysterious ruffles, which made friar Augustine so nervous. When you mentioned them, I started paying more attention to them. They were always from under the floor.’

‘But how did you know these were unearthlings?’

‘I knew it can’t be a large group of people, because the provisions would have diminished much faster. A vampire would make no sound whatsoever, a werewolf would never sit underground without a single growl. And unearthlings... They are the only creatures that can’t help touching the earth, scratching it and digging their hands in it...’

‘Stop it, I have shivers down my spine. How did you know there was a man with them? Did you hear him cough?’

‘Yes, but it was very quiet. But before that, you noticed the disappearing alcohol. It was not friar Augustine – his breath would have betrayed him.’

‘Not to me,’ I admit grimly. “I am used to my own smell. Do you have any idea why he is hiding them?’

Linnamen shakes his head.

‘There is something strange about these unearthings...,’ he starts, but breaks off. Sounds of a heated argument can be heard from under the floor. We exchange glances. Should we run and save Augustine **{16}**? Or maybe it’s better to wait and see what happens next **{15}**? Linnamen looks at me as if he depended on me for the decision.

‘You made it. You got your way,’ I tell Linnamen, as he looks towards the ruins of the Kaer-Nort monastery. Wind shakes the tall grass, which – as it usually happens during the brief Nortan summers – grew within a few days, only to disappear under the snow in a couple of weeks.

‘It was a long way,’ he replies. I know he isn’t only talking about the route. Many times did Linnamen try to return to the place where he had spent two most horrible years of his life, but only now did he succeed. It took Glibannen’s death as well as the demise of his whole family; what is more, only after Linnamen became king, did the ruins of the Kaer-Nort monastery become accessible to him.

As if he were thinking the same, Linnamen turns to me and says:

‘Do you remember the journey when you found me in a cave in the Kaer-nar-Nort Wasteland? This is where I left some unfinished business.’

‘I remember. Barnes... What happened to it?’

‘There is no mention of the colony in the archives. Nor is there any proof that Glibannen ordered anyone to settle in the Wasteland.’

‘Do you think... it was a lie?’

Linnamen slowly shakes his head.

‘I know it was true. Glibannen did establish colonies in the Wasteland. I was in one of them when he was dying.’

I look at him in silence for a long while. So far, he never wanted to talk to me about it. He never said how he managed to avoid death as the only one from his family. I think he didn’t talk about it to anyone, maybe except Liln.

‘He established them... too close to the **City of Tall Ruins**,’ he added pensively. After a while, I realise he is not going to say anything more about it.

‘So Barnes...?’

‘So far, my people have discovered traces of a few human settlements in the Wasteland. All of them are deserted. In some places they found Inhuman spectres. In other places, all the settlers were exterminated in haste.’

I need a while to absorb this.

‘Glibannen established settlements and then, following his order – or at least with his tacit consent – Guns... Ends... or what’s his name... actually murdered the settlers. Why?’

‘Maybe they didn’t live up to Glibannen’s expectations. And maybe they came across things that

even Glibannen found terrifying...? To answer your next question: there are no official records of this man called Ends or Guns.'

'Does it mean that... this monster could still be out there?'

'He could,' replies Linnamen. And quickly adds with concern: 'If he's clever enough, he will stay away from me.'

'What if he does come closer?'

Linnamen looks me in the eyes. There is no regret in his stare. I know he's not going to reproach me for not making it to Barnes back then. I also know that Linnamen doesn't easily let go of his own mistakes and doesn't easily forget them.

'If he comes closer, we will have to think what to do about him, considering both what he did and what we didn't.'

We are both silent for a while, as we watch doctor Søren approach us along the path nearly overgrown with grass.

'I hope this day will never come,' I say. Linnamen nods.

'Me too.'

'And we are here to...?'

‘To address another unfinished business,’ replies Linnamen and waves his hand at **Søren**. Then he starts down the hill and towards the ruins of the Kaer-Nort monastery.

THE END

 *back to the beginning*

I am the first one to walk to the trap door. We are already walking down the steep, narrow steps. Our eyes take a while to get used to the shadow. The basement is deeper and more spacious than I expected. It is much larger than friar Augustine's cottage. Only unearthings could have built something like this. I've been here so many times and never did it occur to me that Augustine might have some secret! Now it was clear he did: I can now see lots of barrels around me. And weapons – silver swords, arrows with silver spearheads, guns with silver bullets – everything people used to fight Inhumen. I whistle quietly and only then do I realise that the men quarrelling at the feet of the steps have fallen silent. I look at Linnamen, follow his eyes and I freeze.

He was right. Friar Augustine has been hiding unearthings in his basement. Three of them. And one man – the one who's now looking at us with unmistakable hostility. Linnamen keeps looking ahead – three frightened unearthings are standing near the wall, clawing at it with their long, sharp fingers. When I realise what I am looking

at, a cry escapes my throat. And just as my whistle made everybody silent, my scream has now resumed their argument.

‘Give me some food for the journey and you will never see us again,’ demands the man. His breath is hasty and uneven.

‘You won’t make it!’ replies Augustine.

‘We’re not safe here, either! Under the very nose of Glibannen’s brother?’

‘Prince Linnamen is not...’

‘Forget it! I know what prince Linnamen is and what he is not. It doesn’t...’

‘Can we leave them here?’ Linnamen interrupts them, addressing Augustine. He speaks firmly – it seems to be quite ordinary, but his voice changes so that everybody immediately starts listening to him.

Augustine clearly understands what Linnamen was asking about.

‘Yes, they are used to it.’

‘We will now go upstairs,’ this time Linnamen also drawn the attention of the sick loudmouth. ‘And we will talk. Nobody needs to be afraid today,’ the last words are intended for the three creatures under the wall. They seem to understand. One of them draws

back its fingers dug deep in the earth. Augustine is the first one to leave the basement, then the stranger follows and Linnamen. I intend to follow them ~~{17}~~. Before, I look at the unearthings under the wall and I wonder whether it would be worth having a word with them ~~{45}~~.

‘My name is Mid Guns,’ says the man and drinks a sip of cognac. ‘For the last five years I have been working in the Barnes colony as a... teacher,’ he says the last word with a bitter smile and I immediately reach for my glass. Linnamen has put his aside.

‘Glibannen establishes human colonies in the Kaernar-Nort Wasteland,’ the prince’s statement – because it is definitely not a question – makes Guns confused.

‘He definitely established Barnes,’ the man replies after a while.

‘It’s not an ordinary settlement, is it?’

‘It’s hell.’

‘How long have you known about it?’ Linnamen suddenly turns to friar Augustine.

‘Once or twice I saw some lights in the distance. I thought these might be penal colonies.’

‘Ah, would that were so!’ says Guns grimly. ‘Barnes was established on the spot of the former werewolf settlement. We found underground tunnels there. Once we reported this, we were ordered to explore them. And when we informed the authorities that people can’t go that deep, that’s when HE came.’

Mid now looks towards the trap door.

‘How did he breed them?’ asks Linnamen. ‘Unearthlings are not born; they can be created in two ways: either from a fresh corpse, or from people who are still alive.’

I can feel a wave of nausea reaching my throat. I think back to what we saw in the basement: three small unearthlings, three young children – two boys and a girl. Young bodies decomposing while still alive. Sharp fingers searching to touch the earth. Mid Guns coughs or sobs, I can’t say which.

‘You selected the children yourselves? Did you draw lots?’ Linnamen asks mercilessly.

‘How dare you judge us?!’ screams Guns in response. Linnamen’s stare is adamant, yet Guns composes himself. ‘This man... Ends... he could summon troops, who would have torn the colony to pieces, if we hadn’t... There were no dead children,’ he adds flatly. ‘We chose the weakest ones, the most sick. They would have died within a month anyway.’

Linnamen doesn’t say anything. He has seen too much to offer hasty accusations.

‘Ends sent them to the caves. I couldn’t look at it. And I couldn’t watch what was happening to the people

in Barnes. I stole some food. We ran away. Then we met friar Augustine.'

After a long silence, Linnamen pushes his full glass towards me. I catch his eyes: 'Do something, if you can.' Can I? Of course. But do I want to? Rather than following Linnamen's silent request, should I wait and learn more **{18}**? Even if Linnamen has heard enough, I haven't. On the other hand, maybe it's better to trust him **{19}**?

‘The only option for you is the Free Island of Kart,’ says Linnamen. ‘You must have known this when you were leaving Barnes.’

‘I thought we would get there sooner. By now, Ends must have guessed that we’re heading there and informed the king. Somebody will be waiting for us.’

‘Why did you linger?’

‘They... the children... They keep trying to dig themselves in the earth. The journey is tiresome for them and...’

‘They are hungry,’ adds Augustine. ‘They need meat. The more rotten, the better. But where do I get rotten meat up here? We give them snowpigs, but it’s not enough.’

‘How did Ends feed them?’ asks Linnamen. Judging by his voice, I’m not going to like the answer. I am right. After a long silence, Guns says flatly:

‘Not all the children survived the transformation. What was left of them...’

‘Have you ever seen the Lid-ar-Nort Strait?’ asks Linnamen, without showing how much the teacher’s words have shaken him.

‘No, but I’ve heard...’

‘Believe me, whatever you’ve heard, is nowhere near the reality. No sentinel and no guard can be placed there. The harbour cannot be watched, either. Ends may have a whole army, but he will sooner lose all the soldiers than approach the shore.

Guns raises his eyes and looks at Linnamen, as if he were beginning to understand.

‘Even if it’s true... the soldiers can be watching the roads, can’t they?’

‘What roads? We’re in the middle of the Wasteland, it’s flat as the table. You can reach Lid-ar-Nort along a thousand of paths and all the time we will see Ends’s troops before they can notice us.

‘Us?’ I reply suddenly. Clearly, nobody has expected me to talk. Linnamen smiles at me and confirms my horrible suspicion. Then he addresses Guns:

‘I will guide you.’

‘Why would I go with Glibannen’s brother?’

I will probably punch him on the face for speaking like this, but Linnamen doesn’t give up.

‘Because you want to save your wards.’

I don’t like this plan. Linnamen knows that. He looks at me for a long while and pensively pushes the

glass away from me, although I didn't even have a chance to touch it.

'Maybe you'd rather stay here, with friar Augustine?' if that's what he's asking, he probably has a point. Maybe he will need me here. But if I stay, wouldn't I be exposing him to a greater risk? I hate such decisions. Should I stay *{21}*? Or should I go *{22}*?

I greedily down the glass offered by Linnamen, I cough dramatically, I spit some alcohol on the table and then I dance like a drunk: my body trembles with convulsions, my eyes roll, I stick out my tongue and send drops of spittle around, only to collapse under the table with a loud roar. Guns doesn't move, maybe he's too scared, but Augustine jumps in his seat.

'We must lay him down on the floor and take off some of his clothing,' says Linnamen seriously. 'He will be fine, but we must give him lots of water. Guns, could you please help us? Thank you. Yes, let's put him this way, so that he won't hurt his head. Now please hold him while friar Augustine will give him the water. I will bring some ice.'

Linnamen runs out of the hut and I have just two thoughts: the first one is that when he wants to, he can be a convincing actor; the other one is that I won't forgive him for undressing me in this cold.

I kick, I spit and bite, I listen to swear words and I swear myself once in a while. Guns has really strong arms, Augustine is not gentle, either, as he tries to wedge

my jaws open. I pretend to throw up. They jump back, but after a while they resume their efforts. It hurts like hell, but I keep laughing inside. I must be damn good at it, as none of them noticed that Linnamen has been absent much longer than he should. We are in the Wasteland: if you need ice, reach out of the window. When Linnamen finally comes back and presses something cold against my forehead, I pretend it helps. I kick a few times more and then I calmly drink some water and pretend to go to sleep. Augustine and Linnamen cover me with a few blankets.

‘We should all get some sleep,’ says Linnamen. ‘Guns, do your wards have everything they need?’

‘I let them dig in the earth for the night. But not too deep, so that they don’t get lost.’

‘Suggest it to them and then come back. In the morning we will see what to do next.’

In the morning? –I think. It’s never morning here. The night is endless. For a moment it seems I’m never going to sleep, but then I let myself enjoy the warm blankets *{18}*.

When I wake up in Augustine's cottage, I don't remember much. I know we are all safe, but I have an impression I missed something. There is something I should remember... Or maybe it's something else: maybe I did or didn't do something important...

Augustine and Linnamen are sitting at the table and talking – both of them try to overcome their own suffering. The hermit groans like a wounded bear from time to time, and my friend... well, he's calm, maybe even too much. He clearly doesn't want me to notice that what has happened in the Wasteland has cast a shadow on his mind.

'Out of curiosity, how long have you suspected it?' asks Augustine.

'I was wondering who could live alone for so many years in a place like this... When I was here the last time, I discovered that you always go out to search for provisions at full moon... This man... Guns... Or, in fact, Ends, if that was his real name...'

'I don't think he guessed. Even if he did, he never had the chance to tell anyone. If the soldiers come, I

will tell them I know nothing. I will offer them some silver weapons from my collection, in case there are more Inhumen in the Wasteland.

Linnamen smiles sadly.

‘What really happened in Barnes?’ asks Augustine.

‘I don’t know. Have you seen these children? They had torn, ragged clothes from their previous lives. The girl was wearing a woollen dress – one of those manufactures in Loch Scarland, and one of the boys had trousers similar to those worn in Portes-des-Oranges... These are not local children. They were brought here and... transformed.’

‘I believed him. If you hadn’t come afterwards, I would have died on that day.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I interrupt unexpectedly for both of them. ‘What was Guns getting at... Or was it Ends?’ as soon as I ask this, I know I will never be able to solve this riddle. Or maybe I could, if... If... I don’t even know that!

‘I don’t know,’ replies Linnamen. ‘But I can guess that Ends had to escape. Maybe his experiments took him a bit too far. Maybe these children were all he had left. He didn’t want to leave Nort. That’s for sure.’

‘You suspected this, and yet you went to the Wasteland with him?’

‘I knew he would try to kill me, if that’s what you want to know. I was hoping, though, that once I’m aware of it, I will avoid the danger and lead the children safely to the Free Island of Kart’.

None of us felt like continuing the conversation. Linnamen looks at me meaningfully, as if he were asking me if I manage to carry on. I only smile in reply.

One hour later we are outside, saying goodbye to Augustine and his cottage.

‘Where to?’ I ask. Linnamen doesn’t answer immediately. He turns around and waves to the old hermit for the last time.

‘What torments you more?’ I want to guess. ‘The young unearthings, the fact that you’re leaving business behind, or the fact that you can’t go to Kaer-Nort now, because the king’s men may ask about Guns?’

Linnamen muses for a while.

‘Let’s sail to the Free Island of Kart,’ he finally says. ‘But...’

‘I know, Rafael,’ he cuts me off. ‘Some things that happen in the Winderness should stay in the Wasteland.’

I want to ask what it means, but one look at Linnamen is enough for me to realise that further discussion would

be pointless. I adjust the bag with food, which friar Augustine gave me as we said goodbye, and I say:

‘All right then. Let’s go. I’m keen to get out of this cursed place.’

THE END

 *back to the beginning*

‘Nice plan,’ mumbles Augustine.

He is referring to the lack of food – the problem that Linnamen managed to solve in a truly devilish manner. How to make anything rot before it freezes in the icebound Wasteland? In Augustine’s hut, Linnamen took the amount of meat needed to feed three children for three days and he tied bits of the meat to the bodies of the young unearthings. Guns believed the children would try to rip the meat off, but Linnamen replied that initially they may be upset, but then they will either resign or understand. He was right.

‘They will have a ready snack by tomorrow,’ I could have sworn that as he was saying this, he smiled at the girl. I can see Augustine is nauseous, but he doesn’t say a word. He starts packing food for those members of the expedition who prefer their meals without rot and worms.

‘I will see you off,’ he announces unexpectedly once we are all standing in the doorway, ready to go. Linnamen thanks him with a smile, but shakes his head:

‘It’s better if you stay here. You never know what other exiles will need support.’

Uh-oh. I know this voice. Linnamen is trying to suggest something. I hope the monk noticed it – anyway, this is something I can do nothing about ***29***.

We walk the way Nortans do in difficult weather conditions: we walk in a single file, without stopping. Every hour we change the person in front of the column. How long can it take? Linnamen believes it will be something like two days. He doesn't seem worried whether the young unearthings can take this much. One hour later I already know why: the transformed creatures may seem fragile, but – like all undead beings – they are in fact immensely enduring. First Linnamen walks in front of the column, Guns follows behind him, then the three children and myself at the end. After one hour, Linnamen walks to the back and Guns takes his place. I move behind the teacher. The unearthings walk in the midst. After the next two hours, when I am back at the end of the column, I can see that Guns is trying to talk to Linnamen. Cold wind blows back their words:

‘You are one of us,’ says Guns. ‘You have also been betrayed by the king.’

‘One king was my father,’ replies Linnamen after a while. ‘The other one is my brother. None of them betrayed me.’

‘I think you have grounds to claim your rights.’

‘Just like the inhabitants of Barnes?’

‘If we succeed in our plan, Ends will soon see to it that me and those three are the last left of Barnes... Did the king at least tell you why he had banished you from the palace?’

I can't hear Linnamen's response, but I think it's just as evasive as the previous ones. Linnamen doesn't like to discuss his family business.

‘What if he gets at you once again? What if he sends you to something much worse than the **Kaer-Nort monastery**? What if there are no more relatives in Lid-ur can no longer take you...?’

‘I didn't realise the story of my life is so well known in a place like Barnes.’

‘The story of your life is known everywhere, but it's never discussed. Haven't you ever feel tempted to become the leader of the resistance? Many people in the country know that Glibannen is a criminal. If his opponents found someone from the royal family to support them...’

I want to whistle quietly. Who are you, Guns? A rebel? What do you want Linnamen to do? Maybe I

could learn more, if I joined the conversation ~~*(60)*~~. I'm not sure it's worth it, though; Linnamen is doing well on his own ~~*(61)*~~.

‘What is it, Guns?’ I say aloud. ‘Don’t you know that having such conversations even here, in the Kaer-nar-Nort Wasteland, is incredibly risky? Or maybe you don’t care?’

Guns looks at me in contempt, shrugs and falls silent. I might have made a mistake. My reaction has startled him. The teacher moves to the back of the column. Only after one hour do I hear him talking to Linnamen again ~~{61}~~.

‘You could even... become king.’ ‘When I was leaving the capital city, my brother told me the palace is not the right place for me. Although he meant something different, I am sure he was in fact right.’

Linnamen moves back and I walk behind Guns. The teacher doesn’t try to make me anti-royalist, though. He starts coughing again – at the beginning he only clears his throat, but then he coughs aloud. Half an hour later, he is coughing so hard that he falls on the snow with his face down. I stop. Behind, I can hear Linnamen say something to the unearthlings; when I approach Guns, I can hear my friend’s quick steps.

‘We need to go, even if you cough up your lungs,’ I address Guns. ‘If we stop, we’ll freeze to death.’

Guns doesn’t reply. He is still writhing in the snow. I grab his arm and turn him to face me. One look at the teacher’s laughing, yet furious face says it all; but now it’s too late – a silver dagger glints in his hand. It’s pointed at my heart. Guns strikes a blow – precise and well-aimed. And fast.

Linnamen is faster, though. He springs at Guns, who is still waving his dagger to the sides – he even

loses his balance. I don't know where his blows hit – I collapse on the snow. When I come to, I see the three unearthings in the distance – they run away, following their own footsteps, led by the girl. Linnamen must have told them to do it. Behind my back, I can still hear the sounds of a fight. I jump to my feet, as Guns is trying to push Linnamen in the snow. I fling myself at the man, but he's very strong and agile; he wriggles away from me, and after a while – I don't even know how – he's the attacker, not me. I freeze, as the pointed dagger touches my neck. If he strikes now, I'm dead. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Linnamen slowly stand up.

'It's not like this,' says Guns, still holding me fast. 'I don't want to kill the prince. Not without the king's order. If I delivered his brother... a fugitive from Kaer-Nort... Imagine the king's gratitude! This is my proposal: the prince for the monk's life. Please be quick. The wound is not deadly, but it may prove so, if you don't dress it properly.'

Only now do I notice that Linnamen is pressing his side. Between his fingers I can see a stream of blood. It's all around us on the snow.

'One question, Guns,' he says. 'Or should I say... Ends? What happened in Barnes? Why did you have to

discontinue your experiments and run away with those three kids? They were the only ones who survived, am I right? What is chasing you?

Ends? So that was it? I don't know what would be better: trying to wriggle from Guns's arms **{62}**, or waiting for the situation to unfold **{63}**. I don't want to know why, but my head is full of memories from Erind, a small town in the Eastern Kingdom, where Linnamen solved the mystery behind a **sheriff's death**. I have a strange feeling that something from that story – some element, or the way my friend tackled the case – could now offer me a solution to my doubts.

‘I will answer with a question,’ laughs Ends. ‘Have you already found out who the boy was...?’ The one you met as a child in the Kaer-Nort basement? I can see you haven’t. Well... Maybe in Portes-des-Blanc they would tell you...’

Ends doesn’t finish his sentence. I’m not interested in what he was going to say, or whether Linnamen would like to hear it. I give the bastard one of my drunk kicks. If you are used to functioning in imbalance, you can learn a few useful tricks. Ends lands in the snow and I jump at him, but out of the corner of my eye I see Linnamen collapse to the ground as well. Not heeding anything, I run to my friend. Ends also leaps up, but he suddenly stops.

‘Something tells me we will meet again,’ he mumbles and runs away. A moment later I know why – I can see friar Augustine dashing towards us. He is pulling a sledge and young unearthlings are trotting behind. Augustine will definitely take good care of Linnamen. Should I take advantage of the opportunity and chase Ends **{64}**, or should I stay with my friend **{30}**?

I run after Ends, without paying attention to anything else. Only after a while do I realise I am not alone. Three young unearthings accompany me in my pursuit. They move faster than anyone could expect. They are the first one to reach Ends. When the girl catches him by both calves, the other two push him to the ground. I stop mid-step. I want to do something, but I don't know what. The word 'no' freezes on my mouth, as I see the unearthings rip the clothes on the so-called teacher and look for uncovered parts of his body, to dig their sharp teeth and claws in it. Ends fights furiously, but unearthings are enduring and resistant to pain.

'Enough!' I scream as soon as I've regained my voice.

The girl, who initiated the attack, now raises her head and looks at me grimly. The other two step aside. When I approach Ends, I know he has not much time left. He would probably die of cadaveric poison anyway, but this will not be the immediate cause of his death. His aorta is ripped; light red blood is gushing to the snow.

'I wonder...' wheezes Guns, looking at me. '**Nils Klein** won't be so easy to kill...'

I've no idea who it is. And I don't think I want to know. A moment later Ends's body stops trembling in convulsions, the ripped aorta spurts the last gush of blood and this is the end. I raise my eyes and look at the bloodstained unearthlings. Out of the three, only the girl looks back at me. There is something extraordinary in her eyes, something... very human. And very sad. When the girl looks around a moment later, it seems that for a while I see her for what she could have been before the transformation. In a short moment of insight, she may also have realised who she used to be and who she has become, because suddenly she lets out a scream full of such suffering that – and I'm sure this is the case – it will echo through the Wasteland for many days to come.

Then the girl makes a slight gesture with her hand. On seeing this, the other two immediately lie down on the snow and start digging a tunnel. So that's it. They will go on for a long time; first they will dig into the snow, and then in the earth, until...

The girl follows her companions. Before she starts digging her own tunnel, she raises her eyes for the last time and I nod a sad goodbye to her.

'I understand you,' I say. And I really do *(177)*.

For the next two days Linnamen sleeps in Augustine's hut. Frankly speaking, so do I. When I open my eyes from time to time, I can see the hermit hustling and bustling around the cottage; he is clearly preparing for something; the three unearthings are kindly helping him. Now that he's busy, they keep running to the snowpig traps and tidy the cottage. Weird, silent servants they are, if stinking.

'Friar Augustine also has to flee,' Linnamen says unexpectedly one day. 'Ends might come back. And when he does, he won't let him live.'

'How long have you known? That Guns is in fact Ends?'

'I didn't like the discord between his story and his indifference to the children. And then, on the way, he talked so much about me... He knew too much...'

I remain silent, watching the hermit prepare the meal. He must be planning a real feast.

'I would normally advise you to rest one more week,' says Augustine, inviting us to the table. 'The wound is healing well, but...'

‘We don’t have a week, do we?’ asks Linnamen, putting a large portion of food on his plate.

‘I saw footprints,’ replies Augustine. ‘I followed Guns... Ends... until his footprints joined those of the troops. They say...’ the hermit lowers his voice and nods towards the unearthings, who are eating rotten meat on the snow. ‘They say Ends is a sort of a special emissary. Each soldier has to listen to him.’

‘It’s good they started talking,’ Linnamen also looks at the unearthings. ‘They retained their intelligence. It could have been much worse.’

‘The girl is the smartest of them...’ Augustine strokes his long beard, considering something. ‘We need to get them out of here,’ he finally says. ‘One of them could find a place in the Wasteland... but a group of three is easy to notice. Ends will get them.’

‘In Ingmar there are centres where they could find peace,’ replies Linnamen. ‘We would have to get them to the Free Island of Kart, and then...’

‘You won’t make it, son. You don’t have enough time,’ Augustine looks at him, worried.

‘I don’t, but you do. Since you have to flee anyway... why not to the Free Island of Kart? You will be safe there... in any sense.’

What IS it supposed to mean, I wonder. Does Linnamen know something I can't even begin to guess? Judging by Augustine's face, I think this must be the case.

'I will write to princess Liln. She will take care of the unearthlings. And you will do whatever you want...'

'What about us?' I interrupt. 'Do I have to remind you that two days ago Ends was going to take you to Glibannen, like a good dog fetching a stick?'

Linnamen looks at me for a long while and says:

'We can't go to Ingmar now. If friar Augustine goes to the Free Island of Kart, we need to choose another direction, to put the troops on the false trail.'

'I will take the unearthlings to the Free Island,' says Augustine. 'And I'll see to it that they get on a ship to Ingmar. Afterwards... This is none of your business. Just tell everybody that I died silently, in my sleep.'

Linnamen nods.

'There is a case waiting in Lid-ur. In a letter I got from him, Henrik Onsen is asking me to help him determine who or what is behind the **extermination of the Erindian dwarves** from the local colonies. If you want to, you can join me.'

What is there to think about? Lid-ur is a good destination. Better than Kaer-Nort, in any case, where Linnamen was trying to get some time ago. Linnamen has friends he can count on there, which means somebody will make sure he doesn't starve to death and I have constant access to the exquisite Lid-urian wine.

'Still... you will be leaving an unfinished business here,' I tell Linnamen.

My friend pensively looks out of the window, to the Wasteland that stretches to the horizon.

'It's not the first business I'm leaving behind,' he replies. 'And not the last one, either, I'm afraid.'

THE END

 *back to the beginning*

LONILN POISONER DEAD?

translation:

Agnieszka Rychlińska

His name was Pol Ants. In Nort he was officially known as an officer commanding king Glibannen's Life Guard; unofficially he was called a hatchet man. In Ingmar his name was the Loniln Poisoner. Nortan rumour has it that last week he died in mysterious circumstances in Portes-des-Oranges.

Inhumen who survived silver poisoning are still in hospital. Some of them went into a coma which may last for centuries. Some of them suffered brain damage, and nobody knows if they ever recover the original faculties. 'You can still hear their scream in the Grid connecting minds of all Inhumen,' says commissioner Kaliore from the police station in Yegorle.



The biggest attempted slaughter of Inhumen in the history of Ingmar took place in Loniln, where you can find one of the biggest colony of vampires, werewolves and exhumers. When the first cases of fatal silver poisoning were reported, nobody could assess the gravity of the situation. 'Inhumen's metabolism is different than human', explains doctor Fidelus Fil. 'Often the poison needs whole weeks to give any symptoms, especially if it was given in small but regular doses.' An increasing number of deaths made the local authorities react. A massive scale of the poisoning turned investigators' attention to water. 'It's essential

for Inhumen as well as for people,' says doctor Fil. 'And in Loniln, though it isn't in short supply, it is harder to get than in the seaside part of Ingmar.'

Testing water samples from reservoirs used by Inhumen from Loniln revealed shockingly high concentration of silver particles. 'Forget about the coincidence,' comments commissioner Kaliore. 'That amount of metal just couldn't get there from soil or any other natural source. We knew at once it was a poisoning.' Discovering the perpetrator was a real challenge. It could be a local or one of many visitors or tourists. The poisoner could be still staying in Loniln or be miles away. 'It was prince Linnamen from Nort who put us on the track of Pol Ants with his intuition,' says Ms Kaliore. 'He told us about an over twenty years old case from his homeland. Nortans were besieging a very strong fortress of Inhumen near Portes-des-Blanche. They couldn't conquer it, so they contaminated water sources with silver. And then all they had to do was wait...'

The Nortan track led the investigators to housing estates and

hotels where small groups of migrants from the country usually stayed. It occurred that Pol Ants, a participant of the siege of Portes-Blanche, was in Loniln. 'He didn't even try to hide,' says Ms Kaliore. 'What's more, he left the city only a day before our arrival. Seems that he wanted to watch closely the effects of his actions. And maybe he was going to report it to someone in details...' The policewoman doesn't explain if she means king Glibannen, who is suspected to be a direct initiator of the crime.

The chase, taken up immediately, ran through the biggest cities of Ingmar, but it had to stop in Kamielnu. Detectives couldn't cross the border with Nort. 'He gave us the slip,' says Ms Kaliore. 'He escaped to Portes-Oranges.' Four days later the news of the mysterious death of Pol Ants, the head of the royal Life Guard, got to Ingmar. Officially, it was a heart attack. 'Do you believe that?' I ask commissioner Kaliore. 'I have no reason not to believe,' she responses. 'Is this true that after the chase you came back to Yegorle with a four-day delay? What have you been

doing during that time?’ I dwell on the topic although I know that commissioner Kaliore, as a pureblood vampire, is not used to explaining herself. ‘I had a few

days off,’ she answers calmly. ‘I surely deserve it once a century, don’t I?’

Anika Ahai, *Ur-li News*

DEATH DEALERS DETAINED

translation:

Agnieszka Rychlińska

The Nortan press informs about spectacular success in fighting white coriander dealers.

‘A gang producing and dealing drugs was smashed by a squad led by investigator Karn,’ states the official announcement by the national security service. However, inhabitants of Nort remain silent about the origin of white coriander. No wonder, trails of smuggling and dealing drugs in Nort, the East Kingdom, and Ingmar show the Church of Nort in a very bad light.

A risky police action resulted in arresting brother Alberic, a former bursar of the Loch Scarland monastery. Aloise Karn, the chief of security service from the Loch Scarland barony, confirmed it officially on the 65th



day of summer in the 12th year of king Glibannen’s reign. At least ten more people are suspected of complicity in criminal activity. Mr Karn denies the rumours that ‘a Lid-urish amateur detective allegedly related to the royal family’ participated in solving the case. The statement astounds the investigators from the East Kingdom and Ingmar who took part in revealing the scandal. ‘The national security service of Nort didn’t contribute to solving the case,’ says police investigator Elion Splinks from El-Kalind irritably. ‘The white death dealers were captured due to efforts of Ingmarian investigators, free

sheriffs from the East Kingdom, and prince Linnamen.'

The Ingmarian Statistical Office informs that over 200 tons of drugs are smuggled through Nort every year. 'The real trouble is white coriander produced in Lid-ur and smuggled to the East Kingdom,' explains Fen Garon, a free sheriff. 'That's why the investigation have brought no result for a long time. We didn't suspect that Nortans are the source of drugs.'

The mystery of Froggut, a river dragon, turned out to be an unexpected twist. Prince Linnamen has worked at solving it in Loch Scarland, at request of abbot Jaromir. 'It was about something completely different,' says Mrs Garon. 'But the prince happened to find a key clue about producing drugs in the very monastery.' Retracing the way of smuggling white coriander was not easy. Smugglers seemed to act chaotically. 'After some time, we discovered it had been a cunning camouflage. Monks from Loch Scarland used the activity of bursars for their dealings.'

The presence of Nortan bursars in the East Kingdom or

Ingmar is nothing unusual. They don't have a fixed route, but usually, sooner or later, they reach bigger cities. That's how it was in that case. Drugs were produced in Loch Scarland and then transported to the East Kingdom. The bursars took them from El-Kalind to Ingmar, where white coriander was delivered through Kazzil and Ozzil to the capital. 'Smashing the gang required coordinated actions in the East Kingdom and Ingmar,' explains Mrs Garon. 'We had to find evidence that drugs appeared in each of the cities exactly during their visits. And that the bursars were delivering them. The organization of the Nortan mission in the East Kingdom and Ingmar helped to resolve doubts: 'Selling drugs and giving out bread to the poor took place on the same days. It was really easy to hide the recipient among the hungry and the homeless, and to put the bag of drugs into the food package.' The way of distribution of goods from the Nortan mission was under careful observation for several months. Finally, it turned out that a part of food packages went round the city

for some time only to cover the tracks. Ultimately, the packages got into drug dealers hands.

Did the Church of Nort know about it? Representatives of Episcopal curiae strongly deny, but investigators have their own opinion about the case. Mr Elion Splinks says: 'We suspect that there must have been someone who knew among the patriarchs.

Profits from selling this amount of drugs must have gone somewhere. As we haven't found them yet, we assume they had fed the church fund. Nortans have reportedly a new cathedral built in Loch Scarland,' adds the investigator. 'I wonder who covered the cost and how they did it.'

Anika Ahai, *Lid-ur News*

INHUMENSLAYER CAPTURED IN KAER-NORT

translation:

Agnieszka Rychlińska

The capture of Colin Antersu is another spectacular success of Henrik Onsen's detective agency. 'I only regret it was such a hard-fought success,' says the head of the agency.

He was a teacher, one of many Nortans working in Lid-ur. He had many friends amongst both teachers and students at the all-boys secondary school in the capital city. 'We've never had an equally energetic and charismatic Nortan teacher before,' said Efron Opinks, the headmaster, the other day. On the present day, during endless questioning, Mr Opinks is trying to explain not noticing that Colin Antersu was an Inhumenslayer.

The police in Lid-ur called a spade a spade from the very beginning. It wasn't a single



murder. 'Extermination was the word used by an investigator I know when he approached me with this problem,' says Henrik Onsen. 'One by one settlements of Erindish midgets were being destroyed like...some nest of vermin.' If you consider the method used by Antersu and his subordinates, the association

seems cruel but at the same time accurate.

The colony of Erindish midg-ets situated in the outskirts of Ur-li is a peculiar example of dispersed development. Small settlements are scattered around the large area. 'Particular groups contact each other very rarely,' explains Mr Onsen. 'The sense of strong clan independence is the foundation of midg-ets' culture. What worked for them in their natural habitat, that is on the border of Nort and the East Kingdom, here turned out to be lethal. Or at least it made the Inhumenslayers' plan a lot easier to realise.

When black carts arrived in the first settlement, its inhabitants were helpless. Today we are able to reconstruct those horrible events using investigators' findings. Prince Linnamen form Nort, who cooperates with Onsen's agency in solving the case, shows me the pictures and documents that have not been included in evidence but are useful to understand what happened. One can find there things like photographs of hansom cabs adapted to transport many short

people at once. 'Carts approached the settlement loaded with hit-men and religious fanatics from Nort,' says Linnamen. 'Fifty big men had no problem with conquering a settlement inhabited mostly by women and children... We've found hardly any signs of battle. Inhabitants were dragged from their houses and transported to places of execution.' Because of the lack of communication between settlements, Antersu managed to eliminate as many as five settlements before the other midg-ets started working together and asked the authorities for help. 'Every village was given ten soldiers protection. That's not enough,' says Linnamen. 'Soon three more villages were conquered.'

'But the forth defended itself,' I remind. 'You and Fen Garon, the free sheriff from the East Kingdom, organised defence of Kintera.' Linnamen nods but without satisfaction. 'Erindish midg-ets living in Norrand prefecture, where Mrs Garon comes from, have to face various aggressors much more often than Lid-urish emigrants,' he answers. 'We used their experience to ambush a

few killers and scare off the rest.' Luckily for the investigators, it turned out that Colin Antersu's people weren't loyal. 'Those who came from Nort believing that God himself called them to kill Inhumen, including Erindish midgets, proudly admitted their guilt,' states Mr Onsen. 'And those who were mercenaries betrayed their companions to reduce their penalty.' The information allowed to discover places where the bodies were hidden and to find Colin Antersu. But he was faster and managed to escape.

'Linnamen suspected that the runaway went to Nort,' says Henrik Onsen. 'But if you want to know how he tracked him down, you'll have to ask him.' But prince Linnamen has surprisingly little

to say about it. He only mentions he did it with a little help from his friends. He doesn't make it explicit, but I suspect that he remains silent to protect his friends who exposed themselves to Glibannen's anger by taking part in an investigation so openly aimed against Nortan anti-Inhumen propaganda.

A colony of Erindish midgets in Lid-ur, though considerably reduced, still exists. Inhabitants of the individual settlements decided to allow telegraphic links between villages. This will definitely improve communication. But will it help them to face those who consider human and Inhumen rights rubbish?

Anika Ahai, *Ur-li News*

CONGRESSMAN. SMUGGLER. SPY?

translation:

Agnieszka Rychlińska

On April 17, during a special press conference, the Supreme Judge, Earl Grand confirmed that congressman Ian Links from Kamielnu was arrested.

The Ingmar Prosecutor's Office has suspected the congressman of illegal activity on the border of Nort and Ingmar. 'We were intrigued by Mr Links's links with emigrants coming to Ingmar. Especially with Inhuman from the north,' says Ila Mus, Deputy Prosecutor General. 'We were sure there has been a link. Suddenly the market was full of Nortan artefacts. Income received from selling them contributed to Mr Links's electoral funds. What is more, many Inhuman were employed in his properties in Ingmar, especially in those situated on the border with Nort. They were mostly werewolves



and their aggressive behaviour rose suspicions. The investigation was stalled for a long time. 'Actually it wasn't even an investigation,' says Ila Mus. 'Officially, we couldn't start any action. Artefacts were being sold legally and we weren't able to check the status of Inhuman employed by the congressman without cancelling Mr Links's immunity.' Then the immunity could have been

cancelled only after giving clear evidence that he had taken part in the illegal activity.

This vicious circle was broken due to private investigators. Henrik Onsen's famous detective agency, in recent years operating not only in Lid-ur but also in Ingmar and the East Kingdom, was involved in the case. We asked Mr Onsen if it's true that he employed prince Linnamen from Nort for the investigation. But he answered vaguely, that as a member of the royal family, the prince couldn't be in employment. 'But it's true that he offered some advice to our investigators,' Onsen adds, with his back to the wall.

According to our sources, the phrase that "he offered some advice" should be considered euphemistically. 'Without Linnamen's thorough knowledge of the Ingmarian-Nortan-East Kingdom borderland we wouldn't be able to solve the case so fast,' says one of our informers, who wants to remain nameless. Today we know that smuggling Inhumen from Nort to Ingmar was difficult to discover because of the unusual route. It led from Portes-des-Oranges to the East

Kingdom and then from the East Kingdom to Kamielnu in Ingmar. The reason for it was something more than just going unpunished. 'If it was just the smuggling of Inhumen, it wouldn't be controversial,' says Ila Mus, the prosecutor. 'After all, vampires, werewolves and exhumers have been coming to our country illegally and then requesting asylum for years. It seems that Mr Links took advantage of their situation in many different ways.'

Standing in front of a huge map of the region, Henrik Onsen reveals details. It turns out that smuggling Inhumen to the East Kingdom was connected with selling their artefacts. Most likely it was the price that fugitives had to pay for a chance of crossing the border. Only part of the artefacts was sold in Ingmar. Most of them were disposed of on the black market in the East Kingdom, where trade regulations concerning this type of objects are much less strict. 'That's not all, though,' says Onsen. 'As you know, bloody prostitution is flourishing on the border of the East Kingdom and Nort. Inhumen, especially female vampires, sheltered in that area

were involved in the illegal activity. Starving, thirsty for blood female vampires were forced to prostitution. The profit was enormous, of course. It's thanks to testimonies of Inhuman that our investigators were able to reach people directly involved in smuggling. And they gave evidence proving Ian Links guilty.

Recent reports show that the arrest of Ian Links is not the home stretch of this case. Our confidential sources inform

about an increase in activity of the secret service in the region. Representatives of the station in Aliks do not comment rumours that Links's smuggling net was connected with the infiltration of Nortan cities and villages. Maybe agents working in the Ingmarian-Nortan-East Kingdom borderland are trying to cover the tracks of spying? We can only guess at it.

Anika Ahai, *Ur-li News*

Magdalena Kempna

SUNNY WINE

translation:

Maria Jaszczurowska

 *back to gamebook*

Those days it was said that no sooner would Linnamèn become king of Nort than after he has buried his whole family. This saying was no allusion to the rivalry for the throne. Linnamèn, literally speaking, had no one to compete with any more. All of his relatives, both those in the palace and those scattered around the world, died on the same night in surprisingly similar circumstances. Linnamèn could no longer count on any elder member of his family to put his hand on his arm in a proper moment during the coronation, as the custom would have it.

I was one of those increasingly astonished, when the news of the deaths reached the palace one by one. Bishop Ignatius said it was as if the Angel of Death herself walked among the family members and took all of them, save Linnamèn. Irrational reaction and metaphysical theories were numerous then, but personally I was convinced that it was no angel – none of them was seen in Nort for centuries – but a human being that was behind all of this. And Linnamèn was the prime suspect.

Such allegations, however, could get people sent to the Kaer-Nort fortress by the national guards, who tried – often resorting to any means – to prevent chaos from spreading after the death of king Glibannèn. Religious people resorted to an old prophecy which said that the

members of the royal family cannot hurt each other, be it with their own hands or through another person. The beautiful myth was sustained probably only because all the wrongdoings within Linnamèn's family were always hushed up and the power in the country was wielded without fatalities.

Those who were more rational in their opinions supported the thesis of Linnamèn's innocence mainly because there was no evidence pointing to him as the killer of his relatives. First of all, the prince definitely could not have been present in so many places at a time. Secondly, if he had indeed wanted to perform a mass murder with the help of accomplices, he would have had to manage a network of at least a few hundred conspirators for quite a few years, which – considering his history – was highly unlikely. Thirdly – and lastly – when he appeared in Nort, he surprised all of us when he was passionately trying to solve the mystery behind the death of his relatives. Those who said he would have to bury his whole family before he can become king were mistaken. Linnamèn himself believed he could rule Nort only after he has explained the tragedy that took place in the palace on the night of Winter Solstice.

I remember he arrived in the city in the coldest month, when the country was frozen and covered with ice and the days were so short that one felt as if the world was snuggled in an endless night. At this time of year, long, winding streets of Nort looked empty and only in the darkest and narrowest corners, among high, old houses could you occasionally meet the most desperate citizens chasing somebody or something, even though they risked freezing to death. I still don't know how he managed to march nearly all through the city in such conditions. Whenever I asked, his answer was evasive.

That day he came to the palace long after midnight, when almost everybody was asleep. I think he chose this time on purpose – as if he wanted to sneak into his family home silently and stealthily, in the same darkness which hid him when he was leaving this place as a boy. I was led to him in complete silence through the dark corridors of the palace. It was like walking in a labyrinth whose thick walls absorbed all the sounds. When I entered the smaller dining room, the prince was still warming his hands against a mug of hot coffee. Untouched food lay on the plates in front of him. He looked exhausted, tormented and frozen. He reminded me of his royal kin,

but only in a way that a negative of a photo may bring the original picture to your mind.

Apart from us, only Pascal was present in the room, the master of ceremony, and the servant who was either staring blankly at the cold food or squinting at a small travel bag, which looked unbecoming in the royal dining room, to say the least, especially that it probably contained all the belongings of the future ruler.

‘I’ve been told you’re a doctor,’ said Linnamèn almost immediately.

‘I am.’

‘I’m sorry I sent for you at such an hour. I would like to see them, though.’

I looked at Pascal, whose sour face proved that he had discussed the matter with Linnamèn and failed to convince him.

‘Doctor Søren will show you the way, your highness,’ he said flatly.

We had laid the bodies in one of the underground rooms – it was nearly as cold as the streets covered with ice. Before we reached the place, we were both shivering with cold – it was second time this night for Linnamèn. The servant lit the candles and the dark room lit up

enough for us to see a long row of stone biers, on which the bodies lay still – some of them really old, others appallingly young.

I didn't see Linnamèn's face when he stood on the threshold of the chamber, with his back to me. It seemed that he didn't heed the awful cold, because he stopped shivering. For a long while he stared at the biers and then he approached the one that was the nearest. He didn't call me, so I stopped near the threshold, next to a torch and watched him move from one bier to another, tearing away the sheets. With surprising gentleness he took the faces of his deceased relatives in his hands and placed an effervescent kiss on each forehead. It took me a while to understand that this tender farewell was at the same time the preliminary examination of the bodies. Without heeding the passing time and the awful cold, Linnamèn observed the faces and hands of the deceased and examined their chests and abdomens, although very gently. After scrutinising the last, twenty third, corpse, he slowly turned to me.

'What reason for the death did you pronounce?' he asked me in a matter-of-fact tone.

'Cardiac arrest.'

‘Caused by... what exactly?’

I spread my arms helplessly.

‘I examined the bodies immediately after the death. Since then, I’ve been coming here every day and I still haven’t found the answer to this question. It seems that their hearts... just stopped beating.’

Linnamèn was silent for a while. After all, how likely is it that so many hearts stop beating at exactly the same time?

‘I’m sure you have analysed all the possibilities,’ he said eventually. ‘Could you please share them with me? What could have caused such death?’

‘The causes may have been multiple. For example a congenital heart disease.’

‘It’s hard to believe all of them had it.’

‘Not necessarily, if it was a hereditary condition.’

‘What else?’

‘An infectious disease.’

‘You have probably tested their blood for this?’

‘Yes. I’ve discovered no known or unknown microbes or viruses.’

‘So?’

‘Hmmm... Food poisoning...’

‘Or just poisoning, for that matter.’

‘That too. But this hypothesis was not confirmed in my tests. None of the theories explains why all of them died on the same night. A heart disease is out of the question, because it would have to progress at a various pace, since the oldest deceased person was seventy five, while the youngest was only seven. No plague in the history made so many people die at exactly the same moment. As for poisoning, it is usually accompanied with external symptoms – if the death is the result of a poison administered over a long period of time, the look of hair and nails is going to be affected. If it’s a sudden poisoning, we may observe changes on the skin, tongue etc.’

‘A vampire once told me about devil’s gold, blue coriander and other substances that cause instant death with no external symptoms.’

‘It’s true. In this case, however, immediately after the death one can sense the characteristic smell in the deceased person’s last breath or notice – in the case of blue coriander – the precipitation of blue crystals in the blood. I witnessed the death of your highness’s three brothers. No characteristic smell was observed and there were no blue crystals in their blood.’

‘Are you sure their death could not have been due to poison?’

‘No,’ I replied after a longer while. ‘I assume there are substances I haven’t heard of as yet. However, to establish this, I would need to...’

‘Perform an autopsy, right?’

‘Yes.’

He looked at me as if he wanted to ask why I haven’t done it yet. He hesitated, though. He must have guessed the answer to the question he never asked. It was about the royal family, after all. Royal family are more than ordinary flesh and blood. They are a symbol, a myth, a metaphor and in Nort – also an element of religion. You don’t slice a metaphor with a scalpel in order to examine its guts. The national law did not allow for autopsy to be performed on any member of the royal family. And nobody had the competences to argue for a precedent.

‘Do it,’ said Linnamèn.

We left the chamber and made for the stairs.

‘Do you know, your highness, how the officials, lords and, above all, priests will react?’

In the dim light of the torch I thought I saw a slight grimace on Linnamèn’s face. It was a shade of smile

which – as I was soon to discover – he used to dismiss all the questions or comments to which there was an obvious reply.

‘They will probably not be happy.’

We reached the great hall, from which a number of winding marble staircases rose in different directions. This is where we were to part. However, Linnamèn stopped for a while and said:

‘During the autopsy, please pay attention to the back of their necks.’

‘Back of their necks?’

‘Yes. On the back of my uncle’s, lord Ethelred’s, neck there is a small mark. A minute, round swelling, as if it were a mosquito bite.’

‘There are no mosquitoes in Nort even in the summer. Winters are by far too cold for them.’

‘I know. That’s why I want you to note that. I haven’t seen such marks on other bodies, but... please check it anyway.’

I didn’t see Linnamèn for the next few days. We were both rather busy. While I was literally drowning in his relatives’ guts, he was preparing to take over the rule in the country. He met with priests, lords, ministers,

generals, with the palace servants. I was told he could spend long hours in the national archives and he talked to everybody about everything – he talked politics with servants, religion with the lords and palace cuisine with the priests. He was interested in every detail: love affairs in the palace, quarrels, minor intrigues from long ago. He had quite a talent for obtaining information – it seemed he could find common ground with anyone, from the youngest butler's helper to the highest priest, bishop Immanuel.

We met again on the day when Linnamèn was trying on his future royal outfit. When I entered, he asked all the others to leave the chamber. He listened to my report standing still with his back to the row of mirrors, which made it look as if there was an indefinite number of himself, which was unrealistic. None of the rulers of Nort ever wore white clothes. In the country covered with ice for two thirds of each year, white colour is plain and dull. It often symbolises unfinished mourning, neverending melancholy. Nobody could understand why Linnamèn ordered clothes in this appalling colour. When I looked at him, I once again got the impression that I'm watching a negative of a

photograph of one of his ancestors. The members of the royal family usually wore bright, colourful clothes, yet they all had fair, almost white hair, while Linnamèn's hair was dark, nearly raven-black. As I've been told, he took after his mother.

It was a brief conversation. I told Linnamèn what I found – the hearts of his relatives torn to pieces.

'It's as if some bullets have ripped them apart, except there is no entry or exit wound.'

'Have you found anything that deviates from this pattern? Any irregularities, weird coincidences...'

'I did find a few things I had not expected. Lord Ethelred's stomach ulcer was in fact a tumour. He would have no more than half a year to live. When I examined the body of princess Sophia, I discovered evidence that suggests that she must have miscarried at least twice.'

'She was only seventeen,' Linnamèn said flatly. I wondered how much he must have been through before he left the palace and how much he knew.

'What about the mark on Ethelred's neck?' he asked.

'In my opinion, it must have been an injection. I suppose the lord suffered from increasing pain due to the growing tumour and he tried to find a way to alleviate the pain...'

‘With white coriander. It is in fact administered via injections, right? But you found no traces of this drug in his blood, did you?’

‘White coriander does not leave any traces, unless overdosed. If the lord did take it, he must have only been given a dose that was not lethal.’

‘Who may have administered this substance to my uncle?’

‘Definitely not me,’ I tried to smile briefly. ‘As a doctor, I am obliged to watch over the health of the royal family at any price, and administering a drug would be a breach of this rule. I suspect lord Ethelred may have instructed a manservant or a... maid.’

‘I’ve heard about his preferences,’ the prince replied dryly. He must have heard by now that lord Ethelred was an incorrigible – and sometimes cruel – womaniser.

Linnamèn asked me to see him the next day. We were supposed to meet at six in the morning in the cellars. When I was leaving, he still stood motionless and stared in the distance, lost in thought. Only his reflections in the mirrors seemed to waver a bit.

Next day, when I reached the cellar, I found Linnamèn in one of the few rooms here that had the

privilege of electricity. He was engrossed in some weird preparations – he paced the empty room, silently counting the steps between the long table and another place, where he had put a chair.

‘I’ve been thinking of what you told me,’ he said instead of a ‘good morning’. ‘And I thought it would be necessary to do an experiment.’

A frightened servant peered in the room. He was carrying a large bundle. Linnamèn told him to put it on the table. He waited for the servant to go away and then unfolded the bundle. I sucked in my breath, seeing a bloodstained cloth. Linnamèn reached in a pocket of his black cloak worn over what was now to become his everyday outfit – a white long-sleeved tunic over a pair of white linen trousers – and he produced two pairs of thin gloves. He put on one of them and offered me the other one, saying:

‘I’ve heard that a pig’s heart has a structure similar to a human heart. I think this one will do.’

He took out one of the hearts from the bundle and placed it on the table. Then we took a few steps back to the place where Linnamèn had put a chair.

‘How do you feel about shooting, doctor?’ he asked and again reached in his cloak pocket, this time producing a revolver.

‘Not particularly good,’ I replied.

‘Same here. Well, we will have to minimise the damages.’

Having said that, he stretched his hand and carefully aimed the revolver at the pig’s heart. When he shot, the loud echo rolled through the cellars, like the rumble of collapsing walls. The first bullet flew over the target and hit the palace wall. Linnamèn frowned slightly, but aimed once again and this time he didn’t miss.

I went to the table and inspected what was left of the heart.

‘You said, doctor, that the hearts of my relatives looked as if they were torn by a bullet. I thought I might well check this option. What do you say?’

I shook my head, looking at the pig’s heart torn to pieces.

‘Quite the contrary,’ I said. ‘If this is what a heart looks like after it’s been ripped by a bullet, their hearts must have been ripped... from the inside.’

‘You mean they exploded?’

‘Yes.’

Linnamèn was silent for a while and then asked:

‘Would you like to repeat the experiment?’

‘Definitely.’

Soon the word got round about the prince’s investigation. On the basis of unverified information, people tried to foresee Linnamèn’s next actions and judging by his gestures, they tried to guess the future direction of the country’s internal policy. New alliances were quickly formed as well as intrigues that were supposed to build up after the coronation. The ceremony could, however, only take place after the dead have been buried. Until then, the palace remained suspended in the state of restless expectation, nervous slumber that could end in a rough awakening any time now.

‘In different times this would have been regarded as a breach of any public, moral or church rights,’ said Pascal during one of our ‘organisational meetings’. ‘The king, the queen, the king’s other wives and all the members of their family have been stuck in the cellars for one week and ice has covered their desecrated bodies. No offence, Søren.’

‘No offence whatsoever.’

The meetings were ostensibly held to discuss the organisation of life in the palace. Ostensibly, because there were three decisive factors as regards

organisational aspects, and these included: the court etiquette, the ruler and Pascal. In practice, it was about exchanging 'useful' information, sometimes minor facts and sometimes gossip, which could affect whatever was going on in the palace. At that time, the meetings were held much more frequently than ever before, probably because Pascal felt exceptionally bad about how Linnamèn kept challenging the holy hegemony of the court etiquette.

'Good Lord, he's not even twenty seven yet. Since he was seven, he has visited the palace maybe twice,' bishop Ignatius, the royal chaplain, complained quietly. 'Autopsy? Shooting at pigs' hearts in the cellars? Investigating the maids about intimate details from the life of the royal family? By what right is all this happening?'

'By the right dictated by the political system, of course,' replied Carl Gustav, head of the security police.

'Carl Gustav is right,' I added. 'Nort is a theocratic absolute monarchy. The ruler has a right to do whatever he wishes, because – as the constitution explains – he is God's appointed representative on earth.'

'Carl Gustav is a filthy atheist. And a hypocrite,' snorted Ignatius.

‘I believe in the idea on which our state is based, reverend bishop,’ Carl Gustav replied calmly. ‘Only the authority strongly rooted in the symbolic content will be able to keep order.’

‘Are you sure that the ruler you swore to defend until your last drop of blood also believes in this idea?’ asked Pascal.

Carl Gustav smiled grimly.

‘Youthful liberalism and the affinity for unwise reforms usually end shortly after the ascension to the throne. If you don’t believe me, consult history textbooks. Anyway, our future ruler seems to be engrossed mainly in discovering the murderer of his relatives.’

‘By the way, Carl, do we already know who or what is behind all this?’ asked Pascal.

The head of the security police frowned and spread his arms helplessly. Pascal tutted with disapproval.

‘That’s disappointing. Be careful, or Linnamèn will get down to this before you do. That would be the first such case in the history.’

‘My people are working on it day and night. We have pressed hard on the surviving anarchists, democrats, socialists, liberals and all the others who survived the last cleansing.’

‘Nobody owned up?’ asked Ignatius.

‘Father bishop, you should be the first one to know that the problem with our methods is that after some time anyone will own up to just anything. I have obtained more than a dozen statements, but none of them is coherent.’

‘Shooting at pigs’ hearts and other methods employed by Linnamèn seem a subtle play when compared to the practices of the security police,’ I said. Carl Gustav didn’t notice or chose not to notice the sarcasm of these words and continued:

‘He likes to play cat and mouse. I know what he’s been up to in the recent years and what he was doing while roaming the world. The late king Glibannèn, his brother, kept a file in his chamber, where he stored information about him. The file was labelled: Do not touch Linnamèn. I don’t know why the king wished for his brother to be left alone. He never enquired about him, never asked for information, but I collected it anyway. Just in case. In Pont-de-Lilac it is said that there is no riddle that Linnamèn couldn’t solve. Maybe it’s an exaggeration, but there is some reason behind it. After all, it was him who explained the cases of missing

children in the Wolf's Forest from five years ago. In Laiec he helped seize the murderer of their bishop. And in Ibsenberg – well, that was almost a political issue, but for obvious reasons nobody mentions it aloud – he allegedly found the clever thief who stole the royal insignia. Therefore, Pascal, I do realise that Linnamèn is usually quick to resolve such cases. The death of the royal family, however, his own family, is a different story than a pervert kidnapping young girls or a cleric murdering the bishop. Linnamèn has long been absent from the palace. Too long.'

Silence followed, only to be interrupted by Pascal:

'But you don't know what Linnamèn is up to. None of us knows.'

'He could do with a decent confessor,' said Ignatius. 'One that Linnamèn would trust and at the same time one utterly loyal to us.'

'Exactly,' added Pascal. 'Has he chosen one yet?'

Ignatius shivered and his red hair shook like a giant fire. Some said it was thanks to this hair (plus homosexual inclinations of a few prominent officials) that he was appointed royal chaplain at such a young age.

'He rejected all the candidates I presented.'

‘You should have pushed someone in a less formal manner, so that he believes he has chosen the person himself,’ said Carl Gustav.

Ignatius scowled at him.

‘Carl Gustav, you should not be the one to teach me how to perform my duties. In return, I will refrain from butting in your business. In the very beginning, Linnamèn told me he had already chosen his confessor even before he made it to the palace.’

‘Does he have a right to do it?’ enquired Carl Gustav.

‘He does, provided he chooses someone from the Albertine Monastery.’

‘So? Who is it?’ I asked.

‘Our future king chose a provincial drunkard as his confessor,’ declared Ignatius with an obvious sneer. ‘His name is Rafael Gabriel, and this peculiar name is the least of his vices. Since he joined the Albertine Monastery twenty years ago, he’s been changing parishes every few years. He was last residing in Loch Scarland. He is insubordinate, disloyal to his superiors and instead of reading philosophical treatises he prefers to drink wine in the company of promiscuous women. He arrogantly claims that he converts them and helps them return to a life of virtue.’

‘Linnamèn solved the case of Frogbelly, the river dragon, in Loch Scarland,’ said Carl Gustav and seeing our inquisitive glances, he continued:

‘You can take my word for it. And check it in the archives.’

‘Never mind how they met and why he chose this particular confessor; Linnamèn may have acted a bit wiser,’ noted Pascal. ‘Judging by what the bishop said, the prince will have to watch out; otherwise, the sunny wine offered by his confessor during the coronation feast, as the tradition will have it, may disappear from the goblet before it actually reaches Linnamèn’s mouth. Since Rafael Gabriel is insubordinate and disloyal, I think it won’t be difficult to find a way to make him inform us of the king’s most secret thoughts.’

‘I am working on it,’ said Ignatius. ‘Rafael Gabriel will be our ally by the time he reaches Nort.’

One day before the confessor’s arrival, I was summoned by Linnamèn to see him in his private chamber. We met in the office full of books brought from the archives, various documents and codes of law, which the prospective king must have been studying even at night. Somewhere in the centre of the big desk

almost completely covered with paper, there was a tray with food that was hardly touched.

‘You should eat a bit more,’ I observed. ‘And I’m saying it as a doctor.’

‘I am waiting for the moment when you tell me that whatever killed my relatives was not administered to them in food,’ replied Linnamèn. ‘Until then, I’ll stick to dried fruit, biscuits and water.’

Linnamèn sat deeper in his armchair and stretched his legs, reaching for a plate with biscuits. I looked around. Strangely enough, the chaos in the room made it look more cosy. A blanket and a pillow on the sofa gave the impression that the future ruler not only works, but also sleeps in this office. In a corner I saw the luggage Linnamèn brought to the palace – still unpacked. On one of the lower shelves there was a cage with a beautiful golden pigeon hiding its head under a sparkling wing. Finally, I turned to what Linnamèn must have watched every time he sat in his chair.

‘The Portes-des-Noires Tapestry. Or its copy, in fact,’ he said, noticing my stare. ‘I asked to have it here.’

‘A perfect copy,’ I observed, looking a bit closer.

The Portes-des-Noires Tapestry is both a history textbook and a summary of truths of the faith for the

citizens of Nort. Above all, it is a guide to national hierarchy. It is hand-woven, made with fine threads and glistens with various colours, silver and gold. It presents Linnamèn's family tree with all his ancestors, relatives and himself, of course.

'I look at it whenever I can,' said Linnamèn. 'I am trying to recall.'

'Recall what?'

'Them,' he replied and glanced down. 'What they were like, what they talked about, what events they participated in. And then I wonder what they could have expected, what they wished for... I know what you're thinking,' he added after a while, noticing my brief glance. 'And you are probably right. How much could a seven-year-old boy remember? What could a twelve-year-old notice at his sister's funeral? And what could a sixteen-year-old see at the celebration of the tenth anniversary of his brother's coronation?'

'And whether any of these events affect whatever is going on at the moment?'

'You think they don't?'

'I believe that some mysteries can be solved by reaching to the past. But not all of them.'

‘That’s true. Still, a case like this must have been planned for a long time and must be rooted somewhere in the past. It’s just that I don’t know whose past to explore.’

I looked at the extensive family tree. Its roots disappeared in the darkness of the lower section of the Tapestry, while its branches spread wide. It was hard to believe that over a single night the large tree shrunk to one tiny point squeezed in the upper left corner. Until now, the generations were pictured as layers with considerable order and hierarchy: the eldest sons or daughters became kings or queens of Nort, those who were second in line to the throne were kept close, the younger ones were sent to foreign courts, married to other rulers. The youngest sons were educated to become priests – all of them, for centuries, except Linnamèn. With him, a special procedure was applied.

‘Memory is not always a good counsellor,’ said Linnamèn. ‘But it is even worse when it is all too willing to help. But this is not what I wanted to talk about. I’ve been wondering what may have been the cause of my relatives’ death. What substance or what ailment can make someone’s heart burst?’

‘There is no such substance,’ I replied. ‘And I have never heard of an illness that could have such effects.’

‘I will agree with the latter. As for the former... You haven’t considered a substance that has never been used for this purpose.’

The golden pigeon spread its wings in the cage and cooed quietly. Linnamèn stood up, approached the cage and let the bird out, so that it could fly around the royal chamber.

‘Do you know this is how they found me?’ asked Linnamèn.

I knew that. Contrary to what Carl Gustav said, there were moments when Linnamèn could just disappear from his – and everyone else’s – sight. Maybe he assumed a different identity or hid in foreign countries.

‘Pascal sent the pigeon immediately after what happened,’ I said.

‘The rumour is that the golden pigeons can recognise the members of the royal family. They won’t approach anyone else. That’s why they are sometimes used to communicate with some member of the royal family who cannot be easily reached. A golden pigeon will always find his master. According to the legend, this is how the angels had made them. You will probably know it’s not true.’

‘Nephritite. This is the reason behind it,’ I admitted.

‘A precious ore excavated in the only mine in the north of the country. Scholars from the Eastern Realm, where there are plenty more of such ores, have recently been studying this substance. Did you know that nephritite radiates a small amount of harmless energy that is more efficient than electricity, which we still don’t know much about? It’s imperceptible for people, but golden pigeons, whose labyrinth contains a grain of nephritite, can recognise living creatures that have something to do with this substance, even from a great distance. That’s how they form large flocks once a year and migrate together.

The golden pigeon returned from its trip around the royal apartments, perched on Linnamèn’s hand above the index finger. I noticed a thin, fair scar on the finger now.

‘When a child is born in the royal family, a thin nephritite thread is placed under the baby’s skin,’ continued Linnamèn. ‘Then, a group of pigeons is bred with a grain of nephritite from the same sample. The pigeon will not only recognise another living creature with nephritite, but it can trace the particular person it is related to.’

Linnamèn gently placed the pigeon back in its cage.

‘A nephritite pigeon is a beautiful animal, but it is never the harbinger of good news. It was once believed that nephritite prolongs life and youth, makes the royal family resistant to diseases and wounds. As far as I know, this has never been scientifically corroborated.’

‘Quite the contrary,’ I admitted. ‘Those who tried to inject themselves with larger amounts of nephritite or administer it in another way usually died ahead of others.’

Linnamèn looked at me meaningfully. I slowly saw what he was getting at.

‘Naturally, autopsy was never performed on people who overdosed on nephritite,’ I resumed the subject. ‘Nephritite is injected in a baby’s hand. The substance, however, does not stay there. It moves to one of the organs – it may go to the brain, lungs, liver, kidneys or... heart. If it accumulated...’

Linnamèn nodded. I wondered about what he told me. It all started to make sense somehow, and yet...

‘With all due respect, my prince, these are just speculations.’

‘I know. That’s why I would like to you to find evidence. Or something to refute my theory.’

‘Any suggestions?’

Linnamèn smiled wanly.

‘I wanted to release a flock of golden pigeons in the cellars, but that would be too much for the notables. And too much for me, I guess. I think we should approach the issue from the other side now. Assuming my relatives were poisoned with nephritite, we may still wonder why they all died on the same night. Do you know what it means?’

‘That they must have been administered a proper dose of nephritite to match their age and weight at roughly the same time,’ I shook my head. ‘It seems too difficult to arrange.’

‘Not necessarily, provided you have the opportunity.’

Linnamèn went to where his luggage lay and started to unpack it. It consisted mainly of the objects useful for a traveller, but there were a few carefully wrapped bundles as well. Linnamèn unwrapped one of them and produced a silver dagger – a symbol of belonging to the royal family. Then he took another bundle and took out a small vial with a golden liquid. He continued:

‘Please give it a thought: what are the circumstances when all the members of the royal family can take the

same poison at roughly the same time, in the amount proper for their age and weight?’

‘Is it the sunny wine?’ I asked pointing to the vial.

Linnamèn handed me the vial and I lifted it to the light to inspect the liquid in which golden flakes slowly swirled.

‘The drink of kings,’ said Linnamèn. ‘Made of the best fruit that manage to ripen in this cold country. Very expensive, extremely difficult and time consuming to make because of the golden chicory, which – unless properly fermented – completely upsets the colour, structure and taste of the liquid. The latter, by the way, could definitely be better, although legends are told about it. Have you ever had a chance to try it?’

‘Of course not. Even the royal family drink it...’

‘Once a year, right?’

‘During the Winter Solstice Feast, on the shortest day of the year.’

‘Which was ten days ago. The royal family all over the country drink the sunny wine during the celebration of this day, when the sun appears above the horizon for a brief while, which is usually around noon. The children only take a sip, as a symbol.’

‘Ethelred has not drunk the sunny wine for a few years, he only pretended to dip his mouth. He quit alcohol. It was bad for his stomach. If you think nephritite was in the wine...’

‘Ethelred must have taken it in another manner. For example in an injection of white coriander.’

‘At noon nearly everybody were drinking the sunny wine. They were all dead by midnight,’ I looked at Linnamèn in bewilderment.

‘Please test it,’ he pointed to the vial. ‘All the members of the royal family, wherever they are, receive a supply of this wine from the same source one month before the Winter Solstice. But make sure you also test the remains of the wine left here, in the palace after the feast. The servants have received relevant instructions – they will do whatever you tell them.’

‘But...’

‘You want to know if I drank it? No,’ Linnamèn suddenly got serious.

‘Why?’ I asked bluntly.

Linnamèn was silent for a while. He was not hesitating – he was rather reluctant to respond. After a while he replied curtly:

‘The circumstances I was in made it impossible for me to complete the Winter Solstice ritual.’

It turned out he was right. When I looked at the samples of wine under the medical glass, I found some golden flakes that were definitely not chicory. Nephritite was also found in the remains of the wine left after the feast. The concentration of poison was high – for a child one sip would be enough to damage internal organs. Since it was the heart that was damaged in each case, it meant that the nephritite used to poison the wine came from a single source. Who could have obtained such amount of nephritite? And why?

Some of my doubts concerned Linnamèn himself. He wasn’t telling me everything. I could understand that. The palace surrounded by the glum city, neverending darkness and snow, was full of mysteries, intrigues and shaded intentions. Whatever Carl Gustav said about him, Linnamèn knew the principles and the reality of this palace enough not to trust it. At least until Rafael Gabriel arrives.

The future royal confessor was ushered to the palace – as he could not enter on his own – through one of the informal gates. As it turned out, when coining his plan,

Ignatius did not assume that Rafael Gabriel will travel the whole way to Nort so inebriated that it would be impossible to win him over to either side. The servants held him upon both sides, but did not manage to support him when he suddenly jerked away and let out a fountain of vomit on one of the statues of the great bishop Clarence. Once he finished purging himself, he mumbled an apology to the statue and let the servants lead him on. When passing by Pascal and Ignatius – the former did not hide his disgust, while the latter tried to cover his glee with pretended terror – Rafael Gabriel smiled gently and muttered some words of ‘greetings to the beautiful ladies’. Eventually the shuffling guest was dragged to his chamber and his slim, dirty body clad in a torn habit was thrown on the white, starched bedsheets. Rafael Gabriel immediately curled up in a foetal position and fell asleep with his mouth open, drooling on the royal symbols embroidered on the pillow.

‘Make him look reasonably human, will you?’ ordered Pascal, and when I replied with a meaningful stare, he only spread his arms and left the chamber along with Ignatius.

Together with the servants we took a couple of hours to bring him round with cold water and smelling salts.

I poured hot coffee in his throat and I kept slapping his red cheeks, to which he only responded with mumbling and more drooling. At one moment Linnamèn joined us – he immediately sent away all the servants, closed the door behind them and then sat on the edge of the bed, where his confessor was snoring. He lightly tapped Rafael Gabriel on the shoulder and said:

‘Rafael, will you please stop tormenting the doctor?’

Without stopping to snore loudly, the confessor opened his left blue eye and cast a surprisingly sober look at Linnamèn. Then he opened a furiously green right eye and eyed me carefully up and down. Only afterwards did he stop snoring and sat up on the bed, crossing his legs clad in dirty shoes.

‘Hello to you, my friend,’ he said in a deep voice, which in no way matched his thin and long-legged posture. ‘I’ve heard everything. I am so sorry.’

Rafael Gabriel stretched his both arms to Linnamèn and the prince hugged him tight.

‘I am glad you came,’ he said and for the first time in a few days I saw a genuine smile on his face. ‘You’ve already met doctor Søren.’

The confessor stared at me with his green and blue eyes.

‘I apologise for my behaviour. I wasn’t sure if you’re not one of the people hired by this coxcomb Ignatius. His spies keep following me.’

‘It’s all right,’ I replied coldly, wiping the remains of the vomit from my clothes.

This unfortunate first meeting was to cast a shadow on my future relationship with Rafael Gabriel. The royal confessor didn’t seem to care what people thought about him. He even treated Linnamèn as if he didn’t notice that he had become a ruler of a large state since their last meeting. As Ignatius had expected, the confessor was usually (at least) slightly drunk, blabbered obscenities, dressed like a beggar and generally came across as someone extremely easy to manipulate. Rafael Gabriel could, however, drink as much as he liked, lay prostrate when overcome with alcohol, yet he always managed to regain sobriety and clear mind in a matter of seconds. Ignatius skilfully wove a network of intrigues around him, and the confessor apparently agreed to everything, yet he quickly forgot all the earlier arrangements or misinterpreted them. As a result, it was not Linnamèn who had to watch out, but Ignatius and his supporters – nobody could be sure when the confessor spills some secret.

One of Rafael Gabriel's many talents was the ability to appear in various places all of a sudden. In the palace people usually smiled indulgently when seeing his swaying, egret-like moves. The confessor shuffled his feet in large wooden clogs, zigzagging along the palace corridors. Although seemingly awkward, he was virtually everywhere. His fair-haired silhouette in a dirty-grey habit emerged suddenly from the shadow in the middle of quiet conversations or lurked in the distance whenever somebody wished to do something secret. I sometimes saw him in the royal archives and in the library, where he browsed the confidential files, seemingly lost and surprised at actually being there. Once or twice I caught him snooping around my office, which didn't necessarily improve our relationship.

He baffled everybody beyond all expectations when he unexpectedly rolled out from under the table during one of the organisational meetings. He knelt at Ignatius's feet and started crying, asked for forgiveness and explained that he fell asleep during the dinner. To prove this, he showed the bishop a piece of sandwich found on the floor. Disgusted Ignatius pushed away the confessor, who reeked of alcohol. Rafael Gabriel

swooned and fell down on me, splashing oyster sauce on himself and on Carl Gustav.

‘For the love of God, Søren,’ barked the head of the security police. ‘Take IT away.’

‘I’m no nanny,’ I called back, dragging the weeping Rafael from the room. ‘If you are pretending again, I will kill you,’ I snarled at him when we were out.

I nearly had to carry him for a few more minutes, before he finally decided to stand on his own legs in some deserted corridor.

‘You’re not too gentle for a doctor,’ he said.

‘You stink. It’s enough that you drink whatever you lay your hands on; you don’t have to bathe in it as well.’

‘Linnamèn wants to see us,’ he said with a smile. ‘He thinks that now that your colleagues are busy with other things, the time is right.’

‘And there was no better way to drag me out from the meeting?’

‘Linnamèn only offered the idea, the rest of the performance was mine.’

‘Why am I not surprised?’

Linnamèn was waiting for us in one of the lecturing rooms, where young princes and princesses, future

rulers of Nort, had their history lessons. This is also where a copy of the Portes-des-Noires Tapestry was kept, but this time Linnamèn did not seem interested in it. When we entered, he was cleaning the boards where important dates from the history were scribbled. I felt uncomfortable, because I realised this is also where princesses Lila and Augusta or prince Albannèn must have been sitting a few days ago.

‘I would like us to establish who may be the murderer of my relatives,’ started Linnamèn, while Rafael Gabriel slouched on the teacher’s chair and produced a large bottle from the habit pocket. ‘One of the sheriffs in the Eastern Realm referred to this method as profiling. On one board we will write down personality traits, features or conditions that must be fulfilled for a person to be considered a likely killer. On the other board we will write down the names of people who fulfil these conditions or may fulfil them in our opinion. When I write down a name here, we will first have to find arguments to help us rule this person out. Is this clear?’

I nodded and Rafael raised his bottle to show that he understood.

‘Let’s start with the traits and conditions,’ said Linnamèn. ‘What do we know about the murderer?’

‘He has or had access to nephritite,’ I observed and Linnamèn wrote it on the board. ‘Which means he or she is rich, influential and rich or knows someone who can obtain this raw material. He must also be somehow connected to the palace – if not directly, then at least through some accomplice. Even if it was one of the maids who injected Ethelred with the poison, it may not have been the same person who added the poison to the white coriander. The motive, unfortunately, remains unknown...’

‘We may speculate,’ replied Linnamèn.

‘Political reasons,’ I prompted. ‘The wish to overthrow the rulers.’

‘Or to grab the power,’ mumbled Rafael Gabriel.

‘Greed,’ I continued. ‘Religious fanaticism. Terrorism.’

‘Personal revenge,’ added Rafael, taking a sip from his bottle. ‘As regards the person who may have done it... I believe you should start with yourself.’

Linnamèn smiled briefly, but he must have expected such a direct answer from Rafael, so he just wrote his name down on the board.

‘I don’t have access to nephritite,’ he said.

‘That’s what you say,’ replied Rafael. ‘Maybe you have had confidants at the court for many years and now they are helping you to take over the power?’

‘It was I who encouraged doctor Søren to perform the autopsy and I helped to establish that my relatives died due to nephritite overdose.’

‘That’s a strong counterargument, but everybody knows you’re clever. This may have been an element of the whole intrigue – you knew you’d become the prime suspect.’

‘You did not drink the sunny wine,’ I added seriously.

‘You also have the motive.’

‘I’ve never wanted to be the king.’

‘Even if it’s true, we need to remember the way you were treated. Maybe for all these years you resented your brother, who sent you away to the furthest province immediately after he was crowned. If it had only been possible, he would probably have pronounced you dead. He left you in the wilderness, to be taken care of by a mad priest. While doing this, he claimed he was following the long forgotten tradition, which has it that children recovered from the womb of a dead mother – and this is

who you were – are harbingers of misfortune and should not be kept near the throne. Why did he do it? Not because he thought you were dangerous. You were the son of the king's third wife – out of four. Your brother did it because he hated his – and your – father. He did it, because he had a sick soul and twisted psyche; he believed that a young dark-haired boy with whom the old king liked to spend a lot of time stole his father's love that should only be bestowed upon himself, the firstborn son of the first wife. This is the only reason why you were banished for so many years. Nobody from the royal family argued for your rights. Nobody took you in. If it's not a valid reason for revenge, then what is?'

Linnamèn listened to Rafael – first he was standing upright, but afterwards he sat down on the edge of the teacher's pulpit and stared at his own hands. All the time he was smiling sadly.

'That's great,' I said. 'The psychoanalysis of the royal family. Where do we find such information now? On the inside of the label on the bottle of cheap wine?'

'My dear doctor, the wine in this country is never cheap, yet always awful,' replied Rafael, taking another sip from the bottle. 'You're not helping him this way,' he

added wiping his mouth on the dirty sleeve and pointed to the prince. Then he addressed Linnamèn again:

‘Come on, get a grip. If you want to keep order, you have to face it. I know you’re afraid. It’s not a case like any other – you will never look at it from a distance. Someone killed your family and tried to kill you. Don’t pretend this doesn’t mean anything.’

Linnamèn was still looking at him with the same sad smile.

‘Do you understand?’ asked Rafael. ‘Do you understand everything?’

‘Yes,’ he replied.

‘Then tell us the real reason why you can’t have killed your relatives.’

Linnamèn reluctantly stood up, approached the board and said:

‘We still don’t have enough information. Where could the nephritite have come from?’

‘Not from Nort,’ I replied. ‘The nephritite stock here is so scarce that each excavated portion is registered. If such an amount were to disappear all at once, we would all know about it. I would opt for the Eastern Realm, which officially trades in nephritite.’

‘Ok, that was the first issue. Secondly, when was the poison added to the wine?’

‘Definitely not in the palace. The sunny wine arrives in bottles that are opened only during the ceremony. It must have been poisoned before it was poured in bottles.’

Linnamèn turned to us with a glint in his eye.

‘Do you know how long the sunny wine has to mature in bottles before it is fit for consumption?’

‘Don’t look at me,’ said Rafael. ‘I can only tell you how briefly it would mature in an open bottle, ready to use.’

‘Twenty five years,’ I responded. ‘More or less. You have your proof, Rafael. When the wine was poisoned, the prince had no opportunity to do it and no motive.’

‘Which means,’ added Linnamèn, crossing out his name on the board ‘that the murderer must be at least forty, and plans his actions well in advance.’

‘A patient middle-aged terrorist from the Eastern Realm, with receding hair,’ smiled Rafael, looking meaningfully at my head.

‘I’m not from the Eastern Realm,’ I barked.

‘And you don’t have receding hair. You’re just bald,’—replied the confessor, pulling another bottle from his

habit. I tore it away from him, before he managed to put it to his mouth.

‘Focus,’ I snarled. ‘Twenty five years ago anti-royalist, anarchist and liberal movements were much stronger than today.’

Linnamèn wrote it down on the board, but quickly added:

‘Liberals never resorted to acts of terror. And anti-royalists and anarchists preferred ad hoc actions – it’s hard to imagine them planning such a long-term plot. Besides, murdering my family did not overthrow monarchy, as may have been expected, so it should be assumed it was not an act of terror after all.’

Having said this, the prince crossed out next points on both boards.

‘We shouldn’t forget that the poison was also meant for you,’ reminded Rafael. ‘Who would inherit the crown if you died?’

‘According to the law, after the end of the dynasty, the church would take the power,’ explained Linnamèn. ‘The next ruler would be elected by the bishops. Twenty five years ago it would have been difficult to predict what would be the composition of the council now and who

would be elected. Willingness to take over the crown as the motive must therefore be ruled out.’

‘Just like the political motives,’ I added. ‘I believe no country is – and twenty five years ago none was – interested in making Nort weaker. We do have customs disputes with the Eastern Realm, but they treat us as a buffer against the influence of Ingmar. Ingmar, on the other hand, prefers to see Nort stronger due to the expanding economy in Lid-ur. Lid-ur may not love us, but they are afraid to destroy the power balance in the region, because they view this area as a collection of precious outlets for their goods.’

‘The church remains, though,’ noted Rafael. ‘Even if twenty-five years ago not much could have been predicted, it’s no secret that during the interregnum periods, which often lasted for years in a row, the church usually got rich very quickly.’

‘We should also consider... Inhumen,’ – said Linnamèn. After this statement a long silence followed, which I decided to interrupt when the prince looked at me expectantly.

‘That’s impossible. Inhumen were eradicated.’

‘All of them, doctor?’ asked Linnamèn with a meaningful smile.

‘I believe the doctor may be right,’ Rafael Gabriel supported me unexpectedly. ‘Your family has been fighting with Inhuman for centuries. Long time ago your ancestors won the strong support of the church thanks to their adamant attitude in this respect. First the unearthings, then lamias, ghouls, werewolves and finally vampires, which were the most numerous here in Nort due to favourable conditions... Inhuman were systematically, gradually stripped of their rights and exterminated as degenerates, creatures that the God abhors. This was doubled with ideological persecution and consequently, no Nortan would meet with Inhuman without a silver bullet in the pistol.’

‘Those who were not killed fled to other countries – mainly to Ingmar,’ I added. ‘The last cleansing ended more than thirty years ago. Occasionally a witch would be found or an old nosferatu hiding in the mountains, but no Inhuman could get close enough to the throne to perform such a deed.’

‘And still,’ said Linnamèn musingly ‘Twenty-five years for a vampire is like one month for humans.’

‘Nevertheless, I would opt for personal motives,’ – I decided. ‘We need to check whose life was made

miserable thanks to the royal family. Who resented them enough to wish them dead long ago.’

‘We don’t know if this person is still alive,’ said Linnamèn. ‘However, since they intended to eradicate the whole family, they must have experienced great pain and suffering in their own personal life. We also need to check who could have had access to the sunny wine and nephritite from the Eastern Realm twenty five years ago.’

The prince bit his lower lip and looked at the information written on both boards. The paintings of Linnamèn’s ancestors looked at us from the walls, hidden in the shadow. After a while the prince turned to us and said:

‘We will meet again soon.’

‘You won’t wipe the boards?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Linnamèn smiled. ‘Whoever did it may have thought he would avoid punishment. After all, it was so long ago. But maybe – maybe – the notes left on the boards will give someone food for thought.’

‘In this case, we should add a bit drama,’ observed Rafael. ‘Maybe you could add some heading like Terrible crime from the past? Or There is a murderer among us?’

‘Tact is not exactly your middle name,’ I hissed, but Linnamèn turned to us with a smile and crossed out some notes, adding large question marks here and there.

Two days later, the funeral of the royal family was held. Linnamèn’s three brothers, including king Glibannèn and his wives, two sisters, uncles, aunts, nieces and nephews were all buried in the cellars of the royal chapel. Linnamèn accompanied them on their last way, carefully observed by thousands of eyes. The crowd consisted both of the Nortans and foreigners, who managed to come here trudging through snow and ice. During the ceremony, I was once again given a most ungrateful role of watching over Rafael Gabriel, who swayed, dozed off, and from time to time mumbled something to himself, winking his green or blue eye, and sometimes blinking both of them. When the funeral was nearly over, he whispered to me:

‘You look worried, doctor.’

‘The same cannot be said of you. And you should be even worried, as you’ve known Linnamèn longer than me.’

‘Ah, so this is it. You don’t know whom to sympathise with: Linnamèn, who – as you suspect – will soon be devoured and crushed by the pit of corruption that the

court is, or the citizens whose future king will soon start to implement his dangerous ideals. I will tell you one thing, doctor: the fate works in mysterious ways.'

Were it not for the circumstances, I would respond to this with roaring laughter. Surprisingly, Rafael uttered these words absolutely seriously.

'Indeed,' I said. 'Especially that he chooses rather peculiar priests.'

'In the Albertine Monastery,' replied Rafael with a smile 'we have a famous saying that if the Lord wants to test your faith, He will send you right in the middle of the devil's tricks and let you become a priest.'

The coronation of Linnamèn was to be held the following week. At that time, the prince was even busier than before. He studied old legal acts and prepared to issue his first decrees. He never stopped thinking about the murder of his relatives, though. Leaving the notes on the board soon proved effective. Many people searched for the opportunity to talk to Linnamèn in private, but he always made sure that either Rafael or myself accompanied him.

Bishop Ignatius made the most fuss, though – he gesticulated wildly, flooding Linnamèn with flattery and

best wishes combined with questions revealing his own worries about his own status at the royal court.

‘Oh, and about that affair from the past,’ he said, shaking his glamorous red mane, which seemed to amuse Linnamèn. ‘I believe that wise and generous as you are, my prince, you will know that I’ve always respected and loved your father and brothers. Even when the late king Aribannèn deprived me of the title of the bishop of Portes-des-Noires, in order to bestow it on his son, Galinnèn, I held no grudge. I knew king had another position for me, where I would gain the experience necessary for me to be of help at the court later on. That’s why he sent me to Pont-de-Blanc, known as the Nortan Pole of Cold, where I spent nearly five years, faithful to the good king until he died. You cannot remember this, my prince, as you were only a cute toddler at that time, but on leaving the palace, I blessed the king and his children, expressing my gratitude to the Lord for the opportunity to serve such a great ruler.’

Carl Gustav chose a different strategy. One morning he appeared in Linnamèn’s office with a stack of files labelled with enormous red letters: **CONFIDENTIAL** and placed them on the desk with a triumphant smile, saying:

‘I’ve searched the archives of the security police. If there was anyone who could hold a grudge against the royal family twenty-five years ago, it is one of these people.’

Linnamèn lifted a corner of the first file with the tip of his finger, but he immediately drew back his hand in a gesture that shocked Carl Gustav.

‘Thank you, baron,’ said the prince in a slightly bored voice. ‘The information will be invaluable without a shadow of doubt.’

‘If you happen to have any doubts or questions...’

‘Thank you, baron,’ repeated Linnamèn in a provokingly firm voice.

Carl Gustav looked at the prince with confusion. Linnamèn had already resumed browsing through a large legal volume. Now he lifted his head and looked at the baron expectantly.

‘You should know that no mystery can be hidden from the security police,’ started Carl Gustav.

‘I’d rather say that the security police prefer to keep some mysteries to themselves,’ replied Linnamèn, looking at Carl Gustav knowingly, as if he knew something that the head of the security police was trying to hide. Carl Gustav took the bait.

‘If you’re talking about that affair... Of course, I’m not proud of it... As a young security service agent, I was sent to the Eastern Realm for espionage and surveillance. I operated among the students from Nort, to see whether they are not influenced by dangerous ideas. I had no proper experience back then. Although I knew I could be observed, I got involved in...’ Carl Gustav looked at Rafael, who happily snored on the sofa under the window. ‘In a love affair with an Ingmarian girl,’ he finished in a whisper. ‘When the affair was discovered, your father, the king, ordered the girl to be quietly eliminated. I was forced to... I mean, I was persuaded to execute her... It was a test of my loyalty. The king remained alert, though and sent me for two years to the Kaer-Nort fortress,’ Carl Gustav broke off knowingly. ‘Since then, everything I do has been consistent with the public interest.’

‘I understand,’ said Linnamèn. Without tearing his eyes away from Carl Gustav, he asked:

‘Is that everything you wanted to tell me?’

Carl Gustav nodded, but tormented by Linnamèn’s inquisitive sight, he added:

‘I have shares in one of the nephritite mines in the Eastern Realm.’

A moment of silence followed. Linnamèn looked sternly at the head of the security service and said:

‘But this is illegal.’

Carl Gustav offered an extensive explanation, presenting economic reasons for accumulating wealth abroad. Of course, he had been planning to support the state treasury at some point. Linnamèn listened to him carefully. When the baron left, Rafael Gabriel ceased to snore and I emerged from behind a bookshelf, where I had been hiding patiently. After a while, Rafael offered an apt comment:

‘Shit is coming out of every single hole.’

Despite the vulgar wording, we both had to agree. Over the past few days it turned out that each of the inhabitants of the palace had at least one dark secret and knew of a couple more secrets held back by others. Even Pascal showed signs of anxiety and tried to sound me out to see how much the prince knew about his past.

‘Our responsibility is to serve the royal family,’ he whispered when we were alone after the next organisational meeting. ‘Even if such service sometimes requires... exceeding certain limits and boundaries. The kings happen to have strange interests... Glibannèn, for

example, liked to experiment back when his father was king. He used to browse old books and read about the tests that his great-uncle, Ardèn, performed on Inhuman. One day he asked me to help him find certain specimens.'

'You brought... Inhuman to the palace?'

'Hush!' hissed Pascal. 'I was the assistant of the master of ceremony back then. Glibannèn promised me that if I completed the task and remained discreet about it, then I could count on his... favour after he took the throne.'

'So who did you bring here for him?'

'Vampires. Mostly female vampires. He... sometimes invited other people to join in the experiments... When it was over, I removed... the remnants from the palace.'

'Where did you find them?' I asked, trying to contain my disgust.

'Mainly in Kaer-Nort. This is where they kept the Inhuman who were caught after the last cleansing. Most of them held out for only a couple of days. After Kaer-Nort they were exhausted. One of them.... One held out for five weeks. Prince Glibannèn considered her an especially interesting specimen. I know prince Linnamèn doesn't approve of it. It is said that he knows

many Inhuman. I will retire, but I would like him to know that no Inhuman I brought in the palace ever got out alive. None could have harmed his family.'

Linnamèn listened to my account of the conversation with Pascal. All the time, his face was inscrutable. After a long silence, he said:

'Glibannèn was a cruel boy. I can remember that.'

I recalled the late king and his infamous bouts of anger. I was sure that in a couple of years one of them would end in a heart attack.

'This scares you, doesn't it?' asked Rafael. 'All these crimes, sins, forced testimonies, tortured vampire ladies, murdered lovers... Everything these people say.'

'I am much more scared of what they are not telling us,' replied Linnamèn. He stood next to the window and stared into the darkness illuminated here and there by the lanterns of the city covered with snow and sleeping at the foot of the hill.

'Doctor, did Pascal mention that my brother made notes of his experiments?'

'No. He only said that king Glibannèn invited others to join in the experiments.'

'We will have to ask Pascal for more details. I would like to talk to him. There are other things we have to

look into: for example why my father sent Ignatius to Pont-de-Blanc. Or whether Carl Gustav was in Kaer-Nort when Glibannèn was looking for vampires for his experiments...’

‘And what exactly these “experiments” involved,’ added Rafael Gabriel.

‘Unfortunately, I can guess what they were,’ responded Linnamèn. ‘And so can you, doctor, am I right?’

‘Yes. Even before the drastic cleansing started, the church came up with a concept – apparently supported by scientific evidence – that Inhumanen can be converted to the right path and transformed into humans. That they can be treated of vampirism, werewolfishness and other ailments. Whole groups of Inhumanen were subjected to tests and experiments contrary to their nature. Such tests usually ended in death. Sometimes, though, they led to the creation of new species of werewolves or vampires, cross-breeds...’

‘Such as half-vampires,’ said Linnamèn. ‘It is commonly believed that vampires are sterile. It’s true in the case of male vampires, but not so obvious for the females. Sometimes – although it’s extremely rare – they

may get pregnant with people. Such children are at risk of numerous defects, aren't they, doctor?'

'Yes... Half-vampires usually have some defects. They may be more related to vampires, or more similar to people. Some are more immune than others, some may live longer.... But there is no rule for that.'

'Half-vampires were born even before that,' added Linnamèn. 'But in Kaer-Nort it happened more often than anywhere else.'

Our conversation was interrupted by a servant who informed us that Baltasar, the owner of the winery in the Sunny Mountains, had arrived. The count was about seventy. It was widely known that he never left his house in the Sunny Mountains. Although he was well-known and respectable, he usually politely declined all the king's invitations to participate in certain celebrations. He always explained that he devoted his whole life to his winery. Only the information that his wine allegedly caused the death of the royal family managed to drag him out of the Sunny Mountains.

Baltasar calmly listened to my account of the autopsy and other tests. All the time, he stared at me intently with his piercing grey eyes. Then he looked at Linnamèn, gently shook his white hair and said:

‘I personally supervise and control the preparation of the royal wine. Only I have access to the places where it is made. If you believe, my prince, that the wine was poisoned in the winery, there may be no other suspect but me.’

‘Was the process exactly the same twenty five years ago?’ asked Linnamèn.

‘I’ve had this system in my winery for fifty years now,’ replied Baltasar. ‘We are regularly inspected by the palace staff. This is the confirmation.’

Baltasar kept looking at Linnamèn, at the same time handing me over the book he was holding in his hand. I took it from him and showed it to the prince. Next to the date twenty five years ago we saw Pascal’s signature.

‘Do the palace staff have access to the place where the wine is made?’ I asked.

‘Of course,’ replied Baltasar, unmoved.

‘Did you notice anything out of the ordinary during the inspection twenty five years ago?’

‘Even if there was anything out of the ordinary, it can’t have been significant enough for me to remember,’ the man replied dryly.

‘I think this is a “no”,’ whispered Rafael Gabriel.

‘Thank you, count Baltasar, for showing me this register,’ said Linnamèn. ‘I am trying to collect as much information and opinions about my family as I can. Who do you think could have committed this crime?’

It was as if Baltasar heard the first question he didn’t expect, because he faltered slightly.

‘I don’t have any contact with the palace. I only supply the wine. Maybe it was some... political opponent?’

‘We rather suspect it may have been a crime committed for personal reasons.’

‘Twenty five years ago the Sunny Mountains were as quiet as they are today.’

‘One more question. I hope it won’t be a breach of your trade secret. Where do you get the golden chicory you use to make the wine?’

‘Pont-de-Blanc.’

‘Is this on the border with the Eastern Realm?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Has it always been supplied from there?’

‘Yes. My wife was born there. I’ve been buying chicory from her family for ages.’

After much persuasion, Baltasar agreed to stay in the palace for the coronation. We haven't had the opportunity to discuss the conclusions from the information provided by the count, though, because we got further news. Pascal had committed suicide.

At least it looked like one. A maid found him in the meeting room with a revolver in his hand and a large hole in his brain. When I reached the room, Linnamèn was already there. Carl Gustav and Rafael Gabriel joined us a moment later. The prince looked at his confessor and said:

'I think we have stirred up the hornets' nest.'

'This... This is almost like a confession to the crime,' concluded Carl Gustav. 'Pascal can't have had any reason to commit suicide other than remorse. He wasn't sick, he didn't have financial or personal problems...'

'Could you join me here for a while, doctor?' asked Linnamèn, who was now bending over Pascal's body. 'I hope the servants haven't moved the body?'

A pale maid, whose name I could not remember, although she often helped me in the infirmary, was hiding in the corner. Now she shook her fair hair.

‘Correct me if I’m wrong, doctor, but a shot from such a short distance should have left visible traces of gunpowder around the entry wound, right?’

I inspected the wound, trying to avoid the stare of Pascal’s dead, fish-like eyes. There were no signs of gunpowder around the entry wound or near the much more hideous exit wound. However, Pascal’s fingers were clenched on the grip of the revolver.

‘He couldn’t have done it himself ,’I said after a while. ‘Whoever shot him must have been standing a few metres away and slightly behind him, judging by the angle at which the bullet hit the skull.’

Linnamèn shifted his gaze to the table.

‘The blood traces are all wrong,’ he said.

And he was right. In the place where blood had splashed along with the pieces of Pascal’s brain and skull we could see a small rectangular spot of clean surface on the table.

‘Something was lying here,’ said Carl Gustav. Linnamèn and I exchanged glances. We knew what it could have been.

‘We are not behaving properly,’ resumed Linnamèn. ‘Our faithful servant is dead and we didn’t even let Rafael Gabriel to say a relevant prayer.’

Rafael Gabriel stood up straight and started to wail a mourning anthem in its ancient form with numerous stanzas – in his deep, sonorous voice. Linnamèn and I assumed the traditional posture for prayer, but Carl Gustav frowned slightly and whispered to the prince:

‘Please forgive me, but I have to start preparing for the investigation. I will return after the prayers.’

Linnamèn nodded gently. Rafael Gabriel kept wailing until Carl Gustav’s steps faded away in the corridor. Then, the prince addressed Pascal’s maid:

‘Did baron Pascal receive any guests this evening?’

The maid pointed to her throat.

‘Johanna is mute,’ I said, suddenly remembering her name.

‘Since birth?’ asked the prince and the girl nodded.

‘Can you write?’ Johanna shook her head, looking at Linnamèn. Her gaze expressed absolutely nothing, not even fear that seemed to be proved by her pallor.

‘Were you with baron Pascal this evening?’ asked the prince. The girl nodded.

‘All the time?’

It turned out that Pascal sent her away nearly an hour ago. He was restless, didn’t want to eat his supper

and said he was waiting to meet with the prince. The girl didn't know about any other meeting, and yet when asked by Linnamèn, she admitted that when she was leaving the meeting room, she heard Pascal talk to someone.

'Who was it?' asked Linnamèn.

The maid hesitated for a while and then looked at me meaningfully.

'You are wrong!' I bridled, trying not to notice the interested gaze of the prince and Rafael Gabriel, who muttered 'But doctor!'. 'I was in my office. I didn't visit Pascal this evening. I talked to him a few hours back and told him that the prince would come to see him later on.'

'Doctor Søren speaks with the Portes-des-Noires accent,' Linnamèn addressed Johanna again. 'Could the visitor have been someone else, someone speaking with the same accent?'

The girl thought for a moment. Suddenly, a glimpse of interest shone in her eyes. She nodded firmly and I felt deeply relieved.

'Well, that would narrow down the list of suspects to a few dozen people,' said Rafael ironically.

Linnamèn asked Johanna about the object that could have lain on the table when Pascal died. The maid

admitted that it was a red booklet. When asked directly whether she knew its content, Johanna replied with an indignant stare. The prince dropped the subject.

‘I can see you’ve been a member of the palace staff since you were born,’ he said looking at the bright red band around the girl’s shoulder. This symbol meant that Johanna was one of the orphans – children abandoned at the palace gate immediately after birth. Although this practice was often criticised, one of the customs in Nort was to take in the orphans and teach them to work in the palace.

‘Have you always served Pascal?’

The girl nodded and I added:

‘Johanna also served lord Ethelred and she also helps me in the infirmary.’

Linnamèn asked:

‘Was baron Pascal a good master?’

Johanna nodded.

‘How about lord Ethelred?’

Johanna raised her eyes and stared at the prince for a long while in a way that many would consider far too bold. Linnamèn clearly found the answer he was looking for in her face. He seemed to consider another question, but quickly changed his mind.

‘Rafael, please take Johanna to the dining room and give her something to boost her strength,’ he said eventually. ‘She is very pale.’

‘Come on, girl,’ said Rafael embracing Johanna with his long arm. His torn habit caught the girl’s hair. Before she left, the girl cast one more intrigued look at Linnamèn.

The next two days passed in a great havoc. Carl Gustav started his brutal investigation trying to find Pascal’s murderer. The palace staff kept trying to hide any information related to the death of the master of ceremony due to the pending preparations for the coronation. The delegates from Lid-ur, Arken and Drei came for the funeral and stayed until the ceremony. A few more guests arrived now: from the Easter Realm came the minister of foreign affairs, Ornea sent the head of the parliament and Ingmar decided to delegate princess regent herself, which came as a great surprise especially due to the differences between the citizens of that country and the Nortans. The members of the delegation from Ingmar were used to much warmer climate and their lifestyle was generally much more liberal than that of the Nortans. They quickly started to freeze and soon got bored. In

other circumstances such situation would inevitably lead to further conflicts between Ingmarians and Nortans. Fortunately, princess Liln managed to keep her subjects under control with surprising ease and the member of her court did not dare to disrespect the atmosphere of mourning in Nort.

Rafael Gabriel also added to the unbearably tense atmosphere, as he drank more than usual and behaved outrageously. His latest way of annoying people was pulling the hair of those he happened to meet. The royal confessor usually employed the same strategy: intoxicated and gazed, he hung on his victim and stealthily pulled a few hairs, which he then hid in his habit.

In Carl Gustav's investigation one accusation followed another. Linnamèn initially dealt with each theory offered by the head of the secret police calmly and quickly, but in the end he lost his patience. This is when it was indeed confirmed that the prince could easily vanish from the sight of those he didn't want to meet. Sometimes for a few long hours nobody knew where Linnamèn was. However, he continued to fulfil his duties also towards foreign guests. Whenever he had a spare minute or two, he tiptoed silently around

the palace like a cat, engrossed in his own thoughts, unnoticed by anyone.

Two days after Pascal's death, Carl Gustav questioned Johanna once again. Later on this evening the girl disappeared. I searched for Linnamèn, to inform him and – to my surprise – I managed to find him, or I should rather say: he let me find him in the lecturing room. I sighed with relief when I saw him sitting on the pulpit in front of the boards. The room was dark – the only lighter spot was where the prince was sitting.

'Johanna has disappeared,' I said.

Linnamèn only nodded his head.

'Have you been expecting this?'

'I've been expecting that she will be in a grave danger.'

'So... You've removed her from the palace,' I guessed.

'But we still don't know who killed the royal family.'

'This should be obvious by now,' said Linnamèn calmly. 'The culprit has confessed.'

Utter surprise must have shown on my face, because the prince looked at me with amusement. Soon, however, he got serious.

'I think it's time to reveal the truth. I would like you to join me. And I hope if push comes to shove, you

will do what is right,' he said as if he wanted to draw my attention to the hidden meaning of his words. 'Doing the right thing may be incredibly difficult,' he added after a while. 'When I learnt what had happened here, I felt sad because I would have to go back here, rather than because I lost my relatives.'

'The youngest children of the last wives usually don't have to think whether they would become the rulers of Nort. They have many older brothers and sisters, who come ahead of them in the line for the throne,' I noted.

'Still, we are brought up so that we know what is right. I adored my father,' he added unexpectedly. 'Now I don't agree with many of his opinions, but...' he broke off. 'Once he told me I would not be a politician and I took it to heart. I'm no politician.'

'But you can still become king.'

He didn't answer. After a while he asked me to help him prepare a meeting which was to be held in the meeting room, where Pascal recently died. He didn't reveal his plan to me, so I could only guess why he wanted the medical magnifying glass in the room and why he asked me to invite a few lords and priests that were previously not linked to his investigation.

As the prince wished, we came to the meeting room late at night. When I arrived, Linnamèn and Rafael Gabriel were placing the magnifying glass and folded narrow strips of fabric on the new table (the old one was discarded). Each strip of fabric had a label attached with a name. Finally, Linnamèn put the red booklet on the table – I saw he placed it exactly in the same spot, where the rectangular clean surface was found among the drops of blood after Pascal’s death. I was curious whether it was the same booklet as the one that Johanna said Pascal had with him on the day he died. If so, I wondered how Linnamèn managed to retrieve it. I thought the killer had taken it.

The prince asked me to stand behind the magnifying glass.

‘Thanks to Rafael Gabriel,’ he said ‘we managed to collect an impressive sample.’

Having said this, he started distributing the pieces of fabric and I noticed there was a hair in each of them. I slowly started to understand.

‘Let’s start with mine,’ announced Linnamèn and pulled one dark hair from his head. ‘You will have some reference.’

I put the hair on the stand under the glass and looked at it for a while.

‘It’s definitely a human hair,’ I concluded.

‘What a relief,’ smiled Rafael Gabriel. Linnamèn handed me another hair, having retrieved it from the first piece of fabric. This one was also human. So was the second, third and fourth hair. When I saw the fifth hair, I hesitated. A few pieces of this puzzle suddenly popped in the right place.

‘Does it mean that...’ I started, but never had the opportunity to finish, as the door to the room suddenly opened and a most unexpected guest appeared – the princess regent from Ingmar. She was alone, without her guards.

I leaped up and she only offered a tiny smile, seeing the astonishment on our faces. Her emerald dress rustled quietly with every move.

‘I thought you could do with an objective witness from abroad,’ she spoke excellent Nortan, with a slight Ingmarian accent and melody. ‘Due to the difficult relations between Nort and Ingmar, I believe my testimony will be considered impartial and reliable.’

The prince opened his mouth to protest, but she didn’t let him say a word. She looked at him seriously and quickly added:

‘I wasn’t there at the funeral of your family, your highness. Now at least I could help. Yes, I do realise it may be risky and the Ingmarian congressmen will probably not appreciate it. Is this what you wanted to say?’

‘I didn’t, your highness,’ Linnamèn lied smoothly.

‘Of course you did,’ she replied. When she was smiling, it was easy to forget her prominent function. At times, she looked just like a young girl would.

‘We will be honoured if you join us, your highness,’ said Linnamèn at last. ‘Doctor, could you please look through the door? I suspect you will find a couple of nervous Ingmarian guards there. If you could please invite them to come in.’

Princess Liln’s guards were not so much nervous as irritated. The regent also seemed to be able to disappear whenever she wanted. Soon the invited guests started to arrive: apart from lord Ang and lord John and the bishops – Immanuel and Anthony – also count Baltasar, Carl Gustav and Ignatius. All of them greeted the princess regent of Ingmar with considerable confusion.

Linnamèn took the chair where Pascal sat two of days before. Rafael Gabriel sat on his right and I took

the chair to the left. All the others sat opposite. The prince looked at the faces of his guests for a while and then said:

‘Over the past few weeks I’ve been thinking of what I would do if I discovered the identity of the person who killed my family. In another country, I thought, it would be easy: law enforcement authorities would take care of this. But in Nort the king is the law. However, even in Nort nobody believes that the injured party may offer a fair judgment to the guilty person. Do I have a right to judge the murderer of my relatives then? Then I understood that someone who poisoned the sunny wine twenty five years ago must have been asking himself the same questions. Injured by the royal family, he wondered whether he had the right to judge and punish them. He therefore gave himself – and my family – a lot of time. Maybe he hoped he would come to terms with his loss. And maybe he thought the royal family would make amends for the past. At any time during the twenty-five years could he prevent the tragedy. When we worked on the profile of the killer along with doctor Søren and Rafael Gabriel, we didn’t consider one thing – that it might have been a person struggling with themselves

and losing the fight, as the suffering was too much to imagine.'

'There was nothing noble in Pascal's murder, my prince,' Carl Gustav interrupted quietly.

'I'm not talking about Pascal's murderer,' replied Linnamèn.

'Don't you think it was the same person?' asked bishop Immanuel.

'Definitely,' said the prince. 'It appeared so from the very beginning. What we see here are two completely different styles. Whereas the murder of my family was planned long ago and executed with utmost patience, Pascal's killer was acting in fear. I don't think the murderer of my relatives was afraid of anything at all.'

'It all started,' Linnamèn resumed after a short break 'twenty-five years ago. We have recently heard a lot about the events that took place back then. From the beginning we could have suspected that some of them are in fact related, but we didn't know exactly how. Pascal's death removed all doubt. On the day he died, Pascal was planning to tell me more about the experiments performed by my brother, Glibannèn, a quarter of a century ago. Pascal knew who participated

in these underhand dealings and where the late king kept the notes from the experiments,' now all the eyes turned to the red booklet. Linnamèn put his hand on it. 'There was no doubts that whoever killed Pascal above all wanted to protect themselves. Since the booklet with the notes had disappeared from the room, I guessed that Pascal's killer was one of the people who participated in the so called experiments and didn't want me to discover this fact. What you see here is a copy of Glibannèn's notes. I believe that the killer, who has destroyed the original, knew nothing of its existence.'

There was a slight commotion in the room.

'Are we sure that the copy is exactly the same as the original?' asked Carl Gustav.

'That's right,' added bishop Ignatius. 'The copy might be false. Maybe someone tampered with it, in order to accuse innocent people?'

'I don't think so,' Linnamèn replied calmly. 'Pascal's maid, Johanna, may confirm that before his death, the baron made an exact copy of the notes and hid it, anticipating the danger.'

'Since when have the noble lords of Nort had faith in the words of a servant orphan? Let me remind you

that this orphan fled from the palace, fearing that her lies may be exposed,' bridled Ignatius. Bishop Anthony and lord Ang only smiled and nodded.

'I think you should have a closer look at the notes,' said the prince in a cold voice. 'Maybe it would refresh your memory, especially as regards the events that took place in the cellars of the northern wing?'

'There were no experiments in the cellars of the northern wing!' cried the bishop.

'Ha, they were performed elsewhere, though, weren't they? And you know it, because you were there.'

'I didn't...' Ignatius looked as if he were out of breath. He looked around and whatever he saw in the faces of the others incited him even further. 'What do you want?' he asked loudly. 'Glibannèn was the crown prince, heir to the throne. Everybody did what he demanded. Pascal brought female vampires to the palace and the prince performed his experiments... Once he wanted a priest to help him perform the ancient ritual of Nortan female exorcism...'

'This criminal procedure was prohibited by international law one hundred years ago,' said Liln quietly, staring at Ignatius in disgust.

‘Your highness, as a foreigner unfamiliar with the genuine faith you have no right to voice your opinions in the matter that is only for the God to decide,’ Ignatius replied proudly.

‘You have said enough,’ stated Linnamèn in a calm yet angry voice that made everybody’s blood run cold. Bishop Immanuel later said that it was at this moment that he heard the voice of the late king Aribannèn speaking with the prince’s mouth.

Linnamèn pushed the red booklet towards Ignatius. It smoothly slid along the table.

‘I didn’t expect it would be so easy, bishop,’ he said.

Ignatius took the booklet with his trembling hands and started to browse it with increasing panic. His fingers touched only empty pages.

‘There is nothing inside,’ said lord John. ‘There was no copy, was there? How did you know it was Ignatius...?’

‘I had no proof, but all the circumstantial evidence pointed to the bishop,’ said Linnamèn, while Ignatius slowly slid down the chair. ‘Johanna confirmed that immediately before his death, Pascal had a guest – someone speaking with the Portes-des-Noires accent. It must have been someone who had a lot to lose. Apart

from doctor Søren, the only such person was bishop Ignatius. Johanna corroborated my suspicions when I talked to her for the first time. A single suggestion was enough for her to realise who her master was talking to, but she was clever enough not to admit it. She knew the more she said, the more risk she would be exposed to. It was obvious Ignatius would also try to kill her.'

'Is this why she fled?' asked bishop Immanuel.

'She didn't flee. I needed to know what she knew, but at the same time I wanted to keep her safe,' Linnamèn looked at the princess regent.

'Johanna will now be reaching Ingmar,' explained Liln. 'I sent her away along with my entourage as soon as the prince had asked me to.'

'Ensuring Johanna's safety was all the more important, because she was the next link in the chain of events,' continued Linnamèn. 'We must again go back to what was happening in the palace twenty five years ago. I believe that the king must have heard of my brother's experiments at some point. This was something my father would not tolerate. He spent all his youth fighting Inhuman, but for him it was a sacred fight, which he pursued for religious reasons. His vision didn't

encompass mindless cruelty and depravity. What my brother was doing must have seemed dishonourable and foul to my father. Tormenting weak female vampires was never part of our family ethos. This was also the reason why bishop Ignatius was sent away to Pont-de-Blanc. It was supposed to be the punishment for helping my brother engage in activities not fit for the future king. I also suspect...' Linnamèn hesitated. 'I also suspect that at that time Glibannèn lost my father's sympathy and support, although the king never wanted to remove him from the line to the throne.'

'Pascal has betrayed us,' Ignatius whispered suddenly. 'I could never prove it, but this is the only way to explain why he wasn't removed from the court immediately.'

'I think you're right here,' admitted Linnamèn. 'Pascal was terrified with what was going on. He was afraid to oppose Glibannèn, but at the same time he felt as if he were betraying the king. Pascal must have faced a breakthrough – something must have happened that prompted him to reveal the truth. I think it must have been when Glibannèn got his "interesting specimen". This is the phrase Pascal used when talking to doctor Søren.'

Bishop Ignatius raised his head and there was a glimpse of understanding in his eyes.

‘Johanna,’ he whispered, and when Linnamèn nodded, he continued, ‘But he was supposed to...’

‘Kill her, that’s right. That was the limit that Pascal could not exceed. When talking to doctor Søren, he admitted that most “specimens” did not survive the experiments for more than a couple of days. But one female vampire was different. She held out for five weeks. It was long enough for Glibannèn to subject her to a whole series of tortures. And long enough for her to have a baby. Vampires’ pregnancy lasts from three to six weeks. I presume the vampire did not survive the labour. She must have been too exhausted. But the baby survived. Glibannèn must have been planning to perform further experiments on the child, but there was a problem – at first sight, the girl showed no vampire features whatsoever. Besides, she was his own daughter. He couldn’t torture her, so he ordered Pascal to kill her and remove her just like all the other “remnants”, as they called it. However, Pascal could not kill a child, especially that it looked human. He informed the king of the “experiments” and then he left Johanna at the palace

gates. There was nothing to point to her vampire origin. Apart from her muteness, of course – that was her only vampire defect. On the other hand, the fact that she was mute made it easier to believe that she was abandoned by her parents, who apparently didn't want to bring up a disabled daughter. This, however, was when Pascal lied to the king – I believe he said the baby did not survive.

'Pascal can't have known that he held the key to solving the mystery behind the death of my relatives. He may not have considered it important that the female vampire he brought to Glibannèn lived as long as five weeks. And the implications were rather obvious; it was enough to look at her child, who looked one hundred percent human,' Linnamèn showed the pieces of fabric lying on the table. 'The easiest way to check whether someone has vampire genes is to examine their hair. This method is frequently used in the Eastern Realm. A few minutes ago I showed doctor Søren a sample of Johanna's hair.'

'Her hair was not human,' I said. 'But the deviation is minor.'

'She's not a pure-blood vampire after all...' said Liln. 'Are you suggesting that the deviations are so negligible that she's not even a half-vampire?'

‘A quarter-vampire at most,’ I replied.

‘Johanna’s mother was not a vampire,’ explained Linnamèn. ‘She was highly resistant to silver and light, she quickly got pregnant... I think she wasn’t even a half-vampire. She was unfortunate in that her ancestor’s features, which were previously hidden in her family, were manifested in her. Some half-vampires cannot be distinguished from humans; they are fully assimilated in our society and then it turns out their children or grandchildren not only look, but also behave like pure-blood vampires. Johanna’s mother came from a respectable family. She was the daughter of an assimilated half-vampire, who was hiding his true identity. Her nature, though, was hard to contain. I suppose one day she must have escaped, but since she was kept in hiding all her life, she was unable to protect herself from danger. She was caught by the Nortan border guards and brought to Kaer-Nort, where Pascal found her and brought her to the palace. He was the next link in the chain of events. Although he didn’t kill my relatives, he unwittingly played his part in this crime. The greatest problem, however, was to discover how the members of the royal family were killed. When it turned out that the cause

of their death was nephritite, finding the murderer was just a matter of time. This method had one particular advantage – it was hard to detect. At the same time, the method, once discovered, immediately pointed to the perpetrator. Anyway, the perpetrator didn't really care much about remaining anonymous. He chose this method, because from his point of view it was the most effective.'

Linnamèn turned to count Baltasar, who stared back at him calmly.

'When you said there may be no other suspect but you, it was a confession. I could actually also add your wife, who – thanks to her contacts in the Eastern Realm – helped you obtain unregistered nephritite.'

'My wife died ten years ago,' replied the count.

Linnamèn took another hair sample and placed it in front of me.

'What will doctor Søren find when he looks at your hair through the glass?'

Count Baltasar smiled with what could be regarded as joy.

'Your highness, you know the answer to this question.'

‘You’ve been successfully hiding for many years. You pretended to be a loner, whereas the real reason why you were unwilling to leave the Sunny Mountains was you vampire defect,’ Linnamèn cast a meaningful glance at Baltasar’s white hair. ‘Right now, of course, it doesn’t matter anymore. At your age, white hair is only natural. But before, especially at a time when the cleansing was drawing to a close, such colour of hair in a young man could be suspicious. Therefore, you stayed in the Sunny Mountains with your wife and daughter...’

‘Her name was Anhela,’ said count Baltasar. ‘When she was born, we immediately knew we will never be able to show her to the world. She was wonderful, it’s hard to imagine a more intelligent child. However, she grew up too fast. She couldn’t understand the threats awaiting her outside. We were going to send her away to Ingmar. On the border, she and her fellow travellers were attacked by highwaymen. Her nature manifested itself spontaneously – she killed the assailants.’

‘You didn’t realise what had happened, until Pascal came to the Sunny Mountains for a regular inspection, did you?’

‘Pascal... he wasn’t much of a drinker. Besides, he had guilty conscience. From fragments of his drunken

gibberish I inferred enough to suppose that Anhela was seized by Glibannèn. Although she was subjected to lengthy tortures, she never revealed her origin, she was trying to protect me. Pascal didn't even realise how much I wanted to sprain his neck on the spot. But it was not him, but that butcher Glibannèn who killed my child. And you,' count Baltasar cast a hateful glance at Ignatius, who instantly trembled, 'You helped him.'

'Over twenty five years, as the wine matured, you closely watched the life of the royal family. You knew, for example, that Ethelred would not swallow nephritite. You needed another way to reach him. This is again where Johanna came in. Contrary to what she said, when she served Pascal, she learnt to read and write and she read Glibannèn's notes. She quickly guessed who her parents were. It is she who helped you kill Ethelred, all the more willingly, as she had previously been abused by him quite often.'

'I've known for years that I have a granddaughter. Johanna was able to combine the elements that Pascal couldn't grasp. In Glibannèn's notes she found the information that allowed her to determine where her mother may have come from. Then she wrote a very moving letter to me...'

‘And if you ever had any doubts about your revenge, the knowledge of what happened to your granddaughter removed all of them. You told her about your plans. Johanna often helped doctor Søren in the infirmary, so she had access to white coriander. She could easily perform the injection that killed Ethelred.’

‘What we have not foreseen was that you wouldn’t drink the wine.’

‘Isn’t this why you came?’ Linnamèn asked calmly.

Count Baltasar sat motionless and a wavering smile appeared on his face. Everybody held their breath and the guards of princess Liln moved strategically to stand on either side of their ruler.

‘I do regret,’ said the count after a long while. ‘I do regret you were not the eldest child of the late king. I’ve been waiting for someone like you. Anhela was my beloved daughter. I do regret you were the beloved son of the late king Aribannèn.’

Saying the last words, Baltasar raised his eyes and looked at Linnamèn. I should have expected what was about to happen. The old wine manufacturer shot up from his chair, leaped on the table and grabbed Ignatius with a movement so swift that it was barely noticeable.

Before the echo of the snapped neck faded and the bishop started to slide under the table, Baltasar reached for Linnamèn – I saw the black claw of his right hand approach the prince's neck. The guards didn't even manage to draw their swords and the lords and bishops hardly began to open their mouth to scream.

Next thing I saw was a red rectangle of pulsating flames, which disappeared as soon as I felt my muscles move automatically and with precision. I jumped between Linnamèn and Baltasar. The surprised count lost his impetus. Together, with the speed that must have been too great for the others to observe the sequence of movements, we hit the opposite wall. The window we slammed against broke into a thousand of pieces, although it was made of the thickest glass and we fell down into the blackness of the night. I took advantage of the moment of surprise and before we fell on the slope covered with hardened snow, I sunk my teeth in Baltasar's neck. What seemed like an infinite moment later – although in fact it must have been only seconds – Rafael Gabriel appeared from among the tiny, slowly falling, sharp snowflakes. Having shed his clogs, he ran barefoot through the ice to reach the place where I clung

to the count. Baltasar's eyes narrowed as the royal silver dagger held by Rafael pierced his side.

'Let go, Søren,' said the prince who appeared next to me a moment later. 'The silver that is killing him may be harmful also for you.'

I let go. From the corner of my eye I saw Carl Gustav approaching along with the lords and princess Liln and her guards. Linnamèn bent over count Baltasar and said:

'I promise that you are the last Inhuman to die under the Nortan law.'

I'm not sure Baltasar heard these words. Maybe a while before or a moment after he drew his last breath. I turned and saw princess Liln, who took off her cape and covered the count's body.

A long time passed before the situation got back to normal. The bodies of count Baltasar and Ignatius were carried to the cellars and taken care of by Rafael Gabriel. They couldn't be buried in the palace, but Linnamèn agreed that each of them may be buried in the place they held close to their hearts – for Ignatius it was the cathedral in Portes-des-Noires, and for Baltasar – his property in the Sunny Mountains. Carl Gustav was devastated. He

immediately offered a spoken resignation from his positions as the head of the security police. Linnamèn accepted his resignation without a moment of hesitation, but he asked Carl to remain close to the palace – he claimed he would like to entrust him with certain duties in the fortress of Kaer-Nort, which was about to change its purpose and character. Then, Linnamèn talked to princess Liln, bishops Anthony and Immanuel, lord Ang and lord John for a long while. He clearly indicated that there must be no lies about what had happened in the meeting room.

‘I don’t understand,’ said lord Ang. ‘Do you want the whole country to learn that the late king pursued morally questionable activities in his youth and was accompanied by one of the highest ranking bishops?’

‘I want everybody to know that I don’t share my brother’s views and that such individuals as Ignatius won’t be tolerated.’

‘And what about Johanna?’ asked bishop Anthony. ‘She did kill lord Ethelred. She should be convicted.’

‘Yes, she killed Ethelred. But at the same time, she is my only living relative. I can’t convict my own niece. If you please,’ he now addressed princess Liln, ‘I would like Johanna to remain in Ingmar for some time.’

The princess regent nodded.

‘I talked to her. She has suffered here more than you can imagine. I think she has repented for her sins,’ said Liln and no more was said about it, although the lords didn’t seem convinced.

‘There is still the issue of...’ lord Ang looked at me knowingly.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Linnamèn replied coldly.

Lord Ang wanted to add something, but he remained silent, intimidated by the prince’s stare. When all the discussions were over, Linnamèn and I went to my office. Count Baltasar had left a memento on his shoulder – a thin scratch.

‘You will have a nasty black scar here for the rest of your life.’

Linnamèn only smiled.

‘Since when have you known... about me?’ I asked putting on the dressing on the wound.

‘Since we went to the cellars together. You were marvellous in pretending you were cold, but you could never make your breath turn into little clouds of steam as you spoke. The insensitivity to low temperatures was

doubled with the lack of hair, so rarely seen in people of your age...’

‘Yes, this is my vampire defect,’ I admitted.

‘You studied in Ingmar and Inhuman receive equal treatment there. I guess your parents must have smuggled you through the border when you were young. After some time, when you returned to Nort, you learnt to speak with the Portes-des-Noires accent, which resembles the Ingmarian speech. I only wonder why you came back to the country that was still dangerous for you.’

‘I suppose this inexplicable fact made you keep an eye on me.’

‘At the beginning, you were one of the prime suspects. A half-vampire working as a court physician... I couldn’t quite grasp your intentions.’

‘Is this why you had Rafael Gabriel search my office?’

‘Yes. So? Why did you choose Nort?’

I lingered with my reply, as I finished dressing the wound. Linnamèn looked at me questioningly. He was genuinely intrigued, and I derived a strange pleasure from the fact that there was something he didn’t know.

‘With all due respect, your highness, but I’d rather not answer this question,’ I said. ‘Just as you won’t tell me why you didn’t drink the sunny wine.’

Linnamèn smiled widely and shook my hand.

‘One more thing,’ I added. ‘You knew that Baltasar will attempt to kill you. The only rescue you could count on was the presence of another half-vampire who would be on your side and may possibly have sufficient skills to overpower the count. How could you be sure I would come out?’

‘Frankly speaking, I could also hope that Baltasar would give up his intention to kill,’ the prince replied seriously. ‘And you are right, I took the risk. I didn’t know how you would react. I chose to hope for the best, though. I think, doctor, that Glibannèn did me a great favour when he hired you years ago.’

Linnamèn’s coronation took place five days later. Although various rumours were repeated in the palace and foreign delegations were soon to distribute the news about the dramatic events in Nort, the ceremony proceeded without any problems. Linnamèn received the royal insignia from bishop Immanuel, just like his brother Glibannèn did twenty years before and just like his father, Aribannèn, was

crowned by bishop Clarence thirty-six years back. Only the empty place on his side – which should traditionally be occupied by the eldest representative of the family, an uncle or a great-uncle – reminded us of the way the prince got the throne. Soon, however, this sad detail was overlooked, because in the key moment of the ceremony, this visible gap was filled by princess Liln, who – drawing on the ancient Nortan tradition – stood behind Linnamèn’s back and when bishop Immanuel was putting the crown on his head, she placed her hand on the prince’s shoulder. This noble gesture was long remembered and the politicians even used it to predict a turn in Nortan-Ingmarian relations.

‘Look at how she has grown up,’ Rafael Gabriel whispered in my ear, looking at Liln. ‘She is no longer that intelligent fourteen-year-old that Linnamèn helped get out of an embarrassing situation three years ago.’

‘I didn’t realise they’ve met before,’ I said.

‘Maybe someday one of them will tell you this story, doc. For me it’s a bit too sad. And will be even more so with each passing day.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked sarcastically, irritated at his understatement. ‘Have you suddenly discovered a gift of prophecy?’

The royal confessor laughed silently and looked at me as if I had unwittingly said an excellent joke.

‘You have an amazing sense of humour for a half-vampire. Ingmar and Nort are like fire and water, like black and white, like the male and the female, like democratic and theocratic monarchy. In this situation each friendship, even the strongest, may be put to the test,’ he finally said. I didn’t even bother to comment on his homespun wisdom.

Paradoxically, it was Rafael Gabriel who experienced a great transition – seemingly overnight – and surprised us the most. Only yesterday evening the drunk confessor was the nightmare of those who organised the ceremony, especially that this time, due to his function, he could not be hidden among the crown of courtiers and guests. However, it turned out that all these fears were groundless. Next morning Rafael Gabriel was radiant: his new clean habit gleamed with a delicate shade of ash grey. The confessor stood tall during the ceremony and most of the time he was visible from the distance, as he took the place near the king. Rafael Gabriel not only looked, but also behaved impeccably. Both during the ceremony and during the feast that followed he attracted

the stares of all those who had the opportunity to meet him before.

‘Rafael Gabriel will always remain a riddle to me,’ I replied when the king observed that I was staring at his confessor.

‘He used to be an angel,’ explained Linnamèn with a smile.

At first I didn’t understand it, but I soon realised the king wasn’t joking. He said it as if he were confiding a secret to me.

‘Did he?’ I asked. ‘Is it possible to stop being an angel?’

‘It’s complicated and I think Rafael Gabriel himself doesn’t really understand why it happened to him. Although he is human now, I believe he won’t always be so.’

‘Who will he become then?’

Linnamèn thought for a while and eventually replied:

‘Rafael Gabriel is roaming the world for a reason. Maybe the reason is that he has to decide what he wants to be. Whenever I talk to him about it, he claims this is the problem we all have to face and then he tells me to bugger off.’

When a couple of hours later Rafael Gabriel followed the tradition and handed a goblet of the sunny wine – this one was not from Nort, but imported from the Eastern Realm – to the king without spilling a single drop, Linnamèn smiled gently. He downed the wine without a moment of hesitation, thus completing the last rite. The pale sun was hiding behind the horizon and cast a cool light on the hills when prince Linnamèn became king of Nort.

THE END

 *back to gamebook*

Magdalena Kempna

THE SHERIFF OF ERIND

translation:

Maria Jaszczurowska

 *back to gamebook*

The Erind Prefecture was famous all over the Eastern Kingdom, but such fame could hardly be a reason for pride. This region was commonly regarded as the most sunken province and a godforsaken place where periphery loses its noble name, culture and civilization reach the zero level and middle of nowhere seems like the city centre. The darkest point of this commonly despised region was the inn, which – just like all the inhabitants of Erind – had its better and worse days. On better days it functioned like a sordid liquor store; on worse days it became a regular barrelhouse. It was a place so dingy that it didn't even deserve a name on its own and the men who used to sit there would willingly have gone somewhere else, had it not been for the fact that the inn was right in the middle of a wasteland and the weather was whimsical in this area. No woman was allowed to enter the inn for fear of having her name dragged through muck and mire, and since earnings in Erind were not attractive even for the cheapest whores the inn soon became a harbour for lonesome, desperate, grim men, tired of life. Travellers usually steered clear of this place.

It had been raining for three days and nights, when a monk appeared at the inn. Outside the rain was pouring. The night was not only pitch-black, but also wet as ink. When the door opened with a loud bang

and a hooded figure appeared, all the eyes, torn away from glum reflection for a while, turned towards the entrance. The monk rolled inside, dragging his feet in old wooden clogs. Water kept pouring from his shoes – it was dark, nearly black, either because the monk had stepped in the mud, or because the rain had washed away the slime and mud that accumulated there for the past few weeks. Shaking off the raindrops like a giant, thin dog, the monk slid the hood back and in the deafening silence, not heeding the hostile looks, he staggered almost joyfully towards the bar, or should we say, a long, crooked table, dirty by default.

‘We don’t serve strangers here,’ barked the bartender from under the moustache.

‘Do you serve your friends’ friends?’ asked the monk and tossed a few gold coins on the counter. ‘I bet you know this one here,’ he pointed to the profile on one of the coins. ‘Don’t you?’

‘Pour him something, Jinx,’ said some voice from the back of the dark chamber. ‘I think I know the guy. This is Rafael Gabriel, a vagabond preacher, he drops by once a year and whatever he collects for his convent, he will immediately spend on booze.’

A murmur sounded in the room, as if to prove that other guests of the inn also remembered the monk.

‘Thank you, brother Aaron, for these fine credentials,’ mumbled Rafael Gabriel with a smile, raising the beer mug filled with the golden, foaming liquid he received from Jinx.

Everybody carefully watched as the monk drank the whole content of the mug in one long sip, without even batting an eyelid. When he was done, he wiped his mouth on a sleeve of his habit and said:

‘The taste and smell of urine are hardly noticeable. I guess this is the best beer in this part of Erind.’

The bartender was opening his mouth to retort, when the monk tossed another handful of coins on the table and said:

‘A round of drinks for everyone!’

The satisfied murmur effectively silenced the bartender, who started to fill the glasses and mugs with beer.

‘Where are you heading, priest?’ asked Aaron, sitting behind the bar and slurping the beer, covering his thick beard with foam. Judging by the look of it, beer foam wasn’t the only thing that recently soaked the

beard. Looking at it, one could only hope than Aaron, who was a shepherd, took better care of his sheep than of his own image.

‘To Ingmar.’

‘Good luck with that,’ laughed a fat man with thinning hair, accompanied by three younger fat guys, probably his sons. ‘Ingmarians hate priests as much as they love screwing whatever comes by. You won’t even get enough money for a single beer.’

‘I guess I have a problem then, don’t I, Kinx?’ replied Rafael, swaying lightly, as if the second beer had reduced his strength. ‘But I still think you have a bigger problem.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Aaron quickly, casting a wary look at Rafael.

‘Three days ago I visited the prefect of Erind. He told me about your lot, you bumpkins. He said how you ride your poor hackneys to death, drink all day and all night, beat your wives and won’t send your kids to school. And that you killed your sheriff.’

The whole inn lapsed into nervous silence.

‘What’ya saying, you stupid priest,’ screeched the tiny, thin human hiding behind Kinx’s back. ‘Our sheriff is alive. He’s here,’ the bag of bones pointed to

his companion, nearly as thin and long-legged as Rafael Gabriel.

‘Correct me if I’m wrong, but this is the young Olinx, the deputy sheriff,’ replied Rafael, narrowing his eyes – one green, the other one blue – as if he had problems with sight. ‘And he should be looking for the killer rather than sit here.’

‘Shut up, priest,’ barked Olinx.

‘My friend,’ said Rafael Gabriel in a cool, almost sober voice. ‘I’m not your problem, as you will soon discover. Prefect Ekatelinx is sending prince Linnamèn here.’

Olinx dropped his jaw. A murmur sounded in the room.

‘Why would the respectable prefect share his plans with a foreign drunkard like you?’ asked Aaron, digging his thick fingers in his beard.

‘He didn’t,’ replied Rafael Gabriel, looking back into his beer mug. ‘Everybody in Pal-Erind knows that. The prefect didn’t make any secret out of it. He’s happy that soon he will solve the issue that is a stain on his honour.’

‘Honour, my ass!’ huffed Jinx. ‘The prefect doesn’t give a damn about us ever since he got the office. He

doesn't know how we live here. If he thinks some Nortan dandy will do something about it, he's more daft than I thought. Hope he won't be surprised when Linnamèn comes back in a few pieces.'

'Yeah, he will have to assemble him like a children's puzzle, to see if we returned all the pieces, before he sends him back to Nort,' laughed the bag of bones.

'Klitalinx is eager to try his hand with him,' Kinx showed his yellow teeth in a nasty grin, and Klitalinx replied with a screeching giggle.

'The prefect expects you to think this way,' said Rafael Gabriel gravely, although his head was strongly shaking on top of his long neck. 'He thinks such country bumpkins don't know the first thing about the world, they can't read or write and they don't talk to strangers. How would they know that Linnamèn had done in Kalind?'

'And what did Linnamèn do in Kalind?' asked Aaron indifferently after a long silence.

Rafael Gabriel must have been waiting for this question, because he immediately started his story:

'Kalind is a nice place. It's a bit like this area here. Silence, peace and hardworking people. It's rather pleasant

in summer. Or, should I say, it was pleasant, because after what happened, Kalind may well be erased from all the maps. Peasants from Kalind used to breed horses. They were really apt at it and this made them famous. God knows it was no easy job. They had to tend the animals from dusk till night – take care of them, feed them and train them. In the evenings, the peasants from Kalind liked to relax in a place that was nearly as charming as this one here. They drank beer, talked about life and about horses, as may have been expected. Hundreds, or even thousands of days passed like this since the settlement was established. One evening the door to the inn opened and Linnamèn entered. He approached the bar and casually ordered a beer. He sat there for some time, listening to conversations, he was kind enough to buy a round of drinks or two for everybody, and he left. Next day the same thing happened: Linnamèn came to the inn, ordered a beer, sat at the bar and observed the guests. When asked by the regular visitors, he calmly, yet briefly replied that he was visiting nearby stables and seeking to buy a horse. He never offered any more details. And he did visit a few stables, talked to the owners, asked a few noncommittal questions – maybe not exactly ones

that a potential horse buyer would ask, but nevertheless nothing suspicious. When Linnamèn appeared at the inn on the seventh day, nobody paid special attention to him anymore. At least until the sheriff of Kalind appeared behind his back withal his deputies. ‘Greetings from king Kapilanx,’ said Linnamèn. ‘The ruler of the Eastern Kingdom values the hunters from Kalind very highly. He only wishes people in this region were as nicely bred as the horses. The king is aware that a gang has been operating here for a few years and that they have been smuggling valuable horses abroad, to Nort and to Ingmar, without paying taxes to the state treasury. He sent me here to help him terminate these proceedings. If the members of the gang come clean voluntarily, the settlement will be saved. If not, the king will imprison not only the main culprits, but also everybody who had a hand in this business – from their wives to the stable boys. Furthermore, the king will close down all the stables and the horses will be given to the king’s faithful subjects from Piklind ‘.

‘You must imagine the disbelief with which the people of Kalind listened to Linnamèn’s words,’ continued Rafael Gabriel after a while, during which

he downed another beer, offered by Jinx for free this time. ‘Their first mistake was that they didn’t treat Linnamèn’s threats seriously. After all, their secret was safe for so many years and they were convinced that a foreigner they kept at a polite distance would not manage to learn anything in a week. They thought Linnamèn was bluffing. Their second mistake was that they started talking to him that evening at all. They nearly laughed, as they responded to his questions, ostensibly not related to the issue. Hardly did they know they were caught in an awful trap. Linnamèn laughed along with them, as if he were surprised he could be asking such silly questions: ‘How many foals did this or that mare have?’, ‘Has there never been a shortage of oat in this or that stable?’, ‘Was it the owner of the stable or his wife who trimmed this mare’s mane?’. After a while, he was still smiling, but started asking different questions. ‘Was it you, Jinx’, ‘Rafael Gabriel looked at the bartender, ‘that put aside ten thousand in the Western Bank of the Eastern Kingdom, without revealing the source of such savings?’. ‘Was it you, Kinx’, the monk now pointed his long index finger at the fatso, who shivered a little’, ‘who promised your long-time mistress that you would

soon amass such wealth that you will be able to leave your wife?’. ‘And you, Pantalinx’, ‘the priest now looked at one of the young men sitting at the back. ‘Are you not hiding a colt that your master ordered you to keep, with an intention to sell it to Ingmarians later on?’. ‘And as for you, Aaron’, Rafael Gabriel caught the eye of the bearded man sitting opposite. ‘Didn’t you meet a man in Nort named Kletus, who illegally bought four purebred Kalindian mares from you?’

‘As it turned out, Linnamèn acted very quickly that week. During the evenings spent at the inn, he listened to gossip and rumours that allowed him to learn who did business with whom. During the day, he carefully observed the local stables and contacted the Nortan border guards, looking for the place where the horses were smuggled. You would be surprised to see how easily he could reconstruct an event from merely a few scraps of information. The witnesses said the interrogation lasted no more than fifteen minutes and yet Linnamèn managed to prove more than half of the people at the inn guilty. Then, the inhabitants of Kalind made their third, fatal error. They thought Linnamèn had hardly any support and the sheriff’s deputies will not want to

shoot at their own kind, so they decided they would easily kill the Nortan, thus solving all their problems. Linnamèn was quicker, though. He shot five of them, before they even drew their weapons, and the bartender, who nearly managed to do so, had his right hand nailed to the bar with a silver dagger.' On hearing these words, Jinx cringed. 'Then, the king's customs guards broke in. You see, Linnamèn wasn't so stupid, so as to visit the inn accompanied only by the sheriff's men. All hell broke loose. Bullets were flying here and there, but Linnamèn didn't pay much attention to them. Once he had no more bullets in his revolver, he used his sharp dagger to cut mercilessly at each opponent, but doing his best to avoid killing them. They say he cut off one palm, pierced through one thigh and cut off one ear and a piece of nose. The king's men did the rest.

'Apparently, in the end, Linnamèn arrested the sheriff himself, proving that he had known of the gang's actions, but turned a blind eye in exchange for considerable bribes. The king fulfilled the rest of Linnamèn's threats, which is something you may verify, if only you venture near Kalind. There is nothing there, save a few empty fields and ruined households.'

When Rafael finished his story, all the eyes were on him for a long while afterwards, even though he kept swaying of the bar stool.

‘Linnamèn is famous for his cleverness,’ said Aaron thoughtfully.

‘Why, he’s a wizard,’ shrieked Klitalinx. ‘They say he is friends with them vampires and werewolves, and these are cunning beasts.’

‘Princess Liln of Ingmar gave him a permit to cross the border without anyone knowing,’ added Kinx. ‘Apparently, there is a sentence in a tiny font that says Linnamèn may kill whoever he wants, any time.’

‘That’s called a leecense license to kill,’ whispered Klitalinks.

‘There is one thing I don’t understand, priest,’ said one of the young men, who had remained silent until then. ‘By helping the king in Kalind, Linnamèn could hope for a great reward. Even one horse would have made him rich. How was it possible that the prefect of Erind could afford his service?’

Rafael Gabriel slowly turned around and tried to focus his eyes on the place from which the young man spoke.

‘Why do you think Linnamèn works for money? He’s no investigator. He’s the prince of Nort!’

‘He was reportedly banished from that court,’ reminded the young man soberly. ‘They say he doesn’t even have a patch of land in his own country, where he could lay his head down to rest.’

The monk shook his head.

‘He inherited some from his mother, who was from Lid-ur. Glibannèn, the king of Nort, would love to seize this inheritance, but he can’t, because Lid-urian law makes it possible to inherit property only for natural children, and Glibannèn had a different mother. Linnamèn often accepts various tasks for strange reasons. Apparently, he had asked princess Lilm for the accurate Ingmarian map of the sky, when he helped her in a difficult business two years ago. Then, he demanded that the peasants of Loch Scarland give him only two teeth of Frogbelly, the river monster. I don’t know what the prefect of Erind promised him, but I presume it may be related to ancient objects that you, bumpkins, sometimes find in the ground and throw away, whereas in Ingmar such artifacts are kept in museums.’

‘When could Linnamèn come here?’ asked Aaron.

Before he finished this sentence, the door to the inn opened once again with a loud wail. Everybody jumped in their seats and a moment later, a bunch of hands holding guns pointed at the door.

‘Godforbid! Don’t shoot!’ shouted a terrified, shrill voice.

‘Oh, it’s you, Ipenfix,’ said Jinx, and all the men loudly sighed with relief.

A short, fat man rolled in – judging by his clothes and the intense smell that surrounded him, he must have been the local vet. It was obvious he must have been running all the way, because he couldn’t catch his breath. When he finally did, he said:

‘Linnamèn is coming here. I’m coming back from Pal-Erind. They are expecting him any minute now.’

The crowd at the inn went wild. Aaron jumped up and called:

‘Oi, oi, quiet, lads! We still have some time to think about it. Even if the time is scarce, it’s better we have any time at all.’

The noise gradually subsided.

‘If he’s alone, we will kill him,’ said Olinx, pale as death. ‘And we will ditch the body in some dried up old

well, like the one behind the inn, where Aaron's goat once fell.'

'Stupid!' brawled Aaron. 'Then the prefect will not let us be. Since everybody knows Linnamèn is coming here, so they will come looking for him. Do you want to draw the king's attention to us?'

'Ok, then we won't talk to him,' replied Olinx, shrinking slightly.

'Didn't you hear what I said?' asked him Rafael Gabriel. 'You don't have to talk to him, it's enough if you let him listen. Besides, he will surely have some assistants. Who knows, maybe he will send them here first, before he appears.'

'Did you hear that? When Linnamèn appears, we can't talk at all,' – called Kinx. – 'And tell your wives to keep mum, too.'

'How will you know it's Linnamèn?' asked Ipenfix. 'Does anybody know what he looks like?'

A disappointed murmur rolled over the room.

'All right, from now on, we're now not talking when a stranger is present,' Kinx suddenly modified him his plan. 'We won't let any strangers in the settlement.'

‘We never let any strangers in,’ said Jinx and shrugged.

‘Don’t you?’ Rafael Gabriel seemed surprised. ‘I can see some faces that weren’t here, when I visited you last year.’

The monk now looked at the young man who previously asked about Linnamèn. The dark-haired youth frowned and cast a grim look at the monk.

‘Oh, that’s just Rem, my cousin’s son,’ laughed Ipenfix.

‘What a striking resemblance,’ muttered Rafael Gabriel with a smile. Even though he was sitting, the twenty-odd-year old Rem seemed a lot taller and slimmer than the short, fat vet, whose middle-age finished long ago.

‘His parents are dead,’ continued Ipenfix, undeterred. ‘He came here two months ago. I wanted to chase him away, but it turned out he knew a lot about cows and horses. I am training him as my replacement. There are many animals I have to tend around here, so I need someone who could help with sore hooves and pregnant cows.’

‘The boy has strong arms, works for food only and never talks when nobody asks him. Plus, he never touches our daughters,’ added Jinx.

‘The latter doesn’t come as a surprise,’ muttered Rafael Gabriel to himself, cringing with disgust. And then he said aloud:

‘I mean you have to be much more careful now. Linnamèn knows you may have been warned. He won’t come here with a cortege. He may come as a traveller, an antique hunter or even a monk.’

‘What would you advise, priest?’ asked Aaron.

‘You must beat him to it,’ replied Rafael Gabriel. ‘If I were you, I would quickly try to find the person guilty of sheriff’s death. When Linnamèn comes, you will tell him you’ve solved the matter on your own and you will just present him with the culprit. Then, he will have nothing to do here.’

‘The way he says it, it’s child’s play,’ one of Kinx’s sons shook his head.

‘This is your only chance. You are all suspected. It’s enough to look at you. You,’ – Rafael Gabriel looked at Aaron, – ‘You are disgusting. You,’ – now he pointed at Klitalinx, – ‘have a stupid laughter. And as for you,’ – now he gestured towards Jinx, – ‘You make me scared. If Linnamèn finds the killer, your settlement will be pulled down.’

‘I think Rafael is right,’ said Ipenfix. ‘We have to try.’

‘Lamias killed our sheriff, phantoms from the swamps!’ shouted Olinx. ‘They didn’t leave a single bone behind, only shreds of blood-spattered clothes, some hair and a piece of brushed skin. Linnamèn may go and look for the lamia, if he’s so clever!’

‘There are no lamias and phantoms in this area, I told you so a million times,’ explained Ipenfiks patiently. ‘And you are perfectly aware of the fact that the sheriff was killed by a human. He had enough enemies nearby,’ he added gravely.

Everybody was silent for a while. Then, Rem said silently:

‘Maybe it would be helpful to know who saw him last?’

‘Alive?’ asked Kinx. ‘All of us, I guess. He made quite a fuss back then, remember?’ the men murmured in agreement. ‘It was two months ago...’

‘Two months, one week and four days ago,’ narrowed down Olinx.

‘The sheriff was pissed as hell back then,’ added Klitalinx.

‘Was he a drunkard?’ asked Rafael Gabriel with professional interest.

‘No, no, he hardly ever touched beer,’ replied Jinx. ‘That day, though, he was drunk as a lord. In the early evening, when everybody was heading home, he got out of his house and started to shout at everyone he stumbled across.’

‘He always thought of himself as better than others,’ said Kinx. ‘He acted as if he were not one of us. And yet he was born in Erind, like all of us.’

‘That day, he scared the women by aiming his gun at them,’ continued Jinx. ‘He said he would shoot us all and then hang us, so that ravens can feast on our remnants.’

‘Did anyone try to stop him?’ asked Rafael. As a reply he got only grim laughter.

‘He may have been drunk, but he could still shoot,’ explained Olinx.

‘And he was in no mood for negotiations,’ added Ipenfix.

‘What made him lose his mind?’ continued Rafael.

Everybody except for Rem lowered their heads. Nobody felt like answering this question.

‘Well, what did you do, bumpkins?’ asked Rafael with laughter.

‘That was... just a stupid thing,’ muttered Klitalinx.

‘He closed down all the breweries,’ said Jinx at last. ‘He even destroyed the equipment of those who brewed beer only for themselves. He said alcohol should be bought in the capital city, even if that meant paying high license fees.’

‘That was... unacceptable,’ explained Ipenfix. ‘People here can’t afford wine or beer from the city. Next day, when everybody woke up with a nasty hangover and saw they had nothing to cure themselves with, the sheriff’s popularity became lower than ever. As a revenge, they decided to take away something he held precious.’

‘What was it?’ enquired Rafael.

‘Dgs,’ screeched Klitalinx.

‘What?’

‘Dogs!’ repeated Ipenfix. ‘The sheriff used to breed dogs. He was a dog-lover.’

‘He loved these beasts more than people,’ mumbled Kinx. ‘Which was no big deal, because he hated all the people.’

‘I understand,’ said Rafael. ‘So you killed his dogs. All of them?’

‘All of them,’ confirmed Ipenfix, while all the others hung their heads. ‘Sheriff Palintex summoned me then. It was not a pretty sight.’

‘Whose idea was it?’

‘I’m afraid it was mine,’ replied Ipenfix. ‘I put this idea into Kinx’s and Jinx’s heads. I didn’t think they would actually do it. Myself, I would never hurt an animal.’

‘And the sheriff? Did he know who had done it?’

‘I don’t think he cared. He knew everybody in the settlement was against him, so he thought all of us were guilty. You see, the sheriff believed we needed a tough hand. If he thought there was anything against the rules, even if the rules were silly, he would punish us with disproportionate severity. He imposed fines so high that some of us would have to pay them for years to come. He kept workers in remand for minor offences, thus depriving them of the opportunity to earn a few daily wages, which was the only means of living for their families. He would enter our houses and search them without a warrant, didn’t he, Aaron? He even banned

the women from washing underwear in the river, because he claimed it was polluting royal ground waters. Kinx is right – – the sheriff had no mercy. He only loved his dogs. When they were killed, he must have felt as if he had lost his family. That's why his behaviour was so strange. But he didn't hurt anyone back then. He shot at the fences a few times, he scared the women, he shouted at the men and he went away towards the swamps. We thought he had fallen asleep in the wasteland.'

'And nobody ever saw him alive again?' asked Rafael.

The men shook their heads. Then Rem said:

'How about Kinx's wife?'

Everybody stared at him, so he proceeded to explain:

'If the sheriff was going to the swamps, he must have passed by Kinx's house. It was early in the evening, so his wife must have been sitting on the porch, peeling the potatoes for dinner. That's what she does every day.'

'Right,' nodded Ipenfix. 'So, how was it, Kinx?'

'Ah, who would have listened to a woman,' mumbled Kinx, visibly disgruntled. Since all the eyes were on him now, he sighed and said:

'She didn't see him. She even said it was weird. As if he took another way to the swamps.'

‘There is no other way,’ replied Jinx. ‘But it’s near the swamps that we found his remnants.’

‘We? Who is we?’ enquired the monk.

‘Ipenfix and me.’

‘The following day, when the sheriff did not appear in the settlement and his dogs still lay unburied, I thought I should go and look for him,’ explained Ipenfix. ‘I saw where he had gone, so I followed that way. On my way there, I met Jinx and he decided to join me. When we got there, we found... the remnants. I’m no doctor, but judging by the amount of blood and the condition of the clothes, he must have died an awful death. It looked as if he had been torn to pieces. The clothes were not cut up with a knife – they were shredded.’

‘I’m telling you it was a lamia!’ called Olinx.

‘There we go again,’ muttered Ipenfix, turning his back on the deputy sheriff.

‘Let’s assume it was no lamia – who may have wanted the sheriff dead?’ asked the monk.

‘It’s a wrong question,’ protested Ipenfix. ‘Everybody wanted him dead. All of the men you can see here hated Palintex. There is not a single person he wouldn’t have pestered. The right question would be: who actually killed him?’

‘And nobody could be excluded from among the suspects?’ asked Rafael.

‘Rem can be excluded,’ said the vet. ‘He arrived in the settlement four days later.’

‘Which doesn’t mean he can’t have known the sheriff,’ replied the monk, casting a distrustful look at Rem.

‘I didn’t know him,’ answered Rem calmly, meeting Rafael’s gaze. ‘And four days before I came here, I was in Kal-Erind. Many people saw me there.’

‘I was right, then,’ summarised Rafael. ‘Almost all of you are suspected.’

The men were silently staring at the foam on the bottom of their glasses.

‘We won’t succeed,’ said Jinx at long last. ‘Look at us, priest. We work as farmers. Most of us cannot read. We can’t find out who killed the sheriff.’

‘We can,’ said Rem suddenly after another minute of grim silence. Something in his voice attracted everybody’s attention.

‘Boy, you weren’t even here at the time,’ said Ipenfiks in a gentle, almost fatherly voice. ‘Of all the men here, you are the only one who can rest assured.’

‘I work with you and I eat your bread,’ responded Rem. ‘This is also my problem.’ And then he repeated: ‘We can do it. We only have to do it the right way.’ ‘And how would that be?’ – Kinx snorted impatiently, to which Rem calmly replied: ‘We must start from the beginning.’

The preparations took some time, maybe even more than was necessary, mainly because not everybody saw the point in trying to explain the mystery behind the sheriff’s death. On top of this, when they moved the tables, so that there was a large patch of empty earthen floor covered with sand in the middle, Rafael Gabriel fell asleep and suddenly slid under the counter with a loud bang. As they couldn’t wake him up, Ipenfix and Rem had to carry the mumbling monk away and they placed him on one of the benches in a position that could prevent him from falling again, at least for some time.

Rem used the sand on the empty floor to draw the map of the settlement, including all the houses, also the sheriff’s home, plus the most important landmarks, roads to Pal-Erind and Kal-Erind and the swamps. Next to

the latter he drew an 'X' in the place where Palintex's remnants were found.

'First of all, it would be good to determine when and where the sheriff actually died,' said Rem. 'Kinx's wife didn't see him, when he was going to the swamps, so either he didn't go there at all and the murderer carried his remnants there himself, or he went there later at night or early in the morning. What did the place look like when you discovered the remnants?' he now addressed Ipenfix and Jinx.

'It looked normal, like the edge of the swamps,' replied Jinx with a shrug.

'I want to know if there was anything out of the ordinary. Ipenfix said that sheriff must have been torn to pieces. Such death is not gentle, you would expect scattered body parts, traces of fight, anything that changes the surroundings...

'Now that you said that...' recalled Ipenfix. 'I think we saw no such thing, did we, Jinx?'

'That's true. The grass wasn't even crumpled. The clothes just lay there.'

'How about the revolver?' asked Rem. 'You said the sheriff left the settlement with a revolver in his hand. But the weapon was not found near the remnants, was it?'

‘It wasn’t,’ admitted Olinx. ‘Maybe the lamia... I mean, the murderer,’ he quickly corrected himself, seeing Ipenfix’s severe gaze. ‘... threw the revolver in the swamp?’

‘Neither a lamia, nor a wild animal would have taken the gun,’ said Rem. ‘A human, on the other hand, would, especially if he were afraid the sheriff might use the revolver again. We’re still facing the issue of the clothes. You said they were covered with blood. But how? Were there bloody smudges, splashes, stains...?’

‘How does it matter?’ sighed Jinx impatiently.

In response, Rem took one of the beer mugs and splashed its content on the earthen floor. The alcohol started to soak into the sand, leaving dark and lighter smudges behind.

‘In the places where the wounds were, the clothes should be more soaked with blood,’ explained Rem. ‘The dripping blood should leave stains nearby and further from the wound would have been only stains.’

‘There were no stains or smudges,’ said Ipenfix, shaking his head. ‘The clothes were evenly covered with an enormous amount of blood. As if... someone had soaked them in blood.’

‘That means the murderer killed the sheriff somewhere else, not near the swamps, and then dipped the clothes in the sheriff’s wounds and dropped the attire near the swamps?’ Aaron asked rather than stated.

‘This is how he made it look like death following the attack of a wild beast,’ said Ipenfix. ‘We don’t even know where the sheriff actually died.’

‘There is still one doubt,’ added Rem. ‘We can’t be sure that the blood on the clothes was the sheriff’s blood. Think about it,’ he explained, when everybody stared at him in disbelief. ‘How deep would the wounds have to be, so that you can later dip the whole clothing in them? Such a crime would have been highly impractical: lots of blood everywhere, lots of traces that are hard to cover. We have to remember that the perpetrator wanted to distract the attention, to hide the actual place where the crime had been committed – otherwise he wouldn’t have disguised it as a beast’s attack.’

‘Do you think this was not how the sheriff died?’ huffed Aaron. ‘If it’s not his blood, maybe he’s still alive? Is this what you’re trying to say?’

‘I’m deeply convinced the sheriff is dead,’ replied Rem gravely. ‘But I don’t believe he died near the swamps.’

I think he was killed by someone who used a lot more discreet method.'

'Where does the blood come from, then?' asked Ipenfix. 'Somebody must have slain a pig or a cow, and in this region something like that can't go unnoticed.'

'The killer may also have used the blood that had already been shed before,' said Rem.

'The dogs,' whispered Jinx, and Rem nodded.

'What happened to the dogs' bodies?' he turned to Ipenfix.

'I buried them immediately after we had found the sheriff.'

'Damn, now we know even less than we did at the beginning,' said Jinx. 'We don't know where or when or how the sheriff died. We don't know anything!'

'Don't we?' asked Rem with surprise. 'Look here,' he pointed to the map of the settlement. 'The sheriff left his house in the evening and walked towards the swamps,' Rem drew a thin line that broke off at some point. 'He made it far enough for most of you to see him, but he never reached the swamps or Kinx's house. Whatever happened, must have taken place along this section of the path,' Rem showed an empty lane

between the houses in the settlement and Kinx's house. 'The sheriff must have met someone here, probably the murderer. We also know that the murderer had to come back to Palintex's house with his clothes, in order to drip them in the dogs' blood,' Rem added another line – a dotted one – to the sheriff's house. 'And then he had to drop the shredded clothes near the swamps,' – another dotted line went towards the swamps, reaching the 'X' sign. – 'Since the sheriff's house cannot be reached without crossing the main road, I think the murderer must have made his trip in the middle of the night.'

'Our dogs kept barking very loudly,' said one of Kinx's sons. 'It was right after midnight. I thought they were sensing a rabbit.'

'So you see that we can more or less define the time when the sheriff died,' said Rem. 'It must have been between the time when he left the settlement in the evening, when it was still light, and midnight. Personally, I think Palintex died closer to the evening, probably immediately after he left the settlement. That would give the murderer the time to come up with the action plan and think how to cover the traces.'

‘Unless he came up with such a plan beforehand,’ interrupted Aaron quite cleverly. Rem shook his head, though.

‘The murderer may have been waiting for the right moment, but there is now way he could have predicted that the sheriff would break down and get drink drunk on that very day, and that he would appear in the middle of the road in a condition that would make him an easy prey. I am inclined to believe that the murderer spontaneously took advantage of the opportunity that came up.’

A long silence followed, interrupted only by Rafael Gabriel, who started snoring loudly and fidgeting on the bench. Rem approached him and rearranged him in a safe position, and then he said:

‘I keep wondering where the sheriff was actually heading that day. You assumed he was going to the swamps, but why would he do it? You thought that because this is where you found his remnants. Even though he was drunk, he must have had some specific purpose. If he wasn’t going to the swamps, where else could he have gone?’

Everybody looked at the map at their feet.

‘There are three options,’ said Ipenfix. ‘He may have been going to the swamps, or to Kinx’s house or... here, to the inn.’

‘The swamps are out of the question,’ observed Rem. ‘And we know he never made it to Kinx’s house.’

‘Don’t look at me,’ said Jinx nervously. ‘I wasn’t here early in the evening, don’t you remember? I was with you in the settlement; together we watched the sheriff’s frenzy.’

‘The sheriff was not going to visit you, he was going to the inn,’ said Rem. ‘I suppose he wanted the thing people usually want at the inn. Judging by his condition, he must have run out of alcohol.’

‘Jinx was with us in the settlement,’ confirmed Olinx. ‘If the sheriff saw him, he would have known there was no point going to the inn, as it was closed.’

‘Yes, if the sheriff had seen Jinx, he may have changed his mind,’ admitted Rem. ‘But then, Jinx had every reason to stay out of the sheriff’s way, didn’t he?’

The bartender lowered his head and huffed a few times in irritation. He looked like a giant furious bulldog. Suddenly, Olinx laughed out loud.

‘So that’s why you kept hiding behind my back and when the sheriff turned to us, you ran behind the corner.’

‘The sheriff was angry and he had a weapon,’ said Jinx. ‘I thought he knew what I’d done to his dogs. I wanted to get out of his sight.’

‘When Palintex reached the inn, he must have been really disappointed,’ said Ipenfix. ‘Maybe at that time he actually regretted closing all the breweries. If the inn was empty, the only thing he could do was retrace his own steps back to the settlement.’

‘In which case he would have met Kinx on his way home,’ observed Rem. ‘No. I think he met someone here, under the closed door of the inn. And this was probably where he died.’

The rain still kept pouring on the roof and the small windows of the inn. Now they could hear it even better, especially that deep silence fell inside. It seemed that even Rafael Gabriel stopped snoring and quietly dozed off on the bench near the door. The men again lowered their heads, avoiding each other’s eyes. Eventually, Jinx looked at Rem and asked:

‘Is he still here? The sheriff?’

Rem’s answer scared the hell out of them:

‘Yes. After all, this is an inn, it’s not easy to carry a dead body away from here. The murderer didn’t have

enough time for this. He knew Jinx could be back soon. He had to hide the body, so that nobody would find it. This is when he stripped his victim of clothes and tore a few handfuls of hair.'

'But... where...?' stammered Jinx.

'In the one place no one would willingly visit.'

Jinx's eyes suddenly widened.

'The dried up well,' he huffed. 'We partially filled it with earth after one of Aaron's goats fell inside and broke its legs. But we covered it with a stone slab afterwards. One man wouldn't have been able to lift it.'

'He didn't have to,' replied Rem. 'It was enough to slide it, so as to be able to fit the body inside the crevice. I bet once we move it in the morning, we will discover a very unpleasant sight: the sheriff's body partially stripped of clothes and in a state of advanced decay. And the revolver, of course. The murderer must have dropped it in the well, although it would have been better to take it to the swamps. This is the only proof that he didn't in fact think about everything.'

'You think you know everything, don't you?' asked Olinx clenching his fists. 'Come on, why don't you tell us who did it.'

Rem smiled and patted the deputy sheriff on the back in a friendly gesture.

‘This remains for you to do. Only you guys will be able to tell who was in the settlement at that time and who may have been near the inn.’

‘Jinx and myself were standing at the end of the road,’ – said Olinx slowly. ‘We must have been the last ones to see the sheriff before he turned towards the inn.’

Rem approached the map and placed two stones retrieved from his pocket in the spot described by Olinx.

‘Who else did you see?’ he asked.

‘Klitalinx’s wife. She was screaming and running away from the sheriff. Klitalinx, like a true hero that he is, was hiding behind his house,’ a tiny smile passed over Olinx’s face.

‘I weren’t hiding!’ shrieked Klitalinx. ‘I were coming back from the loo.’

While Rem put another stone on the earthen map, Aaron said:

‘You were so scared, you didn’t even hear me calling you from my window. Only when the sheriff has disappeared, did you run into your house. Your woman followed you with a scream.’

‘Where shall I put the stone, Aaronie?’ asked Rem. Aaron pointed his finger towards the relevant spot.

‘My father and I were coming back from the field,’ said one of Kinx’s sons. ‘This way, from the direction of Pal-Erind. We saw the sheriff run out of his house and shout at the women.’

‘I saw you,’ said. ‘I went out of my house, when I heard the shooting.’

‘That’s true,’ confirmed Kinx. ‘You were trying to chase the sheriff. The smallest, yet the bravest of us all,’ he laughed.

Rem placed one stone to represent Ipenfikx next to his house. Everybody looked at the map, now complete. Aaron shook his head and said:

‘Nothing there, Rem. As you can see, none of us could have done it. We all saw one another.’

‘Is that what you think, Aaron? Because I believe one stone is in a wrong place.’

It was clear now that all the men were thinking intensely. Only Rafael Gabriel snored a few times, a bit louder, and then started to whistle joyfully in his sleep.

‘Aaron is right,’ said Ipenfix. ‘Jinx and Olinx were together; they saw Klitalinx, who was near Aaron, Kinx saw me and I saw him and his sons.’

‘Maybe we should ask Aaron if he’s really right?’ said Rem quietly. ‘So how was it, Aaron? I asked you where to put your stone. Haven’t you changed your mind?’

Aaron cast Rem a cool gaze. At the bottom of his eyes, the cold stare turned to anger.

‘I didn’t hear you,’ shrieked Klitalinx all of a sudden. ‘And not because I were scared. You wasn’t there!’

‘You are wrong, dear neighbour,’ said Aasron calmly. ‘I saw you right there. Were you more perceptive, you would have noticed me earlier, when you were coming back from the loo, as I was repairing the fence behind my house all day long.’

‘I did see the tools before,’ murmured Klitalinx, slightly confused. Then he stood upright and looked Aaron straight in the eyes:

‘But I were not in the loo. I said that, because I was ashamed... My woman was running away from the sheriff. She needed help. But I were afraid.’

Aaron did not reply.

‘Over the past two months I’ve learnt a lot about you, guys,’ said Rem. ‘I know Jinx was angry with the sheriff, because the latter closed down the breweries, which spelt an end to the cheap booze that could be sold

here. I know Kinx couldn't forgive Palintex for locking up his sons for five days in prison for a brawl at the inn. I know that Palintex treated his deputy, Olinx, very badly and threatened that he would fire him. Ipenfix, in turn, was afraid that the sheriff would reveal what he knew of his background. Erindian dwarves are excellent and wise creatures. It's a shame they were almost completely exterminated when Nortans fought their wars with Inhuman. No wonder, Ipenfix, you didn't want to be recognised as a descendant of the dwarves.

'Nobody here would have believed that a dwarf can be a good vet,' said Ipenfix with a sad smile.

'And who are you?' asked Aaron looking at Rem.

'I think you already know. You were the only person who had ostensibly no reason to hate the sheriff enough to wish him dead. That was suspicious. It was as if you were doing your best not to pay any attention to him. The reason for such behavior may have been the fact that something much more serious was on your conscience – much worse than the issues that troubled most of the people here. I finally managed to learn what it was. And so did the sheriff. I suppose the goat that fell inside Jinx's well led him to his conclusion. How come it was here,

since your pastures are far away, on the other side of the settlement? I suppose the sheriff didn't know what he would discover once he started digging deeper in this allegedly trivial matter. He suspected he would catch you grazing your goats in a prohibited place. However, he quickly learnt you were not a real shepherd. That was only a perfect cover. A shepherd can spend many hours in the fields and you were mainly interested in what you can find there.'

The young man they knew as Rem now reached for the stone that was supposed to represent Aaron on his map and started to crush it in his fingers. In the dim light not much could be seen, but the men quickly realised that it was not an ordinary stone.

'Rafael Gabriel said something about ancient objects you can find here. Most of you probably don't realise how precious these artefacts are. In the ancient times, Erind was inhabited by a rich civilization destroyed as a result of an unknown disaster. Researchers from Ingmar, who claim to be the descendants of the lost civilisation, are willing to pay for the relics of those ancient times, such as this earring. Aaron knew that he could make lots of money on what lay under the Erindian grass. That's why he secretly smuggled

the antiques to Ingmar. The sheriff guessed what was going on, but he needed evidence. That's why he searched Aaron's house. He didn't find anything, of course, but Aaron already knew he couldn't be safe. He could use that opportunity to escape, but that would mean renouncing the riches. Therefore, he waited for the opportunity to silence the sheriff.

Such an opportunity arose when Aaron was searching through the fields near the inn while Jinx was absent and he noticed the sheriff approaching. The place and timing were just perfect: no witnesses and sufficient distance from the settlement to guarantee that no one would hear the shot. The sheriff probably didn't even know who killed him. Aaron quickly thought of the way to get rid of the body. It was his goat that fell inside the well and was the reason why the well had to be covered. Before, he had helped Jinx do the job, so he knew that no great strength was needed to slide the stone slab. After he returned to the settlement, he waited until the night had fallen and stole into the sheriff's kennel. You already know the rest: Aaron dropped the bloodstained clothes near the swamps.'

Aaron jumped up and gazed at Rem with dislike.

'You can't prove anything,' he said taking a step back. 'All you have is a statement of some moron, who

isn't even sure what he saw, and a handful of surmise based on what MIGHT be in the well.'

'I don't need any proof other than what you're wearing,' said Rem, looking at Aaron all the time. 'I've been thinking where you kept the artefacts you found and I guessed there can only be one place – your clothes.'

Jinx, Ipenfix and Kinx suddenly turned to Aaron, as if they wanted to search him then and there, but he quickly drew a revolver and backed away to the door, aiming at them.

'Keep your hands off me, silly morons! I will shoot anyone who dares to move! You,' now he gestured at the smiling Rem with the barrel of his gun. 'You will be the first one to go!'

'I don't think so,' replied Rem.

All the men held their breath, when Rafael Gabriel suddenly rose behind Aaron's back – he stood tall and pale with his lips pressed into a thin line. With one well-aimed blow the monk knocked the bearded shepherd down and then kicked the gun from his hand, so that it flew along the floor and landed under Rem's feet. The men at the inn jumped up from their seats. A while later, many hands caught Aaron and held him still,

while others, with revolvers, were aiming at him. The shepherd was stripped of his clothing and tiny objects were scattered on the floor – ancient earrings, needles, trinkets and even pieces of pottery.

‘Tie him up,’ ordered Rafael Gabriel.

Aaron fought for a while, but once he noticed he had no chance, he resolved to swear words that made one’s ears wither.

‘And gag him,’ added the monk.

Once Aaron was turned into a grotesque, tied up bundle, which kept whistling unpleasantly, all the confused faces turned to the youth called Rem. Eventually, Jinx cleared his throat and said:

‘So the prefect didn’t tell us a word that he had sent the prince.’

‘I wasn’t sent by the prefect,’ replied Linnamèn. ‘You are right, Ekatelinx doesn’t really care about what is going on down here. I came here, because an old friend had asked me to,’ the prince’s gaze now rested on Ipenfix, who muttered something under his breath. Finally, seeing the curious stares of the others, the vet explained:

‘I knew the prince was staying in Kal-Erind, so when the sheriff died, I went to fetch him and asked for help.’

‘But... why?’ asked Jinx, looking at Linnamèn. ‘Nobody cares what’s going on in Erind.’

‘Ipenfix does,’ replied the prince. ‘For me that was a valid reason to come down.’

‘Don’t you understand?’ asked Ipenfix, blushing. ‘It was not about the sheriff – or, should I say, not primarily about him. I’ve been living here for years and I can see what it’s like. You’re working like mules all year round, but your work gets no recognition. You are being taken advantage of: you cannot count, so you sell grain and animals for a song. You have no contact with the world outside, so you don’t even know you’re living in a place with interesting archaeological discoveries. Erind is not only a godforsaken place, the middle of nothing; it is gradually falling deeper and deeper into forgetfulness. And it’s not only because the prefect doesn’t give a damn about us, the king would rather not think about us and the whole world is laughing at us. It’s true that nobody cares about us, but what is worse, we stopped caring about ourselves. Killing the sheriff proved that although the things are now very bad, they can be even worse. Solving the mystery of his death may not have been enough. I knew that and that’s why I asked prince

Linnamèn for help. He was working with you for two months, so that you can finally believe that your hard work deserves respect and recognition.’

The men listened to Ipenfix, seemingly focused on his words. The vet looked at all the faces in turn, trying to reach everybody with his speech. Once he finished, long silence followed. Eventually Kinx spoke:

‘Are you really a dwarf?’

Ipenfiks stood upright, which gave him no more than two centimetres. Although he had to raise his head up high when talking to Kinx, his voice beamed with pride:

‘I am. Do you have a problem with it?’

Kinx smiled in amusement, looking down on the tiny vet:

‘Damn it, of course, I don’t,’ and having said this, he extended his large hand and Ipenfix shook it with serious satisfaction.

‘I think you should remember who really cares about you, when the king chooses his prefects next year,’ said Linnamèn and then he addressed Olinx:

‘You should escort Aaron to prison in Pal-Erind tomorrow at dawn. Take Ipenfix with you. You must

offer a reliable testimony in court. The wealth that Aaron has amassed must be confiscated as material evidence, but in fact, you should take care of what is still hidden underground.’ The prince now looked at Ipenfix. ‘I have written to princess Liln of Ingmar. I have already received a reply. The Ingmarian Academy of Sciences would like to start archaeological excavations in Erind. Princess Liln promised to become the patron and supervisor of the excavations. Everything would be legal, of course – with relevant taxes paid to the Eastern Kingdom treasury, and for you it would be an opportunity to earn some money and experience. If you decide to accept this proposal, I will instruct Ipenfix to contact trustworthy people appointed by princess Liln.’

‘What about our fields? And our crops?’ asked Kinx.

‘Ipenfix has a few brilliant ideas. I believe you should listen to him,’ replied Linnamèn, then stood up and stretched his arms, exhausted. He nodded at Rafael Gabriel and together they left the inn.

At dawn, when the discussion drew to a close, the inhabitants of Erind left the inn and raised their exhausted eyes to the overcast sky. The rain had finally

stopped. They went over to the well and removed the stone slab. Although they were all strong and tough men, only Ipenfix was able to withstand the sight without vomiting. Once they contained their disgust, they started to confer quietly. Linnamèn and Rafael Gabriel looked at them from a distance, sitting on a fence.

‘What you told them is a pack of lies,’ said the prince with an exhausted smile. ‘Especially about Kalind. You know I’m no good at shooting.’

‘I thought it will appeal to their imagination, if I add some colour to the story,’ explained Rafael Gabriel.

‘And my mother left me no legacy. Which is also something you know.’

Rafael nodded.

‘I had to improvise. After all, you didn’t tell me why you were doing all this.’

‘I met Ipenfix five years ago. Those were hard tTimes for me. He did me a favour. I owed him this, although he really wanted to do something noble and important for these people.’

‘That’s not what I mean,’ protested the monk. ‘I’ve been wondering why you’re doing it to yourself. Look at you. How many months have you been going without

rest, proper food and sleep? You keep wandering, even when you don't have to.'

'You do realise that such castigation coming from you sounds ironic, to say the least, don't you?' Linnamèn offered an evasive answer, looking at Rafael with a smile. The monk shrugged, but didn't seem offended.

'All right, keep it to yourself, if you will. What are you going to do now?'

'I don't know.'

'Join me on my way to Ingmar,' said Rafael Gabriel after a while. 'Don't tell me Liln didn't invite you.'

'You know Liln. She starts and ends every letter with an invitation to Ingmar.'

'I feel like sunbathing after all these weeks spent in this rainy region,' said Rafael. 'Nowhere will you rest as well as in Ingmar. Hot sand, sunsets at the seaside, endless, lush, green gardens. Remember?'

Linnamèn nodded. Rafael Gabriel looked at him sideways and stood up, saying:

'I don't know about you, but I've done my bit here and I feel like a holiday. I'm going to Ingmar.'

Without turning around, the monk slowly started towards the road leading to Pal-Erind. Linnamèn sat

motionless for a while, staring at Rafael's back, and then laughed and called after him:

'What was that? A psychological trick to convince me to travel to Ingmar?'

Rafael turned around, seemingly indifferent.

'Maybe,' he said. 'Does it work?'

'Of course not,' replied Linnamèn. And then he stood up and added:

'How could you convince me to something I wanted to do all along?'

The conference near the well was still in progress, when the monk and prince Linnamèn slowly walked towards Pal-Erind. Nobody saw them go. The people of Erind were too engrossed in their own business to notice anything else. Both Rafael Gabriel and Linnamèn knew it was a good sign.

THE END

 *back to gamebook*

Magdalena Kempna

**THE
MONASTERY
IN KAER-NORT**

translation:

Agnieszka Rychlińska

 *back to gamebook*

The saying that there hasn't left one stone upon another doesn't actually apply to the Kaer-Nort monastery as there's nothing left but stones. Some of them lying on top of one another pretending to be a structure – sort of two towers, a courtyard, housing. Others were scattered within several hundred metres. In the middle of the short Nortan summer the monastery appeared to be a lifeless and hopeless place, dead in every sense. Even the all-pervasive grass seemed to recoil from the ruins of the gates – it grew around but not inside the monastery.

'Is it here...?' asked doctor Søren. King Linnamèn nodded without averting his eyes from the ruins.

'It must've been a very gloomy place,' remarked the doctor.

'Indeed. The monastery was founded two hundred years ago, but it has never reached grandness. Perhaps the place wasn't right. After all, it's the very threshold for the Kaer-nar-Nort Wasteland, the former territory of Inhuman. Most of the monks who settled there couldn't stand spartan living conditions. They had to be send back. At times the decision came too late. There...see?' the king indicated a heap of stones that seemed to sprout from

the ground in some grim order. 'There was a cemetery... of an impressive size as for a small monastery.'

'It looks like an effect of some cataclysm,' doctor Søren looked around. 'As Your Highness's doctor I strongly advise against any further exploration. The risk of injury is more than high,' he added in a hopeless tone.

'Your opinion has been recorded and your concern appreciated,' answered the king with a smile. 'And I took you with me because of the risk. Rafael!' called Linnamèn loudly. 'Rafael, come down right now! You'll break your neck!'

Rafael Gabriel, the king's confessor, climbed on a heap of stones that used to be a part of a belfry, and was looking around swinging on its top. He turned his blond head at the sound of the king's voice and after a moment, hesitating slightly, he started climbing down. His skinny white feet shod with worn out clogs were flashing repeatedly from beneath his grandma grey habit.

'No past is relieved until it's relived,' the king addressed Søren. 'Do you know this maxim?'

'Of course. I know the rudiments of Ingmarian philosophy. Why are we here?'

The king didn't answer. His gaze slowly swept the ruins.

‘I think some of the rooms are preserved,’ he said.
‘This is where we’ll start.’

‘And where will we finish?’ asked Søren.

‘In the dungeons.’

*

106th Day of Winter, the first year of King
Glibannèn’s reign

*To friar Schopenhauer, the Abbot of the Kaer-Nort
monastery:*

*Pursuant to an order of H.R.H. King Glibannèn, the
youngest son of the late King Aribannèn, Linnamèn, is to be
put up for education to the monastery in Kaer-Nort. It is not
lawful to allow araka, a child taken out of a womb of a dead
mother, King Aribannèn’s third wife, at court. Preparing him to
enter the priesthood or any other profession is not recommended.
H.R.H. King Glibannèn wishes Prince Linnamèn received
the most strict Nortan upbringing. Concern for his body shall
never exceed concern for his immortal soul. The Prince is to
stay in the monastery until further notice, and if there is not
such, till his death.*

*On behalf of H.R.H. Glibannèn, the King of Nort,
Baron Carl Gustav, the Nortan Security Office Commander*

*

Linnamèn was strolling around the room that was devoid of most of the walls. From time to time he was leaning and scavenging pieces of some artefacts from the rubble. Rafael Gabriel and Søren were looking at him patiently.

‘Was this his cell?’ asked the doctor.

‘Uh-huh.’

‘He must’ve gone through hell here.’

‘You can’t imagine.’

Finally, Linnamèn gave up searching the debris.

‘Moving on,’ he said.

Passing Rafael, he put a piece of a painting in his hand. Søren glanced over the confessor’s shoulder and saw a picture of a menacing angel with iron wings full of peaked feathers. His face contorted with rage, he was directing his sword towards something or someone, that must’ve been in the missing part of the illustration.

‘Kanelel,’ said Rafael.

‘Who?’

‘Seems like you don’t know the holy scriptures, doc,’ a shadow of his usual cynical smile brushed across the confessor’s face.

‘I’m not a zealous follower of the Nortan faith,’ replied Søren coldly. ‘According to its teaching, half-vampires like me have no right to exist.’

‘Kanelel is the angel of vengeance,’ explained Linnamèn walking in front. ‘He’s usually portrayed with a sword, a huge hammer or a fiery arrow. He brings ruin to those who contradict God. He’s cruel, ruthless and merciless. Abbot Schopenhauer put his picture on the wall of my cell on the very first day. He undoubtedly hoped that it would make me remember about my duties to the religion and the king. Every time I failed I was punished neither by the abbot nor other friars and not even by the king but by Kanelel.

*

10th Day of Summer, the third year of King Glibannèn’s reign

Abbot Schopenhauer’s Diary

...one meal a day. Friars check if he ate everything. To monitor it, they make him throw up every few days, and they compare the amount of vomit with the amount of consumed food. At dawn he fainted after kneeling down on bare stone for ten hours. I wish there was snow, it would make the punishment more severe.

Maybe watching his torment makes Kanelel so happy because the boy has been holding on for so long. When the resistance is overcome, his fall will be great. Kanelel waits for it with threatening hope. He thinks it's coming. The escape attempt he made three weeks ago, having some food collected beforehand, proves his desperation. We won't let him escape to the wasteland. We won't let him starve or freeze to death in Kaer-nar-Nort. I will take him to the dungeons. We've put him in the room placed above the Main Chamber at the very beginning. He must've heard. He must've felt. Kanelel says that little boys don't deceive themselves like adults do, persuading themselves that what they hear is just the moan of the wind. Linnamèn's eyes are wide with terror every night. He doesn't know that what he imagines isn't even half that scary as the thing we actually keep in the Main Chamber.

*

The entrance to the dungeons was blocked with stones. In spite of it, Linnamèn calmly started throwing debris aside. Soon his hands were covered in scratches.

'Drop it,' said Rafael gently. 'Let me find some other way.'

The king agreed reluctantly. When Rafael started snooping around the ruins, Søren took care of cleaning the wounds on master's hands.

‘Will you finally tell me, Your Highness, what’s it all about?’ he asked, bending his bald head. ‘I don’t believe it’s just that you’ve spent two years here.’

‘You’re right. Can you... can you feel anything? Anything belonging to Inhuman?’

Søren gave him an understanding look.

‘I’ve blocked this part of my mind a long time ago,’ he answered. ‘My parents had to escape from Nort because of the massacre of vampires, werewolves, and Inhuman in general.’

‘But you were raised in Ingmar, and Ingmarians are open to Inhuman.’

‘The thing you ask for doesn’t turn on easily or quickly.’

The king nodded.

‘I’d appreciate it if you could focus.’

The wind blew cold from the Kaer-nar-Nort Wasteland. Instinctively, Linnamèn put up the collar of his coat donned on a white tunic. Doctor Søren didn’t even shiver, not noticing the change in temperature.

‘You know what happens with Inhuman after death. I mean their bodies.’

‘Of course,’ answered the doctor.

‘For people it’s not that obvious. Especially in Nort, where Inhuman were exterminated. The only thing left was a hazy awareness that bodies of Inhuman don’t putrefy. People imagine their death as something frightening and spectacular at the same time. A vampire exposed to sunlight turns to ashes within minutes. Exhumers decay in their own lifetime, so their putrefaction after death must be faster and more spontaneous. A werewolf stabbed with silver takes the shape of a man and then putrefies.’

‘These are all myths and no more than that.’

‘I know. I saw it with my own eyes here.’

*

21st Day of Summer

Abbot Schopenhauer’s Diary

As for Inhuman, decay of the parts being a poor imitation of a human body comes first. Some tissues putrefy both in vampires and werewolves. But the skin of the vampires stays intact. Rot eating out the muscles throbs underneath it, pretending hideously that the death is undone. Werewolves lose the coat after some time. At that point their bodies start to resemble human bodies but further decay does not confirm their relation with our race. King Glibannèn is very interested in

those matters. Even in Aribannèn's times he's been sending us interesting corpses of Inhumen, monitoring our detailed research from afar. Every two weeks I take photos of the bodies and make notes which I send to the capital city. The king seems to be pleased. He's especially interested in the way the corpses remain mentally active. Their living processes stop completely, but it seems that some primitive, foul form of their consciousness stays alive even years after their death. Obviously, it has nothing to do with the concept of soul, as Inhumen, those godless creatures of Darkness, have no soul. They're as if chained to their material shells. And they send their horrible thoughts and dreams from the depths of that crippled, boggy minds.

So far none of the friars had courage to stay in the Main Chamber longer than two hours. That's a minimum to carry out the measurements, take photos, and make observations, and at the same time a maximum to resist mental violence of the corpses.

When his nostrils caught the smell of slowly (or not at all) rotting dead bodies, Linnamèn flinched terrified. He must've recognized the escalated and multiplied version of the stench reaching his cell through the cracks in the stone floor. He clung on to the damp wall with his whole body, refusing to make even one

step inside the dungeons. Kanelel forced him. The last part of the way he tumbled down the stairs. I checked if his bones weren't broken, and when I saw he was getting up from nonhuman goo and remnants covering the floor, I retreated. Linnamèn gave me a hateful look. Kanelel would rather see him crying and begging for mercy, but the boy haven't reached that stage yet. We'll see how he behaves after several nights in the chamber.

I still hear him shouting. It's amazing that he can still shout after so many hours.

*

'Fire works best,' said doctor Søren. 'At least for a start.'

'But it doesn't solve the problem, does it?'

'No. It's a kind of initial cleansing. Soft tissues are burned as well as skin, which otherwise would decompose for thousands of years. What's more, fire dulls the kind of mental activity characteristic of Inhuman.'

'For how long?'

'There's no pattern. Sometimes for years... Better not to check.'

'What's the next step?'

'Dismemberment. Splitting the body parts is at the same time splitting thoughts, memories, it's dividing

“the self” of an Inhuman into particles. Mental activity is eliminated. There’s still some kind of energy connected to the particular body parts, but it’s not that oppressive. The third stage is about giving peace to the dead.’

‘Which is what?’

Søren’s human face contorted quite inhumanly for a second.

‘Human scientists, as I suppose, call it sacrocannibalism. Eating the remnants of their kinsmen, Inhuman absorb the remaining mental energy and – according to their own skills – use it within their own bodies. The dead becomes a part of the living. His mind dies completely, but its scraps function in our collective consciousness, the Grid.’

‘Have you ever taken part in such ceremony?’ asked the king.

‘Never. Inhuman are longevous. If nothing ends their life prematurely, they can exist even for several thousand years. This makes this kind of ceremonies extremely rare, and taking part in them is an honour. Inhuman have been killed in Nort for centuries. Since queen Alikanta’s the Cruel times they have been buried in the sea. People believed their mental activity wouldn’t break through the water.

‘But it’s questionable?’

‘Sooner or later that energy will somehow manifest itself. Consequences are hard to predict.’

‘They’ll be painful for people, that’s for sure.’

‘Probably. Mental activity of Inhuman’s bodies is devastating for people. It pulls them into the shadows of the collective mind, disturbs reasoning, logical thinking; it interferes with fears and the worst instincts.’

‘Can this energy communicate with a human being?’

‘No,’ Søren shook his head firmly. ‘This would require a coherent mind. After all we’re not talking about ghosts,’ a fleeting smile crossed his face. After a moment he added:

‘Perhaps in different circumstances...’

Doctor Søren wasn’t able to finish his sentence as the confessor’s fair-haired head emerged from behind a nearby heap of stones. Rafael Gabriel found the way forward.

*

26th Day of Summer

Abbot Schopenhauer’s Diary

For almost a week Linnamèn’s been spending every night in the Main Chamber. Kanelel expected he would have lost his mind by now. For the time being, he’s only lost his

speech. The longer he remains silent, the more meaningful his looks are. Kanelel doesn't like them at all. Cold hatred in his gaze doesn't scare him whatsoever, but in those not Nortan dark eyes, taken after his Lid-urish mother, Linnamèn hides knowledge. Not saying a word, with every gaze he clearly demonstrates that he knows.

Still, he dreads going down to the dungeons. There shouldn't be a modicum of strength in his scrawny body, yet he is able to resist. Kanelel thinks that hatred powers him.

I'm leafing through my old notes. Nine specimens. Enough to cumulate mental energy able to make the holiest of bishops lose his temper. Why haven't they broken this little boy yet? Ultimately, they made three monks, who had been here before, friars Jan, Michal and Klemens, slide into madness. And all they did was spending no more than two hours every three days in their presence! I was spared thanks to Kanelel. He stood by me saying: 'I take it on,' when they tried to confuse me, when they tried to rip off my soul. For other friars it was enough that sometimes – for no reason – they couldn't find their way out; that they went blind although their eyes could see; that their minds fed them with images of their beloved ones being tortured, defiled, murdered, raped. They went insane when the creatures made them believe that they

themselves had disgraced their sisters, tortured their fathers, and murdered mothers. They didn't have Kanelel to tell them: 'Look at the joy I get from these beasts' degradation,' like he did it for me. In Kanelel's eyes the most cruel visions were the most beautiful. Maybe except for the one where I was looking into a cold, dark abyss. This one always made him stop with a premonition of terror.

*

15th August, Ur-li

Dear Bendrix,

I send you a record of the medical assessment you've asked me for. In the documents you'll find all information concerning physical and mental health of Linnamèn, the son of Aribannèn, the king of Nort, and Sarrin, your niece.

Despite being without a doubt a victim of violence, Linnamèn doesn't show any symptoms of trauma usually accompanying this kind of events. All conversations and observation seem to confirm that for him the most painful experience was not the horror he underwent in Kaer-Nort, but the death of his father, king Aribannèn, that happened two years earlier. The boy astonished the most experienced analysts. Best practices, that we've been using for years, fail when it comes to him. Linnamèn is aware that he was

harméd in Kaer-Nort, but it seems that evil caused no damage to his after all delicate child's psyche. Perhaps it's a result of cultural differences – I admit that so far we've had a chance to examine very few Nortans so thoroughly. The only aberrations are visible on a moral level. The boy shows unusually developed ethical sensibility. It seems that he feels guilty about the way his stay in Kaer-Nort ended, but at the same time – what's even more extraordinary – he is able to rationalise that guilt.

Lainamèn proves to be great at observing, remembering, and bringing things together. The best we can do for him now is to let him develop naturally, remaining vigilant. If in the coming months you notice any worrying symptoms, like sleep disorder, hyperactivity, self-harm, or an introverted retreat, send him back to undergo further examination. But if nothing happens, do what you can do best – take good and wise care of him.

Best regards,

Prof. Fredrix Son

They walked under something that used to be the ceiling of one of the cellars and reached the mouth of a small, dark corridor. In other circumstances it would be

hard to assume the tunnel actually leads somewhere, but Rafael's intuition seemed to be confirmed by the musty odour getting out of the hole.

The monk took one of Ingmarian lanterns – a gift from Liln, the Princess of Ingmar – and he went first. The king and doctor Søren followed him into the dark. The moment he entered the corridor, the doctor gasped and bent double, as if punched hard. He leaned against the wall instinctively. His pointed teeth gleamed from between thin lips.

‘Doctor?’ the King looked at him with curiosity.

Søren took his hand off the damp, mossy wall and started to examine his long thin fingers. Finally, he turned his gleaming eyes towards the king.

‘Some functions of the mind simply can't be turned off. I think that from now on you'll be a much better guide than Rafael.’

‘Just don't lose the way,’ the confessor addressed the half-vampire forcing his way past him. Søren scowled at him and snarled savagely.

They were moving slowly along the corridor so full of debris that even the light of the Ingmarian lantern couldn't help much. Rafael Gabriel and the king kept stumbling, and only Søren, who could easily do without

light, was moving steadily. The place was creepy enough to make even Rafael lose his sharp wit. A chill offered by the fractured foundations of the monastery didn't eliminate terrible stuffiness. Poisonous fumes seemed to fill the air and cover the walls with slimy sickening stickiness.

After taking another turn, they found themselves in a wider and taller room. Søren was looking around baring his teeth threateningly. Rafael Gabriel directed the Ingmarian lantern at the walls to illuminate them. After a long moment he addressed Linnamèn:

'Is this what you've expected?'

The king nodded. Corpses of Inhuman were still in the Main Chamber. But the sight of them wasn't as frightening as it used to be. Now they were just articulated skeletons.

'I can smell gunpowder,' said Rafael.

'During queen Alikanta's last war against Inhuman the monastery was a base for the army attacking the vampires' metropolis in the Kaer-nar-Nort Wasteland.

'The City of High Ruins,' guessed Søren.

'After the fall of Inhuman most of the supplies were removed, but you can still find some inflammable substance in the recesses.'

‘So that’s what’s been used to blast the monastery, right?’ asked Søren. ‘These corpses experienced fire purification.’

‘Can you sense their activity?’ asked the king.

‘They’re partly dormant. The fire calmed them down.’

‘But it didn’t give them a relief they deserve.’

Søren looked around again. He understood what the king meant. All the bodies showed signs of cruel torture.

‘The funeral ceremony will give us a lot of hassle,’ he said.

‘I know. That’s not what I wanted to do now,’ Linnamèn walked over to the wall. At its bottom there was a narrow shallow niche. Rafael and Søren followed him. For a long moment they were staring at what he’s showed them. Then, in grim, heavy silence, they helped him to take it out.

*

31st Day of Summer

Abbot Schopenhauer’s Diary

Kanelel doesn’t want Linnamèn to come down to the dungeons again. He says the boy was possessed, and that’s why he has to die. I try to explain Kanelel that king Glibannèn

may not understand this. In letters which I receive from his officials, he emphasizes that Linnamèn can be punished in every way but this. Now, as he's been possessed with the devil from the dungeons, he became more arrogant. The devil taught him the paths we never showed him. Sometimes he disappears for many hours. When he finally turns up, he takes another punishment without a word. Friars started to be afraid to administer them. The look of the cold triumph on his face scares them off. We started to bind him, but his arms are now so thin that he's able to free himself using some tricks. Kanelel is pushing. He says that fifteen years ago the king wouldn't be angry with us if..

Kanelel, something's just happened and it persuaded me you're right. I'm watching Linnamèn through the chink in the door all the time. Many hours ago we've put him almost naked on the stairs with the holy book in his hands. He's supposed to read it aloud until we let him stop. He's already at "The Song of the First King". His voice is still clear and shows no signs of weariness. I peeped out to check if he's trying to trick me. And then something terrifying happened.

We hung a lamp above Linnamèn's head. It gives enough light to read but not enough to dispel long shadows. The boy slowly raised his head sensing my presence. His

lips were still saying the words of “The Song of The First King” although Linnamèn wasn’t looking to the book. After a moment, still reciting “The Song”, he smiled maliciously. It was then when I looked again at what he was holding in his hands. It wasn’t the holy book. For many hours Linnamèn has been pretending to read it. During two years he must’ve learnt it by heart. Now he was standing in front of me like a pale, thin shadow, impudently looking me in the eye and slowly reciting more verses. He knew I would see that. No – he wanted me to see that for all these hours he’s been holding one of my old diaries stolen from my cell. When I was slamming the door in a panic, he gave me one more look. This time, apart from fever and triumphant “I know”, there was that black cold abyss in his dark eyes. The one that even Kanelel can’t deliver me from.

*

They were looking in silence at a small skeleton taken out from a niche in the Main Chamber. The king beckoned to his white-faced confessor and, accordingly to Nortan prayer tradition, he covered his face with his hands. Rafael whispered a short litany for the dead. When he finished, the king uncovered his face and addressed Søren standing away:

‘What can you say about the cause of death?’

The doctor started examining the bones carefully.

‘A boy. At most a ten-year-old. Judging from the shape of his brow ridges, he’s a Nortan pure-blood. He’d been tortured before he died. Some of his bones were broken many times and they’ve knit crookedly. At the end of his life he must’ve had serious walking problems. Probably his hands were also crippled. He wouldn’t be able to hold a spoon. His bones and teeth condition shows he’s been underfed. But it’s not what killed him. His cervical vertebrae are broken. He’s been hanged.’

Rafael Gabriel stepped aside. He was running his fingers through his fair hair furiously.

‘Is there any chance to identify him?’ asked the king. Søren shook his head.

‘The bones are so mutilated, that...’

‘Did you know this happened?’ asked Rafael angrily. ‘For all these years, when you’ve been constantly confessing what you’d done here...did you know you felt guilty about someone who was able to do... this?’

‘I didn’t know how,’ answered the king calmly. ‘I only had a feeling the boy died a horrible death.’

‘I see,’ doctor Søren stood up and rubbed his bald forehead with his hand. ‘It was Your Highness who blew up the monastery, right? And he told you how to do it,’ the doctor indicated the skeleton lying at their feet. ‘Inhuman used him as an agent. Their energy couldn’t directly communicate with anyone, but the ghost of a child could.’

‘I’m not sure who used who,’ answered the king. ‘The boy must’ve died here. There used to be a strong beam above the stairs... I think the activity of Inhuman has kept the boy’s soul or some part of it here. When Abbot Schopenhauer started locking me here, I almost went mad with fear. And then he started talking to me. Perhaps you’re right. Maybe his ability to communicate with me had been used by Inhuman. But it could’ve been the other way round; maybe he’d used Inhuman’s knowledge to instruct me. First he taught me how to get around the monastery. Then he told me where gunpowder was, and what I had to do to use it. When I was hesitant, he referred me to one of Abbot Schopenhauer’s diaries. It made me realize my fate was sealed. After it was over, I confirmed it reading abbot’s last entries. On the last page of his diary he clearly suggested I would be “Kanelel’s”

next victim. I was afraid of Inhuman, but I discovered that they gradually stopped haunting me. It was about the fire. They wanted purification.'

'I did everything he asked me to,' Linnamèn looked at the child's skeleton again. 'I escaped like he told me to. It was the summer, so I managed to get to the City of High Ruins. Abbot Schopenhauer knew I had been preparing the escape for some time. He confiscated food I was hiding, but he didn't know I had stores in the old city of Inhuman where he used to often send me to pray. Then, for the first time in my life, I got across the wasteland and I reached an old marina, where Inhuman escaping from Nort left boats for kinsmen. On the Free Island of Kart I was stopped by the officials who wanted to send me to Glibannèn, my brother, but they had mercy on my poor condition, and they found Leopold Bendrix from Lid-ur, my mother's uncle.'

'Didn't Glibannèn protest?' Søren was surprised as for years he'd been Linnamèn's brother's court physician, and he perfectly knew his quick temper.

'He had his reasons not to,' Linnamèn smiled bitterly. 'He knew it was me who destroyed the monastery and killed Schopenhauer and the rest of the friars. Lord

Bendrix made it clear that he had in his possession abbot's diaries showing in a bad light the way the ruler of Nort treats his family members. Glibannèn wouldn't mind it if not the fact that at that time he was going to marry the niece of the bishop of Ur-li as his third wife. A scandal, that wouldn't even break in Nort, could thwart his foreign plans.'

'So Your Highness doesn't know who the boy is?' asked Søren indicating the skeleton.

'I have tried to discover this for twenty-five years.'

*

15th April (the Ingmarian calendar),
the eighteenth year of King Glibannèn's reign in Nort
Princess Liln's Diary

Although he's just solved several extremely difficult cases, contributed to the capture of the Beast from Kamielnu and exposing the Loniln Poisoner, Linnamèn still doesn't seem satisfied. He's asked me about the Snorland List lately. We were having tea in the courtyard of the Ingmarian Art School, sitting under a several-hundred-year-old tree planted by some artist as "a gift of inspiration and rational afflatus" for the next generation. This time my inspiration wasn't rational but somewhat juvenile and ridiculous. Maybe it was normal

for a sixteen-year-old mind but definitely inappropriate for the princess of Ingmar. Grow up, Liln.

'I know there's an office in Ingmar, which collects information about breaches of human and Inhuman rights in Nort,' said Linnamèn. 'I'd need...or I'd hope to get there information about a boy who was once detained in the monastery in Kaer-Nort. Maybe he was reported missing or abused in any other way.'

'What you're talking about is an NGO,' I explained, intrigued by his serious face. 'It was started by the refugees from Nort, to exchange useful information that could help to find their relatives. These are in many cases sensitive data...'

'I know, Liln. This would require bending many rules and... are you laughing?'

'Don't pretend you care about breaking the rules. Who is that boy?'

'Who was,' he corrected me. 'That's what I'm trying to determine. I only know that some thirty years ago he was sent to the monastery in Kaer-Nort and that he must've been closely related to Glibannèn.'

'Related...as...let's say...his natural son?'

'I don't exclude that, although I don't think that's true. What happened to that boy was...Glibannèn couldn't have

done that to his son. Children, even bastards, are his pride; he provides for them.'

'Glibannèn was cruel for his youngest brother. He banished you from the court in Nort even though you weren't dangerous for him,' I reminded him coldly. Linnamèn shook his head.

'What happened to that boy?' I asked. He remained silent for a very long time, deep in thought. Many people were walking around the courtyard, but none of us took notice of them.

Finally, as if he wanted to change the subject, the prince asked:

'Liln, can I ask you to keep something for me?'

When I agreed, he took out a file and two thick, very tattered notebooks from his bag. He never goes anywhere without it lately.

'These are documents concerning my stay in the Kaer-Nort monastery,' he said laying them on my knees. 'I studied them hundreds of times. I remember every word. I know they'll be safe with you.'

'I'll keep your secrets and no one, not even me, will look inside,' I promised.

'I would like you to look inside,' he answered. 'Although these are very grim matters. I know I will have to go back there...'

He didn't explain why he would have to go back to Kaer-Nort. But he told me a bit about the boy he was looking for. The things he skipped I found in the horrifying diaries of that lunatic, Schopenhauer.

Of course, I did what he asked me to. The very same day I wrote to the head of the society of Nortan refugees and I asked my officials to discreetly examine the Snorland List. Today I received the answers, unfortunately unsatisfactory. Whoever the boy who died in Kaer-Nort was, nobody ever spoke up for him. Is there any record of him in the Nortan archive to which we have no access?

Abbot Schopenhauer's diary ends on an entry proving that he wanted to kill Linnamèn. But it's not the last entry. On the next page, there is a question, scribbled with a shaky, probably child's hand, without a date: 'Am I evil?' Linnamèn, how could you even think like that? On the other hand, how, being yourself, could you NOT think like that?

*

They chose a place away from the monastery – a green meadow on a top of a flat hill. They respectfully laid the bones of the nameless boy, wrapped in the king's coat, in a hollow which Doctor Søren dug with his own hands. When Rafael said another prayer, and Søren

covered and marked the grave in the Nortan way, the king said:

‘I hope one day I will be able to bury him in a grave bearing his name. Although we still didn’t find anything about him in Glibannèn’s archive... as if dying half a year ago my brother took this secret to the grave.’

Doctor Søren was looking at Rafael, who was climbing up the neighbouring hill.

‘For six months of Your Highness’s reign I never thought that Rafael could be...’

‘My real confessor?’ guessed the king. ‘You suspected that I brought him over to avoid imposing another confessor on me? One that would be more committed to the bishops and particular interest of the Church than to the country? I don’t blame you,’ Linnamèn gave him a faint smile. ‘Rafael is exceptionally eccentric, and I’m not used to displaying my beliefs. Glitzy religiousness in a theocratic absolute monarchy like Nort have done a lot of harm within last centuries. But Rafael is not only a faithful friend but also a great confessor.’

The monk whistled loudly. When they looked at him, he pointed the wasteland with his head. There was a group of people approaching from the town of Kaer-Nort.

‘Is this...?’ started Søren, but the king wasn’t listening; he was already running down the hill.

A gust of Nortan wind caught princess Liln’s hair but she didn’t seem to notice. She was looking at Linnamèn seriously and explaining something in a hushed voice. Søren and Rafael Gabriel kept an appropriate distance, just like Liln’s masked companions. Finally, Linnamèn gently squeezed both her hands. They were looking at each other smiling for a moment, and Liln got back to her companions.

‘Are these Inhumen?’ asked Rafael. The king nodded.

‘Members of the Society of the Nortan Inhumen in Ingmar,’ he explained. ‘They came to bury those, whose bones left in the monastery.’

‘This is the first time I see Inhumen wandering around Nort officially,’ said Søren pensively. ‘Such things didn’t take place since...’

‘A very long time,’ finished the king. ‘Doctor, could you show them where the bones are? Later, if you wish, you can take part in the ceremony.’

Søren’s face contorted with indiscernible emotion, neither fascination nor aversion. Finally, he nodded and walked towards Liln’s companions. The princess put her

hand on his shoulder in a traditional Ingmarian gesture of trust and introduced him briefly to the five masked Inhumen. When Søren led them towards the monastery, the king and his confessor joined Liln.

‘Doctor Søren will take care of taking them to our quarter in Kaer-Nort afterwards,’ said Linnamèn. ‘We’ll wait for them there.’

Deep in thought, they started walking to the town. Rafael addressed the king:

‘All those riddles, mysteries, and puzzles you solve... Do you do that because you still can’t solve the one concerning that boy?’

Linnamèn didn’t answer. He only gave Rafael a meaningful look. Liln smiled sadly and squeezed the king’s hand. They walked holding hands almost to the gates of Kaer.

THE END

 *back to gamebook*

Magdalena Kempna

CITY OF TALL RUINS

translation:

Maria Jaszczurowska

 *back to gamebook*

We were wondering whether the winter would engulf or kill us altogether. The falling snow was our friend – it brought a brief spell of warmth. Our most uncompromising enemy was a series of long, cloudless, frosty nights, when blood from an injured finger froze before it dropped to the ground. When king Glibannèn said goodbye to my parents, he told them that only true, strong Nortans can survive in such conditions. My parents and their companions thought of themselves as strong, persistent Nortans at that time. Ten years later, when the colony they had set up in Kaer-nar-Nort was nearing extinction instead of flourishing, they were no longer so confident. Neither were they convinced that king Glibannèn knew what he was doing when he decided to send them to live here.

Nortans are very enduring people. Since they live in a country that is covered with ice and snow for the major part of the year, they are used to nights longer than days, can survive in extremely low temperatures and find food where others wouldn't even look for it. Although Kaer-nar-Nort was even more severe as far as climate is concerned – it's a dark wilderness battered by wind and snow, where the ground is frozen so deep that three

men would have to stand on top of each other to reach the borderline – it was not the grueling conditions that killed the settlers. In the first year there were twenty of them, in the fifth – twelve, in the seventh – eight and in the tenth year only five were left. This was when the colony faced death of starvation and cold. But when we were wondering whether the winter would finally get us, we knew there was another option, much more likely. We felt they were waiting and – just as they snatched others – they would come for us in the end.

We didn't know much about them. For ten years, they only revealed themselves as murderers, acting with reason and resolution. We knew some of them didn't have a single form and can could take on most terrible shapes. Those were the most dangerous – they could attack as wild wolves or bears, fall down from the sky as birds or emerge from under the frozen water as enormous snakes. Others did not have a face. They were black as shadows and only their hands with silver claws shone in the middle of the night. They appeared in the first year, before the Winter Solstice, and kept attacking the colony until spring. This is when the settlers suffered the most. The bodies of those who dies died were never found. Some of us suspected they became like their killers.

The colony was on its own. In winter, which lasted seven months, the conditions were so harsh that further journey was impossible. During the brief spring, when there was slightly less snow, and in summer, which was even shorter and when the earth was covered with green, it was possible to reach Kaer-Nort, over which a black fortress towers. This is where Nortans keep their worst criminals – – traitors, murderers, rapists. And Inhuman, of course, at least those who were not exterminated during the previous wars with vampires, crusades against werewolves and when the country was cleansed of dwarves. However, even in Kaer-Nort nobody could protect the colony from attacks. My parents were not so stupid as to tell the officials what was really the problem. They suggested that there was a group of Inhuman, possibly vampires, hiding in the Kaer-nar-Nort wilderness. The soldiers searched the area, looked in every hole in the ground and every cave, but they found nothing. They did it in summer, as they claimed they wouldn't leave any of their people in the colony for the winter. In the third year, my parents sent an imploring appeal to king Glibannè, this time revealing the details of the tragic disappearances of the settlers. His reply made their blood

run cold even more than a possibility of another attack. The king stated that the thing that the settlers blamed for the death of their kin didn't have the right to exist and definitely didn't exist, and whoever says otherwise, is a sinner guilty of heresy and shall be tortured in the Kaer-Nort fortress. The letter ended in an outright ban on proliferating such rumours and an order to increase the effort to save the colony. Whoever left it without a permit, would be sentenced to death.

My parents felt the king's anger deeply, although they never managed to understand it. Myself, I grasped the idea many years later. Glibannèn's ancestors have fought Inhuman for centuries. Glibannèn himself committed many atrocities on vampires, although the world didn't learn about it until after his death. Neither he, nor his ancestors had any scruples about it – since Inhuman were creatures of Darkness, devoid of soul, what could possibly befall those who killed them? The thought that the existence of Inhuman didn't end in their death must have been terrifying to Glibannèn – he didn't want to acknowledge it, otherwise he would have to face the moral responsibility for his actions. He probably stood in his palace in the capital of Nort, looked at the

dark sky and found consolation in the thought that no religious treatise mentioned something anything like a vampire's or dwarf's ghost that becomes a phantom after the death. According to the public doctrine, only the ghosts of people could officially haunt Nort – as opposed to the ghosts of animals, plants and Inhuman.

I don't know when the settlers knew for sure that the creatures that attacked them were dead. Maybe they understood it by combining certain facts – non-material appearance, insensitivity to weapons (even silver), the ability to dissolve in the darkness, no need for food, all of this was sufficient evidence. Most of all, the fact that the spectres could not be injured or killed made them so terrifying. Before I was four, the settlers already knew what Glibannè would never acknowledge – that destroying the Kaer-nar-Nort settlement was a punishment for what Nortans had done to the Inhuman previously inhabiting this land.

In the tenth year of the colony, we were occupying a small household – a few cramped, narrow and short buildings with tiny rooms. Other constructions were ruined – Karian, the leader of the colony after my father's death, was thinking to burn the ruins, but then gave

up on this idea. The wood from those houses could be burnt when the winter is really bad, and some of the buildings still sheltered us against the killing wind from the wilderness. Apart from Karian and myself, the community of Kaer-nar-Nort included my mother, Analinta, her brother Tros and Salena, who lost all his family during the attacks of others. We were all exhausted and emaciated, just like our animals. On the coldest days even our dogs begged us for death with their miserable eyes. We knew that before the winter subsided, most of the dogs would have to be eaten. I tried not to think about it, because dogs were my best friends – they were the only creatures capable of showing joy and willingness to play.

And it is the dogs, in a way, that led me to the stranger.

I had no permission to leave the household. None of us had. In the period before the Winter Solstice, only Karian could venture to the neighbouring, ruined buildings, but never further than that. We barred the doors and windows and plugged the smallest holes in the walls. The only opening into the world was the chimney, but they never dared to enter this way so far – I think

they were deterred by the heat and light. They preferred to kill in the darkness. Despite such precautions, we were still not safe. We knew the others could also probe our minds from a distance. Since we wouldn't let them in, they found ways to make us go and meet them – usually by confusing our minds. That year, they chose me, probably because I was the youngest and seemingly the weakest and most prone to manipulation.

I've been trying to retrace the flow of my thoughts that afternoon for a couple of years now. I know there was nothing dark or evil in them, and yet what I did back then was not only opposed to what I'd been taught, but also extremely dangerous for the other settlers.

I was alone in the kitchen, when I heard a dog wailing. It was quiet outside – there was no wind that afternoon. I approached the window, but I saw only the sea of black behind the last unbroken lantern. The dog wailed again, with increasing terror and imploring. I was sure it was Hen, my ginger favourite. I remember that my last reasonable thought was to call him, hoping he would emerge somewhere in the house and come to me. If he had licked my hands or put his hairy head on my knees, the nightmare would have ended then and there.

But Hen did not respond. He didn't come. I heard his voice again in the darkness of the Nortan day. He was suffering, calling me and begging for help and I knew I could either find him now or never see him again. I don't remember how I got out of the house. I only know that some time later I stood on the threshold of the freezing darkness, tucked, albeit carelessly, in warm clothes. I walked towards the lantern, calling out for Hen and he kept encouraging me with his barking. When I got out of the illuminated circle, there were only starts to lighten up the way for me. The freezing cold started to paralyse my hands and feet, not to mention the throat.

I stopped in the middle of a plane covered with ice. Millions of stars shone reflecting in the snow, and yet I found myself in an utter darkness. Hen's voice was no longer heard. The beasts were with me. They didn't need to pretend anything now. It was only then that I started to be afraid.

People from the colony said that fear you experience in the vicinity of these creatures was worse than the fear of death. That day I understood what they meant. Before I saw their black silhouettes on the horizon – some of them short and stodgy, others tall, and others yet devoid

of human or animal shapes altogether – I felt as if I had lost not only my life, but all my good memories, dreams, hopes and even my soul. I think the latter was the most scared – I felt as if it wanted to escape my body, leaving it lifeless, only to avoid becoming the victim of the others.

They were approaching me, although I could sense no movement. They seemed motionless, like ice statues, yet they were incredibly fast. I was now expecting the worst – immediately before the attack they would let me see their thoughts and understand why they were going to kill me.

One of the stars tore away from the constellation right above the horizon. It was small and lonely against the vast black sky. With the corner of my eye, I saw it getting closer to me – it kept growing and shining brighter with every second. I thought it was running to meet me, to save me from the monsters, which surrounded me and were just about to close the circle. Only when I heard a scream, I understood it was not a star, but a human being. Something in his voice told me to start running. But the beasts were fast. They didn't find the way to my mind in vain; they weren't going to lose me now.

‘Don’t turn around!’ shouted the man.

The light I mistook for the star was coming from an Ingmarian torch he was holding in front of himself. He was running on the ice, trying to separate me from the beasts that were chasing us. Every now and then he turned around and directed the beam of white light at the monsters. That slowed them down for a short while, but was not enough to stop them altogether.

Suddenly I felt my feet rise from the ground. The man lifted me up and put the torch in my hand.

‘Light at them!’ he ordered.

He was running as fast as he could and I held the torch above his shoulder, trying to aim its beam at the monsters. The stranger saw the dim lights of our settlement in the distance. He sped up. That was not enough either.

The others always know what we’re thinking.

One of them appeared to the side – a large, thin, black shadow that circled us in the darkness, so as to remain safe outside the beam of the Ingmarian torch. I screamed when I saw his silver claws reach for the face of the man who was carrying me. The stranger intuitively jumped aside and I aimed the torch at the beast. It

scurried away in a silent fury, but it still managed to hit the man with its paw – the claws tore the clothes and the flesh. I felt the stranger’s great pain. And his fear. This is how they worked – they made all the bad emotions and suffering grow and move from one person to another, like a disease.

The glow of the lantern guarding our settlement engulfed us like warm wind. The stranger fell to his knees and then collapsed to the ground, first releasing me from his grip. I heard a door open. Someone shouted, someone else waved a torch towards the darkness. The beasts withdrew. They didn’t like to attack us when we were in a group.

The stranger was sick for two days. At that time he didn’t eat or drink and he never left the bed. He tossed in fever and was delirious during the day and night no end. His screaming was heard in the most distant corners of the house. On the very first day, Karian and the rest of our group searched through his travel bag, so as to determine where he had come from.

‘If he had been coming from Kaer-Nort, he wouldn’t have met Nalinta on his way,’ said my mother. ‘On the other hand, he can’t have come from the wilderness.’

‘What is beyond the wilderness?’ I asked.

‘Nothing, my dear,’ she replied. ‘This is where our world ends.’

‘Do you think he may have been looking for us?’ asked Tros with hope.

‘He doesn’t look like a lost wanderer,’ said Karian. ‘Have you seen this?’ he pointed at the objects retrieved from the bag. ‘A silver dagger, a flask with sunny wine. Only members of the royal family may drink sunny wine on Winter Solstice.’

‘That’s great. That means we have a relative of king Glibannèn here,’ Salen’s eyes flashed with anger. ‘Let’s write to our gracious king that if he ever wants to see his relative alive again, he must let us resettle.’ Salen had long been blaming king Glibannèn for all the misfortunes that befell him and the whole colony. He was mostly right.

‘Look at him,’ replied Karian patiently. ‘Do you think he would be wandering around Kaer-nar-Nort at this time of year if Glibannèn really cared about him?’

‘Do you think he’s been sent here just like us?’ enquired Tros. ‘Maybe he’s been sent here to help us?’

Karian, Salen and my mother looked at him meaningfully. In our situation it was hard not only to

understand where Tros got his optimistic ideas, but also to find his hope anything but irritating.

‘Do you think he will make it?’ Karian now turned to my mother.

‘I don’t know. He’s strong and clearly not willing to give up.’

‘The body doesn’t really matter here,’ observed Salen brusquely. ‘He will make it only if he has a strong soul.’

We had seen such injuries before. Sometimes the large ones healed pretty fast. And sometimes it happened that a minor scratch proved fatal. Still, it was hard to say whether the infirm died because of a poison in their blood or due to exhaustion caused by nightmares and visions produced by high fever.

Rather than listen to such conversations, I would sit near the stranger along with Hen, who had been in the house all the time. I wasn’t scared by his condition. I was curious about what he was saying under his breath while he was delirious. Various names mingled with words uttered in languages other than Nortan, fragments of strange stories about angels, and especially about a warm sea and a castle built of white rock on the shore. Once or twice my mother listened on to such shredded

stories along with me. She must have understood much more than me, because her face showed great sympathy.

‘I think he’s calling his father,’ I said.

‘This man has many secrets to hide,’ replied my mother. ‘Something lies heavy on his conscience.’

The stranger’s soul was clearly stuck with the worst of his memories, his enemies and his wrongdoings. On the night of the Winter Solstice, the nightmares intensified. This time he wasn’t talking about the sea or the castle. It was as if he wanted to warn someone against a grave danger. It was that night that the others increased their effort to reach us. We squatted close together near the room where the stranger lay and we watched one another. We couldn’t all sleep at once, because this is when we were the most prone to their manipulations. Each time one of us stood up to do something out of the ordinary, the rest had to seize him or her with all their might. The beasts sensed our resistance and we could feel their fury.

The following day the stranger’s nightmares finished and he fell fast asleep. When he woke up a few hours later, his wound was closed and his look was conscious. He ate the soup we gave him. Hunger and appetite were very good signs.

We all gathered at his bedside. Karian was the one to speak first:

‘How did you get here, lad?’

‘I sailed through the Lid-ar-Nort strait. Then I walked towards Kaer-Nort for three days.’

‘Alone?’

‘Yes. The ship I arrived on was bound to the Blue Islands.’

‘Do you know where you are?’

‘I suppose I’m somewhere north of Kaer-Nort, west of the Lid-ar-Nort strait, right in the middle of the Kaer-nar-Nort wilderness,’ the stranger seemed to be regaining his strength by the minute. He kept watching us carefully.

‘You are in the Kaer-nar-Nort colony established ten years ago by king Glibannèn,’ confirmed Karian. ‘At the beginning there were twenty of us, but now the whole colony includes only the group you can see here. My name is Karian and I’m the leader of this group. This is Salen, Tros, Analinta and her daughter, Nalinta.’

‘Has the king sent you to help us?’ Tros suddenly broke in. Karian hissed at him angrily, but my uncle didn’t seem to care.

Care and sympathy appeared on the stranger's face. He must have thought we were rather a pathetic bunch – a group of miserable, exhausted, emaciated people with dark rings under their eyes and mad fear on their faces.

'I'm sorry. I didn't know that a colony had been set up right here. My name is Linnamèn.'

My mother and Karian didn't seem surprised on hearing this name. They probably guessed the stranger's identity once they saw the content of his bag and heard the fragments of his speech while he was delirious. We knew about Linnamèn as much as every other Nortan did: that he was the king's half-brother, the son of the late king Aribannén's third wife out of all four. We were also aware that Glibannèn removed him from the court immediately after he took the throne and that it was best to avoid him if you didn't want to get in trouble. Glibannèn considered him an aranha, one who brings bad luck. In Nort that was the name used to describe people whose mothers died in childbirth. Not everybody believed that Glibannèn had banished Linnamèn only because the latter was an aranha, but who would dare to enquire after the real reason? Since the boy had left the palace in Nort, he rarely visited the place. Apparently, he spent most of his time travelling around the world.

‘Do you remember what happened, prince Linnamén?’ asked Karian. Linnamèn nodded slowly.

‘These creatures have been attacking us since the colony was established.’

Karian recounted whatever we knew about the beasts. Linnamèn listened to him carefully. He seemed to understand not only what was said, but also what was omitted.

‘King Glibannèn told us it would be the ultimate triumph of man over non-humans,’ continued Karian. ‘He emphasized that by settling in the land that used to be occupied by Inhumen and by restoring it to Nort, could we gain great glory. While you were heading here, you may have seen the ruins of an enormous city. Officially, it was completely destroyed during the war fought a few dozen years back. It was literally razed to the ground. But this was not so. Some walls of Inhumen’s houses won’t budge to this day. We suppose this must be where the beasts are coming from.’

‘No colony should ever have been set up here,’ replied Linnamèn gravely. ‘I think you must leave this place.’

Tros stood next to me; now he lowered his head, while Salen clenched his fists.

‘My lord, that would be treason,’ Karian looked at the prince sadly, but with a glimpse of hope. I think he wanted someone to tell him that in such dramatic circumstances an escape wouldn’t be a crime, even if that someone was an outcast rejected by the royal family. Linnamèn said no such thing, though. He only looked at me and then shifted his eyes to my mother’s face. She must have seen some sort of response in his face, because she drew me closer. The prince, however, kept silent. He may have known what we have long suspected: that we had a choice between dying in this horrible place and trying to get out of this country to find a place where Glibannèn’s fury wouldn’t reach us. We had to decide what was our priority: our life or loyalty to the king, who – although infallible according to our faith – could have been wrong in settling us in Kaer-nar-Nort.

‘We have no way of escaping,’ barked Salen after a while. ‘We can’t go to Kaer-Nort and it’s impossible to bypass at this time of year. And the beasts... They are only waiting for us to go out.’

‘You could walk through Kaer-nar-Nort.’

‘But the world ends beyond the wilderness,’ I suddenly remembered.

Linnamèn smiled at me, but immediately got serious again.

‘One world ends, and another begins. In the Dark Harbour in Lid-ar-Nort there are still some boats. Inhuman running away from this country had left them behind, hoping their relatives who evaded cleansing will reach the place and sail to the Free Island of Kart.’

Nobody answered Linnamèn. And nobody dared make such a decision.

‘They won’t leave you alone,’ the prince added. ‘The city you mentioned... The City of Tall Ruins was their pride. The inhabitants used to be the subject of the king of Nort. They fought for him when the country was attacked by the silver army of the Nizgmar Empire. When king Karibannèn took the throne and the period of my dynasty started, Nortans were slowly turning against Inhuman and the latter felt betrayed. When the army of queen Akalinta reached this place to destroy Inhuman, the oldest vampires from the City of Tall Ruins could still remember the time when the rulers of Nort invited them to the palace for a feast. The siege lasted three years and took thousands of casualties. This is where Inhuman died full of anger and despair. And this is how they

remained. They can only find peace in the ruins. Your presence is like an open wound, like a noise that keeps them from sleeping.

‘How would you know that?’ asked Karian.

‘I have seen such a creature before,’ he replied and cast as a powerful look. We had no choice but to believe. ‘You can’t fight with them. You can only leave.’

A few hours later, the sky cleared up. On the day of the Winter Solstice the sun rises above the horizon for a few minutes. Afterwards, the days in Nort are gradually longer – up to seven hours in the middle of summer. Although it was against our rules, Linnamèn left the house tucked in a blanket and walked on the snow, raising his dark-haired head – – untypical of a Nortan – – to look at the sky. Right before the sunrise he sat on a bench in front of the entrance and I joined him, taking advantage of the fact that my mother was quietly conferring with the rest of the group. We were sitting and looking at the blue-grey sky, which started to go pink right above the horizon. After a while I asked:

‘What are you doing?’

‘Light in the darkness,’ he replied with a smile, pointing to a broad band of light where the earth met

the sky. 'These creatures have shown me horrible things. I want the light to chase away the nightmares.'

'I've heard that if you're killed by a beast, you become one yourself. Two years ago they killed my father. Do you think he's a beast now?'

'What was your father's name?'

'Sebastian.'

Linnamèn shook his head without turning away from the horizon and said:

'There is no one of this name among them.'

'How would you know? Nobody knows their names. Nobody talks to them.'

'I did when I was sick.'

'Why were you walking through the wilderness?'

'I wanted to make it to Kaer-Nort in time for the Winter Solstice.'

'Couldn't you stay somewhere else on this occasion?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because long, long time ago I did something very bad in Kaer-Nort.'

I never learnt what it was that Linnamèn did as a child in Kaer-Nort and why he insisted on going back

to this grim city. Our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of an unexpected guest. The sun was rising lazily when a small dark point appeared in the sky and was heading toward us. This time it was no beast. After a while we could clearly see strong wings shining in the sun. I held my breath. You just didn't see such things in Kaer-nar-Nort.

Of all the animals in Nort, golden pigeons are the most resistant to hardships and have a great sense of direction. They are still used nowadays when a member of the royal family needs to be traced quickly and nobody knows his whereabouts.

Golden pigeons are beautiful birds, but they never bring good news. This one brought Linnamèn the most tragic news of all. I saw the prince's pale face as the bird sat on his hand and I watched him go even paler when he read the letter he detached from the bird's leg, as he placed the pigeon gently on my lap. I stroked the pigeon's golden feathers when Linnamèn left the open letter on the bench, where he had been sitting, and staggered towards the last lantern. On seeing what was going on, my mother and Karian ran up to me. We stared at Linnamèn, who stood with his back turned

to us and gazed at the wilderness spreading in front of him. A moment later the wind blew the sound of silent, miserable weeping.

When we got back to the house, Karian and the others of us read the letter.

‘Was it news from the king?’ I asked pressing my face to the window and observing Linnamèn, who fell down on his knees by the last lantern and stayed like this, almost motionless.

After a long silence my mother replied, her voice heavy with emotion:

‘No, darling. The king is dead. Now prince Linnamèn will rule.’

Later people said that Linnamèn learnt of his family’s death while he was abroad. That was not true. He got the news when he was in the Kaer-nar-Nort wilderness. The letter from the palace was brief: on the Winter Solstice, the members of the royal family performed the ritual, drank the sunny wine and then took part in the feast. A few hours later – around midnight, when Linnamèn lay in our house prostrate – all of them died in mysterious circumstances. The great mystery surrounding their death – one that Linnamèn was to solve right before

his coronation – appalled all Nortans, especially the palace officials, who summoned the prince in their letter to return to the capital, if he was still alive.

‘Is that why he’s so sad?’

‘He’s sad, because all his relatives died. Brothers, sisters, uncles, nephews, nieces... He’s all alone in the world now.’

‘But he’s always been alone. Why does he despair having lost those who have never done anything for him?’ said Salen. ‘Don’t you understand? Since Glibannèn is dead, we may leave this place.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ scoffed Karian. ‘Glibannèn is dead, but his law is still the law.’

‘We must help him,’ said my mother, looking out of the window, clearly worried. The sun was already hiding behind the horizon. Linnamèn was no longer kneeling on the snow. He stood in the traditional prayer posture, covering his face with his hands. Nobody dared approach him.

He joined us again, when it was already dark. Although he was overwhelmed with grief, he seemed calm now. None of us knew what to say. In the cramped hut in the middle of nowhere, on the very border of his

country was where Linnamèn received his first homage as the ruler, when a group of poor settlers bowed silently in front of him, pressing their faces to the floor. The prince did not say a word. He just took my hand and led me towards the fireplace. On the floor beside the fire lay my toys, some paper and a few pencils. The prince sat me down by the fire and asked if he could borrow my paper and pencils. Then he sat at the table and without another word started writing a letter. It can't have been in Nortan, because he moved his hand from the right to the left rather than from the top down. We were all very quiet. My mother sat next to me and wrapped her arms around me, while Karian, Salen and Tros conferred quietly in the corner of the room.

‘I will lead you to Lid-ar-Nort,’ said Linnamèn, putting the piece of paper in the envelope on which he drew a symbol of Ingmarian torch. He must have heard fragments of the conversation. ‘From there, I will sail to the capital.’

‘What about us, my lord?’ asked Karian quietly.

‘You will need a warmer climate. You will sail from the Dark Harbour to Kart, and then to Loch Scarland. Once you're there, you will find a monk named Rafael

Gabriel. He will take care of you. I want you to tell him to join me immediately in the palace in Nort. And as regards this letter...' he put the envelope in my hand. 'Ask Rafael to send it to Liln of Ingmar as soon as possible.'

'You're saying that as if it were so easy to pass through Kaer-nar-Nort,' said Salen bitterly. 'The cold itself may kill us, not to mention the beasts. It will take five days...'

'Three days,' – interrupted the prince. 'If we take the same way I did when coming here: through the ruins.'

'They're going to kill us,' stated Karian in a matter-of-fact voice after a long silence.

'They didn't kill me when I was there three days ago. Nor did they do it when I used to venture here long ago. They know your thoughts, you are aware of that. They want you to leave.'

I think Karian, and definitely Salen, must have suspected that the prince was influenced by the beasts, who were trying to lure us from our hiding place. They did, however, see enough cases of possession to reject such assumption on second thoughts. Although we didn't understand that at the time, something changed in us when Linnamèn appeared in our house. We found our lost hope.

We set out the following day, when the sky started to clear up. We wanted to be as far as possible from the settlement, before the beasts surrounded it again. In the pale, cold light of the dawn we looked at what remained of the Kaer-nar-Nort colony for the last time – the might-have-been pride of king Glibannèn, the place where I was born. The farther we were from our former home, the more miserable we thought was the life we were leaving behind. We walked briskly and quietly, like Nortans do when forced to travel in winter. Speaking would be a waste of energy and warmth, so we kept that down to minimum. We wandered through the frozen wilderness, like our ancestors did long time ago when there were no big cities where one could wait until the winter was over – without eating or sleeping on the way. To stop for more than a couple of minutes in such circumstances could result in death. Linnamèn walked first and carried the Ingmarian torch, his ‘light in the darkness.’ Next to him, our dogs pulled a sleigh with our scanty belongings – from time to time, my mother would put me on the sleigh, but it was virtually impossible to rest in the cold. We were also accompanied by the golden pigeon, which used

to sit on Linnamèn's shoulder once in a while. The beasts were also there. We didn't see them, but we could sense their ominous presence. They were escorting us, ready to pounce on us any time. Once or twice they approached the dogs, which started to tremble with fear and bark in frenzy. Then Linnamèn would direct the torch towards the beasts and they withdrew into the silent darkness, hesitant.

At last the moment came that all of us dreaded the most – tall ruins of houses and towers appeared against the starry sky on the horizon. The City of Inhuman. Linnamèn headed straight at it and the creatures around us became even more restless. Every once in a while one of them tried to attack our dogs. Some mysterious force didn't let them get at us; they were so furious that they wanted to kill the dogs, if anything.

Once we entered the city, we were enshrouded by a silence much deeper than the one in the wilderness. This was the city of death, the city of Inhuman. The streets and squares were wider than in Nortan cities and buildings of extraordinary shapes reached high into the sky. They probably reached as far as that beneath the earth, too. Some of them had doors placed so high that

no human could possibly reach them. Others had no windows and others still could hardly be called houses in that they were more like a system of poles, holes or tunnels. Inhuman don't have the same needs as people, who must have access to food, water and warmth in order to survive. The ruins of the city we were looking at proved how much they differed from us. Kaer-nar-Nort, a wilderness and a place impossible for people to live in, was a perfect retreat for Inhuman.

They first appeared on the steps of the ruins of a tall tower in the midst of the city. They were sitting in silence and turning their expressionless faces towards us. They were waiting. As we looked around, we noticed they were virtually everywhere – invisible eyes watched us from the top of the walls and from the windows of the buildings, from the streets and tunnels. We were now surrounded. We had to stop. The fear returned, worse than the fear of death.

We instinctively crowded in one place and the dogs squatted at our feet, wailing quietly. The golden pigeon disappeared somewhere. It must have been just as scared. Hundreds, thousands of Inhuman ghosts observed us in silence. Then Linnamèn handed the Ingmarian torch

to Karian and stepped forward, turning towards the creatures sitting on the steps of the tower. He stopped at the edge of the shadow. Something moved on the steps, as if it wanted to jump at the prince, but it was clearly stopped. The growing tension was finally interrupted by a noise so unexpected in a place like this – and one that wasn't heard here for decades: the sound of a human voice. The prince now addressed the inhabitants of the city:

‘I am Linnamèn, son of king Aribannèn, grandson of queen Akalint, great-grandson of king Iannèn and a descendant of the great king Karibannèn.’ It was as if the whole city seethed with anger on hearing these words, as if Linnamèn's ancestry was a list of human wrongdoings and Inhuman suffering. ‘I am also the heir of prince Stern, queen Anteln and king Tus.’ The silent grumble suddenly stopped. ‘I am the ruler of Nort. And as such I am now returning this land to you. I am returning to you Aank-lin, the City of Tall Ruins and I am hereby restoring the law established thousand years ago by king Tus. No Nortan will be ordered by the king to settle in the Kaer-nar-Nort wilderness. And those who will do so without the king's consent remain yours to deal

with.' Linnamèn spread both arms in a gesture that I had previously known only from history books. 'With my rule I hereby restore peace between my species and all the other races.'

At first it seemed as if silence was the only answer. Yet after an infinitely long while we all noticed that the shadows on the steps moved ever so slightly. They still remained outside the circle of light, but they started to approach the prince, who stood motionless and stared at them persistently. In the midst of the ruins of what used to be a magnificent city, in silence and in darkness, the former inhabitants of this land passed in front of Linnamèn without a single sound, touching his open palms with their silver claws in a gesture of understanding and agreement, while the prince silently uttered all their foreign, strange-sounding names.

It lasted quite a while, but when the last Inhuman passed in front of the prince's face, we finally felt safe. Linnamèn quickly grabbed the Ingmarian torch in his frozen hands. Apart from providing light, it also kept us pleasantly warm.

When we were leaving the city, the sun was slowly rising above the horizon.

‘A light in the darkness,’ I said, grabbing Linnamèn by the hand. He smiled faintly and gently squeezed my fingers.

This is when he told us not to repeat to anyone what happened in the City of Tall Ruins. At that time, there were many people in Nort who mistook fanaticism for faith. The news that there were Inhuman ghosts in the Kaer-nar-Nort wilderness could attract many irresponsible people who would want to implement their misunderstood truths of faith. Some time would have to pass, before the law could be changed in Nort and even more time was needed to affect the people’s awareness.

On the third day – just like the prince had promised – we reached the Dark Harbour, where a long row of big boats lay on the shore of the sea that never froze. Inhuman’s boats had solid, sharp bows and strong sails. Linnamèn told us to sit in one of the vessels, as he put his travel bag in another one.

‘Sail straight ahead,’ he told us. ‘Watch out for the eastern wind. If you ever drift off the course, aim at the Green Star,’ he showed Karian a point in the sky. ‘In four hours you will reach the Free Island of Kart. Once you’re in the harbor, enquire after a ship bound

for Loch Scarland.' He looked at me. 'Do you have my letter, Nalinta?'

I nodded. The prince smiled and kissed my forehead.

'Make sure it's sent. Good luck to you.'

Having said this, he pushed his boat into the water so quickly that none of us managed to open our mouth. Then he jumped inside, unfurled the diamond-shaped sail and set off to the east, to the capital.

As a king, he kept the promise he made to Inhuman. No human ever settled in the City of Tall Ruins or nearby. After many years, queen Liln, who took care of such places, allowed the Inhuman from Ingmar to explore this land. Afterwards, the City of Tall Ruins was declared a monument, but not in the Nortan sense, but as understood by Inhuman, which is hard for people to grasp.

We finally settled in Loch Scarland. Immediately after his coronation Linnamèn gave us some of the land from his Scarland property as a compensation for the Kaer-nar-Nort colony. It was not much, but we managed to make this land our home, learning to live in a country where the wind was warm and the windows looked out on valleys woven with murmuring streams instead of the icy plain.

Even in the years to come we were still afraid to talk about what had happened to us. We had a lot of painful memories from Kaer-nar-Nort. Only occasionally, when news of Linnamèn's extraordinary feats reached us, did we look at each other with meaningful smiles. Only when Karian, Salen and my mother were dead, and Tros was peacefully awaiting death in the Loch Scarland monastery, did I find the courage to tell the story of our meeting with Linnamèn to my grandchildren. The last hero of my story was the letter the prince wrote in our hut in Kaer-nar-Nort.

On the day when we reached Loch Scarland, Rafael Gabriel – the monk with one green eye and the other blue, a weirdo who became king Linnamèn's confessor – took me to the post office. Since I didn't want to part with the letter even for a second, he let me post it myself. The addressee, Liln, was the princess of Ingmar at that time and she must have recalled that the address on the envelope was written by a child, because many years later she issued an official letter, in which King Linnamèn's chroniclers were asking me to explain what happened to the prince before he came to Nort and took the throne. The same hand that addressed the

envelope drew the symbol of the Ingmarian torch on the bottom of the paper. I already knew by then that 'Liln' meant 'a light in the darkness' in the Ancient Ingmarian language.

THE END

 *back to gamebook*



LINNAMEN

We would like to give credit to Mr Hideo Muraoka
for the free personal image release.

[Hideo Muraoka's Twitter](#)

[!\[\]\(35b64bc4e5345f88020b7534d08bd6bd_img.jpg\) *back to gamebook*](#)



RAFAEL GABRIEL

[!\[\]\(f2403e7a5f2c0fa99646e94b99574360_img.jpg\) *back to gamebook*](#)



FRIAR AUGUSTINE

[!\[\]\(ae1245c179d39cbdeb8fbb190bf271dd_img.jpg\) *back to gamebook*](#)



MID GUNS

[!\[\]\(de40034a30ec3a607a35ecadfb207b5a_img.jpg\) *back to gamebook*](#)



PRINCESS LILN

[!\[\]\(885ed3b42ee732389d414d5b5eada218_img.jpg\) *back to gamebook*](#)



DOCTOR SØREN

The Awakenings of doctor Søren
first novel

[!\[\]\(606e15d1ecca8c0d1d0deb92c19bc065_img.jpg\) *back to gamebook*](#)



NILS KLEIN

The Escape of Nils Klein
second novel

[!\[\]\(610bcd4682854e904ed0990fb9d43ef0_img.jpg\) *back to gamebook*](#)



KING GLIBANNEN

[!\[\]\(1f11dca231b63ed285fde6e06b51f4c1_img.jpg\) *back to gamebook*](#)