



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Through the Portal

On Writing Ellwood – a Modern Fantasy Novella

B.A. Essay

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University of Iceland

School of Humanities

Department of English

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Summary

This final assignment is a result of a Creative Writing course taught by Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir at the English Department in the University of Iceland, fall of 2010. The assignment consists of a novella, *Ellwood*, and a report on the writing process. The novella is around 30,000 words and the report about 8,500 words.

Ellwood is a fantasy revolving around Erin Ellwood, a girl in her early twenties, who suddenly finds herself in the middle of a fairy tale as she is pulled from her everyday life into the amazing world of Asria. She discovers that she is destined for a role in this parallel world, where her origins lie. It is the place from where Grimm fairy tales took place, a magical world where anything can happen. In the story I apply many of the known fairy tale elements and hope that I have managed to create a believable paralleled universe. When writing fantasy almost anything is permissible yet there was always that thin line of not going so far as to lose the reader's "suspension of disbelief."

The report explains how the idea for *Ellwood* came into being, how it was created, how it was finished, then edited, rewritten, edited again and finalized. It describes how I relied on famed authors and experienced editors to help me with my writing, mostly by using textbooks on writing by Stephen King and Sol Stein. To understand the contents of the report fully I go out from the assumption that the reader has read the novella before going on to the essay.

It is my desire that this final project does not only show my skill as a fiction writer but also my skills in writing creatively in another language than my own, English.

Table of Contents

The Novella

<i>Ellwood</i>	1
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The Report

Chapter 1: Introduction	66
1.2 How it All Began.....	67
1.3 Switzerland.....	68
Chapter 2: The Creation of Ellwood	70
2.1. The Brothers Grimm	70
2.2. The Number Three	71
Chapter 3: Plot	73
3.1 Plotting <i>Ellwood</i>	73
3.2 Pacing.....	74
3.3 Planting.....	75
3.4. Keeping Secrets.....	76
Chapter 4: Character Creation	78
4.1 What's In a Name?	79
4.2 Accents.....	80
Chapter 5. The Editing Process	82
5.1 Killing Your Darlings.....	82
5.2. Struggling with Length.....	84
Chapter 6: Taking The Story Further	85
6.1. <i>Ellwood</i> : Alternative Version (with Dragons)	85
Chapter 7: Conclusion	87
Works Cited	88
Appendix I	89

Ellwood

By Ásrún E. Magnúsdóttir

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I

“Ellwood!”

Flaming locks of auburn hair circled the air as Erin turned around to the sound of someone calling her last name, eyes scanning the streets in search of whoever was trying to get her attention. The busy lunchtime traffic of New Yorkers swarmed around her like worker bees, whizzing past her without giving her as much as a second glance. Thousand pairs of feet shuffling along, each and every one of them in their own closed off universe within this big city. About to turn and continue on her way home Erin clearly heard her name called out again, followed by the screeching sound of car brakes and blaring of horns. That was when she saw him, he seemed shaken by the traffic as he arrived safely at her side of the street. Angry cab drivers still shaking their fists through the rolled down windows as he made his way towards her. With an eyebrow raised and folded arms Erin waited with intrigued curiosity as the man quickly approached her.

He wore leather boots laced up to his knee, brown pants and a boiled leather vest over a grey shirt. This outfit, topped with leather cuffs on his wrists, made him look like someone who had just walked off the set of her favorite TV show *The Legend of The Seeker*. A few people cast him a glance as they hurried on, she guessed even in New York City someone dressed in an outfit from the middle ages called for attention.

Be still my beating heart she thought when he had reached her, his strong hands grabbing hold of her shoulders.

“I can’t believe I’ve found you.” Excitement shone from his dazzling blue eyes. Erin felt confused. It seemed that this man knew her yet she would have sworn before a judge and jury that she had never met him before. He was ridiculously handsome, perhaps two or three years older than her, making him all of twenty-five or six. He towered over her, his tussled black hair spilling over his hawk like brow down to his brilliant blues. A real life movie star, if Snow White ever had a brother this would be him.

“I fear we don’t have much time.”

“What’s going—”

“We need to talk, do you know a safe place?”

It all began to make sense. Why this shockingly beautiful person was talking to her, even why he looked so much like a movie star. He wasn’t your everyday Joe, he must be the

stripper Carol had promised to arrange for her bachelorette party. Sure the wedding wasn't for another month, but how many times had she hammered to Carol that she did not want the party the day or even the week before the wedding? She wanted to get all that out of her system long before the big day. Perhaps they decided to make a weekend out of it. After all it was Friday and if Erin remembered correctly Janet's parents would be at the cape this weekend, which left their mansion of a house unattended. This was going to be everything she wanted and more, even the stripper. His attire was strange but perhaps that was all just part of it, how many times had she seen them dress as cops or fire fighters in the movies? She smiled at the corner of her mouth as she saw him in her mind's eye dancing around her in the living room of her condo and wondered if she had any single dollar bills in her wallet. Carol must have used her extra keys and was preparing everything for the party. Erin was practically giddy with excitement and there was a skip in her step as she led the way up to her apartment.

Erin lived at the edge of the forest. Well, almost. Central Park was the closest you could get to a forest for miles. Being only a store clerk at Macy's there was no way she could afford the apartment herself, but her wonderful fiancé was a paralegal at his father's law firm *Bachman & Brooks*. And soon she herself would be Mrs. Daniel Brooks. She giggled despite herself at what her Danny would think of her and the girls having the bachelorette at her apartment, but they would be gone out for drinks before he came home. She'd never seen a striptease with her naked eyes before and was getting a little excited.

Entering the lobby of her apartment building Erin noticed that the doorman eyed the stranger carefully. Reaching the elevator her new friend was a little hesitant about stepping inside but sure enough he followed her closely behind. Not a very chatty stripper, she thought. Then she figured that a big chatter was probably not on the job description, now on the other hand if he had a big—

The low chime of the elevator announced they had reached the seventh floor and the door opened.

"After you," he said, sounding a little bit nervous, clinging onto the handle if she was not mistaken. Nonetheless she shuffled out into the hallway figuring that some people had problems with small closed off places. As she went through her purse in search of her keys Erin could no longer contain her curiosity.

"Is everyone inside?" her eyes were dancing.

"I should hope not, if they have found your home then we are in great danger. Why do you ask? Is there reason for worry?" He quickly glanced around as to check if anyone was

following. But Erin just rolled her eyes and stuck the key in the lock, rattling the chain a little before turning the key as to give anyone inside a chance to hide before they entered. Her friends loved surprises and this sure would be a big one, though she felt it was a little weird to have walked with the stripper to her place, but it only added to her excitement.

The door opened silently as ever, her footsteps muffled by the carpet. There didn't seem to be a living creature inside except for the two entering, damn they were good! Erin walked into the dining room, behind her she heard the door close.

"Carol?...Janet? Melissa?" she whispered, walking the circle from the living room to the small hallway leading to the two bedrooms and the bathroom, back around to the kitchen and the front door. With no sign of her friends Erin began to get a little worried. "Come on you guys, this isn't funny." She made her way back into the living room where the assumed stripper was now sitting on one of the sofas.

"You were expecting anyone here?" His eyes looking quizzically at her.

"Well yeah... the guests for the party."

"A bit early for a gathering I find," he said "or is it perhaps common to get together at noon?"

"Look pal, if there isn't a party and you're not a stripper then what the hell is going on?" She stood opposite him, arms folded across her chest. He stared at her a moment before answering.

"I do not know this word *stripper*, but believe me when I say I have long searched for you and now that I found you I will bring you home."

Erin scoffed. "I don't know which mental facility you escaped from buddy, but I'd like you to leave."

"And I will," he replied calmly, "as soon as you have gathered some of your things and are ready to go."

"I don't know what you've been smoking but I am sure as hell not going anywhere with you!"

As he stood up from the sofa Erin took a step backwards and placed herself behind the other sofa, feeling safer with something between them, blocking his access to her. How could she have been so stupid, assuming that he was here for the purpose of entertainment? Now he was most likely going to jump her and use her for *his* purpose of entertainment.

The man ran his hand down his face as if in thought. "I get the feeling that you don't completely trust me."

“I don’t trust you at all! And I want you gone.”

“Well I am sorry, your more than willingness to bring me here lead me to believe that you had at least some idea of who I am and why I am here, now I see it is not so.” He fell silent and reached into the inner pocket of his leather west. Erin prepared to duck behind the sofa in case this lunatic brought out a gun. She was very relieved to find that it was nothing but a piece of paper. “Maybe this will convince you that I mean no harm.”

He held out his hand offering her the note. Erin hesitated but figured that an old scrap of paper couldn’t be more dangerous than an automatic weapon so she reached over the sofa and took the paper in her hands, all the while careful of not taking her eyes off of him, that was until she unfolded the note. Her eyes grew wide in wonder. Not a photograph but a close enough replica of one artfully drawn on this little piece of paper. Erin stared at it open-mouthed and speechless. There was no doubt, the resemblance was unmistakable. The wavy long hair, alert eyes, small nose and high cheekbones told the tale.

“Where did you get this? Why do you have a picture of my grandmother?... And so young...”

“Her grandmother...” the man muttered under his breath then he cleared his throat.

“There isn’t much time for explanations right now, but please believe me when I say that I am here for your safety. There are dangerous people looking for you. I will gladly explain everything when we have more time, but for now all I can say is that your grandmother fled to this place to escape the very same people who are coming after you now, which is why we must run.”

“Listen, I don’t know who got you up to this or even where you were able to get an itty painting of my grandmother, but I –”

A loud crash came from the hallway followed by a muffled cry. They both turned to face the door.

“What was that?” she was asking herself rather than the crazy man standing in the living room.

“Curse the spirits! They are here!” Bending over, his hands grabbed the armrests of the sofa, his blazing blue eyes more serious than before as they levelled with hers.

“Listen, I will keep you safe but our best chance now is to find a secure hiding place. Is there any such place here?” More crashes and shrieks could be heard from the hallway. Each sound edging closer to her door, which was now shaking in its frame with every crash that came.

“Who is out there?” Her voice was merely more than a whisper.

“Bad people, people who wish you harm.”

“Why?”

“Because of who you are.”

He had let go of the chair and was now edging closer to her. Erin hardly noticed, her mind was occupied with the imminent danger just a drywall away.

“B-but I’m nobody, just a store clerk. I work at Macy’s for crying out loud.”

“No,” he said, his hand taking hold of her chin and gently raising it so she could look him in the eyes. “You are much more than that, I will explain this all later, but we need a place to hide and we need it fast.” There was something in his voice, the urgency or the sincerity that made her abide by him. Even though she did not trust him she trusted what was going on outside her door even less.

“Fine,” she said and led him further into the apartment, past the master bedroom, coming to a halt next to the door to the bathroom. It had been a policy of the architect who designed that particular apartment building that broom closets and cabinets must not be seen. There was certain elegance and class they wanted to maintain with the apartments and so the doors had been integrated with the wall making it look as though there was nothing there. And even if one were to enter the bedroom and notice that the wall was uneven the person would only assume that it had been designed this way to have the wall align with the closets. The strangers had reached her condo now, loud bangs emitted from the door as if someone was kicking it. Without looking Erin could tell that only a kick or two more were needed for it to burst open. If her heart had been racing before it was nothing compared to the speed it was working at now, and as the sound rang in her ears she cursed herself for not having installed some kind of handle or a ring to make this little closet easier to open when someone needed it opened in a rush, though that missing detail might have been what saved their life that day.

When the closet door had finally decided to comply and open up they slipped inside, she grabbed the small hitch and silently closed the door behind them. It was a tight fit for the pair of them, Erin had to press herself up against the stranger and he had his right arm wrapped around her, over her shoulder and chest slanting down toward her left hip. There was complete darkness within it; all they could do now was to wait.

The front door burst open, meeting the carpet with a loud thud; splinters and pieces of wood ricocheting on the walls and floor.

II

Erin thought she could hear four, if not five, pairs of heavy footsteps enter the apartment. She imagined these people having made their way into the living room where they talked amongst themselves sounding unsure about something.

“Never mind him.” A voice said loud and rough. “He’s out cold. Just throw him on that sofa, he’ll wake up in a minute or two, have at him then. In the meantime search this place but be quick about it. We must get to her before he finds her.”

The following minutes were the longest of her life. Burglars in broad daylight were rummaging through her home, not even trying to be discreet about it and their bounty was not jewellery, the flat screen TV or hard cash but her. Every time one of them passed the carefully hidden closet her heart began to beat faster, hammering so hard in her chest she felt sure they would be able to hear it, follow the sound and find her and this mysterious saviour of hers. She was starting to see the burglars in her mind’s eye as small but unearthly strong men with large hands and a sturdy grip, disfigured and hideous. A shadow briefly went by the thin slit in the wall catching her eye, a pair of feet came to a halt in front of the closet. Erin marked them by the thin line of light at the floor that was now broken in two places. She could smell him: a vile scent of stale onions. She held her breath, her heart having broken free from the confinements of her ribcage and was now ringing in her ears as well. Her whole body seemed to vibrate with fear. Had Erin been alone in the closet she would have screamed, thrown open the door and made a run for it. She hated being confined and unsure of what was going to happen. Luckily for her this man was with her and it was his secure and steady arm across her chest that held her back from doing anything so foolish.

“There is no sign of her.” This man’s voice had a lighter tone than the one who had spoken earlier. Not as rasp.

“And it does not seem like anyone left in a rush either.”

“Well then,” said the rasp-voiced one, who sounded to be the group leader, “let us see if our friend is ready to wake up.”

With the men gathered in the living room Erin breathed easier, especially when the shadow she had spied at the foot of the closet door disappeared. Then all was silent until a loud smack reached her ears. the sound came once more and then yet another time, the third and final time it was met by a mumble.

“Good fellow,” said the leader. “So nice of you to wake up, but I am afraid we have a little problem, the girl. Isn’t. Here.” Each word dropping off his lips cold as icicles from a rooftop. Nothing was heard for a moment but the tense silence, until someone stuttered:

“S-she s-should be.”

The sound of this voice was enough to drain all the blood from Erin’s face. She felt as if someone had just jerked the world from under her feet and this closet was closing in around her. It was Daniel, *her Danny!* She gasped but a hand was quickly raised over her mouth.

“But she isn’t!” His booming voice followed by a loud crash. “Explain to me where she is.” Another short period of silence followed before Daniel spoke again.

“Work. S-she might have s-stayed and had her lunch at work.”

“Is it not possible,” continued the man ignoring Daniel’s answer, “that she met some tall, dark and handsome man and has gone away with him?”

“No.” Daniel’s answer was short and assured. “She’s at work.”

“Well, for your sake I hope she is.”

The man then began to ask Daniel some general questions regarding her, her appearance, if she was aware of her heritage and some other things as the voices began to trail away. Though it hardly registered with her at the moment, her heart had sunk down to her feet and she felt lightheaded. If this stranger who was with her hadn’t held her she surely would have fainted.

“I think they’re gone.”

Erin was startled back into her conscious mind by the man standing behind her. He pushed open the door. On shaky legs Erin allowed herself to be led out into the hallway, into the living room and eased onto the sofa. At the corner of her eye she vaguely noticed the man moving from the windows to the knocked down front door and peering out into the hallway. Then he came back to Erin, kneeling in front of her and taking her hands in his.

“I know this is a lot to take right now, but we must go.”

Her vacant eyes steadied upon him and she made up her mind. This could only be some kind of crazy dream, so why not go with it? Not thinking she might need to take anything with her – after all this surely could not be real – Erin Ellwood left her apartment in New York with nothing but the clothes on her back and the android smart-phone in the left back pocket of her skinny jeans.

“I trusted that sonuvabitch,” she said matter of factly though more to herself than this newfound companion as they walked out through the open frame which used to hold the

doors. “Shit, I was even going to marry him next month... can you imagine? And then he just goes and betrays me to these God-awful men”

“Well,” answered her companion. “I wouldn’t be too judgemental, these are some very nasty people we are dealing with.” He kept looking back and forth, up and down the hallway, like a young kid crossing the street by himself for the first time.

The hallway was a warzone. The doors to the other apartments on this floor had also been knocked down. It would seem that Daniel had been unconscious when they came to the building and so these people had taken it upon themselves to find her, by apparently barging into every apartment on the seventh floor.

“My God...” Erin gasped as they went past the first broken down door. “That’s Mrs. Groger.”

Just within lay an unconscious woman. Her glasses were askew on her nose and a look of sheer shock on her face. The hem of her polka dot dress was flipped up to her thighs high enough to reveal the white granny pants she wore beneath, stained with something that could only be urine. Erin couldn’t tell if she was just unconscious or dead, though she felt it was more likely the latter judging from the fact that Patches, the old woman’s white and black patched cat (which Erin herself had frequently fed for her elderly neighbour when the woman went out of town to visit her children or grandchildren) was perched near her head and contently lapping up the dark red fluid which oozed from her temple. The man grabbed her wrist when she was about to go and check on poor Mrs. Groger.

“We don’t have time for this.”

“Well then at least we have to call her an ambulance, and who knows, perhaps others were home when these bastards broke in.”

“And Lance will be summoned, but right now all I am concerned about is getting you to safety.”

They came to a halt in front of the elevators.

“I assumed you didn’t like these,” Erin said.

“I really don’t, but neither do they. I don’t think they would dare use this contraption were they to return. It is our safest option.”

Erin smiled at the corner of her mouth despite herself. “Just think, the man I have been with for the past five years gives me up in a heartbeat and here you are, a complete stranger ready to risk everything for my safety. And I don’t even know your name.” She noticed his lip

twitch in amusement though he did not look away from the elevator doors. The chime announced its arrival as he answered her.

“It’s Rickon – run!”

At first Erin thought that made for a strange last name until she noticed the surprise that greeted them as the elevator opened.

Four men were standing within. Three of them were up against the walls, holding on to the railing for dear life much as Rickon had done on their way up there. These three were not short and disfigured as Erin had pictured them. Two were of average height, the third one maybe a head taller. They were all bulky and muscular with many scars. The taller one sporting one which slanted across his face, a thin white line on his otherwise tanned face, reaching from his left temple slanting down over his left eye, across his nose and down to the right corner of his mouth which had formed a grotesque grin filled with crooked yellow teeth. It was a sight that would haunt Erin’s nightmares for years to come.

The fourth person however was none other than Daniel. At the quick glance Erin had off him he seemed dazed and perhaps confused. A vacant expression was on his face and there seemed to be this kind of red powder at the corners of his mouth or perhaps it was dried blood. Other than that he looked perfectly fine, not nearly knocked around enough to warrant his readiness to give her over to them. Rickon, who had still been holding her arm, tightened his grip and jerked her to a run down the hallway. Tall and ugly had apparently recognized them along with his slightly shorter friends and all three of them tried to get through the elevator doors at once, resulting in none of them getting through and thus providing Erin and Rickon about a ten to fifteen second head start. They dashed down the hallway towards the stairwell. Rickon kicked the door open and hurried down the steps still holding on to Erin who followed as quickly as she could.

“I thought you said they wouldn’t use the elevator.” Erin panted as they were coming down the second flight of stairs.

“Well, apparently I was mistaken,” came the agitated reply.

She could hear them coming into the stairwell barking orders at each other as they came running after them. Fright overwhelmed her and she froze on the steps, but Rickon – still holding her hand – kept going. Being jerked forwards she lost her footing. In a split second the world was suddenly upside down, she saw Rickon’s feet as she rolled passed them, floor, roof, floor and suddenly sharp pain shot up her right arm as she finally came to a halt at the wall head first.

“Are you all right? Can you stand?” Rickon asked worried as he crouched next to her. He had somehow managed to escape the rolling tangle that was her body as she blurred past him on the stairs.

“I-I think so,” she said accepting his hand to be raised to her feet. She gave out a cry and pulled her hand back. So Rickon reached under her shoulder and pulled her to her feet. The men were just a few steps away but Erin had practically forgotten all about them after her tumble. She was only vaguely aware of Rickon pushing her out into the hallway of the fourth floor yelling at her to run, then he disappeared into the stairwell again.

Instead of running she leaned up against the wall. She tried to take in what the hell was going on as shouts and other noises reached her ears through the thin door between her and the apparent fight that was going on in the stairwell. Her head hurt and her hand was throbbing, not broken but most likely twisted, her butt was sore too and she would certainly get a bruise or two or three after that fall. This was all too crazy, she was ready to wake up now. Maybe she should just wait here for the men to beat up Rickon and let them do with her what they want. That would surely wake her up. Though she wondered why the fall hadn’t. She drew in a long breath and sighed heavily. Everything had fallen silent on the other side of the door and just seconds later it opened slowly and a tall figure took a careful step out into the hallway.

Despite having resolved to wait and meet her fate, fear clutched at Erin’s heart when the scarred man stepped into the light. It was then she realized she had been certain that Rickon was going to come strutting into the hallway swelling with pride and carry her with him out into the sunset. But apparently this was no Hollywood movie but the bitter reality where good people more often than not lose everything.

“Nice of you to wait,” he said coming closer. Erin tried to make a run for it but only managed a few steps before the man’s hand grabbed hold of her sweater pulling her back.

“Tut. Tut. Tut. You won’t get away so easy.”

In an attempt to free herself she struggled against him but he was too strong, his arms wrapped around her and held tight. She could smell the stale onions and the sour tangy air that was his breath. She nearly gagged.

“We’re going to be taking good care of you, yes we are.” His right hand slithered up from her waist. Shudders ran down her back as it ran over her breast, up her throat and began to caress her cheek. Erin was about to let out a scream for help when an “oomph” emitted from Tall and Ugly sending the pair of them sprawling on the floor, Tall and Ugly knocked

out cold. Erin struggled from the entanglement with his body as fast as she could staring at the fire extinguisher that was rolling down the hallway. She looked up and sure enough there stood Rickon holding his hand out to her. Apart from having received some bruises and torn his shirt in a few places he seemed fine.

“We should hurry,” he said helping Erin to her feet. “I knocked the other two out as well, but they might regain consciousness soon.”

Speechless Erin only nodded and allowed him to lead her by the hand down the hallway. Coming to a halt at the elevator she pressed the button, this time Rickon’s gaze was fixed on Tall and Ugly lying on the hallway floor. The elevator chimed but this time it held no surprise for them. *Thank God*. They stepped inside and Erin pressed lobby. The slow melodies of the elevator music made everything somehow seem more unrealistic, this had to be a dream. Another chime indicated they had reached the lobby and slowly the doors slid sideways.

“Freeze!”

Three police officers were standing in front of the doors with guns pointed at them.

“Now, step out slowly,” said the middle one, a bald headed black man with a few too many doughnuts stuck to his middle.

“You don’t understand...” Erin began with her hands raised stepping slowly in to the lobby praying hard that Rickon wouldn’t do anything stupid and get himself shot.

“It’s all right officers,” someone said from behind the cops. “That young lady lives in seven F.”

Erin breathed easier as the doorman came to the rescue.

“And who is that with her?” the cop on the left asked, though they were already lowering their guns.

“A friend of mine,” Erin said lowering her hands slightly. “The people you’re looking for were up on the seventh floor, I-I think they might have killed old Mrs. Groger.” Her voice trembled a little and tears began to swim in her eyes. The coloured policeman reached to his right shoulder where he spoke into the radio.

“We have a possible four-nineteen up on the seventh floor, suspects still in the building. Seal the perimeter and move in, all inhabitants have been brought down from their apartments.”

It wasn’t until he had spoken those words that Erin looked past the officers. The lobby was a battlefield. She could see blood splatters on some of the walls. About twenty people

were gathered at the fountain near the reception desk. A pair of paramedics was checking everyone and she could see the flashing lights from the police cars through the glass doors. People were speaking in hushed voices, children were crying and it was crawling with police officers. Charles the doorman came over to her.

“This is quite the mess,” he said laying a hand on her shoulder and leading her towards the other people gathered at the fountain. Erin noticed his left arm was bandaged up.

“Not long after you and your friend went up,” he eyed Rickon who followed them close yet seemed to have the sense to keep quiet right now, “these six vile looking men came barging in, and Mr. Brooks with them. I didn’t care for the look of them much more than I did for your friend, sorry if I speak out of turn, but Daniel seemed to be with them willingly enough so I let them be. It wasn’t until they were up on the second floor when the screaming began...” Falling down into one of the couches just left of the fountain he hid his face in his hands. “God, what have I done?”

Erin fell to her knees next to him, she didn’t know what kind of comfort she could offer him. Her mind was a scramble that seemed unable to make sense of anything that had happened within the last hour or so. The stranger, her fiancé in cahoots with some vile burglars and the image of Mrs. Groger’s lifeless body always popping up again. But the police was here now and the paramedics, soon everything would be sorted out for sure.

“So, it’s over now?” she asked fearing the answer.

“I fear it’s just the beginning,” Rickon said kneeling next to her.

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” she muttered. “But surely the police—”

“This Poe Lyse,” Rickon interrupted, “might be able to rid us of these men but more will come. You think those uniformed people can protect you, and for some while they might but these men will never stop hunting you.” Then he rose and began looking around the lobby. “We must find a way out and if you value your life you will come with me.” Turning his head again his blue eyes fixed upon hers.

She felt she must be crazy, why was she even thinking about this? Of course the police would be able to keep her safe, but there was something else. Whether it was the beautiful eyes of this stranger or her longing for adventure she didn’t know, but she had made up her mind. Her voice was calm and assertive as she spoke.

“All right, follow me.”

III

Getting out of the building hadn't been as difficult as she first imagined. The people gathered in the lobby, her neighbours and acquaintances were all too busy worrying about themselves so they didn't notice when the pair of them disappeared from the group. The police also seemed to have their hands full with the men who had come after her, she wondered if Tall and Ugly had woken up. They had heard gunfire and she hoped he had been shot. It was during that chaos that Erin took Rickon by the hand and led him towards the bathrooms in the lobby. There was a young policeman standing at the doors who hadn't been willing to let them enter together at first, but some persuasion on Erin's part, teary eyes and shaky voice convinced him that she did not dare enter the bathroom by herself with gunfire going on in the building. Locking the door behind them she went into the third and last stall where the window was. It had been painted shut so they had no choice but to break the glass in order to get out. The guard out front had started banging on the doors the moment he heard the glass shatter and within minutes he had broken the door down leaving only the thin stall between them and an armed police officer. But somehow they managed to get out. First Rickon lifted her up and followed shortly after her. She suffered a few cuts but it had been even a tighter fit for Rickon though he seemed not to notice the cuts on his arms and legs as he landed next to her and helped her to her feet. Together they ran out of the alley and into the busy streets of the City. Erin felt lightheaded and giddy. What a rush, she thought and was wondering if this was what having an adventure felt like when Rickon suddenly stopped.

"What is it?" she asked seeing him looking around in confusion.

"I'm trying to remember..." his voice trailed off and he began striding down the street, Erin hurried after him.

"Where are you going?"

"There was a forest nearby, I'm sure of it," he said, though more to himself than her it seemed.

"Central Park."

"What?"

"I think you mean Central Park, it's the only area around here that could be considered a forest, it's just up that street and down to the right." She pointed up 110th Avenue.

"Right," he said and was about to enter the traffic heavy street. Erin grabbed his arm.

“Easy there cowboy.” She said amused, holding him back. “We wouldn’t want to get killed in traffic before getting anywhere. One sec.” She went over to the traffic light and pressed the red button. A few seconds passed before the lights changed and it was safe for them to cross the street.

“Amazing,” Rickon mused as she led him over the road.

It was a quiet walk over to the park and she had to struggle to keep up with him taking two or three steps for every one he took. He seemed to be deep in thought. Every now and then she would look over her shoulder to check if anyone was following them but she saw no one, neither a head-hunter nor police officer. Her heart sank a little bit as they entered the park when she saw all the couples sitting on the grass or benches enjoying the good weather and each other. It made her think of Danny and how he had broken her heart. She had trusted him, had the past five years meant nothing to him? What did you call it when you had spent half a decade with someone who was ready to sell you out at the first sign of trouble? Not love: she was certain of that.

“Here it is!”

Erin was startled out of her thoughts as Rickon jogged from the road and into the bushes.

“What are you...?” Following him she saw a small clearing within the trees and in the middle of it she saw something strange. First when she entered the circle she saw nothing but when she stood next to Rickon there seemed to be this strange shimmer, a piece of the trees that didn’t fit. A faded blue light streamed from it.

“After you,” Rickon said holding out his hand like a perfect gentleman.

“What? I’m not going to go through that, are you crazy it could be radioactive or something, what the hell is that?”

“A portal.”

“Yeah right.” She laughed, but her smile faltered at the seriousness of his look. “A-all right.” She stepped towards the portal thing, the air around it was very cold but the blue glow was beautiful and she felt an urge to step closer, to touch it. Carefully she reached out one hand, the texture was soft and velvety and her eyes grew wide as her hand suddenly disappeared from view. Erin pulled it back and looked at it. Sure enough it was still attached, five fingers and all. She looked back at Rickon.

“Go on.” He sounded unimpressed by the wonder that was going on. Drawing a deep breath Erin chewed her lower lip and stepped through the shimmer.

It felt as if a rope had been snared around her mid section by someone on horse back. The whole world had been turned upside down and for some reason she felt a tingling sensation in her tongue and toes. Within seconds she found herself standing in a small room with the worst headache she had ever felt, making her eyes water and temples throb. No light came into the room save for a few rays from the setting sun breaking through the windows on the brick laid walls opposite her. A stale musky smell lingered in the air. She was about to make her way to the windows for a look at what was outside when she heard something from behind her. Turning around her view of the room was distorted by the shimmer that was the portal and within the blink of an eye Rickon was standing in front of her, his hand rising to his head as he rubbed his temple with index and forefinger.

“This really is no way to travel.” Rickon reflected, Erin was about to reply when the sound of heavy footsteps came from the corridor, the door burst open and through them appeared an elderly man. He had frizzed, white, beard flowing down to his waist stroked with silver hairs. His violet eyes beamed when he noticed Erin.

“The spirits be praised! You have found her!”

With her fraught nerves from everything that had gone on in the apartment Erin’s reaction was to jump behind Rickon for safety.

“The spirits know it was not easy, and the Faithless were not far behind.”

“Bah! Wallegar must somehow have found out the location of our door. I had hoped that he wouldn’t but naught we can do about that now. It does make the road before you that much harder seeing that now Raythan will have knowledge of her being here.”

“That and the fact that Lady Ellwood does not know her own heritage,” Rickon added, the furry white eyebrows of the old man drew together.

“What? Dear me,” he said stroking his long white beard, turning his head to study her as she still stood behind Rickon. “This does make things a bit more complicated.”

“Would you please stop talking about me as if I weren’t in the room?” Erin said stepping out from behind Rickon finding some courage within herself once seeing that this old man was probably not going to hurt her. “And if either one of you could explain to me just what the hell is going on, it would be greatly appreciated.”

Still not entirely convinced that all this was for real Erin tried to listen patiently to what Rickon and this old man had to say on the subject. The old man introduced himself as Arkinol Morander, a wizard of the second order. Maybe not as skilled as most second order

wizards but he proclaimed himself a master of the travelling doors, through which Rickon had ventured to find her.

“There are not many of us now-a-days who still know the secrets to travelling through worlds, and most who do need something substantial to move through, be it mirrors or puddles. I however figured out a way long time ago to tear through the thin veil that keeps our worlds apart. Ah, but it is tricky,” he said as he stroked his long beard thoughtfully. “Too big of a tear and the whole madness of your world would come pouring in to our doors. That would not be very pleasant I imagine.” A small smile touched his lips.

“But what does all this have to do with me?” Erin said chewing her lips. She was getting impatient and this dream was far from entertaining but long and dragging.

They were seated in what could be considered a dingy dining room. It was cold and drafty so that even the small fire in the hearth didn’t do much to warm her. There seemed to be no electricity and the light was that from the dancing flames of the fireplace and the three candles that were set on the table. Rickon was sitting opposite her, he had risen earlier and given her a wool blanket, saying that he noticed her shivering and hoped she wasn’t too cold. She had accepted it from him though she wrinkled her nose at it and placed it on the chair beside her she debated whether to wrap it around her shoulders or not. It looked warm but the wool seemed so dusty and it had a certain musky odour to it, similar to the smell that clung in this house and to its inhabitants. A serving maid had brought them all glasses of wine, she was pretty enough but Erin noticed that her forehead and scalp was sleeked with grease and her body odour, though not foul, was a bit potent. She noticed the same when Arko led her by the hand down the hall and into the room where they were now seated and she wondered how often these people bathed, if at all. Rickon and Arko were exchanging glances as if one was waiting for the other to begin to explain. It was the old man who broke the silence.

“Many years ago Lord Arthur Grimm, ruling lord in Grimm-hall kingdom in the West, gathered a great force to try and take over your kingdom, Dragondome – which stands near Dragon Mountain in the Everlasting Woods, from which your last name has derived. Interesting is it not?” Arko eyed her as he took a small sip of his wine. Erin was still unsure of what to think of this, her head had begun to swim at the mention of the name *Grimm*. When met only with silence Arko put down his glass and continued with his tale.

“Well, his strengths were great with over five hundred horsed knights and a few thousand armed swordsmen. What was the deciding fate that day was the fact that Lord Grimm had somehow managed to move his soldiers only by nightfall and escaped all

watching eyes taking Dragondome by a complete surprise. When it was discovered it was too late. Men, women and children were slain left and right along with nearly all animals. They breached the outer walls and were about to take siege of the citadel when your family's wizard, the late D'Arck, successfully opened the first travelling door. It was a mirror really, hand made by the dwarves with extreme quick silver, not much use to have regular quick silver mirrors. Not as reliable I fear when it comes to making magic mirrors..."

Rickon cleared his throat as in a gesture that the old man was trailing off topic again.

"Ah, yes, well. Lord Grimm's intentions were to murder your whole family so he would need to fear no claims from any true born children. Your, as we have it, grandfather was murdered by him just outside the citadel and as they were trying to break down the oak doors. D'Arck opened another kind of doors through which he sent your grandmother who was heavy with child. For the safety of your lineage she stepped through and went on to carry on with her life until it would be safe for her to return."

"But what happened?" Erin asked carefully at last finding herself a bit interested in the story. This was one Grimm fairytale she had never heard before. It was Rickon who answered.

"Evelyn stepped through sure enough and D'Arck sealed the doors behind her. Once they entered the citadel he refused to tell Lord Grimm where the lady was and so he had him murdered. The exact location of your grandmother lost with him leaving us alone to try and calculate the right place and time."

"And does Arthur Grimm still rule Dragondome? Is he related to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm? Can he make these travelling doors?"

"My, she does ask a lot of questions," Arko commented favouring Rickon with a curious glance, but Erin ignored it.

"I'm just curious, that's all."

Rickon smiled. "No. He never did manage to claim the crown. Lords and ladies from the neighbouring kingdoms came riding in for rescue and sent him back to his hollow hall, tail tucked between his legs. With the greatest strength given from the house of White, long time friends of your family."

"Snow White?" burst through Erin's lips without thought but both Arko and Rickon just looked at her uncomprehending. So she shrugged and gestured Rickon to continue.

"As I was saying. Arthur Grimm was driven back. But with no one to rule the kingdom the crown fell into the hands of the stewards who kept it safe for all these years. But

maybe six months ago Arthur's son, Raythan, made his move. Using the same cunning as his father he snuck through the cover of darkness and surrounded Dragondome. His forces may not have been as strong as his father's were before him but it was enough. He took over the citadel and imprisoned the stewards, but he was careful and keeps close watch on the Whites remembering all too well when his father was thwarted. He has laid no claim on the throne yet but we suspect that he is waiting for the threefold moon."

"The what?"

"It is a curiosity that happens once every five hundred years or so," sounded the dry voice of Arko. "In our sky are three great moons, The Maiden is the smallest which is small and shy tonight, then we have The Middle Child and The Warrior Moon. Every two years The Maiden and the Middle Child reach full strength giving the night a great glow. But once every five hundred years all three are plump and full, turning night into day. It is considered great luck to be born, wed or crowned on this day. It is said that the luck will be threefold and that a crowned member will enjoy a powerful rule thwarted by no other."

Rickon shifted in his chair.

"Which we believe is what Raythan is holding out for. He will not claim the throne or be crowned until the threefold moon. If he is successful in keeping the realm until that time he will face no objections and will be able to rule with the same tyranny as he had in Grimmhaal, and it will not end there. He is power-thirsty and merciless. He will not stop until all seven kingdoms bend their knees to his will."

"So where do I come in?"

Once more Rickon and Arko exchanged one of those glances that were now beginning to irritate her so much. It was as if they had the power of telekinesis.

"You are the last of the Ellwoods. If you were to ride to Dragondome and claim your rightful place at the throne the people of the kingdom would fall behind you and rise against Raythan. It would save us all from his iron clutches, but the road will be dangerous. As you've seen for yourself he has sent men after you. He fears you. We must get you to Dragondome before the threefold moon."

"Which is when?"

"In about eight weeks' time."

IV

She had expected to fall asleep the moment her head touched her pillow, but her head had another idea. The events of today were circling in her mind, a tumble dryer of thoughts and endless questions. How was it possible that she was a lady of some kingdom, an heir to a throne? That was just ridiculous. And this bloodthirsty Raythan? Who was she to try and stand up against him? And him being a Grimm, this must be a dream. All she had to do was fall asleep and she was sure to wake up in bed next to Danny, she realized that throwing her engagement ring out the window last night before going to sleep had been childish but she wanted nothing to do with him right that moment. The thought of him nearly brought tears to her eyes but it was soon replaced by another. About these so called Faithless Lord Raythan sent after her. According to Rickon they were bounty hunters who had faith in naught but coin. More ruthless than sellswords, promising to get the deed done or die. The thought made her shiver and she rolled over to her other side and sometime during the midnight hours she finally drifted off to sleep.

The next morning she was awakened by some of the strangest sounds she ever heard and she as good as jumped out of bed. Birds were singing, cows were mooing and horses neighing. Her first thought had been to turn off the TV but when she tried to reach across the double bed to search for the remote she found nothing but air and tumbled down on the cold hard ground. Raising herself up she sat down on the bed and rested her elbows on her knees. A force of habit made her reach into the back pocket for her android smart-phone. It only took one glance for her to note that it didn't look all that smart anymore. According to the phone it was both 03:45 am and 08:20 pm on Tuesday and Saturday in the years 1999, 2011 and 2135. In the left corner a "no service" light blinked in red.

Taking a deep breath Erin let out a long sigh and made herself fall backwards on the bed, hands moving up to cover her face. She wanted to scream but instead she just lay there in silence. A few minutes later someone knocked softly on the door followed by the low mousy voice of Arko's housemaid.

"Are you awake milady, are you decent?"

"What? Uh— sure."

The young girl entered her room, she could be no more than sixteen years old. A plain girl wearing gray and colorless servant clothes which did nothing for her. Erin gathered that along with her mother she took care of the old man doing his cooking, laundry and every day

cleaning. She could not imagine herself at that age doing any of those things. When she was sixteen all she did was sit in front of her computer or sneak out at night and go on car rides with her friends, trying to get into bars or just hanging out with her friends. Cleaning and working were the last things on her mind. The girl had long dirty-blond hair which fell down her back in a single braid. Erin thought that a few highlights might have made wonders for her and really made her eyes more noticeable, they were of a beautiful pale blue.

“Good morning milady,” she said doing a little curtsy. Erin suspected she would undoubtedly have lifted up the hem of her dress had her hands not been filled with clothes; dresses, cloaks, shirts and breeches.

“I brought you these, they are not much.” She cast her eyes down at her feet and her cheeks blushed a little. “It is just something from both my mother and me, when I overheard Rickon mention that you had brought nothing with you we thought... will you try them on?”

Erin did; the two pairs of breeches were a little short, but she would be able to use them just the same. One pair was light brown the other a boring gray color but she thanked the girl for them. There were two cloaks as well and a pair of simple frocks. Erin supposed they might do for travelling around here, though she would not have been caught dead in something like this back at home. She was feeling desperately sad for the young girl and the restricted clothing line this world possessed when she displayed before her one of the most gorgeous gowns Erin had ever seen. It was rich forest green in color contrasting with a beautiful embroidered silk, containing tones of muted lilac and plum. It was in two parts with fully lined sumptuous skirt in deep green silk and a separate back-laced bodice which the girl helped her tie up. It was also double sleeved, with the inner ones fitted and outer ones hanging.

“It is so beautiful,” Erin said half in awe of herself when the girl pointed her to the mirror on the wall where she could see herself, she felt like that elf lady from the *Lord of the Rings* movies. The green of the dress brought out the emerald green of her eyes, she had never had anything so beautiful and delicate.

“I’m so glad you like it!” said the girl clasping her hands together on her chest. “Mother and I spent all night working on it, there was a moment when I feared we would not be able to finish it, but we did.” She was practically giddy.

“You made this?” Erin asked stunned; she could hardly imagine anyone making such a thing by hand. The girl nodded her head enthusiastically.

“And it would do us great honor if you would wear it to your coronation. I hope I am not being too forward or rude if so I do apologize. It is just, well...”

The door was flung open and Rickon burst in coming to a sudden halt when he saw Erin. For a split second there was on his face a rather startled look which she could not help but notice and it made her smile a little. A moment or two later after having opened and closed his mouth like a fish on dry land Rickon finally found his voice.

“I guess I was wrong about you.” He approached her slowly, taking her hand and planting a gentle kiss on the back of it. “Turns out you can be made up to look like a lady.”

Erin stuck her tongue out at him and withdrew her hand, then she turned to the mirror again letting her fingers run down the soft fabric of the dress.

“Just wish I could somehow transport this with me when I wake up.”

“Still think you are dreaming, huh?” Rickon stroked his chin. “Suppose I can work with that. Lana,” he said turning to the girl, “I assume this is the work of you and your mother.” The girl nodded her head. “Excellent work, though I believe breeches or one of the other dresses I see over there might be more suitable now for I wish to ride as soon as possible.”

“Of course,” Lana replied lowering her head and gathering together the clothes that had been scattered across the bed as Erin had tried them on one after the other. Then Rickon was out of the room before Erin could ask what exactly he had meant by riding. In her mind’s eye she saw a beautiful carriage waiting for her outside the door but an uncomfortable feeling nipped at the pit of her stomach.

“He is right,” Lana said after Rickon had left. “Here, you should put these on to not stain the gown.” She smiled faintly, handing her the brown breeches and red shirt. Erin accepted them and let the girl assist her with unlacing the bodice. After she had changed, Lana encouraged her to go out into the dining room and “break her fast,” as she had so strangely put it, while she would pack her things. On the table was set a place for one. Assuming it was for her Erin took her seat and waited. Within a few moments Lana’s mother came out of the kitchen carrying a tray that she placed in front of Erin. It was no breakfast at a five star hotel that was for sure, a bowl which held gray tasteless porridge she would not eat after tasting and two boiled eggs which she saw fit to gulp down. After all it wasn’t until she had tasted that horrid porridge she realized just how hungry she really was. There was also bread that was edible though a little dry but lastly there was something delicious, a lemon

cake. Something she hadn't had since she was a child and she was on her last bite when Rickon entered.

"I have saddled up the horses. Lana and her mother kindly packed for us some supplies. Are you ready to leave?"

"Sure am," she replied wishing to leave this little dirty hollow as soon as possible. There wasn't even an indoor plumbing system here. Disgusting, she thought, hoping that the place they were headed for would be a little more to her standard; she had been born in the 20th century and was not about to settle for something so primitive. She got to her feet and followed Rickon through the kitchen and out the door.

It was a beautiful morning, the sun was shining, the birds were singing and the sky was blue as could be. There was no rumbling of engines or blaring of horns and instead of angry shouts she heard the occasional moo from a cow or the cock-a-doodle of a rooster. All the smells were different, too. The air wasn't as stifled but the smell from the animals that apparently were in the outhouses was something Erin felt she could very well live without. She followed Rickon past the corner of the cottage where before her stood two saddled horses.

The one closer to her was a horse of average height with a large blaze, bright white mane and tail with huge hazel eyes and coat the color of golden sands. To Erin, who had always been rather scared of horses, this one looked like a small pony compared to its companion. The other horse was a huge stallion, raven black in color with eerie blue eyes which seemed too intelligent for comfort. He pawed impatiently at the ground with huge hard hooves. Erin shrank back but Rickon walked up to him without any hesitation and stroked his forehead. The beast of a horse seemed to calm down a little and even closed his eyes as if to enjoy the petting. Erin just stared.

"This is Nightshade, though I usually just call him Shade. He has been my faithful friend for many years." Then he began to pet the mare. "And this lovely little creature here is Felicia, lent to us from Lana. She is young but calm enough, I think you will do just fine."

But Erin stood her ground, making it a point to not move an inch closer to those beasts. Slowly she moved her head from side to side.

"No, na-ah, I will not. If we were meant to ride horses, cars had not been invented."

Rickon rolled his eyes and sighed. "There are no cars to be found here milady, horseback is the quickest way to travel and we must get to Dragondome and get there fast. Come here, just get to know her, pet her."

He approached Erin, took her by the left hand and laid his right on the small of her back ushering her closer to the horses. They were beautiful even though they scared her, Felicia turned her head and began to sniff her open hand which Rickon had held out in front of her. So fascinated by this, Erin didn't notice when Rickon stepped away so entranced she was by this meeting, until a strange sound came from the horse. Erin shrank back in terror.

"It growled!" she yelled waving her hands and making sure she was out of reach so it might not kick or bite her.

"What are you talking about?" Rickon laughed, his brilliant blue eyes beaming. "Horses do not growl: she whickered, as in greeting."

"Nah-ah. I know a growl when I hear one and I'll be damned if I get on a horse that growls at me." She crossed her arms and dug her feet in the ground as if to emphasize the fact that she was quite serious.

"Must everything be done the hard way with you?" he said. It was apparently a rhetorical question as instead of waiting for an answer he marched up to Erin, grabbed her in his arms and before she realized what was happening or found the will to struggle, he had lifted her on top of Felicia.

"Now do not scream or she might bolt," he warned her with a stern look. With her heart racing Erin clamped her lips tight. She felt herself shaking in the saddle, so frightened she hardly noticed when Rickon positioned her in the saddle and placed her feet in the stirrups.

"You can hold on to the saddle or her mane." And he loosened the reins.

"Whatareyoudoing!?" Erin muttered in a single terrified breath.

"Just relax."

She found his voice to be unbelievably calm. The horse began to move as he led it around the yard, her hands clasped tufts of Felicia's white mane so tight that her fingers dug into the tender flesh of her palm. It was a steady and slow rocking motion as Felicia followed Rickon at a walk. They went around the cottage and at the corner of her eye she noticed Arko looking at her through one of the windows. Rickon then led them back to where Shade was standing, shaking his head and impatiently pawing at the ground. Erin was beginning to relax a little in the saddle but dared not release her hands.

"Just breathe easy." His voice was still as calm as a serene river and Erin drew a deep breath which she released slowly. "Good, now I am going to hand you the reins." And just like that he lifted the reins over Felicia's head and they lay limp on Erin's hands which still

clutched at the mane. Then he stepped up beside her and showed her how to properly hold the reins.

“And if you want her to turn left you move the left rein like this.... And if you wish her to turn right you move the right rein. Pull lightly on both reins if you wish her to slow down or stop and kick your heels to her sides if you wish her to go faster, though mostly I think she will just follow Shade.” He favored her with a smile but Erin felt unable to wipe the terror-struck look from her face. She did not like horses, but apparently that was not up for discussion and before she knew it Rickon had jumped on Shade and they were heading down the road away from the cottage side by side at a walk.

V

They had been going at a walk for a few hours and Erin was getting really tired. She was over her initial fright though she still dreaded the moment when Rickon wanted to go faster because although Erin had never ridden a horse before she knew that trot was supposed to be a rather bumpy ride.

“So where exactly are we going?” she finally asked after hours of riding on the seamlessly endless dirt road alongside ditches and fields that seemed to go on forever.

“We are making our way to Dragondome. The fastest way there would be to cut through the fields, down the middle of your kingdom and enter through the Everlasting woods, but the borders are being guarded and I fear that those woods are not safe anymore.” He drew a deep breath and sighed. “So instead we must take the lesser travelled road around the kingdom, near the Crimson Waters and then try to find a way through Dragon Mountain. I fear that way might be shut so it is possible we need to go up and over. Then through Dragon’s Valley into the edge of the Everlasting Woods and hopefully there we might be able to find a way to get in through the gates at Dragondome and into the Citadel.”

“Is that all?” Erin asked in a mock tone.

Rickon ignored her.

“If we ride from dusk until dawn every day it would take us about a week to get there, but seeing that you are not much of a rider I imagine it should take us two, provided that nothing goes amiss.”

“Riiight, I’m not sure if I dare ask but what could go amiss?”

Rickon looked from her to the road ahead of them and said nothing. Erin was starting to think he wasn't going to reply but in the end he did. He explained to her the danger of the Faithless and what might happen should they locate them, then there was of course a chance that either one of them could fall off the horse and get hurt (he said *we* but Erin knew he really just meant her). There were also strange people about and not all of them friendly or good and some even took pleasure in creating mischief wherever they could. Then of course were your regular bands of bandits and thieves to watch out for and the weather wasn't to be trusted neither. The list went on and on but Erin had pretty much zoned out by that point. Taking a look around her she tried to concentrate on the landscape.

There were scattered cottages and farms here and there, and an endless sea of fields, most green but some a beautiful bright yellow. In one she saw seven people working. The three oldest, possibly the father and his two teenage sons were cutting the grass with scythes whilst the four younger children from maybe six and down, Erin judged, collected the hay into bundles, tied them together and carried to a small wagon in front of which was harnessed a small but bulky horse. She was amazed and saddened at the work the children were doing, wasn't this child slavery? But she doubted the people around here had ever even heard that term. She felt bad for them but they seemed perfectly happy, two of the little girls in sundresses running around with their brothers laughing and playing in between collecting the bundles of hay.

"Would you mind if we kick the horses to a trot?" Rickon asked pulling her back from her thoughts.

"Err-why?" she said hesitantly. Truth be told she was terrified of going faster, she imagined the horse bolting with her, running out of control around the edge of the ditch and then she saw herself falling off which was something she desired even less.

"It's just that they've been walking with us for about two hours, I would greatly like to have reached the edge of the woods up there," he pointed down the road and she thought she could see a dark blur at the bottom of a hill at the end of the horizon, "before dark and I can not see that happening at the pace we are going. Besides, Shade is getting rather restless."

He was right about that much. The black stallion kept speeding up his walk and had to be held back by Rickon. When he tugged on the reins the horse gave out a long and heavy almost insulted sigh. After a little bit of coaching Erin finally gave in.

It wasn't as terrifying as she had thought. Sure it went from being a slow smooth ride to a faster and bumpy one but at least Felicia was well under her control as she followed

behind Shade and there was a steady rhythm that Erin soon figured how to move along with. They went at this speed for quite some time, hardly meeting anyone on the road save from a few small children and then an elderly man riding a mule which seemed so close to death Erin though she might witness it collapse beneath him.

After a couple of hours Erin wasn't feeling too good. Her head was swimming and she felt dizzy, she wondered if it could be motion sickness. Sitting the horse wasn't as hard as she had imagined but it was different and strange and already her thighs and calves were getting tired. Rickon told her time and time again to relax her legs but she felt better, safer embracing the midsection of the horse with her legs, like she could use them to hold herself in the seat.

"Can we stop now?" Erin asked, wanting nothing more than to lie down and maybe have a big glass of cold water. The sun beating down on her head was no help at all.

"Not just yet." Rickon's voice was softer than it had been. "Just a little farther and we will see a small spring. There we can water the horses and stretch our legs for a bit."

Just a little turned out to be at least an hour and a half more of the bumpy riding. Erin's thighs were already becoming tender from the constant friction. When they finally reached the spring Erin nearly threw herself off Felicia who walked briskly towards the spring for a much desired drink of water. She had begun to sweat heavily in the heat, but Shade showed no sign of even being tired; he cropped a little of the greens that grew on the water bank and was then pawing at the ground eager to get going again.

"Calm down old friend," Rickon said stroking the flank of his mount. "There are some that tire more easily than you, look at poor Felicia. I best believe this is the farthest out she has ridden in years. Old Arko does not go anywhere these days and if she were to have any use it would be Lana or her mother going to the village which is only few miles away South." But Erin didn't care. She didn't care if Felicia had won the Kentucky Derby she was just glad that they had stopped. The moment she jumped down, her knees had nearly buckled beneath her and her lower back was throbbing. She felt like a ninety year old woman as she waddled towards the edge of the water allowing herself to fall to her knees next to Felicia. The water felt lovely as she splashed it on her face and tasted even better as she cupped her hands and brought some to her lips. When she had drank enough she awkwardly rose and made her way to a large rock where she sat down.

"It would do you good to stretch out and walk around," Rickon said handing her an apple he had produced from Shade's saddle bag. Taking the apple but shooting him a dirty look Erin told him she was perfectly fine.

“Very well then. If you have been drinking from your water skin it might be a good idea to fill it up now, there may be plenty of rivers we pass on the way but one can never be sure of their purity, best to keep filling them as we move along.”

“Water skin?” she repeated after him slowly

As it turned out there was a large leather pouch attached to her saddle bag filled with water which she could have been drinking from all this time. Erin wanted to smack Rickon across his stupid handsome face. They didn’t stop long at the spring, twenty minutes perhaps before Rickon was ushering her to get back up on her horse.

The sun was beginning to set when they finally reached the forest. The trees towered above them, the highest branches swaying in the gentle wind. Erin didn’t think she had ever seen such huge trees. The wonder was such she nearly forgot all about the pain riding up there had been. She had been complaining ever since they got back up on their horses at the small spring. She had been hungry, her thighs were sore, she was tired, she even insisted they stop at one point because she needed to go to the bathroom. That alone had been a nightmare on its own. She had never peed out in the open before, there were no port-a-potties here, not even an outhouse, forget toilet paper and don’t even get started on the bugs! But she had really needed to go so it just happened on its own accord and she reached for some grasses and leaves to clean herself, though she didn’t feel very clean pulling her pants up again.

The sound of their horses’ hooves became muffled on the soft dirt road which was nearly covered in fallen leaves making it look like a carpet. Rickon then turned Shade down a little road that lead to a small clearing. There he got down from his horse, unsaddled it and took off the bridle.

“Are you letting him go?” Erin asked walking up to him, holding her horse by the reins. She wondered why he was setting his horse free. Wouldn’t they need them to get to Dragondome?

The horse walked towards the forest and was soon engulfed by the trees.

“Shade never wanders far and always returns when I need him. He is more than just a horse, perhaps I will tell you his story sometime.”

“Do I let Felicia go?”

“No, we should best keep her close to us. Shade may be strong but I do not think it would be comfortable for us to ride tandem all the way to Dragondome.” He smiled his stupid crooked grin and took the reins from her. He tied Felicia up to a large willow tree and began to gather kindling for a fire. Erin’s tummy was rumbling, she hadn’t had a bite to eat since

that apple at mid day and even when Rickon brought the rabbit out from his saddle bag she didn't cringe as she might have expected to only yesterday. Back in New York City she would never have eaten a rabbit but these past two days had been hell; she would be damned if she was going to starve on top of everything else. Stretching her feet a little she felt how stiff her knees were after the day's ride and she wanted nothing more than to fall down on a feather bed and sleep until next week. Rickon had gotten the fire started and set up a pot above it which he was filling with water. Erin supposed he was going to make some kind of rabbit stew. He didn't seem any more chatty than he had been in the elevator, had that only been yesterday? Seemed more like a week ago. He eyed her carefully for a moment then went back to the saddle bag which was lying on the ground next to him, from it he produced a small box and a knife which he handed to Erin.

"What is this?"

"Something for you to do." Then he took the rabbit and prepared to skin the poor animal, not wishing to see that Erin gave her attention to the box in her hands. It contained mushrooms.

"What do I do with these?" she asked averting her eyes from Rickon and his rabbit.

"Mince them."

"I don't have a cutting board."

"Use the top of the box."

"It isn't wide enough to hold all the mushrooms."

"Then you take out a few, mince them and dump them in the pot. By the spirits, is everything a problem where you come from?"

Erin blushed slightly but didn't reply. She wanted to retort but couldn't think of anything to say. Erin had minced maybe half the contents of the box when Rickon stopped her, taking back the box. He threw some herbs in with the mushrooms, steam was beginning to dance up from the warm water.

"We should eat well and then sleep. You will find a blanket to sleep on at the back of your saddle."

"We're sleeping here?"

"I will not sleep deep within the woods unless I must and you are in no shape to be riding through the night."

"Nor am I suggesting we should, but why couldn't we have knocked on the doors of any of those farmhouses and asked to stay the night?"

“We will not abuse the hospitality of the peasants. The people around here are very poor, yet they have their pride and would serve us up a feast to fit the highest lords even if it meant they would starve for the next week, or even month.”

“That’s stupid.”

“So it may be, but it is what it is. Moreover we cannot be certain where their allegiance lies. It is best for us to stay on our own and away from other people until we get you back home.”

Home. She desperately wanted to go there, though she suspected they were not thinking of the same home. They ate in silence. The stew proved to be better than Erin had dared hope though she figured it was mostly due to her hunger. The meat was tender, she really liked mushrooms and could taste coriander and rosemary. After they ate Rickon washed their bowls and spoons and told Erin not to worry and just lie down.

Spreading out her faded blue blanket Erin lay down on the hard ground. Despite being exhausted and full from dinner she couldn’t get to sleep. The fire was burning out making the only light they had slowly fade away as the sun had set some time ago. She was sure there was a pile of rocks beneath her back so it took her a while to try and brush those away yet the ground didn’t feel more comfortable. The birds had stopped chirping giving way to the crickets and faint hooting of owls. There was rustling in the leaves and every so often when Erin was just about to fall into the sweet slumber of sleep she heard a sound from the bushes around her which pulled her back to consciousness and sometimes she sat up in fright, though it never proved to be anything, or at least nothing she could see in any case. It was just before dawn when she had finally been able to fall asleep and not long after that, Rickon was shaking her awake. Erin would undoubtedly have punched him across the face if the sweet aroma of bacon hadn’t greeted her upon awakening.

“Good morning,” he said almost cheerfully. “Can’t say I have ever met anyone who sleeps so deep. I thought I would wake you for sure while I was preparing breakfast. As it turns out you sleep like a hibernating bear.”

“Thass cuz I just fell asleep.” She rubbed her eyes, shocked to find out how much moving hurt and groaned loudly when she sat up. Her back was aching and her thighs and calves were sore. Rickon said nothing but handed her what looked like a bacon and cheese sandwich. Erin ate it quietly while taking sips of her water skin. She also noticed that Shade was back and that both horses were saddled and bridled and she cursed under her breath. She did not feel like riding today but that could not be avoided.

“You will do better today than yesterday.” Rickon assured her. “And before you know it you will cheerily mount your horse wanting nothing more than to set out for a ride.”

Erin scoffed; she much more expected her own death than finding any joy in riding a horse. After they had gathered their belongings they got up on their horses. Mounting didn't come as much of a problem this morning as sitting down in the saddle was. Her inner thighs were red and raw, a burning sensation ran down her legs sending goose prickles down her back. Thankfully they started the ride slowly but she wondered how long that might last. Rickon had told her that he wished to be out of the woods before nightfall, though he didn't sound very optimistic, especially when she whined about not wanting not to go any faster than a walk. He abided by her for a little while but before long he had kicked Shade to a trot and no matter how Erin tried to hold Felicia back she followed him eagerly so all Erin could do was cling miserably to the saddle.

The woods were dense and dark since hardly any rays of sun could penetrate the treetops, but there were birds singing and sometimes she could hear animals scurrying for safety as they rode through. Erin had lost all sense of time, she had never been good with telling it by the sun as her father had been, not that it would have helped her much in the dark woods. Her smartphone was not to be trusted, but she judged it to only be around eleven a.m. She wasn't sure if she could make a whole day of riding like this.

“Rick.... I need to stop.” She hadn't expected him to listen to her; God knew he had ignored her pleas all of yesterday, but this time there was something that made him rein Shade up and slow down to a walk. For a moment their horses were riding side by side.

“Allright.”

Erin thought she could hear a hint of concern in his voice.

“I have been riding you a bit hard I admit.”

Erin had to stifle down a giggle.

He pretended not to notice. “Especially seeing that you are new to being a horse. We can rest for maybe a half an hour, eat, water the horses but no longer. I have no desire to linger in these woods longer than I must.”

Climbing off Felicia Erin felt her whole body was stiff and aching; she was sore everywhere, even in places she had never felt before. She set down on a fallen tree log after having secured Felicia to a tree. Rickon did the same with Shade, not releasing him for such a short stop. He then disappeared in between the trees. If not the horse then the master, she

thought and laid back, resting her eyes for a bit. Shortly later she could hear Rickon approaching. A dead hare and two pheasants were hanging from his belt.

“Well, this was not a total waste of time. But I ask you to rise, we need to be going.”

And so after only a moment of catching her breath and stretching her tired limbs they were off again. After a few more hours of riding Erin’s body was screaming in pain, goosebumps prickled down her spine every time she bounced in the saddle and before long she had to beg Rickon to stop for the night for she could go no further. He had not been over pleased but slowed down to a walk and said he would stop when they found a good place to rest for the night; until then they could go slower. The woods were not as dense and the air was lighter suggesting they were closer to the edge but they would not reach the clearing today. Erin had never known a forest could be so large. The sound of trickling water caught her attention and through the trees she spied a lake. Large, blue and beckoning and close by they found a mossy clearing where Rickon said they could stop for the night. Erin’s heart leapt for joy. She hadn’t bathed for three days, her hair was a great mess of tangles, leaves and twigs, she probably smelled like a horse and figured that Rickon was longing for a bath as well.

Like a true gentleman he allowed her to go first and attended to the horses while she washed. The water was terribly cold and her chafed thighs screamed as she slid in but still it was so refreshing. Rickon had handed her some soaps and even something she might use as a conditioner as well as a comb, though Erin had her doubts as if she would be able to get through the entanglement that had once been her long, beautiful hair. She stayed in the water until her fingers were so pruned she felt her skin might start to fall off, then she reluctantly climbed up the bank, dried herself and put on some clean clothes. As she was pulling up her breeches there came such a sudden burst of pain she felt like screaming and her eyes began to tear up. Taking a closer look at her thighs she saw they were chafed raw and blisters were beginning to form on her bottom, some having burst open. Luckily she had also brought with her one of the frocks Lana had given her, which she pulled over her head and then walked carefully to camp as if to not have her thighs touch.

Rickon stood up as she approached and grabbed his blanket in which he had folded his spare clothes. He told her that the stew was on the fire and bade her to stir it every once in a while, as it would not boil too much. It would be ready when he came back. After their evening meal she admitted to Rickon that her body was bruised and sore, hurting too much for sleep. He then went rummaging in his bag and brought out a small cup and a bottle of

something that seemed to be wine. "Dream wine," he called it, saying it would hopefully numb the pain and help her sleep. She graciously accepted it and wondered why he hadn't offered her any earlier. She gulped down the contents of the glass, it felt warm going down to her belly, maybe it was the exhaustion but she felt its effects immediately. Her feet and fingers were soon numb to the touch and before long she was out cold, swallowed by comforting darkness, but soon as the effects of the wine began to wane she awoke.

Her heavy eyelids opened slowly. It was dark but not complete darkness as her dreamless sleep had been. The embers of the fire were burning low, to her they seemed to be dancing or perhaps they were fighting for their lives, but here the forest wasn't as dense and the silver light from one of the moons flooded the scene. On the other side of the fire Felicia was lying in the grass, her head at her feet but Erin could see her dark brown eyes watching her. Shade was gone but Rickon had his back propped against a tree, eyes closed and snoring low. He was sound asleep and she couldn't help but smile. How innocent and peaceful he looked in his carefree sleep, not having the world resting on his shoulders for a change.

Her throat was parched, probably from the dream wine, but she had emptied her water skin with dinner. She wondered if Rick had any water left but noting that his water skin was lying at his hip she didn't want to risk waking him. So instead Erin quietly rose to her feet, water skin in hand, decided to fill it up in the lake. Slowly she walked, taking great care to not step on any dry twigs or get her hair tangled in the branches, She could hear the murmur of the water but near it she could hear movement and heavy breathing. Peering through the branches Erin saw a gray horse; for a moment he stood without moving as if listening to the sounds of the forest. His mane was dripping wet and looked exhausted after a battle with the waters, his gray pelt gleaming in the moonlight. In sheer amazement at this sight the water skin slipped from her grasp, falling to the forest floor. The horse raised his head in alarm, large erect ears turned in her direction. She decided to take her chance and stepped unafraid into the clearing at the lake. For a moment they just stood there staring at each other, then to Erin's amazement the horse slowly made his way towards her. His movements were so graceful, he was without a doubt the most magnificent creature she had ever laid eyes upon, elegant, regal and strong. Unable to take her eyes of him she watched patiently as he approached to her. The horse's hot breath felt welcome at the top of her head where he sniffed her and the touch of his nose such velvet softness; she had never touched anything like it. Her hurts and aches were completely forgotten. It was as if all thoughts had abandoned her save one, she desperately wanted to mount this stunning animal and ride as fast as it could take her

deep into the night, and sure enough as if it had understood her thoughts the horse knelt down before her as if offering her to mount.

Erin was about to lift her leg and straddle when the sound of thundering hooves broke the silence of the night. Out of the trees emerged Shade neighing terribly, his usually blue eyes blazing red. As if sensing imminent danger the silver one was already up on all fours with his ears laid back against its skull and before Erin could fully understand what was happening the horses were at each other's throats; screaming, rearing, biting, kicking. Looking upon the scene Erin stood frozen as the fight was about to bring itself towards her. The silver reared but was hit by Shade in the hind legs, losing its balance and came crashing down where she was standing, only seconds before a hand reached for her and saved her from being crushed beneath it. Her heart was hammering in her chest as she looked up into a pair of worried sick blue eyes. They just sat there looking at each other as the fight progressed. The silver had risen to its feet as soon as it fell.

"Are you all right?" Rickon finally asked cupping her face in his hands. They felt warm to the touch and Erin realized just how cold she was. He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. They were sitting so close she could smell him, it was not a sour scent like that of Arko or his maids, but a sweet aroma, like honeysuckle.

"I – I'm..."

A great loud splash interrupted her. Looking up, Erin saw that the silver was gone, down into or across the water Erin didn't know, but Shade alone stood at the bank of the lake. He pawed at the ground a couple of times and whickered before walking over to where they were sitting. Lowering his head Shade nudged her shoulder, the blood red colour of his eyes making way for the usual bright blue.

"What just happened?" She felt as if someone had just wrapped her brain in bubble wrap.

"You were enticed by a water demon."

"What? – no, I just saw a horse. He had swam across the lake..." Her voice trailed off. Rickon was nodding his head.

"This particular demon takes on the form of a horse and lures you to mount it. Once you do you are stuck. I am not sure what it is, some kind of spell most likely that renders you unable to dismount. And then it races with you down into a watery grave."

Erin just stared at him.

“It was amazing fortune that Shade came to your aid, but what were you doing out here? I thought I had asked you not to wander off.”

She was starting to tremble, such was the cold she felt and her brain still seemed soft mush.

“You’re shaking.” Rickon said, stating the obvious. “Let’s go get the fire started and you close to it.” He entangled himself from her and rose, but as Erin was about to rise, Rickon grabbed her beneath the knees and under her arm, he lifted her with ease and carried her to their campsite.

He sat her down near the fire and brought her thick maroon cloak, wrapped her in it and tried to rub some heat into her.

“What you are experiencing is a kind of a shock, due to the sudden separation.”

“Wha-?”

“The water demon entranced you, and intended to lure you on his back, and it would have worked save for Shade. His sudden appearance was an interruption and your body is still getting over it. They usually go after children,” he explained sitting next to her, reaching for his flint and steel. “Their minds are more fragile and more accessible, you need to work on guarding your mind.”

“And how would one go about doing that?” Erin asked half mockingly.

“You build up your own mental blocks.” The spark from the flint repeatedly refused to ignite. After a few more tries he sighed heavily and put down the flint and steel.

“Watch this.” Taking a position near the kindling he rubbed his hands together, slowly at first and then with growing speed. He rubbed so fast that his hands seemed but a blur until he separated his palms, keeping the wrists still connected. A small ball of orange and red flames flew out from his open hands and landed on the kindling where it took hold and burned brightly. Erin just stared wide eyed at the flames. First the water demon and now this. She felt it might just be a bit too much for her apparently fragile little mind.

“Why did Shade’s eyes glow red?” she asked.

“That has to do with what he is,” Rickon said glancing up at Shade who was now standing next to Felicia but facing the lake, body tense, ears erect as if he was protecting his are.

“What do you mean? He’s a horse.”

“You are easily deceived. You also thought the water demon was a horse, yes?”

“Well ... Shade hasn’t tried to pull me down into any pits of water.”

“Nor would he, he’s one of the good guys. Nevertheless he is not a purebred horse, but a mixed breed. His father was one of the best known warhorses in Asria and his mother a black unicorn.”

For a few seconds Erin just stared at him in dumbfounded silence. Soon she found her voice again. “Unicorn?” she scoffed. “Those white horses with a horn sticking out of the middle of its forehead?”

“That is the one. Except Shade’s mother was a rarity, a black unicorn. Not many of those around anymore. Not that there ever really were. His hooves are stronger than even the hardest metal so he doesn’t need to be or rather can’t be shod. He can run faster than any horse and as with most unicorns his normally blue eyes blaze red when he angers.”

“But no horn, huh?”

“No, thank the spirits. Adore him as I might but already he draws too much attention with those brilliant blues. Not to mention when they flame.”

Erin’s mind was a tumble dryer of thoughts, each crazier than the other and the rate of weird information she was receiving was just too damn high. But the mention of flames turned her to another subject.

“How did you do that thing, with the flames?”

Rickon smiled. “Aw, that was just a bit of Wizards Fire.”

Her eyes grew huge. “You are a wizard?”

“No, I was an apprentice for a time. though I fear I was not much good.” He reached for the cup Erin had drank from earlier and poured some more dream wine in it. “that is a story for another time.” He handed her the cup. By now she had over a thousand questions for him but guessed that this was maybe not the time or place. She accepted the cup, drank deep and was soon sound asleep once more.

They rose early, her body was still aching but not as bad as the night before, and this morning Rickon had prepared a soothing ointment for her to put on the sores; the ointment was cold and smelled like mints and its effects were immediate. At first it had been ice cold to the touch but for a split second a sensation of sudden heat burst out as if she had been set ablaze. For a moment she thought she would scream, but then it was gone as soon as it had begun. After that her skin went numb and she felt it no more.

It took a two hour ride for them to get out of the forest and leave the adventures of the night before behind them. After having drunk the dream wine Erin wasn’t entirely sure the encounter with the water demon had really happened or if it had all been a dream, a dream

within a dream perhaps, how very Leonardo DiCaprio of her. She couldn't help but smile a little, but it faltered when she suddenly remembered that *Inception* was one of Daniel's favourite movies.

As soon as they reached the end of the forest the morning sun welcomed them so brightly Erin was nearly blinded but once her eyes adjusted she saw only the vast wilderness, with no sign of civilisation or even a farm.

"What now?"

"We press on, there is a village maybe a few days ride from here."

"Few days?"

"These plains used to be fertile lands upon which many people lived, but Lord Raythan's hand has slithered all the way out here raising taxes and rent so people could not afford to live here anymore, not as separate entities at least. Most of them moved up north where they formed a small farming village, their numbers and the fact that they are striving to stand together against him have protected them so far. But once he declares himself Lord of Dragonhome those independent villages will soon fall." And that was all he seemed willing to say on the matter, as he kicked Shade to a trot. Erin sighed and allowed Felicia to follow suit.

To Erin their days on the road all seemed to melt into one. They went early to bed and rose even earlier. Ate some bread or fruits for breakfast and pressed on, had two or sometimes three other small meals and then it was back to bed. Some evenings when Erin felt very cold Rickon allowed a fire though she could tell he didn't like to light it so out in the open. He had said the travel to the village would take only a few days but it seemed to have been months as all days melted into one. Some nights just before she drifted off into sleep her mind tried to draw up a picture of how her life used to be before Rickon had disrupted everything. Her life in New York, her Danny, their apartment and her job and she found it difficult to hang onto those images, even Daniel's face came as a blur to her these days. It seemed like such a long time ago and so far away, like looking through the wrong end of a telescope.

There came days Rickon was eerily quiet and even Felicia seemed a better company, but other times he proved to be very interested in her world. He had not been terribly entranced by the moving pictures as she explained the cinema to him, but what did seem to fascinate him was the notion of democracy, and she couldn't blame him. Who in their right mind had ever thought of monarchy?

It was a misty morning when Rickon woke her and pointed out a dark shape in the haze slowly making its way towards them.

“I don’t think there is cause for alarm.” His voice was calm enough. “The fact that there is only the one makes me almost certain of that. If it were a company of riders I would ride out of here faster than children after the piper. However due to this fog I fear the horses might stumble and I don’t believe this person to be of much danger to us.”

The person turned out to be a young gypsy, perhaps around the age of thirteen. He bade them a good day and enquired as to if he might break his fast with them and perhaps stay at their campsite until the mist thinned a little, there were many an ill thing that could happen in the black fog. After they had invited him to sit down and break his fast with them he began telling them he was just returning from the village. He spoke so fast and with such a thick accent that Erin had trouble understanding him but she was able to make out something about Lord Raythan’s claws grasping further as the threefold moon drew nearer and people were scared. Especially gypsies, since Lord Raythan seemed to take delight in watching them dance in the hangman’s noose. Rickon asked him why he travelled alone and he replied that he was making his way back to the forest where his family was residing at the moment before pressing on further South. He enquired to where they were headed and when Rickon mentioned the village the boy suggested they take the High Road. Rickon didn’t seem pleased.

“Do you take me for a fool? The High Road has not been safe or cheap for travellers for the past half a dozen years. Lord Raythan’s foot soldiers march everyday and we’re not about to walk into their arms.”

“Ah, ’tis mah point. For t’past three yars peopl’ ’ave bin stayin’ ’way frem t’High Road and Grimm’s men are naw seekin’ peopl’ aff t’road. T’High Road is ta safest way fer yer.”

Rickon nodded his head silently as if in thought. “Thank you for that counsel. Might be that we will take the High Road down to the village.” The boy smiled and said he was glad to have been of some assistance.

“’Cause t’High Road leads to t’only bridge across t’Silv’r Riv’r. Ther ’ave been ’eavy rains and t’river ’as risen above it’s banks tearin’ throu’ everythin’. Traveller’s pass’s underwat’her and t’only bridge remainin’ is t’drawbridge belongin’ to t’High Road.”

After that Rickon fell silent again, his eyebrows drew together as if in thought and he would scarcely speak. But the young gypsy had plenty to talk about and entertained Erin by telling her fortune and reading her palm, most of it was just some random mumble jumble about a dark and handsome stranger, an unexpected journey with an even more unexpected

result, but then his eyes had grown strangely dark and in a grave voice he had told her that three times she would be betrayed by the one she loved. And she wondered what else Danny might possibly do to her, especially now that she was over on this side. Then he had produced from his pocket a miraculously hand carved figure and given it to her. "Fer yer protekshun," he said. After the youth left Rickon encouraged her to rid herself of that dirty gypsy trinket but she ignored him and borrowed from Rickon a thin leather lace from which she let it hang from around her neck, the tiny but as good as perfect replica of a red fox. She cast a glance after him but the thick fog had already swallowed him.

The mist soon turned into a drizzle that had become a heavy rain by midday, and continued well past nightfall. The next day they saw no sun at all but rode beneath the grey skies with their hoods pulled up to keep water from their eyes. Erin was surprised when Rickon did not turn towards the High Road.

"I'll be a mummer's monkey before I accept advice from a gypsy," he replied coldly when she asked him why they were not doing as the young boy had told them. "They are sly creatures. If they ever offer free advice it is most likely because someone has already paid them to give it." She soon saw that he had been right. They kept close enough to the High Road to be able to see it without being seen themselves and sure enough they spied at least eight soldiers crouched behind a few boulders near the road.

"They are waiting for the gypsy to send people their way," Rickon explained. "Had we taken the High Road they'd be on us by now. If we were lucky they'd only want to collect coin from us for using the High Road or they'd suspect who you were and take us to Lord Raythan."

Suddenly Erin felt really lost in this new world, more than before. Was there no one she could trust? The boy had seemed so nice and genuine. They passed the soldiers and made their way towards the Silver River. Soon the endless patter of the rain was greeted by the rumble of water. They quickly discovered that the gypsy boy had not lied to them about the travellers pass. The river was swelled well above its banks and the bridge was gone. The waters not the colour silver but that of brown muck. Whether it was simply overflowed with water or if the river had torn it away Erin could not say, in any case it was not there. Riding alongside the river they had to slow their horses down to a walk, the banks were muddy and slippery. She wondered how long they had still to go in this ghastly rain, her cloak and dress were soaked through, her hands were so cold she could hardly move her fingers and her hair clung wet and lifeless to her head. She felt more like a drowned rat than a woman on

horseback. The torrent of the river drowned out all sounds, so loud it was that Erin could scarcely hear her own thoughts; she was shaking in her saddle by the time Rickon turned his horse around and rode up beside her.

“This will not do,” he called to her through the rumble of the river. “The bank is too treacherous, twice now Shade has slipped and I have no interest in falling into these angry waters. I will take us a bit farther into the land and from there we might follow the river. But I know of a few caves not far from here, it will delay us but if you wish I will take us there and we might dry ourselves or we might press on and hope to reach the village before nightfall.”

“Caves!” Erin called in reply without a second thought. She had never known rain like this and wished for nothing more than to be someplace dry and hopefully warm. Once away from the slippery slopes of the riverbank Rickon pressed his heels to Shade and they made for the caves on canter. Seeing hardly anything through the fog and rain Erin simply let Felicia follow as Rickon and Shade took the lead. For a moment a dread began to form in the pit of her stomach and she feared they might be lost on the moors, there were no landmarks and no road she could see but before long a dark shape of a stony hill came into view and she was able to breathe easier.

Rickon warned her that here might be shadowcats in the caves as they were not so far from The North Twin, a rocky mountain range. But thankfully the first cave they came upon was empty apart from some badger droppings and what seemed to be a ruined nest. They even found a place to keep the horses dry so all would have been well if not for the fact that the heavy rain had seeped through the backpacks making all her clothes soaking wet. After starting a small fire Rickon strung a string from the ends of the cave onto which they hung the wet clothes from their luggage. Erin had shed her drenched cloak but her dress was dripping at the hem and her hair clung to her face. Her breath hung in small puffs of air and she shivered so much it made her teeth nearly clatter. At the corner of her eye she noticed Rickon having removed his own cloak and shirt and hung on the string, he had also laced down his leather boots and placed them close to the warm flames. Might be that he noticed her sneaking glances at him.

“You really should take off your wet clothes or else you might catch a death of cold.”

Through her shivers and shakes Erin gave a low snort of laughter. He would just love that wouldn't he, having her take her clothes off? He was half done himself, had that been his plan all along? But the thought was rebuked as soon as it was born because surely no one could control the weather?

“Here.” Whilst Erin was deep in thought Rickon had found some bearskin in his luggage that was mostly dry. “You can wrap yourself in this, it should warn off the cold and help you dry but for that you need to take off your wet garb. I will not look. I give you my word of honour.” Turning his back to her Rickon began to boil some water over the flames. Rolling her eyes Erin slid out of the dress, a wet *smack* echoed in the small cave as it landed on the cold cave floor. The bearskin might have been a bit damp but it felt so good against her cold, goose prickled skin. Wrapping it around herself she huddled close to the fire and tried to rub some heat into her limbs. Outside the mouth of the cave the rain still pounded the ground. Rickon had also removed his breeches but his long-johns stayed where they were much to Erin’s relief. He grabbed one of the least wet blankets and wrapped it over his shoulders. Erin noticed that he too was shaking from the cold though he had not once complained and the guilt nagged at her for having the toasty bearskin all to herself.

“This is a rather large fur.” She

Rickon turned his head.

“What I mean is— well” she continued in a fluster “your blanket is all wet, we should share the fur. Just to get warm.”

Rickon replied with a devilish grin at the corner of his mouth. It made her heart skip a beat.

“Well, nothing makes for better warmth than holding another body close. If you do not mind I should graciously accept the offer.” He shed the wet blanket, the light and shadows born from the fire danced on his abs. Casting her eyes down at her feet Erin opened the fur and let Rickon slide under it beside her. She was suddenly feeling very warm in certain parts of her body. He laid an arm over her shoulder and began to rub her upper arm as if to get some warmth in her. With his left hand he poked at the fire.

“The broth will be ready soon, I’m afraid there isn’t much we have for it but at least it will be warm.” Laying down the poker and wrapping them together in the fur Erin was suddenly aware of her bare breasts, though Rickon hardly seemed to notice as he closed the fur about them.

The broth was rather tasteless but it was warm and soon Erin was feeling almost giddy, perhaps it was the goblet of wine Rickon had urged her to drink “for warmth,” as he had told her, or perhaps it was just the feeling of his closeness and security that had driven away the hopeless despair she had been feeling when they were out riding in the heavy rain. Rickon seemed a bit different as well, not as brooding. His smile came more easily which

only made him more handsome, as if that were possible. That evening she found herself stealing fequent glances of him every time he stood up to add a fresh kindling on the fire, stretch himself a little or get another cup of broth. He was even in a mood to tell her a few stories. He told her of some brave knights from various houses but before long it was time to sleep and he lay down next to her under the thick furs. The past nights on the road had been so awfully lonely for her as she had for the past five years shared her bed with someone she was now deperately trying not to think of, and now when she did, Erin found she could hardly remember his face. But the warmth of Rickon lying beside her stirred something within her. Maybe it was just the warmth or perhaps the need for a contact with antoher mixed with the loneliness, but that night, as the rain pounded down outside the mouth of the cave and the embers of the fire burned down low, Erin reached for Rickon and together they danced a sweet dance beneath the furs.

VI

The next morning was not as awkward as Erin thought it might have been. She had slept through the night and was resting her head on Rickon's chest when he gently woke her up with a stroke down her shoulder and a light kiss on the top of her head, which was more than enough to send the butterflies in her tummy fluttering. The rain had finally stopped and the deep blue skies bore the promise of a beautiful day. Throughout the day she stole glimpses of Rickon, a few times she saw he noticed her looking at him. It made him smile and she replied in same. Rickon saddled the horses and soon they were on the road again, last night's adventure behind them. It wasn't long until they found the river again; the torrent still strong with no bridge in sight. It would delay their voyage a few hours. Rickon told her to follow the river downstream in hopes of finding a place where the stream wasn't too strong for the horses to cross. They did find it some way down the road and once they were across they had to double back up the river. Rickon pressed his heels to Shade in hopes of making it to the village before dark.

Despite having been able to sleep inside last night Erin was still exhausted. Lying on the furs hadn't really been the most comfortable thing she had slept on since she had been brought here and as it happened she hadn't slept much in the night. The thought made her grin and some small part of her couldn't wait to have his arms around her again. The way was

rough along a narrow track that seemed to disappear beneath the horse's hooves up hills and stony defiles, but as they came down one of the hills she felt her heart leap with joy when she saw the rooftops. And as they made their way down Erin was amazed by what she saw. It was a small village indeed but so beautiful. Timber framed houses with red shingle roofs. They were built close together and around them as far as the eye could see were the fields, some were bright yellow rapeseed fields or tall corn fields but what held Erin's attention were the young girls in the fields of the low grass playing around the flock of sheep. They were all in colourful dresses with ribbons in their hair, holding a wooden staff.

"Shepherdesses..." Erin was absolutely entranced by them. But she was soon torn from her gaze when Rickon made a mention of the inn and the possibility of a bed for the night and maybe a warm meal in their bellies. It sounded so wonderful she wanted to cry. It was late in the afternoon when they finally reached the village and everyone seemed so welcoming. A young stable boy took their horses and offered to rub them down after their long journey. Rickon tussled the boy's hair and thrust a silver dime into his palm. Then they were ushered into the inn, which Erin noticed to her amusement was called the Baa Inn. It was a lovely little place holding a stocked bar and a kitchen. There was a fire burning, someone was playing something on a piano and some of the elderly customers were playing cards at one table. The smell suggested that smoking had not been banned in this bar as of yet. But once the burners of the stove were burning the only scent that reached her nose was that of the lamb she was about to feast on.

It proved to be the best meal she had ever had accompanied by the best apple cider she had ever tasted. The waitress made a jest that she had the appetite of a wolf as she gulped down the rest of the squash. She smiled shyly

"It's just that our journey has been long."

"Aye, it is not a-many who travel now-a-days." The young waitress took a quick glance around before seating herself next to Erin. "But I hope ya don't mind my askin' but did yer by chance saw a young lad in the heights on yer way over? A gypsy fella'?"

"Mary Peep!" A man called standing behind the bar. "Yer seppos'd ter be servin' folks, not bother them with yer ev'r runnin' mouth." The poor girl turned red in the face, jumped up from the chair and hastily began to gather empty plates from the table. Erin waited until the man turned his attention to another customer until she gently took hold of the girl's arm.

"We did, and he seemed perfectly fine."

“No need to worry yourself over a gypsy, they are like rats. Throw them out time and time again but they always find their way back,” Rickon broke in.

Erin could feel the girl stiffen beneath her hand, her lips drew tight together becoming naught but a thin line on the girl’s face before she darted off. Erin stared at Rickon.

“That was uncalled for.”

Rickon was wiping his mouth with a napkin.

“The sooner she learns that she should not go messing around with gypsies the better. Her parents will thank me.”

About to make a further argument Erin was halted by her own body as a huge yawn broke its way through.

“I think we should be getting you to bed. We will carry on early in the morning.”

She would have objected, wishing to stay up and talk to the villagers and know more about the place but being served such a rich meal after days of hardly anything but stale bread and dried fruits made her eyelids as heavy as boulders. Rickon had gone to get a key from the barman and then showed her to her room where she fell asleep the moment her body touched the feathery bed.

Erin rose early feeling refreshed and restored. She found a water basin on a vanity table next to her bed and washed her face. There was a mirror above it, one look into it and she scarcely recognized herself. She was thinner than she had ever been and her face seemed to be one big freckle. Her hair of course being a tangled mess, she tried her best to comb it down but in the end she gave in and tied it up. Venturing out into the hallway and towards the common area where she had enjoyed her dinner the night before, Erin felt she was alone in the world: there was no one there. Was it possible she had awoken before everyone else, even Rickon? She was about to turn around and perhaps enjoy a few more moments of the feathered bed when she thought she heard low voices. They sounded hushed and hurried. Glimpsing around the corner she saw Rickon speaking to the stable boy. Probably something about the horses, but why the whispering? They exchanged a few more words and then Rickon took leave of the boy turning in Erin’s direction. Quietly she slid beneath a table and watched as Rickon’s feet shuffled past her. Once he was gone she went after the stable boy. She found him in the stables, of course, where he was placing a bridle on one of the fattest horses Erin had ever seen, its legs were covered with long fur from the knees down. From somewhere an old memory came forth reminding her that those kinds of horses were used for pulling wagons.

“Good morning.”

The boy had obviously not been expecting her here and almost fell before muttering to her “Good morrow.”

“I saw you talking to my friend, what were you discussing?”

“Nuttin’.” He had turned his back to her and begun combing the fat wagon horse.

“It must have been something, and it seemed awfully important.”

“He bade me tell none.”

“Well, I am a friend of his.”

“Then ask’im yerself.”

The boy had not as much as looked at her but continued to brush the horse. Erin looked the boy over, his clothes were dirty and tattered and his dark hair of medium length and almost as tangled as hers had been this morning though luckily she was rid of the straws which seemed embedded in his scalp. It was dark in there but in the far corner of the barn she thought she saw something which might be a bed made out of straws. Something occurred to her.

“What if I have something to offer in exchange?”

For a brief second the brush halted. But the boy shook his head. “I have all I need here.”

“Oh, do you even have a magic light?”

“M-magic?” The boy slowly turned towards her. Victory!

“Yes, but you must not tell anyone, it’s a very rare artefact. The only one of its kind.”

“Aye, I will tell none.” His eyes seemed to gleam with interest and greed. Taking a theatrical look around as if to make sure no one saw them, she then reached into an inner pocket of her dress and brought out her phone. She was amazed that the battery had even lasted so long, but perhaps that was because she could not use it over here. The boy edged closer to get a better look at the strangely shaped item in her hands. She touched the screen and sure enough it lit up making the boy take a jump backwards, she then slid to unlock the keypad and the light shone brighter. The boy’s hands reached towards it but shrunk back as he looked up at her.

“I may keep it? Really?”

“If you tell me what you told my friend.”

And the story fell from his lips like the Niagara Falls off the cliffs. A specific part of his tale made Erin’s eyes grow wide in shock, she dropped the phone, but the young boy’s

hands managed to catch it in the air and then she stormed out of the barn. She was stomping her way past the bar when she met Rickon at the corner.

“There you are, I’ve been looking for you we must–”

“You bastard.” Her voice was low but the anger and resentment filling it made it sound as if she had yelled it from the top of her lungs, unaware her hands had formed fists which were beginning to fall on Rickon wherever she could get in a hit.

“You let me think he had betrayed me! That he was unworthy! You made me leave him with those people!” Tears were spilling down her cheeks and each hit was falling softer than the one before it, soon she was crying up against his chest. Rickon’s arms came around her gently.

“Don’t touch me!” She tore herself away from him. “He told me everything you know.”

“Who?” Rickon seemed generally confused.

“The stable boy, about how the Faithless are rallying up people for interrogation. How they have these magical roots and how it tortures the truth from you. How your insides curl up in a ball when you try to lie, literally squeezing the truth out of you until you start to bleed through every orifice. So just you don’t – don’t you dare tell me they fed him some magic root which forces the truth out of you!”

Again she was only met by his silence. Feeling lightheaded she turned away from him and went to the doors.

“Where are you going?”

Quickly she turned around, most of her hair having struggled loose from the ponytail by now.

“I left him. I left him with those awful people, I have to go back. I have to see if he’s all right. I can’t stand to think that–” She turned and made towards the stable once more but Rickon grabbed her elbow, gently.

“I’m afraid that is not possible. I admit I did deceive you there but I knew I had to get you to come with me and that you would not have done so willingly if you knew your betrothed had not broken your trust. For that I truly am sorry.”

He let go of her and reached into his leather pouch. He held something in his hands which he placed in her palm. It was small, cold to the touch and round of shape: her engagement ring.

“But I-I threw it out of the window, back at Arko’s house.”

“I thought you might want it back someday.”

She tried it on but her fingers were too skinny now so it got an honorary placement next to the red fox on the leather string around her neck.

“I am still going back,” Erin said as she fastened the leather again.

“It’ll do no good.” Rickon’s voice was grave and there was something underneath it.

“Why is that? What else are you not telling me?”

Rickon turned and seated himself at one of the tables. Erin noticed that there were people watching them by now. Quietly she went to the table and sat opposite him.

“Out with it.”

“Look, opening the doors is tricky at best. There are only a handful of wizards who can manage such strong magic and besides, the doors are very unpredictable. They open in various places at various times. I had gone through them at least half a dozen times and found myself in a different city or a different country each time, sometimes it wasn’t even the same decade. And Arko will have closed the portal by now. It may take weeks to open again and once he does, you can’t be sure where they lead to.”

For a moment Erin only sat there chewing her lips. What was he saying? She could not return to Danny, her own city, her own time... ever? She did not like the thought of that. Not one bit. Her voice sounded more timid than she intended.

“So how will I get home?”

“I am taking you home.” He reached for her hands but she drew back.

“No... Dragondome is not my home. I agreed to go there because you promised to get me back to my world. I cannot stay here, I – I need to go back to my time to my place with my electricity and computers and internet and fast food chains and Coca-Cola.” She felt her body begin to tremble.

“There might be a way but it’s a slim chance...”

“Well you better convince me, and convince me good that you can get me back.”

VII

He seemed to understand that it had been her way of coming to terms with things to have him convince her she’d be able to return home at a moment in time where she had not been gone away so long and then she’d be able to patch things up with her Danny. But that

didn't lessen the guilt she felt believing that he would so easily betray her, and to think that she was almost beginning to like that stupid Rickon. No, he was nothing but a puppet-master using her to get his way. Sure his way might be to thwart some evil dictator and restore peace once more but what was it to her? Not a thing, really. But she still couldn't get home, not yet. She had to get this over with and then try and find a way back home. As they set out again she did not as much as look at Rickon and if there was anything she needed to say to him she would address Felicia or Shade and ask them to tell Rickon this and that. Though the silent treatment only lasted for a day or so, for Erin found it extremely difficult to shun the only living creature in their little company able to converse with her. She did sulk however and for the next three days had him do everything around the camp: rub down the horses, gather kindling, make the fire (when he allowed a fire to be lit), hunt, cook, and clean up after them. She didn't even say anything when they passed three great stone giants. She wondered if they had been sculpted or actual giants turned into stone, but on second thought she wasn't sure she really wanted to know the answer.

It was on the third day that she was beginning to think that maybe she should start helping out a little again, so that morning when Rickon had gone to hunt some rabbits Erin wandered a little way from camp in search of herbs and vegetables to add to the stew, although she suspected they would only end up having vegetable stew. Rickon hadn't had much luck hunting the day before and the outlook wasn't too good for today either. She didn't know much about herbs but she had often seen Rickon pick them up and smell them so she figured that if they smelled like spices they must be safe. She had found something he assumed to be coriander and knew that there were still some mint leaves left in the saddlebag. Then she fell upon some wild cabbage and was picking that up when she glimpsed a peculiar flower growing on the side of a broken stone. It was purple and blue in colour with leaves shaped like a star. She picked one and smelled it, the aroma from the flower was sweet but the leaves gave off a bit tangy scent. But there seemed to be plenty of honey in them. Dipping a finger she gave it a taste. It was so sweet it made her jaws clench, and she almost ate the whole flower. Instead she picked a few more and then headed back to camp to prepare the stew. She put in the mint, coriander, wild cabbage, some carrots and potatoes they had left and last but not least she squeezed in some honey and even added two or three leaves from this strange flower, it seemed to add some kick to the stew. It was so good Erin had eaten a bowlful by the time Rickon came back, sadly empty handed but the stew was so good on its own she didn't think it mattered much. However, as Rickon came into camp she could tell

something was bothering him. He sniffed the air and then ran towards the bubbling pot and kicked it over.

“What the hell are you doing? Please tell me you did not drink that broth.”

“I had a bowlful, what of it?”

He drew a long deep breath before sighing.

“You’re going to be in for a fun filled day, though I must admit I am a little curious to see what you’ll become.”

“What are you talking ab—” a cramp stronger than any menstrual cramp she’d ever experienced seized hold of her, she cringed, hands flying to her stomach. She felt she needed to retch but fell down to the fetal position.

“What’s happen—” Another spasm followed the first one and she felt as if she’d been kicked in the gut.

“Just try and relax.” She felt his hand on the small of her back rubbing it. “It will be over soon enough.”

Her face felt hot and her hair seemed to grow so long it covered her whole body, her eyes burned and before long everything had gone black. The cramps were gone as soon as they had started. It soon became apparent to her that she wasn’t blind but underneath a blanket. She tried to stand up but fell back down on her hands and knees. Wriggling about she finally was able to get herself free. The whole world seemed distorted. The grass around them had grown, even Rickon was towering over her ... had she shrunk? That’s when she realized that it hadn’t been a blanket covering her but her dress. Quickly she tried to grab for it to cover herself and that was when she saw it. Instead of hands she had paws covered in fur! She wasn’t on her hands and knees but on all fours with a long brushy tail at the end, she had been turned into a fox.

“Well, at least now I won’t need to listen to you whine.”

That annoyed her and she was about to scoff at him when her throat suddenly vibrated and a low rumbling growl emitted from her, startling herself. She jumped back. Rickon laughed and she made a try to nip at his heels.

“I’m sorry you make a handsome vixen, you really do. But I think it would be better if we fix you up. Don’t think the people of Dragondome will be very pleased to be ruled by a fox. A born Ellwood or not.”

He then went about setting the pot up again, filling it with water and going through every saddlebag and satchel in search of some herbs or roots and other things that might be

useful to reverse what had happened to her. Rickon had tried to explain some of it, apparently it was the purple flower which was the culprit, a rare flower with magical qualities which name she wouldn't even try to pronounce in human form let alone as a fox. He said he had most of the ingredients for the antidote topped off by the root of the flower though it had to boil for a whole day. But surely that would do no good? A whole day in the form of a fox! What was she supposed to do? This was ridiculous. Rickon sat down close to her and began to stroke her head, she lifted her head and tilted hoping that it was enough to convey the question she was unable to speak up.

"You need to relax." His hand slid down her back and then he was scratching her behind her ears. It felt so nice. "Why don't you just curl up and sleep a little while, think it might do you good. You'll be back to your old self before long." She did curl up next to him and nestled her muzzle in the fluff of her bushy tail but once she relaxed Erin could feel her new and heightened senses kicking in. The scent of their camp and the country around them followed by millions of sounds, bugs crawling in the grass, the wind rustling through it, the horses eating it, she could even hear Rickon's heart beating. It had a strong and steady beat. But then she heard something which made her ears twitch and she raised her head, she stretched her nose towards the sound and immediately knew there was a hare not far from where they were sitting. How awesome would it be if she could catch a hare? She felt almost giddy and could feel her blood begin to course faster through her veins, run hot. Slowly she rose to her feet, and slinked past the fire where her antidote was beginning to simmer. There she came to a halt and crouched about to pinpoint the position of the hare. She drew a deep breath and nearly felt faint from all the different scents that came at her at once, but somehow she managed to distinguish the hare from the others. Twitching her ears she could hear where it was munching on weeds or grass no more than a few feet away behind a brush. Crouching down she began to sneak through the grass but was hardly near the animal when it bounded off. She was about to start after it but Rickon's words held her back.

"Don't strain yourself, even as a fox you make more noise than a drunken troll. You even breathe so loud any decent archer could shoot you in the dark." Erin bared her fangs at him, but he was probably right. So for the rest of the day she just hung around the camp sniffing at various things, being careful not to get too close to the horses as she sensed that her presence in fox form made them uneasy. The day was waning when Rickon poured some of the broth in a bowl and laid it on the ground.

"Lap that up and you'll be back your old self soon enough."

Without a second thought Erin came over to the bowl. For a moment she forgot herself and was about to drink through her lips resulting in her nearly throwing the bowl over.

“Careful, use your tongue. You are a fox remember?”

The bowl stopped rocking and she began to lap. It didn’t taste as good as the other broth had but she forced it all down. Soon enough she felt herself beginning to sweat beneath the thick pelt. She was inside a furnace and before long it was as if someone was pulling at all her limbs and those awful cramps made their presence known once more and then she was human again. And naked. Rickon averted his eyes as she grabbed at her clothes that were lying in a heap near the fire. She got dressed but as she stood up she felt faint. If Rickon had not grabbed her she would have fallen face first on the ground.

“We rest here tonight, maybe next night as well. Changing shapes is nothing to play around with. Even for someone who does it often it takes its toll, and you’ve done it twice today. You need to gather your strength.”

Then he prepared a bed for her made up of their two blankets and a water skin to keep beneath her head. As she lay down he tucked a cloak over her

“Water demons, roots that torture you to tell the truth, shape changing herbs ... is nothing safe in this crazy place?” she muttered in a tired voice just before she drifted off to sleep, she had wanted to nuzzle up to him, to cuddle and feel safety in his arms but she felt too betrayed by him.

The next morning she woke before Rickon and went to find those special flowers again collecting three and hiding them beneath her clothes. Maybe they would come in handy one day.

It was a few more days on the road before they reached Dragon Mountain. Rickon had insisted they go over it in order to avoid any unwanted company which would surely be lurking in the Everlasting Woods, Erin caught a glimpse of the forest once the mountain came into view. During that time Erin brooded and wanted little to nothing to do with Rickon. She was tired of the road, tired of the tasteless food and most of all she was tired of feeling alone. What also stressed her out was the anticipation because her *friend* was late. She wasn’t usually this late though maybe that didn’t mean anything, maybe the whole transformation thing had messed up her whole system or perhaps time was different over here. Yes, that had to be it she tried to convince herself whilst at the same time the memory of a certain night spent in a cave kept coming to mind. She was deep in thought when the trouble began. She heard it before seeing it, a thunderous roar of hooves pounding the ground and from the forest

five knights emerged all mounted on what Erin could only assume to be warhorses. From Rickon there came a loud curse as he called Erin's name, she didn't need to be told what to do but kicked her heels hard and set Felicia following fast behind Shade. They kept the lead almost one third of the way up the mountain but there Erin's mare began to loose speed. So tried from the travel of the past month and unsure in the mountain pass, she quickly fell well behind Rickon and Shade and Erin could hear the knights catching up to her. Her heart was racing as she desperately urged Felicia on but she couldn't believe her own eyes when Rickon disappeared from her sight. Was he just another man who would rather save himself than help her? He had already betrayed her before so she shouldn't really be surprised. Not daring to look behind she kept on the rocky trail, it was getting wet she noticed, and she could hear the low rumble of a waterfall. Suddenly there was nothing in front of her but a drop off. Quickly she made the turn but as they came around the bend Rickon was waiting around the corner.

"Here," he called to her and pointed towards a small trail up to his left, but she was going too fast and both woman and mare were too startled at the sight of him. Erin pulled hard on the reins to get Felicia to turn, the horse flung her head to the right but her hooves scrambled on the wet stone, loosing grip. Her behind swung to the left and suddenly both horse and rider disappeared down the drop.

VIII

As they tumbled down the cliff Felicia plummeted straight down but Erin managed, however barely, to grab a hold of the cliff. There wasn't much grip and she felt herself slipping. She knew she should try to climb up but her body would not comply so Erin clung there for dear life. She didn't hear the knights approaching and was so shocked when the sounds of their frightened cries and screaming of horses reached her ears, she felt them flying past her that she nearly lost her grip. Crying without even realizing it Erin desperately tried to coach herself into climbing up, an inch at a time, a little higher, just a little more. And little by little she edged towards the top. Getting closer she nearly screamed at the top of her lungs as a hand enclosed on her wrist and almost effortlessly pulled her up to safety. Scrambling to her feet she was relieved to see that it was Rickon who saved her and not one of the dark knights. The thank you on her lips turned into a "Watch out!" when she noticed a knight coming up behind him. In one smooth move Rickon swung around, unsheathing the sword on his hip.

The swords sang as they came together and the two men ran at each other dodging and dealing blows. Her man was quicker but the knight was fully armoured while Rickon wore nothing but boiled leather and jerkin. On the slippery slope Rickon felt unsure of his footing for only a split second but that seemed to be more than enough for the knight and Erin cringed as she saw him thrust the sword into his opponent. Rickon dodged the second swing of the knight's sword but was taken off balance and fell down, however, as the knight was about to deal him a deadly blow the knight received one himself by Shade who came charging at him, forcing the knight off the cliff. Erin rushed to Rickon's side, her voice thick with worry.

"Are you badly injured?"

"He only nicked my shoulder." He bade her help him to his feet. Erin noticed a small puddle of blood where he had been lying.

"Take off the vest," she urged.

"I'm fine."

"I said take it off."

Reluctantly and with the pained face of someone who had just bit down on a lemon, Rickon carefully took off the vest. His shirt was drenched with blood. Without a word Erin buttoned it down and gasped. The knight had stabbed him through the shoulder and the wound was oozing dark blood.

"Well, maybe I'm not so fine." Rickon's face was dreadfully pale and he was starting to reel.

"You have to sit down." Erin dragged him towards one of the cliffs where he might rest his back against the stone. Sweat was beginning form on his brow, cold, judging by his shudders. "What do I do?"

"The gash is just under my collar bone so one can hardly bind it. It must be burned."

"What?"

"Start a fire and take my sword."

"What? No, I can't do that."

"Then... then I'll see you in the next life." The blood was still streaming from the wound and he was dreadfully pale.

"Goddamnit. Stay here." She ran off to try and find some wood.

Somehow she managed to get the fire burning. Rickon was too weak for his little wizard's trick. Next he told her to clean the wound with wine and hand him the thick stick he had made her save from the fire.

“Now, after you have cleansed the gash you will take my sword and heat it on the flames until it is glowing. Then place it on the wound and burn my flesh together.”

“I can’t do this,” Erin muttered.

“But you must.” Rickon’s hands reached for hers and grabbed them tight. She nodded.

Afterwards as she was sitting alone by the fire, she was shaking despite the warmth. Even though his muffled screams had been terrible to listen to it was the smell of the burning flesh that was the worst, especially since it made her stomach roar in hunger. Who would have thought that heated human flesh could smell so much like roasted pork? And although he tried to keep himself as still as possible his legs thrashed about and kicked the ground. So hard did he bite down on the thick stick that it eventually broke in half. Soon after that he had fainted from the pain. Before getting the furs from the saddle bag she had checked his back but there was nothing but a small scratch which she sloshed a little bit of wine on to disinfect.

Lying down on the blanket next to the fire Erin glanced at Rickon. He looked so helpless lying there, utterly defenceless. She might be furious with him for so many different things but she would defend him if it ever came down to that. Her mind turned towards Danny and she wondered if she would try and find him in the unlikely event that she got back to her world, but she wasn’t sure. Where once had been feelings of relentless love and affection there was doubt. Looking at Rickon made the butterflies in her tummy flutter, but if he was the one she truly loved he would betray her once more. She had been unaware of falling asleep until she was awoken the next day. A hand had gripped her shoulder starting her awake with her heart pounding.

“We can’t stay here long, we must keep going.”

“Are we to walk? I have no horse.”

Rickon turned his head and taking a look in that direction Erin saw Shade standing saddled next to a bay horse, which was also saddled and waiting.

“He belonged to the knight who dealt me this.” He placed a hand on his bandaged shoulder. “But that doesn’t make him a bad horse, most horses ridden by knights are well trained and relatively easy to handle. You should do fine.” He smiled reassuringly. Erin feigned a smile in return whilst thinking how much she did not want to come near that horse. He was a stranger to her and all she wanted was Felicia. But Stranger as she chose to call him proved to suit just fine, he was more attentive to her as a rider than Felicia had been and seemed to listen better to her, and not just follow behind Shade. He was also more surefooted than the mare had been which made following the rocky trail up the mountain much easier,

yet Erin sorely missed her old friend. They passed a few old bones and torn banners and once she thought she could see a huge skull with set with razor sharp teeth and fangs bigger than her arm and she realized why this had been named Dragon Mountain. Rickon assured her that the last dragon had been killed over a hundred years ago but still she kept a vary eye out for any flying or fire-breathing fiends. The wound didn't seem to bother Rickon and they pressed on through the night, come morning they reached the lowest ridge which Rickon claimed they could climb down and then go through Dragon Valley, which was the pride and joy of the farmers around the city of Dragondome.

Coming over the ridge she could see where Dragondome stood on the other side of the forest, a great city encircled by a great wall. On either side of the entrance stood great stone dragons and in the midst of it stood the citadel on higher ground. The castle was beautiful even from this distance, its white walls shimmering in the light, but instead of the colourful fields and scattered farms surrounding the city were only grey wastelands,

“That is terrible, what happened?” she asked.

“Lord Grimm is what happened, there used to be hundreds of small villages surrounding the city ... perhaps they didn't pay the taxes or did something to offend him in any case he must have wanted to teach them a lesson. But this means we can't cut across the fields or acres, we have to go along the edge of the forest.”

“And that's bad?”

“More dangerous... it's crawling with Raythan's footmen.” For a moment he was silent as if in thought. “Well, let us not waste time. To think we're almost at the end.”

Rickon urged Shade down the last slopes of the mountain. Erin hesitated before clutching Stranger's reins and had him follow their companions. Rocks rolled from the hooves of their mounts but both horses seemed surefooted and before long they were safe and sound on the levelled ground. The forest before them seemed even denser than the one where Erin encountered the water demon. A cold hand clutched at the pit of her stomach as she wondered what might lie beyond the trees. As they entered Erin could sense right away that something was off. There were no sounds, no birds nor scurrying animals, only the hooves of their horses as they crushed dry leaves and twigs. Once they were a little deeper inside the woods Rickon had them turn off the road and he spoke in half a whisper.

“I don't trust the road, and it's too quiet for my liking.”

Erin didn't say anything but nodded her head quietly and followed behind him. The forest was so soundless she dared hardly breathe. They went deeper and deeper into the heart

of the woods and before long Erin could hear something, it was the *whish* of something cutting the air followed by a breaking sound. Pulling on the reins, Erin stopped Stranger momentarily to listen in hopes of hearing it clearer, the chopping of wood perhaps?

“What’s that?” she whispered riding up beside Rickon.

“The woodsman.”

“Better him than the huntsman,” Erin mused.

“Well, I’d rather meet neither.” He urged Shade on.

But as they rode through the woods the sound kept getting louder and louder. Growing closer, it got distant for a moment or two only to get closer again and Erin felt sure they had passed that rotten stump at least twice.

“Rick... We’re going in circles.”

He cursed under his breath. “I should have known ... come, we must go this way.” Sharply he turned Shade to the left. The sound of chopping wood grew closer and closer still until they were standing in a small clearing. In midst of which stood a middle aged man before a cart filled with logs. On his left was a pile of the logs he had split with his axe.

“Welcome friends, lost in t’woods ar’yer? I can be of help, but only if you can guess—” The man had been piling cut lumber as they came upon him, but now as he was turning around, he saw them and fell silent.

“My Lord Grimm.” There was a hint of fear in his voice. “I didn’t— if I had known I wouldn’t...” He jabbered on a while but none of it registered with Erin. What had he just called her Rickon? *Lord Grimm*? It had to be a lie, it wasn’t possible. But the way he had so quickly turned towards her when the woodsman had mentioned the name and that expression on his face, it had to mean ... the third betrayal.

“Erin...” he began but she wouldn’t have any of it. Her heels dug into Stranger’s sides as she wheeled him around, neighing as he turned. Stranger darted off into the dark woods. Keeping her head low and clinging to his back Erin tried to make her way back. Had it been a trap all along? Was it him who wanted to rule Dragondome? But then why bring her all this way? Faintly she could hear him behind gaining on her, she could never outrun him in the woods with all the trees forcing Stranger to slow down at every trunk he swerved around. She had to take the road. Looping their way through the trees they finally found the road, but that was not the only thing. They landed smack dap in the middle of a sentry that was marching through the forest. How could she not have heard them or glimpsed through the trees was the thought on her mind as Stranger reared in surprise spilling her off his back and running off.

The men were in a tumult; they had been just as surprised as she was. They called her names as they helped her to her feet and yanked her back every time she tried to tear herself free from their grasp. But suddenly Shade broke through onto the road forcing the men aside, Rickon yanked her up on Shade's back, but she would not let him have her. Struggling with him she soon slipped and fell head first from the saddle. Nothing greeted her but darkness.

IX

Erin could feel herself gliding back to consciousness with the most mother-of-a-headache she had ever felt, though that perhaps wasn't so surprising judging by that freaky dream she had had. She rubbed her eyes and gingerly touched the top of her head, a voice came from beside her.

"Are you all right?"

She froze, that wasn't Danny's voice. Slowly she sat up fighting the dizziness that threatened to overcome her. Opening her eyes, Erin could see black bars and the gray brick walls that surrounded her. Looking to the left there were more bars splitting a rather large cell into two smaller ones. The person in the other one was none other than Rickon.

"I don't—" She rubbed her head. "What happened?"

"I guess I owe you an explanation." His blue eyes fixed upon her nearly glowing in the dim light. But before she could answer the heavy oaken doors burst open and two guards carrying long axes entered. They were both broad shouldered with thick necks and did not speak a word. One of them held a torch which he took to an empty scone giving the dreary room a bit more light but the other came towards her cell with keys in hand, opened the door and grabbed her upper arm tight.

"Look, there has been a mistake if you just..."

"It's no use," Rickon interrupted. "Raythan doesn't want to risk his captives dealing with his gaolers so he has them castrated and their tongues cut out. They care for nothing you might offer them."

Castrated these men might be, but incredibly strong too, One of them held her by the upper arms as the other placed heavy shackles on her wrists before leading her out of the dungeon. Out of everything Erin was most surprised that they were in one of the towers as they descended down a flight of stairs. Somehow she had always figured that these kinds of

cells were well, down in the dungeons. It was late evening or perhaps night judging by the darkness outside and the only light lighting their way were the torches mounted in scones down the long corridors. The halls seemed dark and dreary, nothing but grey bricks. They marched her between them without as much as a grunt. Counting the doors as they marched her they came to a halt at the seventh door upon which they knocked on the dark brown wood. From behind it someone bade them enter.

They left her in the middle of the room, fire was crackling in the heart. A man was standing in front of it, back turned to her.

“You can leave us.” His voice rang in the room. Without a word the two guards walked out. She heard the door close behind them. Her attention was focused on the man whom she assumed to be Lord Raythan. When he turned to face her Erin barely managed to stifle down a gasp but the staring could not be helped. This man was thicker around the middle and had a goatee which framed his mouth. Thick head of raven black hair which contrasted so nicely with his pale skin and dazzling blue eyes. The resemblance was unmistakable. Not twins, but surely brothers.

“Look at you,” he said, amazement in his voice. “Such beauty, and to think I came this close to having you murdered.” And he smiled his most charming smile holding out his hand leaving a small space of about two inches between his index finger and thumb. “But now that I have seen you, killing you is out of the question, the threefold moon is in a week’s time. I will keep both you and my brother under lock and key until I have been crowned regent over Dragondome and then I believe we shall have us a wedding. Together we can rule the greatest region in all of Asria.”

Erin didn’t know where to begin to understand just what the hell was going on but the first thought that came to her mind was: what about Rickon?

“That treacherous little fiend will be executed,” Raythan answered shortly when she brought up the question. “I really should have had him murdered a long time ago. Funny thing is that I deemed him to be the least of a threat. Ronan I had killed more than seven years ago, knowing he desired Grimmhaal and wouldn’t stand for me being first in line for the throne. I just struck before he got the chance to. Rickon on the other hand, he was always the gentle one. Especially after he was brought back from the Whites, they spoiled him with their soft talk and friendly gestures. They took him as a ward and hostage having driven father back from Dragondome, he was more a White than a Grimm when he returned.” Raythan stepped down and came towards her, his red cloak flowing behind him as he walked.

“But let us not speak of that.” He reached out a hand, it took every inch of willpower for Erin not to shy away from it and she was relieved when his fingers took a lock of her hair and ran through it and did not touch her face. “I will take you for my wife in just over a week’s time. I am having a room prepared for you as I find the cells are no place for the future Lady Grimm, but you must stay there for a day or two more as the room is still being secured.” His smile seemed genuine enough and made him look handsome despite his age, though the fact she knew he was evil did taint her view of him. The guards came in and took her back to the tower cells. Rickon was pacing around in his.

“Did you meet him? Did he do anything to you?” His hands clutched the bars but she said nothing until the guards had left them.

“You are Raythan’s brother?” she asked coldly folding her arms across her chest.

“Only by birth, but you are avoiding my question. What happened?”

“Not much, we met and now he plans to marry me.”

“I do hope you’re not considering, please you must understand he only desires your kingdom, he is an evil man. He does not care about you and would keep you under lock and key surrounded by guards every second of every day and—”

“—and at least he’s honest about it,” Erin interrupted. “From the moment we met you have lied and deceived me. How am I supposed to trust you now?”

“Can you trust that *I* care about you? Because I do and it would pain me to see you entrapped in such a situation.”

“Well, as I understand you wouldn’t need to, seeing that you would be dead and he never asked me but rather told me that we were to marry.”

Walking around his cell Rickon began kicking and pulling at the bars. “If you could only find a way out of here... then I would try to earn your trust and of course save the city from being ruled by such a vicious man as my brother is.”

But Erin couldn’t see how they should be able to get out. There was nothing in the cells but the floor upon which they stood and the guards were incorruptible. The only possible way Erin could see was to squeeze between the bars but that was impossible unless you were a small child or some kind of slender animal. Instantly an idea struck her like lightning. Her hand slid down the collar of her dress and down to her bra from where she pulled out a small star shaped flower. Not long after she popped it into her mouth the cramps began. Grunting she fell to her knees in agony while her bones repositioned and hair grew over her body.

Struggling out of the pile of clothes she emerged in her fox form. Rickon stared at her fascinated but she didn't pay him much attention, what she was interested in was the steady rhythm of low snores she could now hear coming from the corridor. Slowly she stretched her neck through the bars. It was a tight space but her head fit through it and she thanked the heavens for all the weight she had lost during their time on the road. Silently she trotted out into the hall feeling Rickon watching her every move. Peering around the corner she saw the bulging shape of one of the guards sitting on the floor, fast asleep. What an amazing luck! Gingerly she approached him, nearly too scared to breathe out of fear of waking him. The keys were in a chain attached to his leather belt. Dealing with the momentary loss of opposable thumbs Erin had to carefully gnaw through the belt in order to get to the keys, all the while her heart pounding faster than a jackrabbit. After what seemed like forever she finally had the key ring in her jaws and trotted back to the cell where she gave them to Rickon. He gladly accepted them and scratched her behind one ear.

"For a moment there I thought you had left without me." Letting himself out Rickon took a last glance around the room. "No weapons here."

Stepping silently he followed her out in to the corridor and past the sleeping guard from whom he carefully took the long axe. Erin led the way down the circular stairs and to the corridor where the guards had led her earlier. The castle seemed eerily silent, much like the woods had been. She stopped in front of the seventh door and Rickon pulled the lever. They stepped inside, closing the door behind them. The fire was burning low in the hearth. Padding around the room Erin tried to sniff him out but Raythan must have left. Quickly they turned their heads to the sound of the doors opening. It was a young boy around the age of fourteen, he gasped at the sight of Rickon.

"Hyldar!" Rickon exclaimed in a friendly regard. "Come in here please, I mean you no harm." The boy hesitated a moment but then came inside.

"Hullo," the teenager named Hyldar said, his voice low.

"You are my brother's steward, pray tell me where I might find him at this hour."

"In his chambers on the second floor, but my Lord Grimm, it has been said that you are charged for treason, that you are to be executed on the morrow. By rights I should go raise the alarm."

"And why haven't you?"

"I – well..."

The boy could not stand still, he shifted his weight from one leg to the other and Erin could sense how nervous this boy was. No, not nervous. Terrified.

“The rumour is you are travelling with the true heir of Dragondome, an Ellwood! Is it true? Can the throne be restored?”

Rickon looked down at his feet where Erin had planted herself beside him.

“Not in her current form, but we plan to do just that. And we will need your help.” Placing his hands on the lad’s shoulders he looked him in the eyes. “I need a sword and a safe way past the guards into my brother’s chambers. Once he falls so will his followers, they will scatter and scurry off, the rats they are.”

Erin thought Hyldar might die of a heart attack where he stood, but he proved himself true. Each minute seemed like an hour as they waited for the boy to return, the anxiety coming off Rickon in waves but sure enough Hyldar returned with a sword in hand and not followed by guards as they had feared.

“Lord Raythan’s bedchamber is on the second level, second door on the right. Guards are posted there all hours but there is a secret entrance from the maid’s quarters. You can get in there through the kitchens but be careful, there are guards walking the halls every half hour or so.”

“Thank you Hyldar, you’ve done more than your share.” Rickon patted Hyldar on the shoulder.

Erin trotted after him out of the room. When they were down the corridor Rickon ushered her before him trusting her acute nose and hearing to help them dodge the guards and they reached the maid’s quarters without incident. Crossing their room was more stressful as three maids were fast asleep in their beds. Sneaking past them wasn’t the difficult part, the difficult part was searching for the secret passage that would let them into Raythan’s chambers without any light and without making any noise that might wake the ladies. Erin felt that some kind of fairy godmother must have been watching over them when they stumbled upon the hidden door without waking anyone. The sleeping jailer, the boy Hyldar and then being able to find a way into Raythan’s chambers without incident, everything was going better than she dared hope. But as they entered the chamber they encountered their first obstacle.

A deep rumble of a growl greeted them as they came into the room. What she saw were the great wrinkles of a giant mastiff and the sharp teeth they revealed. Instinctively her

ears laid themselves back along her skull and her bushy tail tucked down between her legs. Rickon stepped in front of her.

“I’m sorry it had to come to this, Balor.”

All Erin heard was the *woosh* of metal cutting the air, saw the glimmer of steel and the dog’s head landed on the floor with a thud followed by its great big body which was still twitching. The growl may only have been a low rumble but apparently it had been enough to awake Raythan who was now standing at the foot of his bed, his own sword in hand.

“So, the crow has left the tower. Have you come to treat with me brother? Or are you only planning to steal another thing that is rightfully mine?”

“Dragondome was never rightfully yours, and neither is Erin.”

“Hah! I know these stones were never to be mine but I got them nonetheless, much like you did with that stallion you took. And just so she will be mine as well. So where is she? Did you tell her of some escape route? Or perhaps she’s still up in the tower. She is, isn’t she? And rightfully so I think it would pain her some to see you killed but not to worry, I’ll take such care of her that she’ll forget you soon enough.” And as Raythan unsheathed his sword, Rickon followed suit and momentarily Erin worried that the injury he suffered on Dragon Mountain would slow him down but Rickon held the sword in his left hand and seemed to have no problem wielding it as their swords sang together. They moved so fast that Erin had some trouble following their movements. The swords clashed together as they moved forwards or shied away from one another. A low whimper sounded from her those few times when it looked like Raythan might have the upper hand; yet somehow Rickon always managed to get back on his feet. They crashed into a vanity table, glasses and mirrors shattered with shards of glass falling all around them and Erin wondered why the guards who were supposed to be outside his doors hadn’t come barging in at the sound.

Sweat was beginning to form on Rickon’s brow and she noticed that he was getting slower, tired, whilst some kind of crazy gleam came over his brother’s eyes who laughed manically as he hacked at him. Rickon was becoming too tired to advance; the fight had to end soon, she knew, if he was to withstand a chance to win. He needed her help and so without a second thought she moved in the shadows of the walls and came up from behind Raythan and quick like a fox she darted towards his leg and sank her teeth deep in his tender flesh. They broke the skin and she could feel the hot blood spilling into her mouth. Raythan yelled out both in pain and surprise, stumbled and fell to the floor. Rickon used this sudden

chance and pierced his brother through the heart. Raythan's body twitched, a wet gurgle came from his throat and then he moved no more. Rickon fell to his knees breathing heavily.

"It's over, h-he's dead."

Erin laid her head on his thigh, the sword still sticking out of the man on the floor. Rickon looked both dazed and confused.

"I-I can hardly believe it."

But he had to, because it was true. After regaining his breath he opened the door ready to face his brother's guards only to be greeted by the servants of the castle who had overcome them. Soon it was all over the city that Lord Raythan was no more and that the lady of Ellwood had returned. Raythan's men fled the city fast as their feet would carry them whilst the people of Dragondome began to celebrate into the break of dawn. Assisted by Hyldar, Rickon recovered his luggage including the potion which changed Erin back into her former self, though she must admit that being a fox had its benefits. After the transformation Erin was utterly and completely exhausted, being malnourished and drained of all energy after the long travel she felt herself collapse on the floor and then she remembered no more.

X

Her mind awoke before her body and she struggled with opening her eyes. Once that battle had been won she found herself in a large four post bed with silk linen and she could feel a hand clasping hers; at the corner of her eye she saw Rickon fast asleep, slumped down on a chair next to her bed.

"We've been waiting for you to wake up milady. You've been asleep for almost two days," came a quiet voice; its sudden presence surprised Erin. It was a woman in her mid thirties Erin guessed and a maid judging by her clothes.

"I don't think I realized how tired I was."

"The grand counsellor will be pleased to hear you are awake, and in time for the threefold moon. Praise the spirits!" and she left the room closing the door behind her. Erin had felt Rickon's hand slide from hers, she turned to him, but the chair was empty. Had he snuck out when the maid came in? Or had she simply been dreaming? Sitting up in bed, Erin looked around the room but she was alone. After a few confused minutes a group of people entered introducing themselves as her counsellors; each name she forgot as she was told

another. For the following days the grand counsellor hardly left her side teaching her about anything she needed to know about the region and when she could take up her office as the Lady Regent of Dragondome.

But most of Erin's mind was preoccupied thinking about Rickon and the child she was now certain she carried. It wasn't long until she found out that during the confusion of Raythan's death, his men fleeing the castle and her supporters storming it, Rickon had been thrown in the dungeons. She ordered his release as soon as she heard, but hadn't seen him at all, though she always sensed him near.

After the celebration of the three fold moon and Erin's taking her place as the Lady Ellwood of Dragondome she found herself often thinking about New York City. A part of her wanted to go back to see if Danny was all right and what he was up to these days, but something always came up. Arko had been too ill to travel and the restoration of her lands demanded her complete attention: a duty which she gladly fulfilled. There was also the fact of her growing heavier with child. The counsellors were calling it a miracle, that the spirits were finally rewarding them for all the years they had been without a true born leader to now give them two at once, hailing her as the mother of the two ladies to come. As it seemed none of the women in her family had ever given birth to a son, but Erin felt the winds of change in this as in so many other things.

A week after the coronation she was walking around in one of the palace's beautiful gardens, trying to get some peace and quiet from the stress of court, beneath the bloom of the cherry blossoms. That was where Rickon found her.

"I hope I am not disturbing you m'Lady."

Her heart skipped a beat at the sound of his voice, two beats as she turned around to face him.

"Of course not," she replied favouring him with a smile. Their trials on the road seemed like a whole lifetime ago. He seemed rather awkward as he slowly approached her, running his fingers through his hair.

"I just wanted to tell you how truly sorry I am for everything I put you through ... I wouldn't blame you for ordering me away."

He kept on talking and apologizing but Erin heard none of it, all she knew was her desire to have him ravish her, right then and there. She suspected that some of that was the work of her hyped up pregnancy hormones but sure enough she got her wish. Biting her lip she approached him and leaned upwards for a kiss. Without hesitation Rickon's lips touched

hers, gently at first but soon it was filled with the hunger they shared for each other. They made love beneath the cherry blossoms and afterwards, as a single pink petal slowly glided through the air and landed on one of Erin's breasts, Rickon asked if she might consider accepting his hand in marriage.

“You know what?” she answered grinning. “I just might.”

The Report: Writing *Ellwood*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For being allowed and able to create this BA assignment I give my thanks to Ingibjörg Rósa Björnsdóttir who made all this possible, having fought tooth and nail to do the first Creative Writing final assignment in the English Department of the University of Iceland. It was Björnsdóttir who bulldozed through and cleared the path for students to come, to have the opportunity to do their own Creative Writing final assignments.

After having struggled for months to write and finish my first novella and after countless hours of re-writing and editing, I sat down and wrote this exposition in which I try and do my best to explain how the idea for *Ellwood* came about. I trace the evolution my seemingly insignificant and imagined characters went through to become the three-dimensional characters they are today within these pages. What the first drafts of the story were like and how the story transformed through the process of editing, writing and re-writing the whole chapters until satisfaction was reached on both ends of the table between the editor and the writer; the instructor and the student.

To support my thoughts as I argue my case I refer to letters from my instructor, a textbook taught in the Creative Writing course I took in the fall semester 2010, as well as other books on the subject of creative writing. Furthermore I rely on novels and fairytales which I found helped me a great deal along the way as I try to explain what it was that affected my decision making in regards to plot and character creation, as well as what on earth possessed me to take on this challenging, frustrating, yet amazingly fulfilling project.

Stephen King's book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* inspired me greatly. It made me think there was nothing I couldn't write about and that everything I wrote would be brilliant, and secure me seats on the best sellers list. Call a publisher and roll out the red carpet! But it wasn't long after I had put his book down that I picked up another one, for the purpose of my entertainment but also to keep my toolbox in check. The book was *The Game of Thrones* by George R. R. Martin. It is very intimidating for an aspiring novelist to read something so artfully written. Martin is someone who obviously did a lot of research and drew quite a few maps and has his characterisation in perfect order. My best seller dreams crashed and burned with each carefully constructed sentence I read, but I soon figured that it was up to me to accept the challenge, to not crawl under the sheets and hide from it and to take both myself

and my art more seriously. And so I did. My feelings towards the project pretty much echo one of the many clever advice King gave in his book, especially this particular one:

You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair—The sense that you can never completely put on the page what's in your mind and heart [...] Come to it any way but Lightly. Let me say it again: *You must not come lightly to the blank page.* (99).

So it was not lightly that I came to the blank page, but with mixed feelings at heart. I desired to get my ideas down on paper but feared that now matter how well I wrote or how much time I would spend on my writing I might never reach the greatness of my favourite authors; J.R.R Tolkien, Terry Pratchett, Douglas Adams or George R.R. Martin. But I am sure to try and do my best.

1.2 How it All Began

In the beginning there was the word. Or so they would have you believe. From the day I was able to form my words into sentences I loved to tell stories. In school my favourite subject was writing. Sometimes we were allowed to clip a picture out of a magazine, glue it in our notebook and then create a story about it. The fun this activity held for me stretched out to my home where I began cutting pictures out of everything I could find: picture books, comics, magazines, newspapers. Nothing was safe from my ambition to create a new as I filled notebook after notebook with stories about the pictures which were more often than not of cute and furry animals, and in the mind of an eight year old these creatures can get themselves into endless adventures. But it wasn't long until my interest for storytelling began to fade as most of my friends found it rather lame to sit inside with a notebook when I wasn't even studying, but at the age of thirteen something changed. For years I had refused to read the Harry Potter novels by J.K. Rowling simply because everybody else was doing it. But in 2001 I was tricked into seeing the movie. That summer I read all four books and eagerly waited the publication of the fifth. While waiting, my imagination jump-started and I began scribbling down my own version of what might happen the next year at Hogwarts adding my own characters to the mix.

As Stephen King so elegantly puts it, “Imitation preceded creation” (141). Because it was about a year after I began scribbling my little fan fiction that my passion for writing was at its highest. I was working on a novel – which is still a work in process. This story in particular is the one which I am most paranoid about and I really am glad that it is taking me so long to write as it changes a little from year to year. Reading it over from year to year I can clearly see how I have grown as a person from being that fifteen year old teenager to the young adult in her mid twenties I am today. So far it is over fifty thousand words and it is nowhere near finished. No matter how many short stories or novellas I will write in the future finishing that particular novel will be item number one on my bucket list.

1.3 Switzerland

It was the year 2010 and the month was February when I was living in Switzerland, working as an au-pair. The interesting thing was that I was taking care of Icelandic horses and not children so it gave me plenty of time with my own thoughts. I also did watch quite a bit of television. There was a certain show that really caught my interest and became the spark that fanned the flames beneath the creation of Erin and Rickon. The show was named *The Legend of The Seeker*, based on the novels *The Sword of Truth* by Terry Goodkind. The show might not have been the best fantasy I ever saw on television but it was enough to get the motor of my imagination running. The show had a leading male and a leading female, accompanied by a wizard as they travelled throughout the lands trying to find a way to defeat an evil tyrant who happened to be the leading man’s brother. Does that sound familiar to the reader of my story? Of course, but despite the fact that the main elements are similar, my story is completely different. In the show it was the guy who was the chosen one, unaware of his evil brother and it was the woman who possessed magical powers. These all change places in my story as it is the girl who is pulled through to another world and the wizard accompanying them is morphed with the leading male as Rickon becomes both her protector and guide.

If you take a look at an exercise suggested by King it is fascinating to see how a story can take a whole new direction with only the slightest adjustments. Provided with the basic outline King gives you the story of Dick and Jane and little baby Nell. Dick is an abusive husband and Jane is terrified of him. Paranoia, incarceration and escape from jail are what King also graciously hands on his silver platter of thought before asking you “to change the sexes of the antagonist and the protagonist” (King 170). Keeping the names it was Jane who

was the abusive one and Dick the victim. This project held so much fun for me that Dick and Jane were soon replaced by John and Peter who were then again taken out for Deborah and Hailey. Three versions of the same story with a different set of main characters and none of the endings were even alike. Each character had their different personalities and different decisions were made in each scenario. So it was poor John (protagonist) who ended up hanging from the closet with a noose around his head after having accidentally murdered Peter (antagonist), whilst Jane (protagonist) ends up happily married to her rescuing police officer Rachel, different people leading similar lives yet the outcome never remains the same. And so it is with *Ellwood*, it might have been inspired by *The Legend of the Seeker* yet is very different in a countless number of ways.

Chapter 2: The Creation of *Ellwood*

In this chapter I will shortly reference to the Brother's Grimm, as their collection of fairy stories was a big part of what inspired me to create the world in which *Ellwood* takes place. There are certain elements which make a fairy tale a fairy tale. More often than not, fairy tales are short stories used to convey a strong ethical moral. *Little Riding-Hood* for example is supposed to teach young children not to talk to strangers, in *Cinderella* it is stressed that evil begets evil, so as long as you are kind natured and a nice person good things will happen to you. It might take a while but rest assured they will happen. Lastly *The Golden Goose* is a cautionary tale teaching its readers to be grateful for what they have and not to be greedy. Fairy tales are reported to always have good endings where the protagonists live happily ever after and the antagonist suffers for all the evil he did. Thus derives the concept of a "fairy tale ending" meaning that all is well that ends well. Magic and enchantments are always floating around and there can nearly always be found talking animals and strange creatures that are nonexistent in our dull little world. Then comes the question of origin and destiny and let us not forget the ever popular patterns. In most fairy stories, myths and religions are some numbers that you will encounter quite frequently such as the numbers seven, twelve and three.

2.1. The Brothers Grimm

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were German folklorists who, in the early 1800's, collected fables and myths. A collection which would become known throughout the world as children's fairy stories and cautionary tales about beautiful princesses, frogs turning into princes and happy endings. However, the original fairy tales are not quite as happy as I remember them as a child:

The Grimm versions are surprisingly, sometimes shockingly, different. *Cinderella* has no fairy godmother, her ugly sisters are not ugly but they do have their eyes pecked out by pigeons. *Sleeping Beauty* does not have an evil stepmother, *Rapunzel* is pregnant and *Frog Princes* do not get kissed but thrown against walls. (Bragg).

These are quite different from the tales read to me as a child where all the unsettling and dark scenes had been trimmed and endings changed, but I absolutely loved them. Fascinated by the

world of talking animals, dragons, countless dangers, spells, enchantments, princes and princesses, my idea for *Ellwood* came forth with the thought: “What would happen if a girl from my world was dragged into one where the Grimm Fairy tales might have happened?” Thus Asria came to be, a magical universe where all of the famous fairytales actually happened – See map in Appenix I. But as this particular story is of my own making none of the famous Grimm characters directly touch the storyline. However, they can more often than not be found dancing along the sidelines. But going back into the popular fantasy elements I soon realized within my story that a certain theme kept coming up again and again.

2.2. The Number Three

In the Grimm’s Fairy Tales alone there can be found at least sixteen stories in which the title alone relates that the number of the protagonists is three (for instance *The Three Little Pigs*, *The Three Spinners*, *The Three Sons of Fortune*, *The Three Little Birds*, *The Three Apprentices*, *The Three Brothers*, *The Three Black Princesses*, *Knoist and His Three Sons*). However, it isn’t always the number of characters to which the number three can refer to. It can also have to do with occurrences, something happening three times i.e. three wishes. This is done for rhythm, for emphasis and to help both the characters and the reader to believe in what is happening: This is not just a single occurrence or happened twice by coincident: The event happens three times. There is a message being conveyed. The number three goes back a long way. Look into any religion there is and rest assured you may find it: In Christian Faith you have the holy trinity. The ancient Greek and Romans had the three graces – goddesses of joy, charm and beauty, the Vikings had the three witches, Urður, Verðandi and Skuld who knew the past, present and the future. There is a kind of symbolism to the number three which makes it special in our minds, or mine at least as it became somewhat of an obsession of mine when writing my own fairy tale. In a few scenes it was not a conscious decision but reading through my story there can be found a few instances where the number three comes up.

- When the elevator opens revealing Danny inside it he is there with three of the Faithless.
- When the elevator opens downstairs Erin and Rickon are greeted by three other people, this time police officers.
- When in Arko’s house there are three lit candles positioned on the table.

- In the world from where Erin's parents came from there are three moons.
- Three times she is betrayed by Rickon as he withholds the truth from her.
- Before leaving camp after having been restored to her old self Erin picks three of the star shaped flowers and hides beneath her clothes.
- On their travel Erin notices three stone giants.
- Three times Rickon saves her.
- Three maids are sleeping in the maid's quarters when they sneak into Raythan's chamber.

There are a few more incidents regarding the number three within the story, but these were the ones which are clearly noticeable as I leafed through the pages. In many stories the meaning of a certain number or in fact any of these popular fairy tale elements can have strong effect on the plot of the tale. Which brings us to the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Plot

The plot to a story is like the purpose to life. Without a plot the story will become boring and lifeless, plain facts with no meat on the bones. Similar to, unfortunately, many textbooks taught at school. They are lacking that breath of life which would make them interesting, suspenseful and fun. Stein writes “A plot consists of scenes” (Stein. *On Writing*, 90) and like with any movie the major scenes are when interesting and exciting things are happening. Throughout any story there is always a handful or more of important scenes which then need to be connected together in order to form the whole picture.

3.1 Plotting *Ellwood*

The plot outline for *Ellwood* came to me easily enough. As previously stated it has to do with the girl, Erin, being dragged into the fantasy world from where the Grimm’s fairytales actually happened. That offered the big questions of both “how” and/or “why?” Did she fall down a rabbit hole? Take a train from platform 9¾? Was there a hurricane in which she was lifted over a rainbow? What happened exactly? It seemed obvious to me that she had to be brought or at least guided to that world. That’s where Rickon came into the picture. The out-of-this-world handsome fellow who has been looking for her for quite some time because she is needed on the other side. Why? Because she is in fact a rightful heir to one of the kingdoms there (her grandmother having been sent over to our world many years ago to save her and the child she was carrying from a great war) and she must claim it or else it will be ruled by the evil Tyrant Raythan. Though that posed a little problem of its own. How was he going to get her to come with him? He couldn’t just tell all this to her because she would just think he was crazy. Something had to happen which would make her trust him and therefore be willing to go with him. That’s where the Faithless came in. Mean and dangerous head hunters from Asria sent over to murder her. Luckily Rickon arrives in time and presto! Erin is saved and hurries along with him to Central Park where an open portal is waiting for them.

Then what? It wouldn’t make much of a tale if the portal had led them directly to Erin’s kingdom, she accepted the crown and all would be well. That would be a rather bad story. Thus the portal on the other side was placed almost as far away from her castle as possible and so in a world with no cars, planes or trains the city girl finds herself riding a horse through a world utterly unknown to her where dangerous things can jump out at you

from every corner. And so, little by little, the plot began to unravel. It is interesting to note that for me writing is like a peculiar game of connect-the-dots. A scene will edge its way forth from my mixture of thoughts and usually as I am writing that down another one will appear, perhaps it is something that happened before the scene which I am writing or something that doesn't even occur until a few years later. I strive to write these scenes as they come to me always leaving big gaps between each one as if not to mix them together and in the end the outcome has so many and such big holes you can drive a truck through nearly all of them. Then I need to pick the pen up again and struggle to sew the storyline together, for me this is usually the more boring part as all the juicy and exciting things have already happened and all that is left is to build the bridges between A and E and M and R. So terribly aware of the vast length of my story I tried to connect the dots best I could, though always fearing that I might pace it too fast at times and suddenly lose the reader in a dust of confusion or that at times it is paced too slowly and I'm boring him. It is the golden middle way that I seek as I try to follow that yellow brick road and hope I am able to keep myself on it most of the time.

3.2 Pacing

As an avid reader and a big fan of Stephen King I am more familiar with slow paced novels, as he himself mentions “I *like* a slower pace and a bigger higher build” (King 223). This of course came as a bit of a problem for me as I struggled with the length of my story. What I do like however is that with a slower pacing, and this is something I more often than not notice in many of King's novels, is how much better you as a reader get to know the characters. You get to watch them for a little while doing the most simplest of tasks and you start to relate to them, connect to them on some deeper level which then makes you react all the more strongly when something happens to them – be it good or bad. Stein calls attention to this important point “I am convinced that *we need to know the people in the car before we see the car crash*. The events of a story do not affect our emotions in an important way unless we know the characters” (*On Writing* 50). And he is completely right. It really is amazing how the human being is capable of forming strong emotions towards fictional characters that we have never met, touched or even spoken to. One of the biggest emotional rollercoaster I have ever been on, in regards to a book, has got to be King's *Dark Tower* Series. Seven books built around a quest of a single character supported by people from both his world as well as ours. The pacing is slow but the action is never far away.

Taking a look at my original draft I noticed it took me ten pages, and about 5,500 words to get Erin from her apartment and to go with Rickon to Central Park. Cutting from the beginning should be easier than to hack away something deeper from within the story as the plot begins to unravel, yet it is a delicate process to know just how much you as a writer *want* to let the reader know opposite what the reader *needs* to know. For example when Rickon and Erin run down the hall and see Mrs. Groger lying there dead on the floor. She does serve the purpose of showing how ruthless the Faithless are but shouldn't Rickon's warnings suffice? Another problem I faced was getting the pair of them out of the building. Should there be such an upset group of people in the lobby along with the police squad there already or could they just stroll out the front doors? If they did that though I imagine that some of the Faithless would follow close on their tail which would probably result in an even longer scene where they run around New York, causing chaos as Rickon and Erin try to rid themselves of their followers.

3.3 Planting

Planting means preparing the ground for something that comes later, usually to make the later action credible. Planting is necessary when a later action might seem unconvincing to the reader. (Stein, *On Writing* 152).

Planting is similar to the literary technique named Chekhov's gun.

The technique comes from Anton Chekhov, who explained that a pistol hung on a wall in the first act of the play should be used at some time later in the story. If the gun isn't used, then it serves no purpose and is a mere distraction. (Johnson and Allen).

It would be very scholarly of me to say that the scene when Erin eats the magical flower which transforms her into a fox was my presentation of the gun which would go off when she eats another of those flowers and her fox form ables her to escape from a prison cell, but it wasn't. My initial thought was that Erin would turn into a fox and remain in that state for some time, during which time the point of view would move from her and over to Rickon as her mindset being so much different from her human one. But as I was writing a novella and not a novel and already feeling the urgency of the story not being too long I feared for Erin's

fox form thinking it had to be removed. Then brilliance struck. I could transform her shortly in *medias* provided that it would happen again later and have significant impact on the plot. And so the great escape was planned. What should never be done is to plant something and never use it, that is a waste both of the writers time and the readers. But what can even be worse than showing a gun and not using it is to keep secrets from the reader.

3.4. Keeping Secrets

How are we to learn from our mistakes if we don't make them? It was from a mistake I made myself and from it I learned to not keep important facts from the reader. It seemed very simple to me as the writer what had just happened, especially after all the times I had played a particular scene in my mind I felt it didn't need any further explanations, but of course it did. In this scene, Erin gets to know something which I did not reveal to the reader in the first draft. As the whole story is seen from her point of view it seems strange that the reader does not know about what is going on in her mind. Following this scene in the first draft, Erin throws a tantrum, crying and trying to beat up Rickon. Let me go back to the scene that caused her anger.

Rickon and Erin have made their way to the small village and spent the night at the Baa Inn. That morning Erin sees Rickon speaking in low voices with the stable boy. Being the curious girl she is (and still a little uncertain about how much she can truly trust Rickon) Erin goes after the boy and gets some shocking information from him – not revealed in the early draft – resulting in her confronting Rickon about it and breaking down in a kind of a tantrum. My supervisor pointed out to me that reader does not have access to my mind, and I cannot sit next to everyone reading my story to explain to them what it was I was thinking the moment I wrote each sentence. The stable boy did in fact not tell her anything about Danny directly, he did however – albeit unknowingly – tell her some very important information relating to him. The Faithless were on the prowl, capturing people and interrogating them. With them they had a wizard, very skilled in enchanting a certain kind of weed so that once ingested a person would be incapable of lying for at least twenty-four hours, and if they even tried to be untruthful their intestines would begin to twist within them, squeezing themselves and the more they tried the more pain the person would be exposed too. No signs could be shown of this torture except the person's pale face and blood around the mouth which would form only after an intense torture. And having the image of her dazed and pale faced Danny in the

elevator, with some red smears around his mouth burned into her memory. The feeling of guilt and betrayal overwhelm her. So this piece of information which was foolishly kept away from the reader in the first draft of my novella was revealed in its final version. There is full disclosure. Though just to build up a little suspense the reader does not read it from the lips of the stable boy but from Erin herself in the following scene when she is beating on Rickon.

Erin's outburst of anger and display of emotion is all part of her character. A lot of thought has gone into characterisation and will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Character Creation

When creating characters for a story it is vital to make the characters attractive to potential readers. The protagonist needs to be likable and easy to root for while the antagonist must be convincing. Fashioning a likable character does not mean that the person needs to be perfect, perfect characters are not interesting: they are one sided and dull it also makes it unbelievable as there is no such thing as a perfect person and if the reader doesn't believe the writer's characters, the said writer might just as well move on to other things. Stein points out that in the most famous novels of the twentieth century the main characters have been eccentric, very different from the so called normal Joe.

Readers don't want to pay money in order to spend twelve hours in the company of someone who is just like their neighbour next door. They are attracted by differentness. Readers identify with the main character's humanity, hopes, temptations, joy, triumphs, vulnerability and sadness. (*Growing* 66).

As with any other story or novel the main and supporting characters of my novella are archetypes. Rickon is the hero, "He [the hero] is the mana personality and the defeater of evil dragons" (Boeree).

The mana-personality is a dominant of the collective unconscious, the well-known archetype of the mighty man in the form of hero, chief, magician, medicine-man, saint, the ruler of men and spirits, the friend of God. (qtd. In McDowell).

So, the mana fights evil and is someone the reader finds it easy to relate with. In the case of my novella the evil dragon is the mana personality's brother, Raythan. Rescuing a maiden is also the duty of the mana which is one of the first tasks he completes after being introduced in the story, when he suddenly appears on the streets of New York and saves Erin's life. As I read over the first twenty or so pages I realized that Erin kept getting herself into trouble from which she was always saved from by a strong male character. For example when she was enthralled by a water demon and transformed into a fox. At first this was something I hadn't really noticed but once I did it became very important to me that it was not always the helpless maiden being rescued by the brave knight. Erin is a strong independent woman from

the 21st century who should be very capable of saving herself when the occasion calls for it. One of her more cunning acts is to take with her a few flowers after she has discovered that eating one would transform her into a fox. A simple enough act yet important as it enables her to escape from the prison cell and release Rickon, thus turning upside down the old notion that women are always in need of being rescued. But there was a certain danger I faced with Erin. She is torn between the worlds, her old home where her fiancé remains with no clue as to what might have happened to her and this new fairy world with more adventure than she could ever have hoped for. Things only get more complicated when she finds herself falling for the person she knows she should not trust. Especially when she realizes she is pregnant after that night in the cave.

It was very challenging to find a way to express Erin's tumult of emotions and confusion without confusing the reader and also without causing Erin's character to become whiny and annoying. That is what my opinion became of J.K. Rowling's character Harry Potter early on. He was whiny, more often than not self-centred and annoying. Especially so in Rowling's fifth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Still, she successfully created many other lovable characters to which I could relate to and find joy in even though Harry was having his own little pity party. But I feel I was able to convey Erin's character as a believable one and even make her likeable if not relatable. It is also necessary for a character to grow within the story. The character growth is shown through the choices they make. For example Erin accepting her destiny by choosing to stay in Dragondome to rule her Kingdom and Rickon's realisation of how much he needed her and in the end asking her to marry him. But from character growth let us move on to naming characters.

4.1 What's In a Name?

For me finding a suitable name for a character is just as important as the rest of it. When I write short stories the characters sometimes appear to me already bearing one name or another. That is the best I can hope for because there have been times where I have struggled for days and days naming a character, simply referring to them as "x" as none of my suggestions seem to fit the person.

Erin was born in my mind bearing the name Robin. And it seemed to suit her just fine, a cute name for a cute girl – and a red head to boot. So over the course of a couple of months she remained Robin. But before long there came a seed of doubt: the brothers. Raythan's

name came to me a little later than Robin's did. Struck by the brilliant idea of combining the first half of the name Raymond and latter half of the name Nathan, also I felt it could be a small play-off on the Icelandic word *reiður* meaning angry or mad. *Hún gerði hann reiðan* (pronounced ray-than) translated as "she made him mad" is a good example of the feeling Erin's intentions bring about in Raythan. I was so pleased with this discovery and my own brilliance. Then strolled in the thought that the brothers should bear a name with the same capital and since I was less willing to change Raythan's name, Robin had to be renamed, as it would not have been very intelligent to have three of the main characters names begin with "R". Isabella and Elaine were two that were tried out for a short while but for the longest while she only went by the name Ellwood until one day I fell upon Erin. It possessed the same ending as Robin and is also alliterated with her last name Ellwood. Without a doubt my winner.

4.2 Accents

Voices of the people in the story came as a little bit of a challenge. Erin was the least amount of trouble as much of her language derives from myself and what I have experienced with my friends or from the television. Rickon however and all the folks from his world were a great deal more complicated. Luckily I consider myself somewhat of an avid reader and had seen many texts written out phonetically. *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh is a perfect example of a work brilliantly written, something which I consider a masterpiece when it comes to working with pronunciation as the whole book is written in either Scots, Scottish English or British English which goes to show Welsh's skill and also tireless research on the subject. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston is also an excellent novel when it comes to researching dialects in novels, though it could not be of much help to me with this story as apparently there are no African American characters to be found. Having read *The Dark Tower* series by Stephen King and *The Song of Ice and Fire* series by George R.R. Martin made it easier for me to find their voices and imagine how the people from the other world speak and what they might sound like.

The character of Rickon, being noble-born, speaks the high-speech. He annunciates and rarely shortens his words, the only real problem I had with his dialogues was running the risk of making him sound too formal. Despite him being noble born and speaking the high-speech there was no need to make him sound like he had a plumb in his mouth, it would make

him too dry and I feared that a reader would be unable to relate to him. Yet in my first draft I had made a deadly mistake. Rickon referred to himself as being “okay,” a word which should not be in his vocabulary. This could be explained by it having rubbed off on him from Erin, but at the same time it digs out from the foundation that makes him believable as a character and so his “okay” had to be transformed to a “fine.”

As Rickon speaks the high-speech I wanted to have someone in the novella represent the low-speech. The gypsy boy, whose name is never revealed, was a perfect candidate for that, though his speech patterns were a bit more of a hassle to write as he possessed a more complicated dialect than Rickon. Unlike the almost standardized accents Welsh and Hurston worked with in their books; Welsh with Scottish and British in *Trainspotting* and Hurston writing conversations out the way African Americans in the South of the United States speak in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the gypsy boy sounds like he came from anywhere and nowhere at the same time. It’s not Irish, not British it’s just, well, gypsy. His accent is very thick and he has a way of speaking extremely fast which makes him almost incomprehensible, to the untrained ear you can hardly understand what is being said. That little fact might come in handy when he’s doing business with ordinary folk, as the gypsies living in the world of Asria have the reputation of tending to be sneaky and trying to make as much money off of you as they possible can. This is why it took me by surprise when the gypsy boy gave Erin the little carved fox instead of trying to sell it to her. Maybe it was because he felt a little guilty about sending them to the arms of the guards or perhaps he just wanted to be nice. I am not really sure myself and mayhap I will never find out as he is long gone now travelling through the wilderness of Asria with his family.

Chapter 5: The Editing Process

Much as the relater's catchphrase is *location, location, location* the writer's catchphrase should go along the ways of *re-write, re-write, re-write*. Which I, much to my dismay, discovered the hard way. Getting the story down on paper might not be as hard for me as it comes to some but it's the constant editing and rearranging and poking and dabbling that I sometimes felt was enough to drive me to an early grave or at least give me a few strands of gray hair. I strongly believe that having my dog by my side each step of the way helped me maintain my sanity – or what's left thereof. She was there every evening for me to express my frustration or despair, never judging or dismissing but listening and reassuring with a lick on the hand or a wag of her tail. And the long walks we took helped clear my mind and get a new and often better perspective of things.

5.1 Killing Your Darlings

When it came to the process of writing and re-writing I mostly relied on Stephen King's guide *On Writing* by taking my "story through at least two drafts; the one you do with the study door closed and the one you do with it open" (King 210). Bearing in mind the patience of my instructor and her willingness to work with me, it was also important to find someone else to read through my story, a third party who could look it over and help me locate any bumps I might be missing because was too close to the forest to see the trees. Very much like the fact I hadn't felt as if I was keeping the conversation between Erin and the stable boy a secret until it was suggested to me by my instructor. There also came one scene in which it was possible that the reader might stop believing in the world I had created and that would have just been awful. When writing fantasy writers strive to have their readers believe their narratives. This is a literary phenomenon called suspending disbelief:

In the world of fiction you are often required to believe a premise which you would never accept in the real world. Especially in genres such as fantasy and science fiction, things happen in the story which you would not believe if they were presented in a newspaper as fact. Even in more real-world genres such as action movies, the action routinely goes beyond the boundaries of what you think could really happen. In order to enjoy such stories, the audience engages in a phenomenon known as "suspension of disbelief". This is a semi-conscious decision in which you

put aside your disbelief and accept the premise as being real for the duration of the story. (Media College).

So, to have my readers suspend their disbelief, I opted to cut out one of my favourite scenes when Erin encounters Hansel and Gretel; it was my instructor's feeling that reading this scene suggested this was all a dream, as she related to me in one of the many e-mails we exchanged: "I think you may be overdoing it with the Hansel and Gretel thing, though. With that, you imply that it is all a dream, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, and that Ellwood will just wake up in her apartment."

Not wishing to disappoint any readers this became my first encouragement to cut out chunks of my story. "[K]ill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler's heart, kill your darlings" (King 224). So I grabbed my butcher's knife and hacked away the their whole encounter with Hansel and Gretel, then moving in with a small scalpel and trimming the edges before I inserted a charming young gypsy instead. But killing my darlings wasn't enough, pressed for time and hindered by the fear of my story being too long I had to be come more radical, I began to smother them with the pillow or drown them as they peaked out their heads in the struggle of being born. For instance the stories behind the naming of Dragon Mountain and Dragondome were never told and I was forced to leave all dragons out of my tale.

Another clear problem that came out early on was the way I tagged speech, a tag being "the name for the attached phrases which indicate who the speaker is" (Barry 229). I kept going after the same pattern: "xxx," said John Doe. It was something I really had to work on. I spent countless hours at the computer scanning my dialogs and figuring when tags were needed, when they weren't and how I might go about tagging a sentence in new and creative ways. Barry discusses various ways a writer can present exchange of words and provides the following examples:

Directed and tagged –

"What is your name?" Mario asked her. "It's Thelma," she replied.

Direct and untagged –

"What's your name?"

"Thelma."

Direct and selectively tagged –

“What is your name?” asked Mario.

“Thelma.” (Barry 229)

The difference between these ways of tagging seems slight, but there is always the thin line between showing and telling. These three examples refer to ways of showing the reader the dialogue between Mario and Thelma but there is also the option of flat out telling. Which provide tagging options such as:

Tagged indirect speech –

He asked her what her name was, and she told him it was Thelma.

Free indirect speech –

What was her name? It was Thelma. (Barry 230)

This provided much help with creating more interesting ways to tag the speech of my characters, giving added life to the text. It also gave me the realisation that speech does not only have to be tagged with “he said” or “she said” but can also be established through actions, gesture or simply a look.

5.2. Struggling with Length

Ellwood is one of the largest projects I have finished and yet it does not feel finished. It began as a story about a man and a woman who would travel through a magical world, conquer the bad man and live happily ever after. My own little fairy tale. Seemed simple enough. But it wasn't. Soon I discovered that the story was taking a life of its own, growing faster and expending more than I had intended. Before long I began to worry about its length, especially after receiving a comment from my instructor after she received the first half of the novel asking me how many words I was aiming for (what I sent her being 19,000 words) and saying that it might be difficult to find a second reader willing to read a 40,000 word novel. This did send me into a bit of a panic as I struggled with both finishing the novella and keeping it short, fearing and hoping that, as I quickly ran through some scenes, I wasn't leaving out anything important. The scenes I cut or left out completely became a compromise which will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Taking The Story Further

The scenes that didn't make the cut are still alive and kicking inside my mind. They bide their time until I feel ready to blow the dust from this manuscript and indulge myself with lengthening the tale, squeezing into it everything I was unable to this time around. This doesn't mean that I will put in everything I removed after being advised to do so, and with good reasoning. It means that I will create more of the same but longer, filled with entertaining scenes and dragons, especially dragons. Having created a whole other world offers so many possibilities. Rickon and Erin's travel to Dragonsdome could be made a much slower and hectic process, there could be more of intimate moments between them, they might encounter the Faithless on the road and perhaps in the end Erin will find a way back to her world and finally have a chance to explain things to Danny to name just a fraction of the things swimming in my head.

6.1. *Ellwood*: Alternative Version (with Dragons)

Cutting the dragons out completely made me rather depressed as I always longed to write a fairy tale with those fascinating creatures, but at the moment they are hibernating, biding their time which will surely come sooner than later. The whole thing would begin with Rickon telling Erin about how all lords and ladies used to have their own protective dragons until some incident which forced them to be banned and exiled until about little over a hundred years ago when the last dragon was slain. Most of them had dwelt in Dragon Mountain and travelling over it Erin finds a fossilised egg which comes alive again once she picks it up and starts caring for it and things begin to heat up when she places it on the fire, testing a theory she had read about/or seen in *Game of Thrones*. Rickon tries to stop her but it is too late and from the egg emerges a small dragon, which marks Erin with a small bite on her left shoulder. Now they belong to each other. Having the fast growing dragon in their company makes their journey a much slower affair than it would have been, much to Rickon's annoyance and with each passing day the dragon grows larger. In that version their way from Dragon Mountain to Dragondome is a few leagues longer than the one in the finished version and Rickon growing more nervous each day they edge closer to Dragondome due to the terrible speed the dragon is growing. In the end Rickon makes Erin send it away, ordering it to either stay hidden at the edge of the woods or try and fly back to Dragon Mountain. The dragon now being gone

Rickon is more at ease and they pass through the forest only to encounter a person which calls Rickon by his last name dubbing him “Lord Grimm.” Much as in the finished version hearing this Erin rides off and finds herself trapped in a sea of soldiers who pull her down from her mount, Rickon tries to rescue her but in her struggle both fall from Shade who bolts away.

This next part of the story with Rickon and Erin captive becomes longer with more conversations and guards but basically ends with Erin eating a star shaped flower transforming her into a fox. At the moment she does the dragon appears clutching the top of the tower. As it is young it can not yet breathe any fire but its claws and jaws are deadly enough. Finding the empty clothes in her cell along with a few leaves from the flower Raythan can only assume that Erin has been transformed into the dragon and demands it be captured but not harmed, and so Erin is free to roam the castle without much hassle in the form of her skinny little fox self. For some reason unknown even to myself, Raythan is not killed but captured alive and thrown away into the dark and deepest dungeon to await his fate after Erin takes her place as the Lady of Ellwood. The faith of the nation in her rule and family is strengthened by her return, Raythan’s defeat and not to mention the return of dragons. In an ideal world where I am not pressed for time or word-count the final few chapters of *Ellwood* would have gone something like this.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

There is much more to writing than just jotting your thoughts down onto a piece of paper, there is a whole formula of actions that needs be followed come hell or high water. The process of editing can be frustrating for writers who are just beginning to write when needing to cut out chunks of their story and still trying to hold their characters likeable and above all believable alongside striving to keep the plot interesting.

It was fortunate that the basic idea for the story had been simmering in my mind for well over a year before I began writing. That made the flow through to the paper easy enough, but that is not to say that the process of editing was a breeze. These past five months which have gone into completing and editing my novella have been the most exasperating, rewarding, annoying and fulfilling time I've experienced these past years striving to accomplish my BA degree in English. When I started in the spring of 2009 I did not even dream that I would be capable of doing something like this as a final project but now I have and even though it was hard I am very proud of it and myself. I have come to learn so much both about myself and the process of writing and editing. If things don't work out in the first try: try harder.

One of the biggest problems I faced was not in regards characterisation or plot but that of length. My project is larger than your average BA essay and thus during the whole process I was very aware of it both being too long and the deadline which kept creeping closer. It is far from easy to skip all the things you want to include in your story, however I had to be hard on myself and if I found a certain event didn't have anything to do with the plot directly it was out. So I did my best, following the guidelines of both Stephen King and Sol Stein striving to create a work that captivates the reader from the very beginning, with characters he can care for, relate to and even come to love.

As fairy tales are more often than not filled with moral codes I think it could be said that the moral to *Ellwood* is along the lines of you are not able to escape your destiny. It comes back to get you even if you jump into another world. It is also the notion that anything can really happen, nothing is too unbelievable. Life was made for living and let us enjoy the ride.

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Appendix I

– Map of Asria –

