The wanderer staggered on. His arm limp by his side, sword still clutched firmly in his hand. He wore black leather armour, currently sporting a large gash across it. The blow had cut right through the armour and shirt leaving a large trench in his chest. The blood from his wound turning his white shirt red below the gash and the deep cut on his arm, dripping and seeping into the blue sash around his waist. His breathing was laboured as he looked down at the wolf that was his companion.
"Hang in there friend."

*

The wanderer looked around the room, making sure everything was packed. Normally he avoided inns, preferring to sleep outside, but some contracts required it. It was sparsely furnished. Merely a bed along one wall, a wardrobe along another. There was a mirror mounted on the wall with a small table below it. On the table was a basin and a just of water. A window opened onto a view of the street. No balcony though. Just a drop straight to the roof of the porch below. His wolf was lying near the door watching him. It was slightly larger than the average wolf, jet black with sharp, yellow eyes that almost seemed to glow in the dark. He moved back to the bed and made sure his pack was secured, his extra armour tucked away. He started reaching for his sword which lay on the bed when there was a knock at the door.

*

The sword left a furrow in the ground behind it as it dragged along. The pain from his wound shot through his arm every time he tried moving it. He looked down at the arrow protruding from the side of his wolf.
"We're done for if we don't find help soon," he muttered.
They carried on in silence for a while, the only sounds those of their footsteps and various birds singing. Normally the wanderer would listen to their melodies as he walked but not today. Feeling his strength diminishing he leaned back heavily against a tree.
"We've had a good run old friend," he said smiling weakly. He closed his eyes, resigning himself to the fate he'd always known would be his.
Then he heard the voices.

*

He opened the door to find the local "sheriff" at his door. The man was probably a head shorter than the wanderer but made up for his lack of height with a wide girth. He was well dressed, better dressed than one would expect from a local law man. The phrase 'fat cat' presented itself.
"You the one who brought down the bandit leader?"
"The coin in my pocket says I am."
"You planning on staying long?" The sheriff said, peering into the room. His gaze taking in the pack on the bed. The wanderer followed his gaze for a moment.
"That's my business now wouldn't you agree?" he asked calmly.
"Well we've had trouble with your sort before," the sheriff said, stepping into the room. The wanderer calmly stepped back to make room for the man, and also closer to the bed.

“You mean trouble like capturing the bandit leader whom you really work for?”
The man’s face solidified into an impassive mask, trying to betray nothing. All traces of joviality were gone.
“Careful Friend,” the man growled.
“He was sloppy. Easy to find and even easier to bring in. Which got me thinking and made me wonder why a ‘capable’ gentleman such as your good self couldn’t do just that? Unless of course you’d found it to be more profitable *not* to find him.”
“Half that coin says you keep your mouth shut and walk out of town,” the man threatened.
The wanderer considered this for a moment.
“Well that’s very generous of you,” he replied.
The sheriff’s face cracked into a friendly grin.
“Alternatively,” the wanderer continued, “I could walk out with all my coin and in my own time.”
He turned and calmly made a show of securing the straps on his pack.
“You think you can come into MY town and…” the sheriff’s voice trailed off as he became aware of the wolf for the first time. It was standing behind him, between him and the door, letting out a low warning growl.
“I’m trying to be reasonable friend,” he started trying to placate the situation.
“I’m being more than reasonable. I’m offering you the chance to walk out of here alive,” the wanderer said, strapping on his sword, “An option that may not be there if you keep threatening me.”
He turned to face the lawman and slowly drew his sword.
“What I should do is run you through like the scum you are!”
The sheriff roared, yanking his weapon free from its scabbard but his roar of anger turned into an agonised howl as the wolf lunged and held his arm in its jaws. The wanderer heard footsteps thundering up the stairs. No doubt lackeys alerted by the howl from their leader.
“Mad’akna!” he cursed, straining his ears over the pained yowls of the sheriff. When he gauged the moment to be right, he thrust his sword out the door. He struck the first lackey square in the chest and watched him crumple. He kicked out at the man behind him, knocking him back, causing him to stagger and fall down the stairs, careening into his friends behind him, even sending some of them tumbling back down the stairs. The wandered turned and yelled to the wolf who released the sheriff from its vicelike grip. The wanderer grabbed his pack, hoisted it onto his shoulders and ran to the window, ignoring the sheriff who was still rolling on the ground holding his arm, yowling in pain and hatred. The wanderer climbed out the window and dropped to the roof below just as a crossbow bolt buried itself in the window frame behind him.

*

The wanderer gathered all his strength and half limped, half staggered toward the voices.
“Help. Salvation,” he thought as the voices got closer. He pushed on through the bracken and bushes and found himself in a clearing where he saw a group of women, eight dressed in flowing white gowns, one in a fabulous golden gown and one woman dressed in gold and read armour. He tried to call to them to draw their attention but he was too weak to make a sound. He staggered a few more steps

before faltering and falling down onto one knee. Just then one of the women noticed him and screamed. Blackness engulfed him and slowly he fell forward.

*

The wanderer opened his eyes, disoriented. He was lying in a bed, in a room that looked like a hollow that had grown inside a tree. He tried to remember what happened. He sat up suddenly, looking for his sword but sagged back when pain rocketed through his body. He looked down and saw bandages around his chest and arm. Pieces of the recent past started coming back to him. He remembered the fight with the sheriff and his men, losing them in the woods, finding the clearing. Before he could do anything else the door opened and a young red haired girl, probably around nineteen, walked in carrying a tray of dressings. His gaze didn't wander as he watched her putting down the tray and closing the door. She picked up the tray and turned and looked at him for the first time. Her eyes went wide when she saw him looking at her and she stifled a scream as she dropped the tray and rushed out before he could say anything. She yelled something he couldn't quite make out. He listened for a moment then sagged.
"Great," he muttered as he heard the sound of armour clanking hurriedly closer.

"At least they left my pants on," he thought as the two female guards marched him through unfamiliar corridors. They were dressed in red and gold armour, similar to the armour of the woman in the clearing. They were tall but still about half a head shorter than him, one raven haired and the other golden haired. Both wore a long sword on their hips and a bow and quiver on their back. They weren't rough, something he'd come to believe was bred into guards everywhere, but their movements and business-like manner made it clear that they were highly trained and no strangers to real combat. They entered a large hall and lead him to before a large chair on a raised platform. He tried to ignore the pain as he was forced down on his knees.
"Eyes down!"
The command was not unkind but firm instead. He couldn't tell who issued the command but he felt it best to comply. While his head was bowed he became aware of people filing into the room.
"Who are you?" a quiet voice said. He began to lift his head but before he could speak he received a vicious blow to the back of the head. He couldn't tell if it was from a pommel or a boot.
"Eyes down!"
A different female voice this time. He decided he didn't like its owner. The quiet voice returned.
"Ash'Ania! There is no need for that."
The wanderer risked looking up. No blow assaulted him this time. Before him he saw the golden robed woman. Her hair was auburn and hung loose to below her waist. She had fine features and piercing blue eyes. On pillows scattered around were women of varying ages. All dressed in flowing white gowns. A retinue for the golden robed woman no doubt.
"I am but a wanderer," he replied. This time he was ready.
"Your name!" the voice behind him roared. He twisted his body left as he leaned right, lifting his hands, catching the oncoming boot in his hands. He quickly twisted and push the boot, unbalancing its owner,

sending her sprawling. The guards on either side of him drew their swords and held them at his throat. He calmly turned back to the golden woman. He heard a sword unsheathe behind him.
"Ash'Ania! Stop!" the golden woman shouted.
"But Milady…" the voice now identified as Ash'Ania started, striding past him sword in hand.
"Enough Ash'Ania! The stranger was busy answering me."
"He struck me!"
The wanderer took his first real look at Ash'Ania. Her hair was red and seemed to be filled with an inner fire as it moved in the light. It had been braided into a tight ponytail that hung low down on her back. Her red and gold armour was slightly more ornate than that of the guards who had brought him here. It clearly identified her as the head of the guard and the woman he had seen in the clearing.
"No he merely managed to unbalance you. He was just defending himself because *you* struck *him*."
"We know nothing about him," she protested.
"You gave me no time," the wanderer said.
"He is right. Now stay here and let him speak."
"Yes Milady," Ash'Ania seethed. Cowed but not placated. He noticed some of the girls trying to suppress smiles at Ash'Anias embarrassment and discomfort.
"I am but a wanderer as I said. I live by the sword and earn my coin by taking contracts and bounties I deem fair. I harm none I deem innocent. Someday I assume I shall die by the sword, a fate I thought was befalling me today when I heard voices. You saved my life and for that I thank you. I had a companion, a black wolf," he hesitated for a moment.
"The wolf is well. We've been tending his wounds. He defended you loyally till he became too weak and saw that we meant no harm," The golden woman smiled seeing his relief.
"I thank you," he smiled.
"We were uncertain, however, as to your chances. You've been asleep for two weeks."
Two weeks? The wanderer wondered what else had happened.
"How did you end up here?" she asked.
He recounted the events leading up to the sheriffs visit and the fight with his men, managing to lose them in the woods, wounded.
"Then I heard voices and the rest you know. May I ask where I am and who you are?" he finished.
"My apologies. This is the Glade of Enutha, the Earth mother. I am High Priestess Ineela. You've met Ash'Ania, head of my guard."
"Pleased to meet you, although my head isn't," he smiled as he saw the flash of anger in her eyes.
"This is Ana'Ria," Ineela indicated the girl who dropped her tray. "She has tended your wounds each day. She is also the one who first saw you."
He inclined his head in thanks and saw Ana'Ria smile then blush and look away.
"And this is Selenkia, she tended to your wolf."
"Selenkia was a golden haired woman, probably in her late twenties. She held his gaze.
"I'll take you to him later," she said.
"Matnaa. I thank you."
She inclined her head in acknowledgement.
"Now wanderer," Ineela smiled. "You are clever with words. I asked you who you were and you told me as much. Now I'll ask you. What is your name?"

He smiled. She had noticed that he answered what she'd asked him and not what she'd meant to ask him.
"Ash'Antal," he replied.
"Well Ash'Antal, you are welcome in our Glade. Once you have fully recovered we will talk again. Any questions?"
"Only one. Where is my sword so that I may retrieve it?"
"It is forbidden for anyone to carry weapons in the Glade unless they belong to the Holy Guard," Ash'Ania snorted.
"Ash'Ania is correct. We do not allow weapons within this sacred Glade," Ineela said.
"With all due respect High Priestess. I make my living by the sword and as I said I only harm those I deem unjust or who try to harm me."
"Nevertheless, I will make no exception," Ineela said firmly. Ash'Antal realised that she would not change her mind and that arguing may diminish his chances of recovering fully here.
"Very well. I shall comply. For now," Ash'Antal noted the smug look in Ash'Anias eyes.
"Selenkia will take you to your wolf and Ana'Ria will continue to tend your wounds. You will be instructed in our protocol but you will be allowed to move freely."
"Matnaa Ineela," Ash'Antal bowed his head.

*

Ash'Antal and Selenkia walked in silence. He took his first real look at her. She was a head shorter than he was and her golden hair was copped to shoulder length. She had her hair tied back into a pony tail. It was interesting because apart from Ana'Ria, Selenkia was the only short haired woman he'd seen thus far. After several minutes of silence she finally spoke.
"Your wolfs injuries were not as serious as they seemed, but he's barely eaten since he got here." She said, concern heavy in her voice. Ash'Antal laughed heartily, which seemed to startle her.
"No it's not, but he can be silly at times. Just take me to him."
"Very well Sir."
"And do not call me 'Sir'. I am not your lord, master or a person of rank. My name is Ash'Antal and I would consider it a favour if you would call me by it," he said firmly.
"Yes S…Ash'Antal," she stammered. For a moment as she hurried on he could have sworn he had seen her blush. Until now she had been entirely impassive, showing virtually no emotion other than concern. He smiled inwardly and set off after her. They walked through winding passageways until they entered an area that appeared to be a menagerie of sorts. Animals of all descriptions inhabited naturally formed cages and pens.
"He's in the enclosure," she gestured to a cage on the far side of the area.
"He is sluggish and weak and won't respond to anyone and merely spends his time curled up in the corner."
Ash'Antal grinned and straightened up almost theatrically.
"Thank you for your care," he winked at Selenkia. The confusion on her face turned to surprise as she heard the commotion from the back. Bewilderment replaced surprised as a black shape barrelled past her and knocked Ash'Antal down. Selenkia looked down to see Ash'Antal laughing and wrestling with

the wolf.
“But… He barely moved this entire time!” she blurted out. Ash’Antal wrestled the animal off him and sat up. The wolf moved around and lay next to him, nuzzling in so that Ash’Antal’s hand rested on his head.
“He is as tough as nails, a fierce fighter and as loyal a companion as a person could hope for. But he can be silly too. He was just pining. Weren’t you?” The last comment was directed at the wolf while Ash’Antal scratched his ears.
“I’m very happy to hear that,” Selenkia muttered, her face crimson. Ash’Antal couldn’t tell if it was from anger at his wolf or from embarrassment at not realising what the problem was. Ash’Antal smiled then composed himself.
“His name is Ta’Tyr,” he said then he turned to Ta’Tyr.
“Well? Apologise for worrying the people who saved our lives,” he smiled.
Selenkias eyes widened in fear and bewilderment when the wolf hopped up, standing with its front paws on her shoulders. He gave her a stare that somehow seemed almost human. As she looked at him she could let herself imagine a voice in her head apologising for worrying her.
“I’m just glad you’re both well,” she said to the wolf before she realised what she was doing. Ta’Tyr made a happy noise and hopped off. She looked at Ash’Antal who smiled. She was about to speak when they were interrupted.
“Excuse me Selenkia, but I need to tend to our guests injuries.”
It was the young Ana’Ria.
“I suppose I should go. To me Ta’Tyr,” Ash’Antal summoned the wolf.
“I am sorry Sir but your wolf should stay here,” Ana’Ria protested.
“He goes where I go,” Ash’Antal said firmly.
“Very well Sir,” Ana’Ria replied as she turned and started to leave.
Selenkia suppressed a giggle when Ash’Antal glanced at her. His expression made clear his annoyance at being called Sir and having to make his objections known again.
“Come Ta’Tyr, let us go,” he sighed. The wolf yipped and went to go stand next to Selenkia. Ash’Antal looked at the wolf for a moment then threw up his arms up.
“All right, fine,” he sighed then looked at Selenkia. “Well you seem to have a new friend.”
Ash’Antal started to leave and as he passed Selenkia he leaned in toward her.
“I can hear him too,” he winked and followed Ana’Ria out. His comment startled Selenkia but she smiled when she heard him speak to Ana’Ria.
“Listen. We need to talk about this Sir business,” he was saying.

*

Ash’Antal winced as Ana’Ria saw to his wounds. He had thus far been unable to convince her to use his name. He decided that he would take the matter up with Ineela. He winced again as she applied more of a herbal preparation to his chest.
“I am sorry for any discomfort Sir, but it must be done,” Ana’Ria said tremulously. He smiled tenderly.
“It’s alright Ana’Ria. I am no stranger to pain, it was merely unexpected.”
“Very well Sir,” she smiled and continued. Ash’Antal sighed wearily.

“How old are you young one?”
“I’ll be twenty next year sir,” she said shyly.”
“Well I am Twenty-nine, I am not that much older than you are. Please call me Ash’Antal,” he pleaded once more.
“It would be disrespectful Sir,” she said adamantly.
“Very well,” he sighed. “So tell me young one, why is it that you and Selenkia are the only women I have seen who wear their hair short?”
"We are not the only ones with short hair sir," Ana'Ria replied. "In our glade it is a sign of those who have dedicated themselves to being healers. Selenkia is one of the animal healers while I am a healer of people."
"I see. I wish to return to Ta'Tyr, would you be willing to guide me there?" Ash'Antal asked as she finished his dressing.
"I must attend to my other charges and duties but the guards will direct you I am sure."
"Very well. Matnaa," Ash'Antal sighed as she turned and left the room. He began looking for his clothes as the door opened and another girl came in.
"Ineela sends these and hopes they fit you," she said before hurrying out the door.
"Matnaa," Ash'Antal called after her then turned his attention to the clothes she placed on his bed. There was a white tunic made from a thin yet warm fabric which he donned. It had been embroidered with gold and blue thread, the patterns reminding him of vines. The pants on the bed were made to match the tunic but he decided to keep his own pants on. His boots had been cleaned and placed next to his bed. He pulled them on then turned his attention to the last item on the bed. It was a dark travelling cloak with a hood. It was made from a heavy durable cloth.
"Well that could be useful later," he smiled as he folded it and put it away safely. Then he turned and walked out the door to find his companion.

Ash'Antal marvelled at the construction of the glade as he wandered aimlessly. The entire structure seemed organic, as if it had been grown from the tree itself. Large parts of it were obviously underground, between the very roots of the tree. After a while Ash'Antal spotted two guards keeping watch beside a small door. The door behind then held a small grate which, once he got closer, Ash'Antal could see looked into a storeroom. He smiled at the guards as he approached them.
"Could you help me please? I'm looking for Selenkia and the animal pens."
The older of the two guards gave him a bored look then ignored him. The younger guard, seeing this, quickly jumped in.
"You have just passed it Sir. Just go back down this passage and take your first left. That will take you straight to the pens," she said.
Her keenness and eagerness to help made Ash’Antal put her down as the newly appointed guard. Her keenness not yet blunted by boredom and apathy as it had her colleague, the bored veteran. Ash'Antals’ eyes quickly scanned contents of the room visible through the grate. It appeared to contain nothing more than what one would expect to find in a storeroom. No sign of why it would need to be guarded by two guards.
"Well thank you very much," Ash'Antal smiled as he set off back down the passage. As he walked down the passage he had been instructed to, Ash'Antal became aware of excited yips and laughter coming

from up ahead. When he finally entered the pens he saw Ta'Tyr gambolling about in a small pod and Selenkia laughing as she tried to catch the playful wolf. She was already soaked to the bone, her robes clinging to her body, accentuating her curves. Ash'Antal leaned against the doorframe and watched them romping from a while.
"Come here you silly wolf," she laughed. "I'll tell your master what a silly thing you are being."
Ta'Tyr yipped happily at her.
"I told you he could be a silly old thing. He simply loves the water."
Selenkia started as Ash'Antal spoke. As she turned and looked at where Ash'Antal was standing she suddenly became very self-conscious as she felt his eyes wander over her. He detached himself from the wall and started walking over to her.
"I have a favour I wish to ask of you," he said.
Selenkia felt her face flush as he strode over to her, his gaze still locked on her. Unfamiliar emotions and sensations washed over her as he drew closer. He stopped before her and began to take off his shirt. She felt very nervous as he stood there.
"Go and get changed. I'll finish here with Ta'Tyr. Come find me when you are done," he said, taking the rag from her. Selenkia nodded mutely and hurried off, her mind filled with unaccustomed emotions.
Selenkia returned a while later to find Ash'Antal lying against an empty pen with his eyes closed and Ta'Tyr by his side.
"Now that you are dressed," Ash'Antal began as she turned to leave.
"I would very much like it if you would show me around the glade."
"I would gladly do so Ash'Antal," she said, her body suddenly flooding with relief. "But I will have to wait till one of the other healers comes to relieve me. They should be here soon though," she added quickly.
"Very well. In that case I'll wait and help you if you would allow me to," he grinned.
"Well that would be most unusual but if you wish to help I will gladly welcome it," she smiled.
They went about feeding and grooming the animals in the pens for a while. Eventually Ash'Antal turned to Selenkia.
"So how did you come to be a maiden of the Glade?" he asked.
Selenkia paused for a moment before she spoke.
"It is a story of woe that I am sure you would not want to hear," she replied.
"I would not have asked if I did not wish to know but if it is a tale you do not wish to tell I understand," Ash'Antal said.
"Thank you Ash'Antal. It is a tale for another day perhaps," she said quietly.
Before Ash'Antal could respond the other healer entered the pens and spoke to Selenkia. Selenkia turned to Ash'Antal.
"Come. Let us go," she said as she turned to the door.
"Ash'Antal motioned for Ta'Tyr to follow him and set off after Selenkia.
"I did not mean to upset you and if I did I am sorry," Ash'Antal said as he caught up with her.
"It matters not but thank you for your understanding," she smiled.
"Matnaa Selenkia."
"Now what exactly is it you would like me to show you?" she asked.
"Everything to be honest. I got lost trying to find my way back here to be honest," Ash'Antal admitted sheepishly.

"I see," she smiled. "Very well follow me and we shall start from the beginning."
"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Ash'Antal replied and followed her with a grin.

The two walked for ages as Selenkia pointed out various interesting aspects of the glade as well as all the places he would likely want to see. She showed him the armoury, the audience chamber, the training ground and much more. They made idle conversation as they walked along.
"So how many of you are there in the Glade?" Ash'Antal asked.
"At present there are two hundred of us, not counting the close to one hundred guards," Selenkia explained enthusiastically. Ash'Antal smiled as he watched the enthusiasm and passion on her face.
"What can you tell me of Ash'Ania?"
"Well noone really knows much about her. Some people say that she is Ineelas sister and some people say she is the daughter of the god of war and the goddess of vengeance. All I know for sure is that she is the greatest fighter who has ever served the glade and that she has never been bested except by you," Selenkia finished, awe creeping into her voice. Ash'Antal smiled at her.
"I would not say that I've bested her. I merely unbalanced her. I have not faced her in a real face fight but I am sure it would be a very challenging battle," Ash'Antal explained.
"Oh," Selenkia said looking crestfallen and feeling sheepish.
"I only say so because she seems like a formidable foe, but between you and me," he leaned in conspiratorially. "I do believe i could best her. I cannot say that I like her very much. Nor does my head to be honest." Ash'Antal gingerly touched the bump that had developed on the back of his head. Selenkia giggled.
"Few people like her very much but she is well respected," she said.
"One more question. How do I go about receiving an audience with Ineela?" Ash'Antal enquired.
"Well unless she seeks an audience with you, the only way is to ask Ash'Ania to organise one for you," Selenkia explained.
"Somehow I do not think she would be too helpful when it comes to my request," he said.
"Probably not," Selenkia admitted. Ash'Antal thought as they walked along in silence for a while. An idea seemed to present itself and he turned to Selenkia.
"Tell me, where could I find Ineela at this time of day?" Ash'Antal grinned.

Ash'Antal pulled the traveling cloak out of its hiding place and slipped into it. He walked to the door and peered out to make sure there was no-one in the passage. When he was sure it was safe he motioned for Ta'Tyr. They slipped quietly yet swiftly through the hallways until they reached the main entrance to the Glade where Selenkia was waiting.
"Right. You know what to do?" he asked. Selenkia nodded nervously then headed towards the guards. Ash'Antal and Ta'Tyr slipped into some deeper shadows nearer to the exit and waited.
"Excuse me," Selenkia started as she reached the guards.
"Yes Selenkia?" one of the guards replied.
"Could you help me at the animal pens please? I just need help lifting a few bags of feed onto the cart but I cannot do it alone," Selenkia said.

"We are actually on duty but i see no harm in it," the guard smiled and began following Selenkia back into the Glade. They passed by Ash'Antal and Ta'Tyr were hiding without noticing them. Selenkia looked back at the entrance to see Ash'Antal smile and wink at her before donning the hood and slipping out.

Ash'Antal headed into the woods until he gauged himself to be safely out of view of the glade before looking for signs of Ineela and her entourage. It wasn't long before he found a track that had clearly been used recently. He moved off to the side of the track, far enough to not be visible from it but still close enough for him to see it himself and set off along its path. After several minutes he started to hear voices. He moved slightly deeper into the woods and increased his pace, circling ahead of the group until he found a clearing that would be in the path of Ineela and her party and took up station next to a tree on the far side. It wasn't too long before he heard voices again, confirming that the party would end up in the clearing.
"I still say that he cannot be trusted Milady," Ash'Ania was saying.
"He has given us no reason to doubt him thus far Ash'Ania. Until such time as he does he will remain our guest and will be treated as such," Ineela replied.
"He is a hired blade and as such is a threat to us all," Ash'Ania protested as they stepped into the clearing.
"Once he poses a threat you may deal with him in your way Ash'Ania," Ineela said.
"Thank you for your wisdom and kindness Ineela," Ash'Antal said as he stepped into view. The party started and looked up to where he stood.
"You!" Ash'Ania exclaimed.
"Yes me. I am glad to see how vigilant you and your guards are," Ash'Antal said, barely suppressing a smile at the look of embarrassment that flashed across Ash'Ania's face.
"What are you doing here?" she asked with contempt dripping from every word.
"Yes. What are you doing here and how did you find us?" Ineela enquired.
"The how is simple. I slipped past the guards at the main entrance, finding your trail wasn't difficult and then I merely waited. As for the why… I seek an audience with you Milady and I do not thin Ash'Ania would have been too inclined to grant me such a request," Ash'Antal answered.
"Of course I would not have granted you an audience! You have no right to ask such a thing," Ash'Ania blurted out. Ineela rounded on her as she spoke.
"I do believe that that decision is ultimately mine to make and not yours Ash'Ania!"
"Yes Milady but…" Ash'Ania started but her words trailed off into silence under Ineela's firm gaze.
"You are a most resourceful man Ash'Antal," Ineela said as she turned back to give him her full attention.
"Thank you Milady. In my line of work you have to be. If you are not, you are dead," he answered simply.
"Well come closer and tell me what it is that you seek from me," she said, beckoning him closer.
Ash'Antal bowed and removed his hood before approaching Ineela. Suddenly a movement at the far end of the clearing behind the group of women caught his eye. He started to sprint toward Ineela. The guards were startled for a moment before drawing their swords but their hesitation allowed him to dash past them. He barrelled into Ineela, bearing her to the ground just as a crossbow bolt whistled through the space where she had been standing only a moment before. The bolt struck the shoulder of one of

the bewildered guards who dropped to the ground yelling in agony. The forest erupted with the battle cries of the bandits as they poured into the clearing. Ash'Antal scrambled to his feet as he looked around. Ash'Ania was barking orders at the guards who were preparing for the fight. Ash'Antal looked down at Ineela then called to Ta'Tyr.
“Ta'Tyr, guard Ineela,” he said then turned to Ineela.
“Go with Ta'Tyr, he will protect you. Head back to the glade!”
Ineela nodded and got to her feet to follow the wolf. Ash'Antal grabbed a nearby panic stricken guard and told her to accompany Ineela. The woman nodded then practically ran after them.
“Don’t need inexperienced panicky guards getting in the way or dying here,” he muttered to himself. A blood curdling yell behind him made him turn around to see a man thundering toward him. By looking at him Ash'Antal guess that he was from one of the northern tribes, known for their strength, ferocity and blood rage. The man carried no weapons but he did not need them. His hands were huge and the muscles that bulged on the barbarians arms made it clear that getting hit would be a very bad idea. Ash'Antal ducked, avoiding the first blow, knowing that in unarmed combat he would be no match for this behemoth of a man. He was slightly too slow to dodge the second blow which caught him on the temple and sent him sprawling on the ground. Ash'Antal struggled to fight off the blackness that was threatening to engulf him, rolling to the side as the barbarian brought a booted foot down heavily in a blow that would have crushed his sternum had it connected with its target. Ash'Antal scrambled to his feet and dodged behind the man, jumping onto his back. One hand covering the man’s eyes while the other arm wrapped around his throat in an attempt to choke him. The barbarian flailed around before finally managing to to pull Ash'Antal off him, flinging him to the ground.
“So much for that idea,” he muttered to himself. The cat and mouse game carried on until Ash'Antal saw a crossbow bolt lying near by. He dived toward it, his hand closing around it just as the barbarian grabbed him and picked him up, pulling him into a crushing bear hug. Ash'Antal groaned as the man crushed his ribs and still unhealed wound before plunging the crossbow bolt into the man’s neck. The blood gushing from the wound let Ash'Antal know that he had hit an artery. The man let out a howl of pain, letting go of Ash'Antal as he clutched at his neck, the blood pouring from his wound. The man staggered toward Ash'Antal before collapsing to the ground. Ash'Antal looked around trhe battlefield until he spotted Ash'Ania and ran toward her as she felled another foe.
“Give me a sword!” he shouted as he approached her.
“You brought them here! Now you expect me to hand you a weapon?” she roared at him.
“Don’t be stupid! I don’t know who they are either but I cannot help unless I have a weapon!”
“I do not trust you.”
“Look this is not the time to be arguing. Give me a sword that I may help you. If you still think that I am one of them afterward then we will let Ineela judge me!” he shouted at her. Ash'Ania looked doubtful but she knew that they could use the help. She yanked a sword from one of the other gguards who was currently using her bow.
“Do not make me regret this stranger,” she snarled as she handed it to him. Before he could respond Ash'Antal heard a scream and turned to see Ana'Ria being pursued by one of the bandits. Ash'Antal saw her stumble and fall to the ground, the bandit raising his axe to strike her down. Ash'Antal wrenched a dagger from the belt of a fallen bandit and hurled it at the man. It struck him in the shoulder causing the man to scream in pain. He turned to see Ash'Antal charging toward him and started to do the same. The

two men charged at each other but Ash'Antal managed to avoid the sweep of the man's axe and felled him with two swift strikes, first to the chest and then to the neck. He ran over to the frightened girl.
"Go after Ineela, head back to the glade. There will be plenty of work for you when this day is done," he said as he hauled her to her feet. She remained motionless, staring at the carnage around her.
"Go!" he yelled, pushing her in the direction Ineela had taken. Ana'Ria looked back at him for a moment before running off with tears in her eyes. Ash'Antal surveyed the battle then ran at the nearest foe. The man turned his attention from the guard just long enough to allow the injured guard to plunge her blade into the man's back. The man crumpled to the ground but Ash'Antal was already engaged with another foe.
After several minutes of frenzied fighting the last bandit fell and Ash'Antal surveyed the aftermath. All the bandits were dead along with four of the guards and the rest of the guards sported an array of injuries. He walked over to Ash'Ania and offered her the sword she had given him.
"You fought well," she said.
"Matnaa. I told you I could be trusted."
"I never said that I trust you," she grinned as she motioned for two guards who promptly grabbed him by the shoulders and restrained him.
"What?" he yelled, struggling against the guards for a moment.
"I believe that the reason they found us is because you led them to us."
"That is ridiculous! Why would I help you if that was the case? Is I was one of the?"
"How should I know what you planned? Besides, you yourself said that I could do as I wish and let Ineela decide. Do not think she will be as merciful this time," Ash'Ania smirked.
"Uthna angor!" Ash'Antal cursed at her. Ash'Ania glowered at his slanderous remark and struck him across the face.
"Get him out of my sight!" she growled.

Ash'Antal was escorted back to the glade and detained in one of the animal pens while Ta'Tyr was pacing back and forth in a nearby cage. Ash'Antal cursed Ash'Ania frequently while he awaited his fate, the freshly opened wound on his chest sending spears of pain through his body. After several hours some stony faced guards entered the area. Their grim expressions and demeanours made Ash'Antal assume that they were Ash'Ania's handpicked cronies. They wordlessly manhandled him out of the cage and started marching him to the audience chamber. Behind him, fading into the distance he could hear Ta'Tyr's angered yowls.

"for the second time Ash'Antal found himself on his knees, wonded and bleeding in the audience chamber. It was Ineela who addressed him first.
"Explain yourself Ash'Antal. Do you know the men who attacked us in the clearing?" she demanded.
"On my oath I do not know them Ineela."
"Lies!" Ash'Ania snarled.
"I have no reason to lie!" Ash'Antal said through gritted teeth.
"How else do you explain them finding us right after you delayed us in the clearing?" she said smugly.
"That I do not know, however, it was easy enough for me to find you. Neither your guards nor you are exceptionally vigilant," he replied. "Either that or or you have grown complacent."

Ash'Ania walked over and struck Ash'Antal hard enough to send him to the ground, his lip now gushing blood from where her gauntleted hand had struck him.
“Ash'Ania!” Ineela exclaimed in surprise.
“Who helped you escape the glade?” Ash'Ania roared, ignoring Ineela. From the corner of his eye Ash'Antal could see Selenkia and the mask of terror on her face. Without moving he fixed his gaze on Ash'Ania.
“Escape?” he asked calmly. “I understood that I was a guest not a prisoner.”
“He is correct Ash'Ania,” Ineela said.
“Who?” Ash'Ania roared again.
“No one aided me, he replied not looking at Selenkia. “As I said before, your guards are not overly vigilant.”
“Why did you charge at me?” Ineela asked before Ash'Ania could continue.
“I saw a movement, and then I saw the crossbow. I had no time to warn you. If I had you would no doubt have been struck by the bolt. Instinct took over,” he explained calmly.
“Milady how much longer do we need to listen to these lies?” Ash'Ania begged.
“We have ways of doing this Ash'Ania, and we shall follow them,” Ineela said sternly. She looked around the assembled crowd before speaking again.
“Is there anyone here who would speak upon Ash'Antal’s behalf?” she asked. Ash'Ania looked smug in the silence and after a pause Ineela began to speak.
“Since there is no one..”
“I will speak for the stranger,” a tremulous voice said. All eyes searched to find the speaker before coming to rest on young Ana'Ria.
“You will?” Ash'Ania asked in bewilderment.
“Y-Yes. During the battle he came to my aid and saved my life,” she said a little more defiantly than before.
“I too shall speak on his behalf,” said one of the guards.
“You too?” Ash'Ania snarled, her voice dripping with contempt.
“He saved my life too and I do not believe him to be a threat,” she said simply.
“Milady, this is pointless. The bandits must have been led by hime,” Ash'Ania implored.
“There is one more person who will speak on his behalf,” Ineela said.
“There is? Who?” asked Ash'Ania.
“Me,” Ineela said calmly. All eyes turned to you and a shus went through the room.
“Once he had prevented me from being wounded or killed he sent his companion to guard me on my escape back to the glade. He also sent Ana'Ria to me once she had been rescued. By your own admission in private Ash'Ania, he fought valiantly to defend us and I have no doubt that had he not acted as he did this would indeed be a much more sorrow filled day. As such I decree that Ash'Antal be released from his incarceration and that from now on he be treated as an honoured guest.”
“But Milady…” Ash'Ania began.
“I have spoken Ash'Ania,” Ineela said firmly. Ash'Ania seethed as she was chastised.
“May I crave a boon milady?” Ash'Antal asked.
“You may.”
“I appreciate your kindness and I ask but two things. First that my weapons and equipment be returned

to me," Ash'Antal said.
"It is most unusual but in light of today's events I shall grant you that request," Ineela said as she nodded at the guards. The two detached themselves from the group and left the room.
"And your second request?"
"A duel with Ash'Ania," he replied calmly. A collective gasp went up from the crowd followed by a deadly hush. Even Ash'Ania was silenced. It was Ineela who broke the spell.
"You want a duel?"
"Yes. If Ash'Ania bests me I will leave the glade as she wishes. If I best her, I wish to stay here until I find it time for me to leave. I will also lend you my sword should you need it during my stay," he explained.
"Do you accept the challenge Ash'Ania?" Ineela asked. All eyes turned to Ash'Ania, awaiting her response.
"This is preposterous! We have no need to acquiesce to the demands of this outsider," Ash'Ania began.
"If Ash'Ania wishes to decline then I shall merely take my sword and equipment and remain your guest until I am healed," Ash'Antal said.
"Ash'Ania?" Ineela asked.
"Very well. I accept. When do you wish this farce of a duel to happen?" she snorted.
"Three days from now. In the clearing. Just the two of us. Ta'Tyr will remain here."
"very well. Do not expect any quarter from me," Ash'Ania growled.
"And expect none from me," Ash'Antal replied.
"I declare this audience to be over. Everyone out.," Ineela announced. "Ash'Antal I wish to speak to you alone."
"Milady…" Ash'Ania protested.
"Alone Ash'Ania," Ineela said sternly.
"Yes Milady. As you wish," Ash'Ania relented, glowering at Ash'Antal as she left the audience chamber.

"Why do you truly wish this duel?" Ineela asked once the room had been cleared.
"You doubt my words?" Ash'Antal asked, an amused smile creeping across his face as he looked quizzically at Ineela.
"It is not that I doubt your word, but let us just say that I have noted your skill and way with words," Ineela said simply.
"True," Ash'Antal admitted. "Simply put, it is a matter of honour. For both of us. I wish to defend my honour after the accusations made against me and in Ash'Ania's eyes I have slighted her," Ash'Antal explained.
"And what will you do once the outcome has been decided?"
"Exactly as I said."
"Very well. Now tell me your *real* reason Ash'Antal," Ineela said, her green eyes fixed firmly on his. Ash'Antal remained silent for a moment while he debated his answer but decided to be truthful.
"Honestly, I have a score to settle. As simple as that," Ash'Antal admitted.
"We do not deal in vengeance here Ash'Antal," Ineela admonished him.
"I understand Ineela," Ash'Antal said, bowing to her.
"I am glad that you do. Your equipment will be in your room upon your return. And I suggest you get your wounds tended to," Ineela said as she rose, signalling the audience to be over. Ash'Antal bowed

and left the chamber.
“You might not deal in vengeance,” he thought as he left. “But I do.”

Ash'Antal returned to his room and found his pack, armour and sword laid out upon his bed and Ta’Tyr lying by the foot of his bed. Ta’Tyr let out an excited yip and jumped off the bed, trotting over to Ash'Antal who dropped to his haunches and scratched the wolf behind the ears.
“I’m glad to see you too boy,” he laughed as the wolf nuzzled into his hand. Ash'Antal looked over at his equipment and considered changing into his own clothes when there was a knock at the door and one of the handmaidens entered and began bustling around his room.
“Can I help you?” Ash'Antal asked a little surprised as he rose to his feet.
“Pardon me Sir but I am here to tend to your wounds,” she explained.
“Oh, I was expecting Ana’Ria.”
“She has been sent to rest after what happened today.”
“I see,” he began but was promptly cut off.
“Please take a seat and remove your shirt so that I may start,” she said curtly. Ash'Antal glanced at Ta'Tyr, realising it was futile to argue and did as he was told. The woman nodded and got to work. She was efficient and business-like and Ash'Antal laughed. Normally he preferred healers to have the demeanour of the woman who was tending to him but he realised he enjoyed the conversations with Ana'Ria when she tended to him. Once she was done Ash'Antal opened his pack and took out a clean change of clothes. Once dressed he donned his armour and boots and grinned.
“Much better,” he said, feeling comfortable in the clothes he was wearing for the first time since his arrival. He turned and looked down at Ta'Tyr.
“Find Selenkia boy.”
Ta'Tyr jumped up and ran out the door, nose to the ground, snuffling as he went. After making a few turns he yipped as he picked up the scent and started off down a nearby passage. Ash'Antal followed Ta'Tyr through the winding passages of the glade and to his surprise, passed the passage down to the pens. After several more twists and turns they came to the entrance of a beautiful laid out garden. Ta'Tyr had stopped by the door and looked at Ash'Antal. As Ash'Antal approached Ta'Tyr let out a soft sorrowful whine and lay down. Ash'Antal looked at the wolf.
“What’s wrong boy?” he asked but only received another whine in response. He shrugged and stepped through the doorway. The garden was laid out in a clearing formed by the enormous roots of the tree the glade called home. As Ash'Antal marvelled at the garden he instinctively moved silently, his footfalls making nary a sound and leaving no trace of their passage. As he walked Ash'Antal became aware of a muttering voice and moved toward it. He soon recognised the voice as Selenkia’s and heard the litany of her words.
“Stupid man! Why does he have to be so reckless? Doesn’t he think of others? That perhaps other people would prefer to not see him get hurt?”
Ash'Antal drew and saw Selenkia sitting on a stone bench, staring at the ground. Ash'Antal stepped back slightly into the shadow of a nearby tree and watched her. She looked dejected and worried for a moment before her expression changed to one of anger.
“And who does he think is going to tend to his wounds? Little Ana'Ria that’s who. It’s not like she doesn’t have enough work as it is. Stupid man. Ash'Ania has never been bested. Does he not realise that

she is the head of the guard for a reason? Stupid, stupid foolish man. What if she kills him?”
Ash'Antal smiled and was about to interrupt when she spoke again. Her voice soft and filled with concern.
“What if I lose him?” she almost whispered. Her eyes welling up with tears. She let out a sigh.
“I do not understand all these feelings. Why should I care about what happens to that stubborn fool?” she said, but her voice lacked all conviction. Ash'Antal was shocked at hearing her words. He watched as she cried and wanted to take her in his arms, dry her tears and still her fears. He stood there for a moment before turning and walking out as silently as he had come. Ta'Tyr looked up quizzically at Ash'Antal’s quick return. Ash'Antal merely shook his head and leaned against the doorway. His mind suddenly filled with a multitude of thoughts. Could such a beautiful creature as Selenkia truly be falling in love with him? After knowing him so briefly? Could he possibly be feeling the same? Ash'Antal looked down at the wolf and shook his head laughing sardonically.
“Well isn’t this a fine nest of wyverns?” he said as he started down the passage. Ta'Tyr looked from him to the doorway.
“Not now boy. This is a battlefield I am not prepared for. Not yet. Another time maybe,” Ash'Antal said as he continued walking. Ta'Tyr looked back at the door one last time, letting out a mournful sound before trotting off after Ash'Antal. The pair walked in silence for a while until Ash'Antal spotted one of the guards.
“Excuse me, which way to the training grounds?” Ash'Antal asked.

Ash'Antal walked into the training grounds to find it empty but for one guard who was training on one of the dummies. She looked up as he entered and nodded a greeting at him. He nodded in response and took in the bandages across her chest and arms.
“Those wounds, are they trophies from the fight with the bandits?” he asked, pointing to the bandages.
“I would not call them trophies but yes I sustained these wounds during the battle in the clearing,” she replied. Ash'Antal hear the bitterness in her voice and smiled softly.
“I have my fair share of battle scars too. Just think of them as the price you pay for experience,” he smiled.
“I’m not sure I want too many more lessons,” she laughed. Ash'Antal smiled at her response and was about to answer when he was interrupted by a voice.
“Training now won’t help you to defeat me stranger,” Ash'Ania scoffed. Ash'Antal calmly turned to her and spoke.
“One can never train too much, and if one thinks one no longer needs to then one will surely be struck down,” he responded simply. His response angered her and she reached for her sword. One of the guards with her grabbed her arms and whispered in her ear. She listened and then, still seething, let go of her sword and growled.
“Enjoy the clemency you currently enjoy outsider. Once I beat you, you will no longer be so arrogant,” she snapped and stormed out. A few moments later the injured guard walked over to him.
“Ash'Ania has never been bested yet sir,” she said. Ash'Antal sighed and turned to her.
“Defeat is always a possibility,” he smiled. The guard nodded silently but he could see her troubled face.
“What is it that is bothering you so?” he asked. The guard bit her lip for a moment then spoke.
“Honesty sir, I do not think she plans on letting you live is she beats. I think she intends to kill you during

the duel.”
“Nor do I,” he responded. The calmness of his answer visibly shocked the guard.
“Does that not worry you sir?”
“No. I walk with death every day. I live by the sword and I shall someday die by it. That is a fact I have made peace with. We all die so why fear it?” he asked. The guards face became a mixture of concern and confusion. Ash'Antal smiled and decided to lighten the mood.
“Enough of such things. If I am to die then I wish to enjoy myself before I do. Where can I find some decent mead around here?” he asked.
“There are no taverns in the glade sir,” the guard answered. Ash'Antal laughed at her response.
“I did not think there would be. However, I myself was a guard once too and there is always somewhere where the guards would gather for a drink at the end of a day,” he grinned. The guard looked sheepish for a moment then grinned guiltily.
“Follow me sir,” she laughed. Ash'Antal sighed.
“Please stop calling me Sir. My name is Ash'Antal,” he begged as he trotted after her.

Selenkia sat in her room, her mind in turmoil her thoughts centred on the wanderer. She remembered the unaccustomed feelings that coursed through her body when he approached her in the pens, the desire that filled her when he took off his shirt. How she wished he would take her in his strong arms. She craved his lips against hers, her body entwined with his. Yet as much as she desired him, she feared him. His power and energy scared her. The knowledge of how he lived his life, that he had taken lives. When she looked at his chest covered by the bandages, saw the scars on the rest of him her own strength of feeling and desire scared her. Her mind filled with doubt and her face clouded over.
“Why would he even wish to be with me? I am but a hand maiden and pure as is proper. He is a man of the world and would not wish for one who is inexperienced and knows nothing for the world. Or of the flesh,” she sighed. She stood up and made ready to bathe. She slipped off her robe and looked at her body in the mirror. She picked up the sponge and dipped it in the water, her eyes closing as her mind went back to the moment in the pens.

Ash'Antal walked back to his room a little unsteadily after carousing with the guards. He had been led to a storeroom and down a partially concealed staircase to a room where the guards had set up a makeshift tavern. The furniture was sparse and simple, the whole setup r Rough and ready, able to be moved and set up elsewhere when needed or discovered. Ash'Antal remembered rooms like these from his youth, before he became a wanderer. He spent several hours with the guards swapping jokes and stories, singing songs and drinking quite a good ale for a guard’s tavern. It felt good to relax like that again. He hadn’t done so in years. Ash'Antal finally reached his room and simply fell headlong onto the bed still fully dressed. His thoughts briefly turned to Selenkia, wondering what she was doing as he drifted off to sleep.

Ash'Antal awoke the next morning still fully dressed. He sat up blearily and rubbed his face.
“Thank the gods I don’t get hung over,” he muttered as the previous night’s revelry came back to him. He got up and moved over to the mirror and basin and stared at his own reflection, remembering how they sang as the mead flowed freely. He poured some water in the bowl and started to wash his face,

groaning as more memories of the night before resurfaced. Once he finished he donned the extra clothes from his pack and decided what to do next. He eventually decided to explore the clearing where Ineela was attacked in the hopes of learning more about the assailants and why they had been there. As he wound his way the passages of the glade he made sure to avoid Selenkia. Her words from the night before were still ringing in his head. “What if I lose him?”

Ash'Antal shook his head to clear it as he stepped out into the clear air of the forest. He took a moment to get his bearings before heading off toward the clearing. As he approached the clearing he heard a voice. It was reciting a chant which made him slow down as he stepped into the clearing. On the far side of the clearing he saw the figure of Ana'Ria. She was kneeling in prayer at the foot of a large cairn of stones. Her clothes were torn in places and caked with mud and dirt. She had her eyes closed as she repeated the chant over and over, still oblivious to Ash'Antal’s presence.

“Ana'Ria?” he asked as he stepped closer to her. She jumped up with a start and looked at him with a look of fear and guilt.

“What are you doing here?” Ash'Antal asked.

“N-nothing,” she stammered. Ash'Antal looked around and realised that none of the bandit’s corpses or their weapons were lying around the clearing. He turned his attention back to Ana'Ria and looked at her more closely. She had been crying judging by the redness of her eyes and the streaks in the dirt that had become caked on her cheeks. Her hands were dirty, raw from digging and her whole body radiated fatigue.

“Have you been here all night?” he said as he placed a hand on her shoulder. She lowered her gaze to her sod covered hands as she began wringing them and nodded.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Why?”

“Ash'Ania said they were to be left here for the crows but they were people too and I didn’t feel it was right. So I came here to bury them,” she said as her eyes began to well up with tears again. Ash'Antal put his arm around her and drew her close as she started to cry.

“You truly are pure of heart and innocent little one. Few people would have done what you have. You were nearly killed by them and of all people it would be understandable if you wished them ill. Yet you came to bury and bless them on their way to the next world,” he said while stroking her hair.

“Is… is that wrong?” she asked as she looked up at him, her voice tremulous.

“No little one. It is merely rare to find one such as you.”

“I know they were bad people but they were still people. Would you not wish someone would ensure you get to the next world if you fell in battle?”

“I live by the sword and I shall die by it someday too. In a life like that the best one can hope for is to die swiftly. I do not know if the gods have a place for someone like me. What I do now is that you were right in what you did but in battle you do not have the time or luxury of stopping to pray for others, you save all your prayers for yourself. As a soldier, when a battle is over you move on. There are others to take care of the dead,” he said, his eyes unfocused and staring into the middle distance as looked back over the many battlefields he had been a part of, both as a wanderer and before.

“Who takes care of the dead?” Ana'Ria asked, her voice hopeful.

“The crow and the ravens,” he replied.

“How can you be so cold?” she cried, tears streaming down her face as she weakly pounded her fist

against his chest.
“It is a cold world that we live in and it is the difference between death and survival for people like us.” Ash'Antal looked down as she cried, knowing that it was a harsh reality she was suddenly being faced with after living a pure and sheltered life. He knew that she had to learn it.
“But does she have to learn it now?” he thought to himself. He sighed and looked into her eyes.
“I do like the world you see better however. Let me help you and then get you back safely,” he said as he picked up a rock and added it to the cairn.

“You spoke about saving all your prayers for yourself when you are a soldier. Are you a soldier?” she asked as they were walking home.
“I was. A lifetime ago it seems,” he replied.
“What rank were you?”
“I was captain of the guard in charge of the troops.”
“Why did you leave? Didn’t you like being a guard?” she asked.
“Being a soldier was all I ever wanted to be. My friend and I worked hard to get to where we were and it was a great honour and a matter of pride for both of us,” Ash'Antal answered, not looking at her, knowing what was coming next.
“So why did you leave?” she asked. Before he could answer he saw the glade come into view and he breathed a sigh of relief.
“That is a story for another time,” he said. The look of disappointment on her face must have matched the look of relief on his when she looked at him and answered.
“Very well. Another time then. If there is another time that is,” she replied. Ash'Antal looked at her quizzically then realised what she was referring to.
“Why does no one think I could possibly survive the duel against Ash'Ania?” he laughed. His reaction caught Ana'Ria off guard and she blushed.
“It is not because I doubt your skills sir, but she has never been bested yet.”
“That is where you are wrong little one. Just because no one has seen her bested doesn’t mean she has never been bested. It merely means she has been bested recently. All of us have been bested. Even the greatest warrior knows that there will always be someone somewhere who is better than them. The day that you think otherwise is the day that you seal your own fate,” Ash'Antal explained. He looked to Ana'Ria only to see utter incomprehension on her face. Ash'Antal laughed and tried to think of a way to explain it more simply.
“Ash'Ania is over confident and therefore complacent. Two very dangerous things for a warrior and I intend to use that against her,” he said.
“Oh I see,” she replied even though it was clear to Ash'Antal that she still did not truly understand.
“Well I had best be on my way, I have much to do before I meet my fate tomorrow,” he teased. Ana'Ria was clearly unimpressed by his joke but merely nodded as she headed back inside. Ash'Antal turned back in the direction of his room and set off down the passage.

Ash'Antal opened the door to his room only to be greeted by a rather annoyed Ta'Tyr. The wolf stood up and yipped at him.
“Yes I know Ta'Tyr. I did not want to wake you and I wanted some time to myself,” Ash'Antal said. Tatry

yipped and growled again.
“Yes I know you could have found me and I thank you for not doing so.”
Seemingly mollified Ta'Tyr let out a suitably triumphant whine before lying down on the floor. Ash'Antal smiled and shook his head.
“You worry about me like a mother wolf about her cubs,” he smiled. Ta'Tyr let out a growl of surprise and indignation. Causing Ash'Antal to laugh heartily.
“Come on boy. Time to go have that would of yours looked at again.”

Selenkia was brushing out the mane of one of the horses when Ash'Antal found her.
“Ah Selenkia. I’m glad to find you here. I was hoping you would take a look at Ta'Tyr’s wound for me,” he smiled jovially as he approached. Selenkia smiled as she put down the brush and knelt down to look at Ta'Tyr.
“Judging by some of the scars I found while tending to him I would say that you are no stranger to tending his wounds yourself,” she smiled.
“That’s true. But I am no expert and thought it would be best if someone with a defter hand than I had a look.”
“Is that the only reason?” she laughed.
“Well I think he misses your company too to tell the truth,” Ash'Antal grinned. Ta'Tyr flopped down with an exasperated sound causing both Ash'Antal and Selenkia to laugh.
“Well let me see what I can do,” she smiled as she unwrapped the bandages around Ta'Tyr’s body.
“Could you bring me a bowl of water and a cloth please?” she asked, motioning to a corner filled with healing supplies. Ash'Antal walked to find what he had been instructed to while Selenkia opened her medical bag and selected various herbs.
“There you go,” he said as he returned and handed her the bowl of water and the cloth. Selenkia nodded and started to clean the wound on the wolf’s side. Ash'Antal watched as she worked, her hands deft and delicate but moving with purpose and without hesitation. Once the wound was cleaned she mixed the herbs and ground them into a poultice in the mortar and pestle she had taken from her bag. Once it had been mixed she applied it to the wound before wrapping it with a new bandage.
“There you go Ta'Tyr. You should be just fine in about three days,” she said stroking the wolf’s head and scratching him behind the ears. Ta'Tyr let out a happy grumble as his ears were scratched.
“See boy. Much better than when I do it,” Ash'Antal laughed as he sat down and leaned back against a tree. Selenkia smiled as she washed her hands before sitting down next to him.
“I-I’ve been meaning to ask… What was your life like? I mean before we found you. Where did you learn to fight like you do? What made you become a mercenary?” she asked uncertainly.
“Well that is a story I was hoping to avoid but I guess I’ll have to tell it seeing as you are the second person to ask me about it today,” he laughed.
“The second?” she asked quizzically.
“Ana'Ria. She asked me the same thing earlier. Tell you what, after tomorrows duel I will tell you the story. If I survive that is since no one seems to think I will,” he smiled. Selenkia frowned at him and pushed him softly.
“It is not a laughing matter but I’m glad you find such humour in your possible fate,” she said with mock anger.

“The humour I find is not in my fate but in your apparent concern for it,” he teased. Selenkia blushed bright red and stood up.
“I…I need to get back to my work,” she stammered, trying to hide her face from him. Ash'Antal smiled and stood up.
“Come Ta'Tyr, let us not bother her any further.”
Ta'Tyr rose with a grumble that seemed to say that it was not *him* who was doing the bothering.
Ash'Antal stopped as he reached the door and turned back to Selenkia.
“I do hope to survive tomorrow as I would like to spend more time talking to you,” he said before turning and walking out before Selenkia could answer.