

Fire Destroys



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The good part

The unwelcome guest

A cold breeze woke him up. Rolf found himself on a grassy field somewhere in an unknown forest.

The glowing, magic stones behind him were the proof that he was not on earth, but he wasn't interested in those. More interesting was the broken pavement that indicated a path that lead past the stones.

He looked at where the paths disappeared in the forest, and he chose to follow the path downhill.

Rolf was one of the many agents of SubGeo, an organization that managed to use the absurdity of quantum mechanics to access parallel universes. They started recruiting agents to search the earth-like planets in these universes, and Rolf ended up as one of them.

As he walked on the path he noticed movements in the far depths of the forest. He stopped and watched carefully, and realized that there were wolves around here. He looked to the sky and noticed to his discomfort that the sun stood low.

Worried, he turned to the path. To his surprise he saw that the path was heading to an actual castle.

Well, that is a lucky coincidence. This may even become the fastest mission I ever had.

He continued his journey and prepared how he would enter the castle. The plan was simple. He was a tradesman who buys magic stones and amulets here, and sells them in foreign lands. It was not absolutely lied too, because his real mission was to get these magic material to earth, where SubGeo sells them at unreal prices to other companies.

However, this story wasn't quite convincing enough in Rolf's opinion. He only had a little golden ring that was meant to be sold for local currency, and for a tradesman you could expect a little more.

Suddenly he noticed a white wolf on the side of the road. Unlike the wolves he saw earlier, this one was lonely laying in the last bit of sunlight, in plain sight of the path. When the wolf noticed the approaching man he lifted his head and watched curiously.

An albino wolf, that explains the white fur.

An idea popped up. Rolf reached to his bag and pulled out a chunk of dried

meat. He rubbed it until it started smelling and slowly approached the wolf. *Now I got his interest.*

He stopped on an arm reach distance. The wolf started sniffing the meat, while Rolf slowly pulled it back. With his free arm he reached under his jacket and silently pulled out an arm-sized, rigged dagger. As soon as the wolf got up to reach for the meat, Rolf quickly swung his dagger aiming for the wolf's throat, but the wolf was faster than he expected.

It quickly pulled back his head, causing the dagger to leave only a deep wound on his face. Rolf jumped forward, trying to grab his last chance but the wolf already jumped back. Scared, it turned away and scurried into the woods.

Disappointed, Rolf looked how his tradable fur ran away.

I know I can't always be lucky, but why not just once...

After a while he got to the castle, which laid on the shore. It had one bridge connecting the castle to a road that was wide enough to host two-way traffic. Despite this, the road and the castle seemed almost deserted. There was nobody around but Rolf and the two guards that guarded the bridge to the castle.

Rolf walked up to the guards, but before he could say a thing, the most-bearded guard snorted in a German-Norse language "No traders or other beggars in this castle"

Parallel universes always have a different language than English, but SubGeo has a special department dedicated to decrypting the languages of the universes with just the little information that they can cheaply get from a universe.

"I am not a tradesman." answered Rolf in an accent that was just convincing enough. "I am a war-technician specialized in making trebuchets and ballistae."

If any king is not interested in good, he is interested in war

"If you are looking for war, then you are in the wrong country, friend" The guard answered.

"The kings around here are honourous men." The other guard added. "They settle their disagreements in discussion and negotiation instead of bombing each other"

"I know." he said, improvising this time "That is why I offer my services as a mechanic worker. I have learned to build mechanics in various ways."

Rolf has no knowledge of mechanics whatsoever, but he is sure that he can do well with a degree in physics. At least he can presume it until he knows where to search for magic.

"Listen up." The bearded guard said with a clear irritation in his already dark voice. "We don't need no mechanics here. We have water and everything and we

need no more than that.”

Rolf got angry. “Okay, I understand. May I at least have a shelter for the night? The sun is already low and you know there are wolves around here. If I don’t get shelter here then I may not survive the night” he said.

“Are you insane? The sun just got up!” the guard shouted. “Get out of my sight or I’ll be more dangerous than the wolves you just slept with” and he swayed with his halberd.

Furious, Rolf turned around. *How am I supposed to know it is only daybreak?*

With large steps he entered the road in a random direction. It didn’t matter where he would go now, as the day apparently just began.

Hey, do I know you?

As Rolf walked down the path he looked at his watch.

Well, it was clearly a lot more interesting than just a watch. It was mere a thick band with a display, and was meant to reverse the trans-dimensional matter displacement process, or in other words, send him back home. In order to send someone across dimensions, a huge machine homes in on cold plasm that is found in an extremely small part of the possible universes, more precisely those universes where magic is a common thing.

“Don’t dare to return without something useful” his chief told him. And Rolf knows he really shouldn’t try to return with anything less than supernatural. Sending and pulling people across dimensions costs a lot, staying in it is completely free.

He looked over the meadows that suddenly appeared as he left the forest. The path lead through some hills and disappeared from sight after passing the ruins of what once was a temple. Distracted by the view he turned to his thoughts.

His best treasure he ever brought was a stone that accelerated plant growth in a small vicinity. He was proud of it, although his chief was not very impressed. “Look, it is great to sell it to some rich-ass oil baron, but not the kind of stones that really makes profit” He told him. “You know Jeffrey, right? He found a rune that halves the weight of all metal that was electrically connected, well that is the stuff that we need.”

Yes, he absolutely knows Jeffrey and his precious stone. Jeffrey is his friend and he couldn’t stop talking about how he found that stone. Rolf heard it was sold to the army, just like most of the stones that were found by the agents.

“Hey, do I know you?” a bright voice suddenly asked

Rolf turned around, distracted from his thoughts. “Who...”

He froze.

Behind him stood a wolf on its back legs, playfully leaning against a pillar of the ruins. It had shining red eyes and a terrible red wound on the right-side of its face. For a moment the fluttering blouse of the wolf was the only thing that moved.

This is not a wolf... But it is definitely angry.

As quickly as he could he turned around and ran. He glanced at his watch. *No, first try to escape.*

It wasn’t the first time he was chased, but it was the first time his attacker

could speak.

Even before he left the shadows of the ruins, the wolf had taken him over. He got tackled, but managed to jump out of the wolf's grip, and rolled on the pavement. The wolf jumped again but this time Rolf grabbed him, throwing his attacker further on the path. Without hesitation he sprinted to the closest pillar, reached the top in no-time and jumped to the cracked inner wall. He glanced around.

The meadow stretched out in all directions, he could never reach the forest in time. He thought about fighting back, but he was fairly convinced he was no match for this wolf. Suddenly his attention was drawn to the other side of the ruins, where water could be heard, and he realized there had to be a cliff down there. Rolf prepared to sprint to his possible freedom, but the shadow of the wolf was already in its full size behind him.

"Got you now!" it shouted.

As the wolf jumped forward, Rolf unexpectedly rolled off the wall. He landed quickly and sprinted for the cliff. The wolf pursued him on the wall and jumped down on the fleeing man. They rolled to the cliff side, but before Rolf could stop himself and recover his orientation a fierce claw in his neck pushed his face forward and a strong grip pulled his left arm back. With his right arm loosely trying to find balance, he hung in this grip facing down the cliff that didn't look as promising as he imagined, as the bottom was filled with rocks where the water scarcely flowed through.

With a strangely enthusiastic voice the wolf asked "don't you have better things to do than scaring the shit out of peaceful wolves?"

"I... I didn't know you could talk..." Rolf stuttered

"No no, I mean, in general" the wolf replied.

"I... what... I am just a salesman" Rolf answered very confused.

"hm... whatever. Just don't do it, mkay?" the wolf said and pulled him back on land.

Now absolutely baffled, Rolf looked in the wolf's face.

"Okay?" the wolf asked again.

"... yes absolutely" Rolf answered, surprised how happy the wolf seemed to be about that answer. He also noticed that when the wolf stood in front of him on its back legs, he was about the same size, and despite his survivor-like appearance, he had really something human in the way it stood there.

"So... you are not going to kill me?" Rolf cautiously asked.

"What? No, of course not!" the wolf answered surprised. "I just wanted to scare the shit out of you like you did to me. You sure tried to kill me but, well, you didn't succeed. And if you did, then it's still like... Sure I'd be dead so it

wouldn't be a thing but, you know..."

Yea, no I don't

"So... what are you planning to do now?" Rolf asked, still uncomfortable with the cliff just behind him

"I don't know. I was planning to run back to the forest, laughing hysterically"

Rolf frowned. *Something is absolutely wrong with this guy.*

"Please, tell me" he said. "Are you a druid that can transform into a wolf or something?"

"A druid? No I'm really just a wolf, and some mage turned me into a human. Well, kind-of-human. Half-human. It's not really finished yet"

"And... just lying in the sun will do so?"

"No!" the wolf replied "I stopped it, I don't want it, it is a curse!"

Rolf searched for ways to end this conversation as soon as he can, but suddenly realized what his instructor once told him. "If a mage doesn't want to kill you, he sure as hell will give you profit." He sighted. *Shall I follow this mentally retarded shape-shifter or move on and find mages myself... He realized that this wolf would know where to find magic, and thus following it would be the best option. Sorrowful he accepted his fate.*

"What is your name?" he asked. "Do you actually *have* a name?"

"Bloodfire is my name, because of my eyes" he replied happily. "And yours?"

"Rolf Veerensen. Because my parents liked it", and after a pause he asked "so... do you have any plans about what you are going to do?"

"When, now?"

"Well, just... anytime"

"Well, no. Honestly, I don't even know what I will have as dinner"

How could you live like that? Rolf wondered. *I would die of grieving without a goal in my life...*

"Soo... how about the mage that cursed you" Rolf tried, searching for something to activate the wolf

"He is an evil man that likes other people crying. I don't quite know why he does that" Bloodfire answered

"Do you know where he is?"

"It has been about five springs since I last saw him, but I am sure I can find him. Actually, I hope not. I hope he chased a bird off a cliff someday. Or that he fell into some river that leads to some waterfall someday. Or that got caught in some forest fire someday."

Or, you know, something a human would do. Rolf thought. *Someday.*

"How about we go and help that evil mage by ending his life." Rolf said.

“Why would we help him? Also, I don’t think he wants to die, and... wait, what?”

Rolf sighted. *Ok. Subtlety is not going to work.* “How about we go and kill that mage” he said

“oh...” Bloodfire looked up while imagining the plan, only letting Rolf wonder what he thought of.

“That is a great idea” he finally replied, and with an evil glance in his eyes he added “Let’s go!”

With a flash of green he morphed back into a wolf, where his cloth apparently vanished, and ran the road uphill.

Rolf followed hastily but Bloodfire was already out of sight before he reached the top of the hill. It wasn't for half an hour before Rolf saw Bloodfire appearing in the far distance.

“Dude, are all you humans so slow?” Bloodfire asked when they got together.

“Well we don’t run on four feet, you know?” Rolf answered. “Also, I wasn’t planning to run when you got out of sight.”

“Well I just realized that it was a bit exhausting to run for a day and then attack a mage with just the two of us, so let’s just walk”

Rolf stopped. “It is a full day of *running* before we reach that mage?” he asked. “And you just want to go there and attack arbitrarily?”

“I don’t know what that means, but yes” Bloodfire answered smiling.

“Maybe we should collect food and water for the trip and make preparations for this attack?”

“That sounds about right”

Rolf sighted deeply. “So let’s go to the nearest village and get our resources there” he said

“Oh, I know where we can get that” Bloodfire said and sprinted further on the path

“You know I won’t run!” Rolf shouted in his direction, and Bloodfire shouted something back while jumping in circles. *Sweet Heavens, what did I start with*

Incognito

They reached a village named Etforsinig soon after. When the crowd was thickening Rolf turned to Bloodfire.

“I think it is better that you act like a normal wolf, and pretend I am your owner, okay?”

“Sure thing, boss” he replied and walked further.

“That includes that you don’t speak” Rolf said, worrying that the nearby people noticed it.

As for the sake of demonstration Bloodfire strode to the nearest tree for his duty.

As they walked towards the market Rolf made up a list of what to collect.

“I’ll have to get some currency first.” He said to Bloodfire, and headed to the goldsmith.

The smell of coal fire here almost overrides the smell of a good shit-soaked medieval village.

Rolf sold his little golden ring for a fair amount of coins that was apparently worth it. He noticed that although Bloodfire didn’t do a thing but sniffing around, the smith was afraid of him and did everything to make the negotiation go well. Sure that Rolf used this to pull the best out of the ring.

“Alright” he said afterwards “Now we can buy the supplies. Let’s get the food first” and he turned to the bakery.

After Rolf bought some large breads Bloodfire said “You know, I always wondered what those coins can be used for. Didn’t know you can trade it for food”

“You can trade it for everything, if you have enough” Rolf whispered back

They went to several shops until they had enough food for the next two days, bought an extra bottle for water and then found an armory. They had a discussion about what weapon would be effective in fighting mages, and eventually they settled on just buying a small shield. They quickly collected the remaining supplies and eventually stranded in a bar near the city wall.

“What is this white stuff?” Bloodfire asked with a frown to his glass of milk that Rolf put down in front of him.

“Milk, the juice they get from cows.” Rolf softly answered. “You better like it, I’ve put myself a fool by ordering it.”

“But... that’s *child’s* drink” Bloodfire muttered

“Hey, you didn’t do anything to deserve a free drink, so you better act like

you are grateful.”

“Grateful? For offering milk?” Bloodfire asked disturbed, “You try to poison me and I have to be grateful?”

“Poison?” Rolf asked with rising voice “You got this stuff too when you were a whelp, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Bloodfire answered, now shouting, “But only humans can drink it when grown-up and get away with it”

Suddenly Rolf remembered that all mammals grow allergic to milk in adulthood. *Not my fault I didn’t know that.*

“Alright, I will get you some water” Rolf replied softly, and when noticing all eyes in the bar were pointed to them, he added “Nice way to blow your cover, man”

“I didn’t get why I should act normal anyway” Bloodfire lightly replied
If you ever would act normal

They got out of the bar without too much trouble. Rolf figured that the man in the bar wouldn’t want to fight a buff wolf like Bloodfire. They took the large road that led out of the village. Bloodfire got cheerful again, running between the carts of the tradesmen, who were not pleased by his ecstatic appearance.

Right on track

At some point on the road Bloodfire came running back past Rolf, shouting
“Come, we missed the exit”

“What?” Rolf replied, “You just ran past it?”

“Well I sure can’t stay sharp any moment of the day right?”

I’ll die once day with this dog here

The exit wasn’t far back, and it was a narrow, unused path right into the mountains.

“You are really sure this is the right path” Rolf asked, assuring he wouldn’t have to climb in vain.

“Of course, I know where I am going”

I don’t know where this is going, I don’t know where anything of my life is currently going

Rolf sighted. “Well I hope we find a good place to stay for the night.”

“Oh right, that is a thing too”

They followed the rigged path to where it could no longer be called a path, and to Rolf’s relieve there was a large flat plateau nearby. He packed out his bag, taking out a sleeping bag and a large blanket.

“I figured you would like a blanket to sleep under” he said

“Why?” Bloodfire asked, “I always sleep without”

“I’m still pretty sure you will like it” Rolf said and laid it down.

He put some stones together and added the few pieces of wood that he could find around while it was slowly getting dark. Bloodfire just laid down watching Rolf do the work.

“You know,” Rolf said frowning “Maybe you can go collect some wood too, that way you can run off the energy you have left and I don’t have to do this all alone”

“I’m tired, and I don’t know why” Bloodfire answered, then added “why collect wood, I mean”

“Well, to make a *fire* maybe?” Rolf answered and grabbed his lighter

“Ok, but why make a fire then?” Bloodfire answered, still not willing to move

Rolf frowned deeper. *Of course, he never uses a fire.* “One: it gives warmth” he started hopefully. “Two: you can cook food with it...”

“Why cook food” Bloodfire interrupted

“Humans can only eat meat if it is cooked” Rolf answered, and he continued. “Three, it scares off wild animals”

“Like?”

“Wolves... “ immediately realizing what he said.

“Well as long as you don’t set the forest on fire, I’m not really scared of it... “

“And four: “ Rolf continued, pausing to think of any more reasons why to make a fire, “It gives light” he concluded, and looked satisfied at the flames that came up from the wood

“Now that I think of it I wonder why I ever wanted to be human” Bloodfire reacted. “A wolf has fur for warmth, you can eat uncooked meat, you *are* a wolf and everyone is scared of *you*, and best of all, I can see everything in the night”

“And that is why I make fire” Rolf grumped.

“I have to admit it’s still pretty nice” Bloodfire said and morphed back into human-size to sit near the fire.

They watched as the flames grew, and while the wood burned Rolf shared a chunk of dried meat from his own as dinner. While eating, Bloodfire asked “So... where do you actually come from?”

There is no use to make decoys for this dog. “You know magic right? Well I teleported here from another world.”

“Oh, I didn’t know there were other worlds. How is it like?” Bloodfire asked interested

“It’s nothing special. We have a lot more mechanics than magic”

“So that’s why you are a technician mechanic-builder right?”

Apparently he heard me talking to the guards

“Sort-of, but now I am looking for ways to collect magic amulets, because we have very few of those on my world” Rolf said. *Maybe that dog can prove helpful once we get there.*

Bloodfire laid down on his back, looking at the stars.

“Do you have any friends?” Rolf asked and turned to Bloodfire

“Not really, all wolves are just beasts and the humans are afraid of me.”

“And your parents? Do you see them often?”

Bloodfire looked back. “why do you ask?”

“Well, we are heading for a few days of walking and you didn’t see anyone to tell where you were going to, or when you will be back. It makes me wonder whether there is anyone who cares for you”

Bloodfire didn’t answer directly, but after some thinking he replied “Most wolves live in groups, but I was cast out as soon as I could stand. Lucky for me it was at the side of Nazeron, a village that lies about four days north from here. Many people liked me and gave me food, those were really nice people. I think one of them had this weird cape and he gave, like, fish and stuff but I didn’t like

that... “

“And then you left the village?” Rolf interrupted

“Yes. One day I got on some tradesman cart that travelled for days, and halfway some rocky path he saw me on his cart and threw me off. That was not a nice man.”

“And then... ?”

Bloodfire remained silent. He rubbed his face with his half-paw.

“I don’t want to talk about it” he finally said.

Better leave it, Rolf thought and pulled up his sleeping bag.

“We will leave at sunset” he said to end the conversation.

Flashbang

The wolf watched how the rackling car rode down the path. He didn't dare to follow it. The ride from Nazeron to this deserted place has been fun, but he was really shocked when the man found him and got angry.

I'll go the other way, just in case the man starts yelling again. He turned around.

He didn't walk for long when he encountered a lone man, one that appeared to him as one of those that in general don't like him. *Well maybe this one is a nice guy.* He walked to the aged man to an armreach distance. The man kneeled and said something what the wolf couldn't understand

Is that fire?

He looked interested to the hands that now got a purplish glow. Although it was scary for the city-raised wolf, he cautiously let the man put his hand on the wolf.

"Are you from Nasheron?" the man now said.

What is this? How can I understand him?

"Don't be afraid, I am a... mage, we can understand each other for a moment."

Understand each other? How can you understand me then? I'll bark, let's see what happens

The man smiled. "You don't have do anything, my boy. I can hear your thoughts. Now tell me, what do you do so far from home?"

Home, I don't have a home.

"You don't? But all humans have homes there, why don't you have one then?"

Never thought about it. They give me food, which is all I want.

"What if you were a human, then you would have food yourself. And a home. And maybe... friends"

The wolf got hit when hearing the word *friends*. The idea of it, directly translated into the simple mind of the wolf was something he had never thought of yet something that only sounded right.

Then I could even feed the other wolves...

"What if I tell you, I can make you a human."

Who? Me? A wolf, into a human?

"A wolf into a human, yes. It takes time and love but eventually a human couldn't say you were a wolf"

The poor wolf was stunned. His entire youth he grew up in the grace of these

humans that liked him, and now he could come back as one of them. The idea was the ultimate thing for him.

“Come, my cottage has a place where I will make you human”

The man started walking, then turned around saying “unless you don’t want to... “

That had not to be said twice for the wolf and he joyfully followed the man.

This man, he is so...

Slow...

They reached the place soon after, and the mage set up a magic ritual using many things the wolf never saw before. Many stones that were in just three different shapes, some white hollow pieces with two holes and teeth on the bottom, many candles that made the room have something like a cozy house in the village and pots that made smoke that gave light. As more as the day grew dark, the more the wolf started to like the eerie chamber.

The man spoke to the wolf, but he could only understand to sit down.

I liked him more when I could understand him

The mage lifted his arms, and from the stones and ground and all kinds of fires suddenly came up. They flowed around the chamber, some of them even hitting the wolf. They weren’t hot, and afraid that he would spoil his only chance, he stood still.

This is so scary, but it is worth it. What was it for again? Oh I am going to be a human! A real human! This is so scary.

With a flash, the wolf was hit by a force that knocked him out.

As he woke up, he felt weird. He gazed around, and looked at himself. He realized he was still a wolf.

Why didn’t it work? Maybe I shouldn’t have been scared. Can it be cast again? Please, I will try it again.

He looked to the old man, who closed in.

“You have given the power to grow as a man!” he said with a loud voice.

At least I can understand him again

“Now for the final part, go and befriend yourself a man! Friendship with a man will give you the being of a man. With love, your humanity will grow and slowly, as time will pass, you will become a human like us”

The wolf now realizing he succeeded, couldn’t be more happy hearing the news.

“I am old and my spirit is falling, but any young man will fulfill your dream.”

The wolf ran out of the castle, feeling he achieved every dream he lived for, despite he never had one. With blind enthusiasm he ran and ran until he exhausted ended on a road he didn't remember to enter. Panting, he strode ahead until he suddenly heard a familiar sound

He walked to the sound and stopped when he saw what made the noise.

A human!

The Promised Land

“NOOOO”

Bloodfire sat right up in his blanket as he screamed his dream to an end.

Slowly he realized it was just a nightmare. Still panic-stricken he noticed Rolf, who has reactively jumped out of his sleeping bag. Rolf glanced from side to side with his dagger in his hand, trying to find what woke him.

“Was that you?” Rolf said, now fully awake.

“Yes, I... I had a nightmare” Bloodfire said, trying to get rid of the stress.

“It sounded pretty serious, do you have this often?”

“no... yes, but the last was years ago”

Rolf crawled back in his bag. *Great, because I don't like to be woken like this very often.*

“Well, try to get some sleep before the sun comes up” he said.

“yea” Bloodfire answered, knowing that he will stay awake, grinding his thoughts until anything gets him distracted.

When the sun finally rose, they packed up and started climbing the mountain. Bloodfire morphed to wolf and happily jumped up and down while Rolf followed rather swiftly.

Now that he got to it, Rolf enjoyed climbing the mountain a lot. It was precisely why he enlisted in SubGeo's department for traveling to human-less worlds. Their promise of endless green worlds and real adventure was of course just a way to sell the job, but aside from the potential dangers of predators, there was a lot of climbing and searching.

This world is a lot different, but that is what he asked for. SubGeo preferred that he would travel to human-lived worlds, because it is in general much faster. *This is absolutely not what I expected to be doing here.*

He looked at Bloodfire, who apparently found something interesting.

“What is it” Rolf asked when he arrived to where the wolf was.

“Here, take this” Bloodfire said and he shove an edgy, head-sized rock in Rolf's bag

“Whoa, hold on. What is this for?” Rolf asked. He took out the stone and looked at it. It was absolutely regular, not like it was gold ore or any precious metal.

“You will like it when you see it” he replied and ran further.

You know what, I'll carry it. If I have to get something done on your cost, I can use it in my turn.

As fast as they came across the highest point of the path that Bloodfire made up, they reached the forest at the other side. Curiously, this forest was somewhat bewildered, much more than the ones before the mountain.

They wandered through the forest, and at some point Bloodfire pulled another stone out of the ground and handed it to Rolf. He sighted, removed the dirt from the stone and put it in the bag with the other.

They walked further until Rolf asked to stop

“Is it lunchtime?” Bloodfire asked enthusiastically

“No, I am pretty sure we are running in circles. I have carved that tree a while ago, and here it is again. We have been here before”

“Actually that is quite possible, I am walking the same route as how I left here, and I got pretty lost in this forest.”

“Hold on. doesn’t that mean you are lost again?” Rolf asked with a frown

“haha No. I remember the path precisely the other way around.”

“You say you left this place years ago, right?”

“Doesn’t mean I am lost” he shouted and ran ahead.

As by a miracle they eventually reached the far end of the forest, leading directly on a well-paved path.

“Okay, now it is lunchtime” Rolf said and sat down

“Told you I knew the way” Bloodfire said happy

Rolf took a bread and handed Bloodfire half of it.

“I don’t know if I can eat that” Bloodfire said while sniffing the bread carefully.

“You are half a human right? Humans can eat this and so can you.”

With a betrayed face he ate it and said “The Hungry Wolf accepts your pity offering”

After a pause, Rolf turned to Bloodfire “Tell me, where was your nightmare about?”

“Nothing that would interest you” he said evasive.

“Oh come on, traumatizing adventures from the wild are always interesting” Rolf replied laconic.

“Not when you lose a friend in it!” Bloodfire replied furiously.

Rolf didn’t expect such reaction. He left the subject for what it was.

They didn’t speak afterwards and got back on the road when they finished. Bloodfire got remarkably silent, what made every step on that road feel the same as it ran past swamps and fields on whose a few lone trees grew with a dark gloom. In contrary to the woods at the entrance of this universe, there were no

signs of bird or other animals, although a few nests and burrows proved that this has been different. The horizon slowly turned dreary by the misty shrouds that damped up from the swamp. The sun nearly faded despite it has to be past noon now. Three more times Bloodfire ran off to grab another stone that was again the same size.

“I really hope this is really something good, or I’ll be dragging this around for nothing.” Rolf said when adding the second stone.

“Well, it is for you so it’s your choice to do it”

“You bet it’s worth it”

After the third stone Bloodfire was remarkably obsessed with searching for yet another stone. This time, he promised, Rolf did not have to carry it. Suddenly he jumped off into a swampy pool of water. He surfaced, morphed to human-size and dove again, returning with yet another stone.

He jumped on the shore and walked with it to a grass field that seemed relatively stable.

Rolf looked doubtful to the black water of the pool, wondering how Bloodfire could find anything in it.

Enchanted

“Okay, hand me the other stones.” Bloodfire said, shaking off the water

Rolf tossed them to Bloodfire, relieved that he probably didn’t have to carry them any further.

The wolf carefully placed the six stones in a circle, and only now Rolf saw that curiously enough, the shapes of the stones were identical.

Bloodfire now laid the palms of his hands in opposite direction on each other, and rubbed. Nothing interesting happened. He inhaled and tried it again, without success.

“What are you trying” Rolf asked not very interested.

“Hush” he got as answer and Bloodfire sat down, inhaled deeper and closed his eyes.

He slowly exhaled and rubbed his paws again twice.

With his usual bright and happy voice he said “Man, I haven’t done this in so long”

“You are sure you still can do it?” Rolf asked, starting to feel like he carried the burden for nothing

Okay, now I am getting curious about what he is trying...

“You don’t forget magic, little boy” he answered on a made voice, apparently imitating his teacher. He then pulled up a serious face again and said “Let me concentrate”.

A few seconds passed and Rolf noticed that now that he stood still, the wind got cold and he realized it felt like it could rain any moment. The sky didn’t tell anything different too.

Then, Bloodfire grasped to the ground on the sides of him, acted like he pulled up something and rubbed his paws just like every previous time, but this time a faint blue glow appeared on his paws. With this he grabbed the closest stone, who seemed to light up. At once, the outer layer of the stone started to crack and fall off, and it took the appearance of a black and almost mathematical figure with a glowing symbol on every of its few sides. He repeated transforming the stones, at each of them having the same peculiar effect, transforming in exactly the same shape and each having a unique color. After Bloodfire finished he put his paws together and the glow disappeared.

“Runes!” he said as if he presented a surprise gift.

Rolf tried to figure out what happened, then realized something crucial.

“Are these just stones or did you... can you, like, sense these runes?” he asked

“Yes, I got magic lessons from Draudiël” he answered. “He had a lot of runes, but they attract dust and sand like they try to hide themselves. However, I can feel them and he thought me how to activate them.”

He jumped back to the first stone. “But that is just the beginning, go sit in the circle!” he said.

Rolf followed. *If you try to teach me magic, it is in vain. If that would be possible we wouldn't have to get magic amulets in the first place.*

He sat down on the grass. Only now he noticed that it was mere mud where the fragile spouts of grass tried to find stability. The humidity of the grass crept up his medieval-styled trousers.

“How about starting with a drying spell” Rolf grumbled

“Oh if I would know a drying spell I wouldn't be soaked by now, don't you think?” Bloodfire answered. “Just sit down and think of home”

Rolf frowned, but did it anyways. Thinking about earth is a piece of cake when you are sitting in the mud already, with the smell of the swamp in your nose.

He felt a weird glow in his back, creeping up his head.

“Don't block it, just... let me have a look...” Bloodfire calmly said in a comforting voice.

Rolf tried to relax and ignore the glow, but it felt like it tried to press through, knocking the door to his mind, calmly yet firmly asking to get in. And then, he suddenly felt like his life was being looked at, as if he was being judged by the naive wolf.

“You can say it is empty here” the wolf said behind him. “Let me find... hm... that's peculiar”

“what... what do you see?” Rolf asked, getting nervous.

“Better ask what I don't see. You have no room in your spirit to store energy, so you can't practice magic yourself”

“Well I actually already knew I can't do magic. No one from my world can harness magic” Rolf explained.

“Actually, there are some spells that can be cast without storage...”

“I can't” Rolf countered suddenly getting uneasy about the feeling

“Yes you can, you have the lines for it and the mind to learn it. After all this magic is really shallow, it doesn't *use* your spirit” Bloodfire answered and he pulled back the magic from Rolf.

Rolf immediately got up as he felt the creeping feeling going away, and gazed in the blanket of the swamp's mist, rubbing his neck as if it could be leaking.

Bloodfire also stood up. “It is just detecting magic, feeling presence of it and

maybe even take control of other's spells."

Rolf turned around. "Well *that* is worth trying, but we shouldn't let it come in the way of getting there" and he pointed in the distance.

"Yea about that, I think we should leave the road for a while before we get there"

"Is it to make the path sorter?" Rolf said with a trustless voice.

"No, to avoid..." Bloodfire started, and looked to where the path was swallowed by the mists.

Rolf frowned. "Avoid what, beasts? thieves?"

"... Yes, thieves! I lost the word" Bloodfire replied enthusiastic, and he looked back to the mists.

"Thieves..." he repeated.

Thieves?

They left the runes behind, for whoever could find them again, and soon found themselves walking on a wooden bridge-like path that lead through a mist-shrouded swamp like every other piece of mist-shrouded swamp in the past day.

As they walked Bloodfire noticeably looked around more and more.

“Is it finally going to rain, you think?” Rolf asked, absolutely not interested in the growing discomfort from Bloodfire's side

“I think I start to see things moving around...” he said with lowered ears.

“I know that, it's nothing” he said and turned to his thoughts. “The worst places are where you find the best things.” It is one of those stupid and wrong things Jeffrey tends to say every so-often, but as Jeffrey is more successful than he is, he'd better agree. Success is what earns you power in the company. He thought he wouldn't care about it but it bothers him more than it should, especially because everyone who stumbled across a slightly useful stone prefers nothing than to have everyone know how awesome they are and how terrible you are.

“Don't you think we are being looked at?” Bloodfire asked worried.

“No.” Rolf answered shortly, not interrupting his thoughts.

Jeffrey started in human-lived universes, but he had a master's degree in psychology, so he was trained for it. Rolf worked longer at SubGeo than Jeffrey, but he had to work with just a high education in physics. Absolutely useless now, but he knew that when he started it.

“GET DOWN!” Bloodfire suddenly shouted and he pushed Rolf aside, causing him to land in the shallow pool that laid under the road.

Shocked, Rolf looked up and saw how Bloodfire got hit by a ball of fire that shattered on his arm. From out of the mists a bewildered man came running, with his cape wildly fluttering in the wind.

“You will not take her from me!” he shouted louder than he could handle.

“Who are we going to take?” Bloodfire shouted back.

“NOBODY!” the man shouted and launched another meteor-like ball of fire.

With a graceful movement Bloodfire dodged the incoming projectile, which landed hissing in the pool behind the path.

“Maybe we should take another path” Rolf shouted to Bloodfire, and reached for his shield. It was completely useless now.

“There is no other path!” Bloodfire replied, focusing on the attacker

Shocked, Rolf saw that the hands of the man now caught fire. While the man started to run again he fired a fireball at every word while he shouted “You.

Shall. Not. Pass.”

With fluent movements Bloodfire dodged every projectile, even though the projectiles were fired from shorter distance every shot. The man now came close to Bloodfire, who suddenly saw its chance to sprint in his direction. With open mouth Rolf saw how this time Bloodfire's hands caught fire.

When Bloodfire was about to crash into the stranger, he joyfully shouted “Fireballinyourface!” and smashed a hand of roaring fire in his opponent's face.

The stranger flipped in the air by the force, landing on his back on the path. Bloodfire turned around.

The man lifted itself rather quickly and half on the ground he swoop with his hands over the path towards Bloodfire. The path immediately caught fire, and made a crackling noise as the flames grew. A wall of smoke and fire roared towards Bloodfire, who quickly dove into the pond. He noticed Rolf on the other end of the mage.

“Hey Rolf, are you okay?” he shouted while wildly waving.

To Bloodfire's surprise, Rolf dove underwater. The mage, quickly turned around, searching for what the wolf was talking to.

Bloodfire saw the sudden distraction of the attacker, and used it to fire another fireball at the attacker.

The blow that was heard when the spell left the water shocked the attacker, but he couldn't dodge the swift fireball. He tried to catch the impact with his arms like Bloodfire did, but got pushed back by the blow and fell. He landed in the pool, and glanced to his opponent who was silently floating at the other side of the path. Bloodfire smiled.

A large ball of glowing light moved slowly under the water to his attacker who tried his best not to drown. With a loud explosion the water under the stranger blew up, launching him far backwards.

Bloodfire jumped on the path and looked to where the attacker was disappeared in the mists.

“We are not going to take anything” he shouted frowning.

Rolf carefully lifted his head above the damaged path and looked to Bloodfire.

“Hm... guess I was right again” Bloodfire said. “We were being watched”

“Yes... is... is he gone?” Rolf asked, still not comforted.

“Yes, you can calm down and get out of that terrible pond.” Bloodfire replied and stretched his hand to Rolf.

When they stood on the path again Rolf asked, “I didn't know you were a magician yourself...”

“Really? I am a talking half-man half-wolf, can morph into a real wolf, and

`fire' is even part of my name. Why would I not be able to throw fire?"

Well, Rolf couldn't figure a sound answer on that. He sure has to be careful around this wolf.

Capes, Rituals and all that stuff

when the swamp that carried the road finally made place for rock formations, the sun was already about to get down. Bloodfire appeared to recognize the surrounding more than he did earlier on the path, and Rolf was glad enough they finally left the terrible swamp.

To get rid of the smell they jumped in the first relatively clean pool of water they could find, had a quick dinner and searched for a place to stay for the night. They decided to head into the rocks, and found an opening between rocks where they fell asleep.

The next morning they continued their path uphill on Bloodfire's suggestion. The surrounding was rigged but definitively not steep and because they both enjoyed the new path they progressed faster than on the road. They found themselves on a place where they could oversee the swamp, and Rolf was even convinced he could see the forest behind that. They moved further until they heard a low, groaning sound.

"It is the wind that blows in these caves" Rolf explained.

"Is that a thing?" Bloodfire asked with a face as if that would be beyond magic.

"Yes. When the wind passes the entrance of the cave, it makes the air vibrate, and the cave's shape can increase these vibrations until you hear this sound" he explained.

He looked at the unchanged face of Bloodfire.

"It's the wind" he summarized, only nearly satisfying Bloodfire to rest the case.

After they passed a few other caves, hearing the same sound over and over, it slowly became clear to them that this sound was actually human made. They followed the holes that made the most noise and eventually found a group of fifteen cloaked men standing around ruins, who were mumbling something in a language that had some Latin sounds. Rolf couldn't identify the language, but it wasn't much of his concern now. Much more interesting was it to spectate the happening from this point where they could not be seen by any of the caped men. He looked at Bloodfire. Aside from the fact he was firmly wagging its tail, he remained absolutely silent.

When the shady figures finished their moaning, they moved to make space for another man that came out of the cave that was adjacent to the ruins. Rolf tried to see him, but the other people blocked his view.

“The Beasts from Her forest are bounded by only Her power” one of them spoke, which was responded by the other man with what could be translated as “In His Name”

“Her power lies in the forests and Her Beasts in it”

“In His Name”

“His power is weakened by the Beasts, and They shall ground us”

“In His Name”

“For this, we sacrifice These Beasts to Him and His Power”

“In His Name”

Bloodfire’s ears suddenly peaked up and his tail stopped. Rolf tried to see what he saw, but there was nothing but capes and shadows.

“In His Name” the men shouted once again, and one of them raised a wooden plateau, that only now came visible with on it a grey pile of something.

Before Rolf could even react, Bloodfire had jumped up and with a trail of fire he ran in the circle of men, who jumped back at the sudden appearance. Rolf instinctively jumped up, shouting Bloodfire’s name and following him while trying to see what made Bloodfire react like this.

The men, who now saw their ritual being ruined turned angry and, in contrary to what Rolf had in mind, most of them drew swords from under their capes. Now that Rolf entered the circle of the ruins, he immediately saw what beasts lay on the wooden plateau. Wolves. With a slash, Bloodfire already cut the ropes that kept the wolves prisoned. He then jumped on the most nearby man who tried to save the offering, and paid his action with a flaming claw in his face. The wild wolves fled into the forest and anyone who tried to stop them was hit by the wraith of Bloodfire.

But now the situation only got worse. The fifteen men had together seven swords and apparently there were four mage apprentices too. Rolf was accused of bringing this monster to their offering, and realized too late that the men had surrounded the pair, not planning on letting them leave alive.

“Whoa, just... Wait. We can explain what happened here...” Rolf tried, but the men had made their decision

“A wolf would be the offer, and a wolf will thus be offered” the apparent leader said, who seemed unarmed.

Rolf slowly pulled the small shield from his back. At once, one of the man at Rolf’s side attacked and he could only nearly fend it off with his dagger, but now all six other armed men launched their attack. The shield got smashed out of his hand, leaving him with only his dagger to defend. He was planning how he could outsmart them and escape the circle unharmed, when suddenly a large smash just behind him shocked him up. Before he could react Bloodfire grabbed whatever

he could reach of Rolf and threw him down the hole that was apparently opened by the smash. He fell, hitting the sides of the rugged tube and landed badly in an underground creek that had just enough water flowing through that Rolf landed fairly unharmed.

He looked up, aware of the fact that the men were still searching for his blood. He expected a shadow, but instead a bright light flashed and a roaring sound like distant thunder was heard. A wave of burning dust swayed over the entrance and fire went down the cave hole. As he felt dust and ash falling down, the light dimmed again and a queer heat passed through the hole.

In much the same way that Rolf didn't, Bloodfire glided down the hole, landing on its back feet. He looked around, wondering why he didn't see Rolf. He sniffed the air and smelled the swampy air that hung around Rolf behind a rock.

"Why are you hiding for me?" he asked playfully, jumping on top of the rock

"Did you just burn the valley to a crisp?" Rolf asked, acting like he is hiding.

"Not the entire valley, just the ruins" he replied, adding "guess you could say I... "

"don't"

"Ruined it... "

With a mix of fear and the inability to be angry on the youthful wolf Rolf looked him in the eyes.

"Alright," Bloodfire said, "let's get going, I am pretty sure I can smell the exit."

Rolf followed on a distance.

Cabbage smells

They found themselves having lunch in the underground cave. Now that they stopped for a moment Rolf noticed it was rather cold and the humidity didn't really help with that. Even Bloodfire pulled his cloth closer, showing that he was feeling the cold too.

"How can it be that your... *cloth* is not burned" Rolf asked, looking at it.

Bloodfire looked back puzzled, and thought for a moment. He finally said "I honestly don't know. I always assumed that this was just wool. I even took it off when practicing, afraid I would burn it."

Rolf didn't continue on the topic. *Pretty stupid of me to think it was cotton...*

He thought back to Bloodfire's nightmare. "So... This friend that you lost..."

"Stop about it!" Bloodfire replied directly. "He is not part of this..."

Again, Rolf decided not to continue on it. It wouldn't bring him any good either...

They finished their lunch and walked further in the cave, guided by a torchlight that Rolf carried in his bag. Bloodfire sniffed every side-way, but always seemed sure of the direction they were going.

After walking for over an hour, Rolf remarked "You know, I have the feeling that we are only heading *inward* the mountain."

"I know, right?"

Rolf frowned. "Are we not supposed to get out of the cave then?" he stated firmly.

"Well yes, but not now. As long as I can follow this smell I am sure that we reach the right spot."

He replied. "Unless the stuff I smell is dumped deep inside the mountain"

Alright, at least we never went on a dead end

At last they reached a place where they saw drear daylight coming from the end of the cave, and Rolf turned his torchlight off to enjoy it in its glory. he started to run for the light, Bloodfire enthusiastically taking him over, who jumped out to the appearing flowerbed, with Rolf swiftly following his example.

"I knew I smelled it right!" Bloodfire shouted in its over-excitement

"For sure, but now we have to pick up the trail again." Rolf doubtfully said, and looked up to the colored sky. The sun was about to get down.

"Oh but I know precisely where we are! I knew where we would end up when I smelled this in the first place" Bloodfire replied and explained "Look,

These flowers only grow on very soft places, and this is the only one near the mountains. Now hurry, we are almost there!” and he ran to a paved path that looked suspiciously much like the one they left in the first place.

Rolf kept laying down in the flowers. Now he smelled them too, and it had something sweet. And something... dry, like cinnamon.

“Come on, don’t let me wait like this” Bloodfire shouted impatiently

The balance of the sweetness is just perfect, not filling your nose, but just tickling it. Modern perfumes could learn some things from this flower.

“OK. I get it.” Bloodfire shouted. “You are tired. How about we take a rest here and then we go on”

If this would be turned to perfume, maybe it would sell great. It’s saying something like... Youth. Not quite freshness but more... cuteness? Kinkiness? He picked a flower.

Bloodfire stepped close to the relaxing man.

“I understand we have dinner?” he said in an unentertained voice

“Boy, you have no idea” Rolf said playfully and he stood up.

They went to the nearest flat stone on the roadside and Rolf opened the bag. For now, Rolf took out pickled pork chops and a large cabbage.

It took some explanation to convince Bloodfire that they should share both meals, instead of pork for one and cabbage for the other.

“But I hate cabbage” he cried. “That is... what my food eats”

“I taste horrible” Rolf said and demonstratively took a bite of his part of the cabbage.

Bloodfire shook his head and with gestures he clarified, “I am a wolf. Wolf eats meat. Not greenfood, just the red stuff”

“You’re half a man, so you eat half like a man” Rolf stated.

“That’s unfair” Bloodfire replied like a little kid that has to eat its veggies “And you already used that to feed me that grain stuff”

“And?” Rolf now joyfully asked, “Did you died?”

Bloodfire mumbled groaning and looked at its half cabbage. With his other hand he grabbed its half of the pork and finished it before Rolf could even finish chewing on his part.

Staring at the cabbage, he asked “If I don’t need it, I don’t really have to eat it, right?”

“You really need it” Rolf replied. “We have a battle to fight, remember?”

A few minutes passed and Rolf was already finished while Bloodfire was still procrastinating his first bite. The idea came to Rolf’s mind to just stow it in his throat, then remembered that this was someone you wouldn’t want to have as an

enemy. At last, Bloodfire chewed down his first leaf of the cabbage. With an angry face he looked at Rolf while putting the second one in his mouth. “I feel like a sheep” he muttered, now eating the cabbage leaf by leaf.

After he finished the cabbage, Rolf noticed how Bloodfire snatched one of the leaves that were meant to be thrown away when he turned to his bag. *Don't like cabbage you said?*

They got to sleep under the covering leaves of the bushes that marked the beginning of yet another forest.

Cottage? More like Castle

It was almost noon, and Rolf and Bloodfire walked on the road that led through forest hills. At once, Bloodfire stopped.

“Two more turns and we are there” he said with a somber tone in his voice.

“Are you worried that we can’t defeat him?” Rolf asked.

“No, I am worried that I will meet him” he replied. “He betrayed me, cursed me. When I came back to plead him to stop it, he just laughed, threw me out and that...”

He paused. “That destroyed something inside of me...”

“And that is what we are here for. Payback. Revenge”

Bloodfire looked him in the eyes. A shimmer appeared in the red eyes of the wolf.

“You are right” and with a fast pace the duo walked further.

Then, a castle appeared in the opening in the woods. The large, sinister building was made from a dark grey stone that made the entire castle give the impression as if it was a hole in the woods. The castle had on its corners four towers that were much wider than could be practical and all four had different heights. The front-right tower was mere like a bastion and gave support to the largest tower, who was placed within the walls and connected several buildings despite it was not as wide as most other towers.

The entire structure had, with its asymmetrical placements and some towers reaching to outside the wall, somewhat like as if it was almost natural grown, but then heavily malformed and damaged. For some reason it even appeared to Rolf that it had something like the strange-shaped trees that appeared everywhere in this area.

“The home of Ketusalem!” Bloodfire shouted brightly. “And soon his grave too...”

“You didn’t say he lived in a *Castle*” Rolf said, impressed of the darkness of the place despite the fact that the sun frequently shone through the clouds.

“Well, quite honestly I didn’t remember that he lived in a castle” Bloodfire replied while carefully watching every detail of the structure, trying to compare it with his memory.

“I am quite sure this is the place” he then said. “I remember the bridge to be precisely this.”

“And when the wizard took you to this place you didn’t get second thoughts about his intentions?” Rolf asked, looking at Bloodfire

“Well I was a wolf” Bloodfire replied. “This looked absolutely normal to me”

Rolf frowned. *How could you think this was absolutely normal. I wonder whether the mage himself looks demonic...*

He looked around and figured that, if they planned to get in the castle unseen, they better find a way to cross the moat that laid around the castle.

They decided to walk around the castle and try to find a place where they could wade through the water, and found that at one place a terribly smelling pile of food remains and other trash was dumped at the waterside, almost forming a bridge over the water. They decided to have a lunch a bit away from the castle.

During the lunch Bloodfire turned to Rolf. "Hey, I should make a plan by now, right?"

"That would be a great idea" Rolf answered, not showing his surprise about the sudden spark of intelligence from the wolf.

"Alright..." Bloodfire said and looked to the castle. "I remember there is a large room in the middle, and he will probably be there"

"He won't" Rolf replied. "That is what you should assume at least. First find a way to make sure that he is there"

"We can just see that right?"

"No..." Rolf sighted. "We need something that would make him go there, like someone that would like to see him personally."

"Then we don't have to do such trouble to get in there, right?" Bloodfire asked and ate his last bit of the cabbage.

"They will keep an eye on their visitors. If you just walk in, then they will make sure you can't cast any magic. Actually, do they know you do magic?"

"Yes they definitively do" Bloodfire said smiling, but then turned serious again. "But who is going to get him there then?"

"Don't worry about the plan" Rolf said. "First, are you just going to shoot a fireball? I think he can block that with some magic shield."

"I haven't thought about that, but I can do more than just a fireball." He said and he turned to his thoughts.

"Actually I ever heard that every fire spell *has* to be countered with air, and you can't make shields with air as element. The shielding is precisely why I preferred fire above air despite air is much simpler."

"Then how do you stop fire if you can't shield against it?" Rolf asked

"You can't stop fire, only bend its direction. My teacher always just created a stream of air in the opposite direction that stopped the ball in the air, where it died out."

“So you *can* stop it...”

“No... well I am confused now” Bloodfire replied

Rolf suddenly remembered what Bloodfire said about his magic.

“You told me I could control fire, right? How fast can you teach me to bend fire?” he asked.

Bloodfire frowned, but then looked enthusiastically to Rolf.

“That depends on how fast you can feel it” he said. “I can teach you this in no-time”

Bloodfire jumped up enthusiastically. “So... you have a plan with that?”

Rolf quickly finished his meal. “All right, listen. First, you get in the castle with your wolf-form without being seen. You try to get to the second floor and find the large room. Meanwhile I ask to see the mage personally and get there too. When the mage is in the room I will try to have him walk forward. That is when you jump, fire a spell towards me and morph into yourself. When you land you prepare two more projectiles, and I try to redirect your spell towards the mage. With your first hand you fire some meteor to his face. He will possibly counter you with a wind-attack, but that will only empower the redirected attack from my side. Being hit from the back, he will turn around almost certainly and that is when you fire your second, most powerful attack.” He leaned back. “that should take him out”

Bloodfire gazed away while imagining how he would take his revenge.

“Do you think killing the mage will also revert the curse?” he doubtfully asked.

“Well I don’t know shit about magic, you on the other hand had a personal trainer” Rolf replied.

Watching the wolfs reaction, he noticed he assumed it right: Bloodfire got his magic from a real wizard. It made him think about the shady background of Bloodfire. What does he really know?

“Come, I have to teach you how to bend fire” Bloodfire said and he sprang up. Rolf carefully cleaned the place and pointed out that they should get into the woods to where no one could see them.

Feel the magic

“Do you feel the air?” Bloodfire’s voice calmly said

Stupid question, I’m nearly blown away here

“Yes I feel the wind” Rolf replied

“no no, the wind is just the obvious part.” Bloodfire said. “The air is what’s the real thing here”

They sat on a rock they found rather far back in the forest. Bloodfire held his eyes closed, and Rolf tried his best to follow the wolf.

With the same calm voice, Bloodfire continued. “The air is your map. Your empty field. Only if you really know the essence of air, you can feel the magic in it.”

About 80% nitrogen, 20% oxygen and a few other gasses that cars poop out. I know my air.

“let’s see... oh, I know something” Bloodfire said and he made a flame float in his hands. “Here. Take this flame, and try to keep it floating in your hands”

Rolf tried. He laid his hands below the flame and concentrated. He felt nothing that could indicate if he was holding it or not. He slowly tried moving his hands back and to his utmost surprise the flame followed. As soon as Bloodfire withdrew his hands, the flame died out.

Bloodfire looked unsure. “Maybe I pushed the flame in your hands... it shouldn’t just die out”

Rolf looked at his hands. *Could it be that controlling magic is actually possible for men?*

“Oh I have an idea” Bloodfire shouted. He grabbed two stones of equal size and placed them on the ground. He did the rune activation ritual, this time succeeding at first try, and placed the glow on one of the rocks. The rock started glowing, it even cracked a little, but a rune did not show up.

He gave both stones to Rolf, one in each hand and said “just concentrate, switch the stones around in your hands and find the difference between the rocks.”

Rolf closed his eyes. He felt that the glowing rock was a little heavier than the other. For the longest time he switched and switched the stones, concentrating on them. Within moments he noticed how Bloodfire quickly grew bored and went away. He smiled.

Silence, in so long I have missed the very thing that threatened me in my previous missions. Days of walking through wood, following the hideously large

device that points to some rock while I had nobody to talk to aside from the few animals that were brave enough to show their faces.

He interrupted his thought and concentrated on the rocks again. A long time passed and he forgot which one was the magic one and he was too tired to find the heavier. Still, he got the idea that despite both stones were warmed by his hands, one of them was a little warmer than the other. He realized that the rock was not just warmer, it had some radiation coming off. *This one gives light of some kind, so guess that is the magic one.*

He remembered what Bloodfire said about the air. As to put that idea to practice, he imagined that he sat on a plateau in the void. He imagined that he didn't held stones, but instead two boxes that laid in his hands. He shook both boxes. They were empty, yet one of them had... money. *Yes, one of them has money and to me the task to feel which one has worth.*

Only a few seconds later he lost his concentration again. The silence of the forest and the idea of standing in the void made him surprisingly drowsy. He would be sleeping by now if it wasn't for that one burning stone he was holding.

He shocked up, realizing that this burning stone happened to be the magic one.

He tried to get up, but misplaced his foot and tumbled. The stones fell down to the bottom of the rock he sat on. Rolf jumped down, but to his displeasure he noticed that the ground was covered with little rocks. He sought among them but rather surprisingly he couldn't find the glowing rock, they all seemed absolutely regular.

He closed his eyes. *Could it be... ?*

Again, he imagined standing in the void. All the stones disappeared from his image, and concentrated on feeling. He didn't quite know what to feel, but somewhere away from the rock, he felt that very same feeling. With closed eyes he crept to the source of the feeling, until it blurred as if it hid its precise location. He opened his eyes and looked right in the glowing stone that laid hidden in the grass.

Smiling, he picked it up and closed his eyes again. This time something on the left drew his attention. He turned around, but immediately he got forcibly grasped by a magic green hand.

He laid on the ground, strangled by a green glow that felt like tied ropes, apparently fed by the two mages that had a stream of green coming from their hand, much like they held the end of the rope. There were two more men, and with these four they stood around Rolf, who was fairly convinced that this was

no good.

“Where is the wolf” one of them said.

“dead” Rolf answered, and looked the man in the eyes. Suddenly he saw that three of them had terrible, fresh scars of burns on their faces. *The mages at the ruins... did only these survive?*

“Don’t lie to us!” the man spoke. “This wolf would not die from nature’s hand, nor from his companion!”

Rolf realized that he either told them that Bloodfire would return soon, thus bringing him in danger, or that he would be prisoned, maybe even killed. *Even just getting in prison will ruin every chance to return with useful amulets... maybe there is another way.*

Suddenly, Rolf started to roll around for as much as the green hands allowed. he shook his head, groaning and shouting. At once he stopped, looked up and cried “Don’t give me back to the wolf, please”

The men were completely surprised by his act, and turned their anger to concern.

“What is it... what did he do to you?” another man asked.

They are buying it

“He threatens me, he controls me!” Rolf shouted. “I am just a tradesman, buying magic amulets here and... This one day, that wolf attacked me...”

All under control

Bloodfire jumped over a fallen trunk. He was away for much longer than he hoped he would be, mainly because his trip back had to be in human-shape due to the large bracelet that he brought. The bracelet was made from marble, set with some magic imbued gems that made the bracelet shine when you activated it.

As he passed over the last hill, he shocked. He saw four men, but none of them was Rolf. Where was Rolf? He saw two of the man having a green glow coming to the ground, and it came clear to him that these man had captured Rolf.

“Eat this!” he shouted and fired a wide cone of fire a bit above the direction where the men stood. They didn’t get hit but they were shocked by it and jumped back. Rolf felt the grip weakening and took his chance. He jumped up and sprinted towards Bloodfire, then dove flat on the ground. Bloodfire fired two more spells, but the men already fled away.

“Who were those people” he asked concerned.

“A few of the people back at the ruins” Rolf said carefully trying to see whether they were really gone. He repacked himself and asked “Did you just shoot fire at me?”

“Did you *dieded*?” Bloodfire asked joyfully

“It’s dangerous, okay?”

“Well I saved you, okay?” he now fiercely replied

“I guess it’s okay, you *did* save me there” Rolf admitted. “So, what did you do that took you so long”

“I visited a good friend of mine”

A good friend? Probably not the one he doesn’t want to talk about...

“What did he say?” Rolf asked

“Well, he didn’t quite see me, I actually just... took this bracelet...” Bloodfire said, showing the marble bracelet.

“Where do you need it for?” Rolf asked, and inspected the bracelet.

“I don’t need it, It’s for you! It enhances your grip on magic, it helped me too when I was learning it” Bloodfire said. He grabbed Rolf’s right arm and equipped it. The bracelet had a movable piece that laid on the back of his hand, and it stretched to halfway its lower arm. It was heavy, but it didn’t really hinder his movements much.

While trying to find how it managed to close off so well, he asked “How does it work?”

“Did you manage to feel the magic?”

Rolf looked back. "Yes, it is a strange feeling..."

"Well, just concentrate on that, and then you grab it. It's that simple"

"All right" Rolf said and stretched his arm. "Let's give it a try"

"Ready?" Bloodfire asked, ready to throw a fireball at Rolf.

"Wait! Don't throw it at me, throw it... "

"up?"

"No, that would be too dangerous. If anyone in the castle sees us, we're boned" Rolf looked around. "Throw them on the rock here"

"Alright, here comes the first" Bloodfire shouted and fired it off.

Rolf couldn't react on it, not even feel its movement.

"How about we wait until I am ready" he said.

"hm, that sounds about right"

Rolf concentrated on his imaginary void. He now felt a wavy magic coming from Bloodfire, and his bracelet seemed to pull towards it.

"Now I am ready" he said and reactively Bloodfire fired again

This time Rolf felt it flying. A large pulse of magic cut through his void and his bracelet seemed to pull on his arm, although it didn't really move. Before he could manage to grasp it, it hit the rock and disappeared in a puff of energy

"Aww, you missed it again" Bloodfire said.

As a reaction, Rolf asked "could you fire it something... *slower?*"

"I'll try" Bloodfire said and drew his arm back.

"Wait" Rolf said and prepared himself once more

This time the fireball was remarkably slower and Rolf tried to grasp it. The bracelet pulled on his arm as he tried to get a hold on the moving pulse, but once again it shattered on the rock.

"Alright, I think I can learn it over time... how long can you keep up throwing fire?" he asked, looking at Bloodfire.

"My teacher said I have a lot of energy to use" Bloodfire happily replied

Yes I have noticed that. I sure have noticed that

They practised the remainder of the evening, and at some point the fireball missed the rock.

"Did I just miss it?" Bloodfire said concerned, looking at his paws

"OR... I finally got it under control" Rolf replied smiling.

"neh, I probably missed" Bloodfire said while preparing to fire again.

But he didn't miss. Every spell after Rolf got it more and more under control. They practiced some sick skills with jumping and holding control over the spell as long as possible before they exhausted walked back to where they left the bag.

They ate their last dinner and in the cover of an overhanging rock they eventually fell asleep.

By fire be purged

Drear morning light only barely lit the dark structure that gave home to the dark necromancer known as Kethusalem. His rituals and spells that enhanced his power were slowly weakening the land. He may be older than anyone in the land, but the power that it took to keep him vital was much. Not that he really was concerned about it. The negative effects of the rituals only affected the lands and intoxicated the air, not something he would care about. Due to this, the nature in the land crawled, got slowly corrupted and deprecated.

Rolf walked on the bridge leading to the castle. There were no guards and the bridge was opened. The absence of protection does make sense when you think of it. Who would ever attack a mage's castle? He entered the port and spoke to the man that stood at the door to the middle building

"I wish to speak Kethusalem" he said

"And what makes you think our great Kethusalem wish to answer you?" the man answered. "I am here to ensure Kethusalem will not be disturbed, and to my honor I will fulfill my duty"

This man sure thinks he is the right-hand of the lord himself

With wavy hands and a threatening voice Rolf replied. "I, Rolf Veerensen, am here to warn him for the danger with the name... Bloodfire"

It had a visible effect on the guard, but he clearly needed just a little more

"As a Hungering Wolf He will enter!" Rolf continued "And with Fire He will lay the land to Ashes!"

The man now hesitated, but before he could make a decision, Rolf started again. "Go now, unfortunate! Call Kethusalem now and I will uncover the nefarious plan of Bloodfire!"

The man ran inside, leaving the door open for Rolf. He smiled, and entered the castle. From the inside it was more threatening than from outside. Rows of various armors made the hallway a creepy road to the next chamber. As usual with castles, the throne room was easily found by following the largest doors, and he quickly ran into two guards who clearly didn't expect him to appear here.

"What are *you* doing here!" one of them said.

"I was recalled by Kethusalem, and my power brought me to this room" Rolf said, knowing that this has to be the room he should be. The man frowned, but refused to let him in.

"He is not here, thus he can't receive strangers."

He only nearly said it, as the door behind him opened. A darkly dressed man opened.

“Veerensen, if you would please to enter the room?” he spoke without showing any surprise that his guest was already at the doorstep.

with a smirk to the guards, Rolf walked into the room. The dark oak floor had a queer effect on the dark room. The room had no windows and was lit with only candles. He looked at the roof, and to his relief saw that it was built in several heights, each showing holes for ventilation on the connecting parts, meaning that there were ways for Bloodfire to reach the room, even right above the throne.

His attention was drawn to the right, where a door was being opened. Five men entered, but it was not hard to figure which one was the mage. With large steps he marched to the throne, but didn't sit down. Instead he stood in front of it, and with his back to Rolf he spoke with a terribly broken, eerie voice.

“And what makes you think you are more important than my RITUALS?!” he said, raising his voice every word, and turned around. “What great danger do YOU think will ever concern ME?”

Rolf didn't move a single bit. *Well it concerns you well enough that YOU thought it is more important than your rituals...*

Rolf noticed movement on the ceiling, and was relieved that at last he found a signal everything went well with Bloodfire. The wolf had to climb the wall of the castle, find its way through the castle and get on the right spot, all without being seen. Sure, Bloodfire was certain he could pull it off, but precisely that let Rolf have his doubts about it.

At last, Rolf is on the right position and the mage only has to walk forward. He concentrated on the bracelet, felt magic coming from everywhere around the castle and specifically from the mage.

“Bloodfire has awoken, your apprentices have witnessed its destruction, and now it is hungering on your path” he said in a dark voice.

The mage looked thoughtful at him. For the longest time he stood still, looking at Rolf. Rolf now saw that the mage looked like he was over a hundred years old, his face was absolutely broken and his skin was nearly as grey as his hair. At last he spoke again. “In what form does this enter the lands” he spoke on a soft voice

He doesn't know who Bloodfire is?

“Bloodfire is not a parasite, neither a curse, yet it harasses itself in the wraith of a beast.” Rolf answered on a dreary voice. “More wolf than man, yet more man than wolf. White of fur, blood and fire as its eyes.”

The mage now looked up, and with a frozen face he stepped closer to Rolf. All of a sudden, he laughed. His old, broken and dusty laugh filled the chamber with such absurd sound that Rolf thought the mage would die of it.

“Let him come to me!” the mage shouted laughing. “The stupid wolf, thinking a full transformation to a human will be for free! His loved ones will suffer, his simple mind won’t be able to handle the demise! As long as I live I will feast on his suffering!”

That was apparently the cue for Bloodfire to get in action. The sound of a launched spell let Rolf quickly get into concentration and focused on the entering fire. *Grab it or get burned.*

“Ketusalem!” Bloodfire shouted while landing on his back feet, lighting both hands. “Your feast ends now!” and fired his first spell.

At Bloodfire’s utmost surprise, he got immediately grabbed by four apprentices that blocked his arm, and his spell only barely left his hand, dying out in the air. Another grip let him fall on his knees, losing the charge he had in his other hand, absolutely disabling him on firing anything anymore.

Panicking, he looked at Rolf. Rolf was looking down to a black place on the floor. He tried to shout to the shocked Kethusalem, but even his beak was firmly shut by the grip.

The mage repacked himself and said on a stressed, almost soft voice “my guard is tough, your efforts in vain.” He then turned to an apprentice, saying “you have interrupted the threat well”

“Don’t thank us, we got help” the apprentice said.

Bloodfire looked around. *What did the apprentice mean by that...* His thoughts were interrupted by what he saw. Another unknown man walked to Rolf, gave him a queer stone, and shook his hands.

“Rolf... “ he managed to shout through his grip, but to his disbelief Rolf turned his head away.

Kethusalem now started to see what happened. In an old, but much clearer sound he laughed.

“Betrayal!” he shouted. “Betrayal of the worst degree, right in front of me!” and turned to Bloodfire

“You see this?” he said to the wolf “This. *This* is your curse”

Bloodfire barely heard it. With tears in his eyes he looked to Rolf. His life, not just taken but also destroyed. Is this really my curse? Is this what I chose for? He looked back to the mage. Then, his eyes turned shining again and an uncontrollable anger rose in him.

“Yes, *that* anger is the only thing that will remain of your pity life” the evil mage said. He turned around, about to speak to Rolf, but Bloodfire was not defeated yet.

In a flash of green, Bloodfire morphed to his wolf-form. The apprentices lost

their grip on the wolf by this sudden change in shape, and Bloodfire used the tiny window to jump up, morphing back half-jump. The apprentices quickly tried getting hold of the wolf again, but this time, Bloodfire sent out a roaring fire that shielded him and blasted the floor around him to pieces. Flames swirled form his body and a bright light came from his eyes.

Looking in the eyes of the shocked mage he shouted “I will END you reign, I will finish ALL you have. To ASHES you will burn!”

The fire now spit form all over its body, as he turned his hatred to Rolf.

“And YOU will BURN with THEM”

An explosion of fire and heat blasted the castle off its fundaments. The flames eliminated the floor and all beneath it and the towers were nearly pulverized by the power of the blast. The scorching heat blasted through the walls, which fell outwards with the towers, and eventually fell in the fields outside the castle that were already nothing but glowing plains. Even the sky temporarily turned orange, testifying the destruction to anyone in the large vicinity.

End of the first part

Exhausted, Bloodfire finally got his consciousness back.

He looked around, seeing nothing but black ruins and ashes. He climbed out of the former basement and tried finding grip on the few stones that were left from the pavement. He grabbed a glowing stone, looking at it. Fire magic starts with fire resistance, which is one of the advantages. Despite he walked through the glowing rubble, he felt terribly cold. He walked ahead and realized he crossed the surrounding water, what now was filled with charred stones and crumbled walls. He looked back.

What used to be a magnificent castle was now nothing but ruins. Smoking, at some places still glowing, the ruins marked the end of Bloodfire's mortal enemy, his curse and likewise, his only friend. Tears rolled off the shivering wolf.

Not my only friend, he thought. *Is this where I was waiting for? Can I return now?*

The bad part

Back home

Rolf locked his phone. Countless times he opened it without knowing why. There was nothing he really wanted to do, but after all this was the last day of his obligated week off.

It was a standard procedure, anyone who came from a human-lived universe had to 'come back' and may only continue his work after a week. Sure that SubGeo had him filling in several forms and make a report about that universe, but now those are filled in, there is not much else to do.

He shouldn't be worried about Bloodfire. Rolf timed using his watch to return just before the blast, so Bloodfire would think he is dead. This way he has its revenge already.

The bad part about his situation is that he didn't *want* to do anything. Running, watching TV, going out with friends... it all seemed so unattractive. His thoughts could only dwell off to Bloodfire. Was it right to tell the four apprentices the plan, and just like that selling Bloodfire to the enemy? It's not like Bloodfire was his friend, but it still seems so... *terrible*.

Yes, Rolf got precisely what he wanted. The Rune they gave him could change the direction of projectiles, with all imaginable applications in the army. His chief was very satisfied, promised Rolf a bonus if it sold well and even though Rolf didn't brag around, he met many envious eyes in his department.

A message popped up in his face. It shocked him, as he didn't realize he had his mobile phone opened again. Irritated, he read the message. SubGeo wrote that he would have its next mission in universe... Random code followed... with agent Jeffrey.

Jeffrey? Since when did I agree on duo-missions?

He didn't read the message further, it was all auto-generated information that he absolutely couldn't miss according to the safety board. *Well, better try to get along with Jeffrey. Maybe I can learn some things about manipulation...*

He contacted Jeffrey and invited to meet him in the bar that evening.

"You haven't told me much about your first human-lived mission." Jeffrey noticed at some point. "Did you like it?"

"Well, it was... not what I expected." Rolf answered hesitating.

"I heard you made yourself a mage apprentice on your first day?" Jeffrey asked enthusiastic.

"That's a little over-stated." Rolf answered. "It wasn't a mage, more like a retarded animal that actually learned magic." He frowned. "Who told you that?"

“Come on, did you think reports were private?” Jeffrey honed. “It sounded much like you made it all up, spare form the fact you can’t make it up this crazy”

Rolf now quickly recalled what he wrote, and more importantly, what he didn’t write in the reports. He left out all parts about Bloodfire's past, except that it is a cursed wolf. He didn’t write a word about how he learned magic, and had to change the last chapter to something acceptable. Oh, and of course its first meeting with Bloodfire was left out.

Rolf was a bit more relieved now. “And what made you read the report so thoroughly?” he asked frowning.

“Preparation. I could have called you but I figured you didn’t want to tell it again.” Jeffrey lightly replied.

Preparation? Rolf grabbed his phone, and quickly looked up the message. With a shock he read that, due to previous success, he would be sent back to the universe of Bloodfire. Accompanied with Jeffrey he would try to obtain more ‘practical materials’ in the upcoming week.

Jeffrey noticed how Rolf read the message for the first time. “I thought *you* were the lord of preparation?” he taunted

Rolf had already mindlessly packed his bag with his survival equipment, even packed a new book for lonely nights. The idea that he could be sent to another human-lived universe was not popped up, let alone that he would be sent back to Bloodfire.

What if I meet Bloodfire again?

“You act like you are going to die there...” Jeffrey noted.

“Well, maybe I will... the mage could be a bit angry on me because I sold his soul to the devil...” Rolf replied.

Jeffrey frowned. “Oh right, you betrayed him... Luckily we will be dressed as guards, so at least we have weapons”

Rolf didn’t react on that. *As guard it won’t be hard to stay out of the scope of a wolf, right?*

He looked back to Jeffrey. “I actually don’t quite know where to find more amulets, the castle where I got in is probably destroyed.” *And Bloodfire is probably in that land somewhere...*

“Oh that won’t be a problem.” Jeffrey replied. “We now know that there are magic stones there, and I am pretty good at finding them.”

Rolf laughed. “Finding the stones is my thing, you are better at getting them.”

“I know, I read you had troubles with *getting* the stone.” Jeffrey said smiling. “About that, when reading your report I noticed some things I would have done different... I mean, why did you pushed that wolf to get to the mage? You could have asked the path and then find it yourself, right?”

Rolf answered evasive. He drained his beer and turned around. “I better try to find how SubGeo designed our suits, maybe change them. I know as best how those guards looks like.”

A cold welcome - Again

A cold dive in the water woke him up. Trying to recover from the shock he swam to the black shore. When he got on the side, another splash indicated the arrival of Jeffrey. Rolf turned around, enjoying the show of how Jeffrey freaked out about the water and only calmed down when he noticed Rolf. He pulled himself ashore and took a breath.

“Waddup? Can’t swim for like five meters?” Rolf jokingly asked.

Jeffrey glanced back. “You could have warned me the portal was right above a lake”

Rolf frowned. *That's weird actually, why did the portal change place?*

“So, where shall we go first” Jeffrey said and got up.

Rolf got up too and looked around. Suddenly he realized where they were. The rugged ruins that laid around the water were charred or burned and the fields around it were barren. Only the flooded basement proved that he stood where once was the dark castle of Kethusalem.

“But... this is not the entrance” Rolf stuttered.

Jeffrey turned to Rolf. “You *do* know where we are, right?”

“Yes.” Rolf answered “this is where I *left*”

That idea was clearly new for Jeffrey and surprised he looked around. “You didn’t lie about that the castle is destroyed...” he then said softly.

Rolf panicked inside. *How could he get them out of the area before they encounter Bloodfire? And where would Bloodfire be around now?*

“Still though, were shall we go now?” Jeffrey asked again, waiting for a response. Rolf remained silent.

“Okay then, where should we *not* go.” He tried

That brought an idea to Rolf's mind. “I know where we should go. Follow me.”

They climbed out of the rubble and headed to the path that used to lead to the castle's entrance.

It was not until they walked past a terribly familiar flowerbed that Rolf could eased up and start to look at the surrounding. For some reason it seemed like the trees were less dark than they used to be.

“Is it just me or are there no birds around here” Jeffrey suddenly asked.

“I noticed the same when I got to this land, but behind the mountains...” Rolf replied and looked to the horizons. “Well, far away from here there are actually birds and stuff.”

“If there are no animals around, then it will be quite possible that people

know about a wolf that roams around.” Jeffrey noticed.

“We are going where the wolf won’t show up in any case” Rolf replied, and pointed at a grey mass that appeared on the road they were walking.

With most of their clothes still wet, they entered the village Ulveniëm. Its center was a little smaller than Etforsinig, but it harbored a large monastery-styled place for rituals that occupied half of the village. It also had a low but strong city-wall that made the city look much more important than Etforsinig.

“Bloodfire refused to enter this road when we passed by, so I figured there had to be something here.” Rolf explained in his Germanic-Norse.

“Great.” Jeffrey replied uninterested. “Let’s see if they offer free place to sleep for guards around here.”

On good luck they went to a stone building at the side of the wall that had to be the security center for the guards. Jeffrey spoke to one of the guards who were surprised about the entrance of the two unknown guards.

“We are sent here to investigate the destruction of Kethusalem’s castle. We were told we could reside in this village” he said on a confident tone.

“And what makes you come to this house then?” the closest guard answered.

It is always the most-bearded man that takes the word, Rolf thought.

Jeffrey frowned. “I expected to find barracks and other services here.”

The guards laughed loudly. “Sure we have services! Come and see!” the guard shouted and kicked a door that concealed a stairway. They quickly stood on the flat roof.

“Beds as far as the eye can see, waiters more than you can tell!” he pointed at the piles of hay that lay drying in the sun. “We even have latrines, for every guest one!” and he pointed down the wall that surrounded the roof.

“I expected more when I entered your city...” Jeffrey softly said, and before the furious guard could counter he said loudly to Rolf “Let’s find ourselves a real roof!” and they swiftly ran down the stairway.

When they got outside again, Jeffrey turned to Rolf. “You have some money right?”

“Sure” Rolf answered and showed him the purse.

“Oh, you can keep that. You go get some food and a place to stay, I will see if I can get some information from the other guards. Let’s meet here again at sunset”

Of course Rolf packed enough food to survive another day but it was a good idea to have some vegetables to eat. He looked around. As usual with villages, the market was easily found by following the largest streets. Especially if you

build a village like a castle.

No, the other one

They met each other again and Rolf guided them to the one tavern that had actual flowing water somewhere, and they got themselves a room for one night. When they dumped down their stuff and sat on the hay-filled beds, Rolf curiously turned to Jeffrey.

“And? What did you find?”

“You won’t believe this.” Jeffrey replied smiling. An awkwardly long silence followed.

“I won’t believe what?” Rolf finally asked

“I’ll tell you tomorrow, let’s have dinner!” Jeffrey joyfully said and stood up.

“They included real crossbows in our guard equipment, y’know” Rolf sighted Jeffrey let him fall back on the bed. “Alright. Listen.”

“I was listening the whole time.”

“I told some guards that we were being hunted at by a fire mage, disguised as a white talking wolf.” Jeffrey started “so I asked whether they would look out for him.”

“That is a nice way to tell it”

“Yes, but the strange part is that they reacted in some... disbelief.”

“Well, I normally wouldn’t believe that either”

“Shut up. I asked further to more guards and apparently there is another talking wolf that often show up around here.”

Rolf was surprised. *Then Bloodfire wasn’t the only who got cursed*

“That other wolf is however grey, and is scarcely signaled wearing a cape, avoiding everyone.” Jeffrey continued

“And did anyone know where we could encounter him?” Rolf asked

“Well that is the best part. Some of them heard rumors about a house where he would live.”

“Maybe we can ask him about Bloodfire” Rolf enthusiastically said.

“What would that be useful for? I doubt that he has more magic amulets than your previous friend, who happened to have none”

“That’s right.” Rolf replied. “What did you find out about amulets around here?”

“Well...” Jeffrey began. “...actually I kinda forgot the amulets because of the wolf.”

“Then let’s see if that wolf has some amulets!” Rolf reacted joyfully, and jumped up. “But first, let us have some dinner, I’m starving”

“Don’t complain about starving, you carried the food all day” Jeffrey

muttered

The next morning they left the village early. Rolf took a large marble bracelet from his bag and equipped it on his spare arm. "It repels magic" Rolf shortly answered when Jeffrey asked to it curiously, and hid half the bracelet with his sleeve. Despite the bracelet, Rolf kept cautious while walking in the open, and the curiosity about the second wolf didn't really help in relaxing. Jeffrey noticed it.

"You ain't shitting your pants, are you?" he asked

Rolf snorted. "I forced a fire breathing feral wolf to eat a cabbage. You better focus on where we should go"

"Well it should be around here. It is probably just a sand-path" Jeffrey replied and looked around.

After a few more turns they found a path, and headed on it.

"So what are we going to say when we are there" Rolf asked

"Just leave that to me, I have a plan" Jeffrey replied mysteriously.

Why would you keep it secret? I don't care to know but it won't harm either.

Jeffrey confidently knocked on the door. For the longest time there was no sound, and Jeffrey knocked again. Eventually, the door was opened. A grey wolf appeared standing up in the opening of the door.

"What can I do for you?" the wolf asked on a broken voice.

Rolf saw that the wolf was notably smaller than Bloodfire. His hands were covered in sawdust and looked much more like human hands than Bloodfire's paws did. He was dressed up in a way you would expect from craftsmen, only leaving out the boots.

"We are looking for a talking wolf." Jeffrey started. "You happen to be the only one that the people in the nearby village know about"

The wolf frowned uneasily. "Where am I being searched for then?" he asked

"Well, the castle of Kethusalem, the great mage, has recently been destroyed." Jeffrey continued. "The few witnesses that we could find gave report of a wolf that appeared as a human, a few days before the catastrophe happened."

"The castle is gone?" the wolf asked with a light joy. "And the mage, did he survive?"

Jeffrey looked darkly at the wolf, then said on a pressing voice "let us talk inside, so we can share all the details."

The wolf hesitated visibly. With his brown, distrusting eyes he looked at Rolf and back to Jeffrey

"But of course..." the wolf then answered, knowing that he had no choice.

He stepped back and let them in

Who is this guy anyway?

The house was mere a workplace. The wolf was a woodcarver, and made all kinds of sculptures, all with great detail. The largest part of the main room was filled by a large table covered in wood curls and sawdust, with a few unfinished artworks on it.

The wolf grabbed two heavily decorated chairs. "If you break these, don't bother about it. I made them too thin in the legs" he said and placed them around the large table.

Jeffrey, who seemed absolutely unimpressed about anything, sat down and got to business.

"We already figured that the wolf wasn't you." Jeffrey said. "The description of the culprit didn't match."

"How did he look like?" the wolf curiously asked.

"None of your business." Jeffrey stated. "Or do you happen to know other half-wolves?"

The wolf frowned again. "If I would know any, I wouldn't be so lonely" he said softly.

Jeffrey frowned. "Alright then. The wolf we are searching for has magic powers. Do you know other mages in this area aside Kethusalem?"

"There are many mages here, and all mages have different powers." The wolf replied.

"Well, the castle has been destroyed with fire and it is undoubtable a magic attack that burned everything down." Jeffrey lightly replied. "Kethusalem didn't learn his apprentices fire so... you don't happen to know any fire mages around here, do you?"

The wolf looked away, not answering the question.

"Or do you?" Jeffrey asked with pressure.

Rolf felt sorry for the wolf about Jeffrey's distasteful act. In the way it lived, the way it showed himself in town... He appeared to Rolf as if he was disrespected by everyone.

The wolf stood up. Jeffrey watched carefully, but refrained from doing anything. The wolf reached in his wood collection and pulled out a large board that had most of its upper side carved out. It was a map. The wolf started pointing and calling names of mages that knew fire, and Jeffrey listened carefully. Rolf was more interested in the places he recognized on the carved map. He found the forest and the swamp and noticed even the path carefully shown on the wood.

Where could Bloodfire have gone to? He turned to his thoughts, but suddenly his eye fell on a dark square on the wall that he didn't notice before. It was a painting that was covered in sawdust, letting it blend in with the wood of the room. Rolf walked nearby.

Afraid to damage the painting, he didn't dare to blow off the dust. The painting showed the wolf with another man, happily looking to the painter. Rolf looked closer to the man. It was a young man that looked strange in some way. His brown eyes dominated the beardless face, but it still had some shapes that made it ugly, as if the painter did a bad job. The wolf however looked fine, shining his joyful expression right through the dust.

Rolf shocked from what he noticed. The painting showed the wolf with a pair of blood-red eyes that youthfully shattered in the drear light that fell into the room.

He looked at the man again. If the wolf is Bloodfire, then who is this... He looked back in the deep brown eyes of the wolf.

"You are Bloodfire's friend, aren't you!" he said way too loud.

The wolf's eyes grew, and before Jeffrey even could react, a flash of green swayed up the dust that covered the floor. Rolf knew what happened, but before he could reach the door, the now full-wolf already ran into the forest.

"What did you do! I wasn't finished with him!" Jeffrey said angrily. "I tried to save that name until the end."

On a calmer tone he continued. "Well, we do now know that he knows Bloodfire."

Rolf didn't hear what Jeffrey said. He could only think about what this meant for Bloodfire. So many questions were left unanswered...

"We better start visiting the mages, I think I can force them in paying in amulets." Jeffrey said

"We don't have to. I know where we should go now." Rolf said and turned to the path

"Where then?" Jeffrey asked

"Just leave it to me, I have a plan" Rolf replied mysteriously.

Jeffrey cringed, but followed without further questioning.

They entered Ulveniëm again and headed to the magic place. They asked to see an elder who was said to know a lot about the mages in the surrounding. Rolf turned to Jeffrey.

"Look. Bloodfire learned his magic from a mage." He explained. "Mages are very picky about teaching magic, or otherwise everyone could do it. The mage that learned Bloodfire this magic must thus be a friend of the grey wolf, and thus

the grey wolf didn't call his name when addressing the mages on the map."

"Good way of thinking, friend" Jeffrey said. "But what can we use that for?"

"Well, we visit him to ask him about his friend, tell about Bloodfire and find out what he knows about it."

"And if we solve the case of the roaming danger, we can ask them for amulets?" Jeffrey asked and turned to the appearing elder.

"We need a list of all the mages that teach fire in the surrounding." He said before the elder could even say his greetings. Rolf sighed.

"Hello mister Xeldrich, we are pleased to meet you" he said of his sweetest tone. "My friend has an important task that he just explained."

The elder frowned, but agreed in helping them. He showed a map that was precisely the same as the wood carved one, and called the mages in the same fashion as the wolf did.

When they got outside Jeffrey smiled. "You were right this time, there is a large magic chateau half a day walking from here that the wolf apparently 'forgot' to mention"

"Of course I was right. I'm always right" Rolf answered smiling.

The large magic Château

They ate their lunch quickly and started their journey, which led past the burned castle and mostly tough woods. Even though they had no troubles, it still took the full afternoon before they could see the first signs of the building that laid hidden in the forest. From where they walked they saw a man that approached running. With a shock Rolf recognized the man with the fluttering cape as the attacker from the swamp.

“You will not take him from me!” it shouted in much the same way as it did last time.

Instinctively Rolf raised his arm with his bracelet and focused.

A surge of power came from the attacker's hand, heading in Jeffrey's direction. He heard Jeffrey shouting something and the attacker called something else, but he could only concentrate on the projectile that now flew through the air. He found grip on the ball just within time to bend its trajectory enough to let it miss Jeffrey and crash into a tree behind them instead.

Jeffrey now grabbed his crossbow, and shouted “do not challenge the royal guards!”

The attacker was barely impressed. “You...” he shouted from the distance while creating fire with his hand.

A bolt flew from Jeffrey's crossbow. Faster than Rolf could see the attacker pointed his hand at the ground and a wall of fire roared up and caught the bolt mid-air. The wall turned to smoke and the attacker was about to launch its next attack when suddenly he got smashed aside by a wave of water.

“Fool!” an old voice shouted from the far back of the path. “Every visitor is a guest, and you do not attack your guests! Are you insane?”

Rolf, still not easy with the situation kept concentrating on his bracelet.

“Don't let them in!” the weary attacker shouted. “Don't let them find him!”

He tried to stand up, planning for another attack. The old mage sent another wave of water, smashing the attacker back.

“Come quick.” The mage said, and Rolf and Jeffrey followed swiftly.

“We are lucky that your bracelet really bends off magic” Jeffrey said. Rolf smiled.

The old man introduced himself as Draudiël, the owner of the place. They entered the walls of the settlement that was built around three colored floating stones. Most of the space was designed like a practice range, and seeing the

training dummy's that was precisely where it was used for.

"I train anyone who wants to learn magic, and who has a heart clean enough to use it wisely." The old mage explained. "Don't bother about the man that attacked you, he is... paranoid."

They went through some halls and got into a little room with four chairs and a table. The old mage sat down.

"What brought you two here?" he asked.

"Have you seen this before?" Rolf asked and took off the bracelet.

"Yes, I made it myself" the mage answered, clearly surprised. "I didn't know it was missing. How did you get it?"

"It is the last sign of Bloodfire, who disappeared about ten days ago" Rolf answered evasively. "What do you know about him?"

The mage turned to thoughts. "He is the pet of Perthuel, a good friend of mine. Bloodfire first was a wolf, but appeared to take slowly the form of a human, started to talk and even showed to learn magic from Perthuel."

"Is Perthuel another mage?" Rolf asked, more to find an explanation of the past.

"No, but I taught him magic." Draudiël said. "He can transform himself. Anyway, at some point Bloodfire also showed to be able to transform into his wolf-self, and so I searched what magic would suit him. I found he would be a great fire mage. I taught him to control it, to feed the magic with its inner emotion..."

The mage paused. "You know, they used to come over for a few days every so-often. But since a few years they never showed up again." He looked up. "It hurts when you don't know where your friend is."

Jeffrey leaned forward. "We could try to find your missing friend while we search for Bloodfire"

Draudiël frowned. "Isn't that precisely why you are here?" he asked

Jeffrey looked at Rolf, Rolf looked back at Jeffrey.

A painful silence fell for a moment.

"We didn't say we even knew about this friend" Jeffrey said mistrusting.

The old mage suddenly looked panicking, which had an odd effect on the image of the slow, relaxed landlord that he was before.

"He is here, isn't he?" Rolf asked sharply.

The mage sighted. "Yes, he is. But if you want to take him..." he spoke and stood up. "...you have to go past me"

Jeffrey reacted defensively but Rolf calmed him down.

"We weren't honest to your friend, and we never intended to take him in any way." Rolf said. "We only want to speak with him about Bloodfire."

Draudiël looked at Rolf with a piercing glance. To Jeffrey's surprise he gave in.

“Very well then. I will allow you to speak him, but only if he agrees. And he stays here in any case.” The mage said.

The duo nodded.

Shadows of the past

The grey half-wolf looked mistrusting to the two guest at the other side of the table. He wore the same clothes as first time but he looked much better. Refreshed, almost younger.

“What do you want form me” he snarled.

“It may be better if I tell you what really happened.” Rolf said.

Jeffrey looked at Rolf. “You mean the true story?” he whispered.

“Yes.” Rolf replied and took a deep breath. “I have known Bloodfire for quite a long time. I was actually the one who made Bloodfire go to destroy Kethusalem, I even accompanied him all the way to the face of the wretched mage himself.”

Rolf told the story from the first meeting with Bloodfire up to the betrayal and his escape using the watch. The mage listened with interest, the wolf followed every word with a smile or with a growl. Jeffrey listened only to interrupt Rolf to point out stupid decisions and to give comments. He also heard the story as if it was not the full truth.

When Rolf was done, Perthuel was visibly angry. “And why would you now seek Bloodfire again?” he asked.

Rolf looked down. “To ask him to forgive me, I think”

“I think you better grant him a favor instead” Draudiël said. “Find Bloodfire and reunite him with his friend here.” he laid his hand on the grey wolf.

Rolf frowned. “When I visited you, it was ten days after Bloodfire... destroyed Kethusalem's castle.” he said. “Why hasn’t he returned in that time?”

“Because he is afraid.” Perthuel spoke somberly. “Afraid of me”

It was spring, nine years ago. With a fierce swing Perthuel chopped a large block of wood in two. The crumbling wood he found was only suited for the furnace, not for the quality that he used to deliver.

As from nothing, a white wolf came loud barking and jumping form the depth of the wood. The carver shocked and lifted his axe as defense. The running wolf seemed however not so interested in killing, more like playing. Before Perthuel could even react, the wolf jumped around him. When the wolf stopped in front of him he knew that this was not a hunter. He threw his axe on his bench.

“Want to play fetching?” he said to the wolf. He grabbed one of his many flutes from the shelf and threw it in the forest. This could be the last time anyone came to him to play.

But it wouldn’t be the last time. The next morning he found the wolf on his

doorstep, and decided to feed him. For the first time in years someone wanted to keep him company. Someone where he didn't have to morph his appearance in order to be accepted. Yes, he was ugly. He have heard it a lot, and would hear it more often if he didn't draw the attention of Draudiël. The mage taught him a partial solution, a spell that allowed him to alter his appearance for a while. Without it, he knew he would never be able to become the woodcarver that he is now.

On the first day of the week after, Perthuel loaded his cart with his best goods, then turned to his wolf. "Don't freak out, my friend." he concentrated, and flipped to his altered appearance. The wolf shocked from it, was uneasy even after smelling that the stranger was his owner.

"You see, wolf? It is still me." Perthuel said to ease the wolf. It was however not until the end of the day when his owner morphed back that the wolf was satisfied.

"This is my curse, wolf. You will get used to it." he said to the enthusiastic wolf.

In the summer of the next year, Perthuel was shocked up from his work. A voice was heard form the back of his house. He walked outside, but there was nothing but his wolf.

"Wolf!"

Perthuel was baffled. He really was witness of his wolf saying his own name.

"Did you just speak?" he said, sitting down to his wolf.

The wolf jumped up shouting "Wolf, Wolf!" a couple more times. At the end of the week the wolf could already say word like "wood", "food" and of course, "Persuel".

"Maybe `wolf' wasn't quite the right name for you" Perthuel said. "I will call you after your eyes. Your name will be... Bloodfire"

He looked at the cart. He could survive a week without working.

Perthuel sat in front of the mirror. It was a few days later in the evening, Bloodfire was already sleeping in his own bed. He looked at himself, something he didn't do that often. His ears were changed, they got up and pointy. His hair changed, it turned grey. And not because of age, he was just in his late thirty's. His hands felt different, his feet felt different, he felt different. And deep inside he thought to know why this happened. He thought to know why Bloodfire could speak. But he didn't want to know it, he hoped he was wrong.

But he was not.

He concentrated himself, remembered how it was back at Draudiël's school.

With concentration he morphed back to how he once was. *So it shall be.* He thought. *Bloodfire may not know this.*

Years passed, and Bloodfire has grown. He could stand up, his thumb grew to convenience, and his shoulders allowed moves that he once could only dream of. When the magic lessons of Perthuel appeared to work, allowing Bloodfire to be as a full wolf in the crowd, Draudiël agreed in teaching the wolf more magic. Bloodfire choose to learn fire, and with an unending energy and perseverance Bloodfire trained on it and quickly got hold of creating fire and launching fireballs with precision. However, Draudiël was more interested in Perthuel.

“You can’t keep it a secret forever, and you know that.” the mage said when they got together. Perthuel sat on the other side of a table filled with food. He grabbed his nose, which now pointed out of his face, haired as that of a wolf. “but... I can keep it secret for now” he stuttered. His hand and arms had a thin layer of fur that currently covered his entire body. “I know that Bloodfire is cursed” he said. “I know that I can stop it... if I leave him. But...” He covered his face. “but I can’t...”

The mage felt terrible. Terrible for his friend, but even more terrible that he couldn’t give him the support he needed. Being a mage is rather... unsocial.

Perthuel inhaled, then sighted. “I can’t go away. He cares for me, more than anyone ever cared for me.”

The mage couldn’t answer. What did he know about it? He grew up as only child, was praised for his intelligence, and as magician you are loved by everyone. That's precisely why he was so interested in Perthuel. Perthuel was the fifth child, and he left his family as soon as he could. Not to follow his dreams, but to flee from his repulsive family. Sure, Draudiël became his friend, but only since he introduced Bloodfire he was energetic again.

“I can hold the spell the entire day because I do it for Bloodfire.” Perthuel concluded and stood up. A flash of green let him morph to his pervious self. “I cannot imagine how he would react if he would ever find out.”

It was just another night, when Perthuel woke up. He felt his pillow was drenched. He sighted and stood up, looked out of the little window and found the moon outside. He tried to remember what he dreamt. He remembered Bloodfire swimming in a river. A bit further on the river was a waterfall, one that would mean a certain death. Bloodfire was caught in the stream but he didn’t know. He was happy, joyfully playing in the water and every second...

Perthuel closed his eyes. “I will never leave you, Bloodfire” he whispered.

He sat in front of the mirror and looked at how he was changed. He smiled at

his tail. That was without doubt the best part. His hands were developing claws. It was early but it was changing.

“Did you call me?”

The innocent voice of Bloodfire cut through the silence of the room. Perthuel looked into the eyes of Bloodfire.

“What... happened to you?” Bloodfire said softly.

Perthuel would never lie, and even now he would hold on to that.

“This... I don’t know where it comes from but... I... I can cover it...” he stuttered

“How long... when did you get this?” Bloodfire asked with raising concern

“A few years... we better talk about it tomorrow, okay?” Perthuel tried

“okay...” Bloodfire asked, slowly turning around and closing the door

I knew this day would come, and it would always be too soon.

The next morning, Bloodfire was gone. Perthuel knew that Bloodfire couldn’t live with this, that he would eventually leave anyway. Still, he hoped that fate would let him at least say goodbye.

It wouldn’t.

That day he wouldn’t carve a thing, the day after he would finish one piece with great effort. At the first day of the next week he loaded his cart, and waited. He waited for the loose hope that Bloodfire may return to come to town with him.

The evening fell and Perthuel still waited on his chart. He looked to the lowering sun and decided to go to bed. The next day he would morph, sell his goods on the market and come home. he noticed that his power to morph for long was deprecated.

Every first day of the week he would stay with his chart until the evening fell, for every week in the five years that went by, waiting on the wolf that would never return.

What now?

Rolf listened to the story with endless interest, finally seeing what played in the twisted mind of Bloodfire.

“We will find Bloodfire and bring him back to you.” Rolf said and stood up.

“It would be an honor to reunite the two of you.” Jeffrey said and followed Rolf.

When they walked through the hall, Jeffrey turned to Rolf. “Why are we doing this?”

Rolf didn’t answer directly. “We reunite the friend of the old mage.” He finally said. “That mage will be grateful and lead us into his cellars stuffed with magic amulets.”

“You can do that much easier, but admittedly this works too.” Jeffrey responded

Deep inside Rolf knew that he didn’t care about the amulets. He only cared about Bloodfire. Why hasn’t he returned just yet?

They crossed a hallway, when they heard a familiar shout.

“It’s him again!” Jeffrey shouted and stepped back. Rolf looked to the right and saw the stranger from the swamp, now looking even worse than before

“GET OUT OF THIS PLACE!” the bewildered stranger shouted. He had his hand lit, and he threw a fireball big enough to scorch the floor it flew over. This time it was aimed at Rolf, who already had his hands lifted. Rolf concentrated on the spike of energy that cut through the air and hold of the ball. He felt how he got pushed back, how the power of the fireball barely was willing to listen to his grasp. He could not feel the power of it, and realized that he didn’t have the braces on. Still, he felt how he was pushing it. Deeply concentrating, he forced it to slow down. At first, it appeared to rage on unhindered, but eventually it listened. It kept going slower, and eventually halted.

As it stopped right before Rolf, he saw how the ball burned further for a second before dying out. He looked up, right in the eyes of the stranger, and could see his face well for the first time. He seemed to be stunned at how Rolf stopped his attack mid-air.

There was however something that Rolf couldn’t place.

“Rolf...?” the stranger whispered

Rolf was surprised that he knew his name, but didn’t show it. “What makes you so surprised about it?”

The hallway got lit by a flash of green. “you are alive...”

On the other end of the hallway stood Bloodfire, powerless looking at Rolf.

“Bloodfire...” Rolf whispered.

The same moment Bloodfire sprinted forward on all four, and jumped in Rolf's arms.

“I thought I killed you...” Bloodfire shouted.

“I thought I lost you...” Rolf answered.

“I thought he wanted to kill you?” Jeffrey asked, surprised and confused.

Bloodfire toughened his hug. “I already did, and I regret that more than anything else”

“There is someone that you should meet” Rolf said when they let go. “And I am pretty sure you know he is here”

“I know, I know.” Bloodfire sighed. “I know that he is here.”

The Epilogue

Rolf looked at himself in the mirror. He was back home, to his neat little apartment. His chief was delighted with the stones they got back. Draudiël let them choose two from his collection, and they chose wisely. But out of Jeffrey's scope, Draudiël gave another little amulet to Rolf.

"I don't know whether you will use it, but I want you to have it." he said.

No explanation, no instructions, just that. Still, Rolf sure knew what it was. There was magic in the shift between universes made by his watch, and this stone had that very same property.

It all made sense now. Bloodfire never went back to Perthuel after he destroyed the castle. It wasn't for the reason he left, but for returning in general. Bloodfire was afraid of facing the truth, Ashamed of staying away.

He had only one friend that he could visit, to fit the pieces on their places and to figure out what to do now. Morphed as the wild stranger from the swamp, he went to Draudiël. As talented trainee he sat down, grinding his thoughts on his past and, ever so more, Rolf.

Within two weeks nobody less than Perthuel himself came running in the school. Yes, he was morphed to a wolf and looked terribly old, but Bloodfire could recognize him even while standing on the far edge of the training ground.

He quickly heard about the two guards persuading Perthuel. At this point, he had decided that never again shall he ever lose a friend. He has lost two friends now, and was determined to give his life to get one back. Yes, any of his lost friends. He would protect Perthuel, even though Perthuel didn't know Bloodfire was here.

Furious in his rage, he would have no mercy for the guard. It was only after that last attack that he recognized Rolf.

Bloodfire regained one friend, and even less would be in the way of being together with both.

"Don't stay in the past, You have to leave it behind" Jeffrey said this day. He sure noticed that Rolf wasn't easy with how he left Bloodfire.

"It is used up. You can't stay there." Jeffrey went on. "You have to get your mind to the things that really matter."

Rolf had little answer to that. "Do you often leave someone behind that you befriended?" he asked instead.

"Well, I don't really go into that matter like you did." He answered lightly.

“That is a mistake that newcomers do”

Can I just leave everything behind like that? Bloodfire is with his friend now. There is nothing I really have to do there. There is nobody who needs me anymore. I have to focus on here, on my work. I have to make this choice.

A realization came up in his mind. He has to make this choice. It was a choice.

It is used up. I have to focus my mind on the things that really matter. Why do I work? To buy happiness? There is nobody who needs me on this planet.

He grabbed the amulet and focused on the power.

This is the choice I make.

A cold breeze woke him up.

The end

Final Thought

I hope the story was interesting enough. It probably was, otherwise you wouldn't read this.

In the first concepts, the story was rather simple. Bloodfire's past was about the same, and after Rolf meets Bloodfire, they think the mage is in the nearby village. They infiltrated the local palace and found out that he is in another castle. They pass a swamp and a barbarian village and blow up the castle in much the same way as it happened now. Rolf returns solo, finds Bloodfire right away and live happily ever after.

A lot of the details changed before I started writing, but it was when I was writing chapter 3 that I decided to add a part two. Even when I had written half of the second part I hadn't quite figured how I would work out the plot. In total I am very pleased with the result, especially considering that this is basically an experiment.

There weren't many things that inspired the book or its characters. If anything in this book is found in other works, then it is certainly a coincidence. Names and places are also named at random, without having persons or places in mind.

Oh, and if you really enjoyed this, you may be interested to know I am planning on making at least one more book. This book will play in a time where the internet is no more, and is centered about artificial intelligence (which conveniently happened to be part of my current study). Two men are on a personal mission to gather information about the AI that keeps the society together while the internet essentials are being rebuilt. They will find out what happened to the first Artificial Intelligence that disappeared along with the internet, and what the new AI is really doing. The book is centered about understanding and about how being perfect will not solve everything.

Thanks for reading, really