

The Glisters

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THE GLISTER

The summoned
Outlaw

2022



Tiel

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original title: De Verlister
www.janssensvandoorn.nl

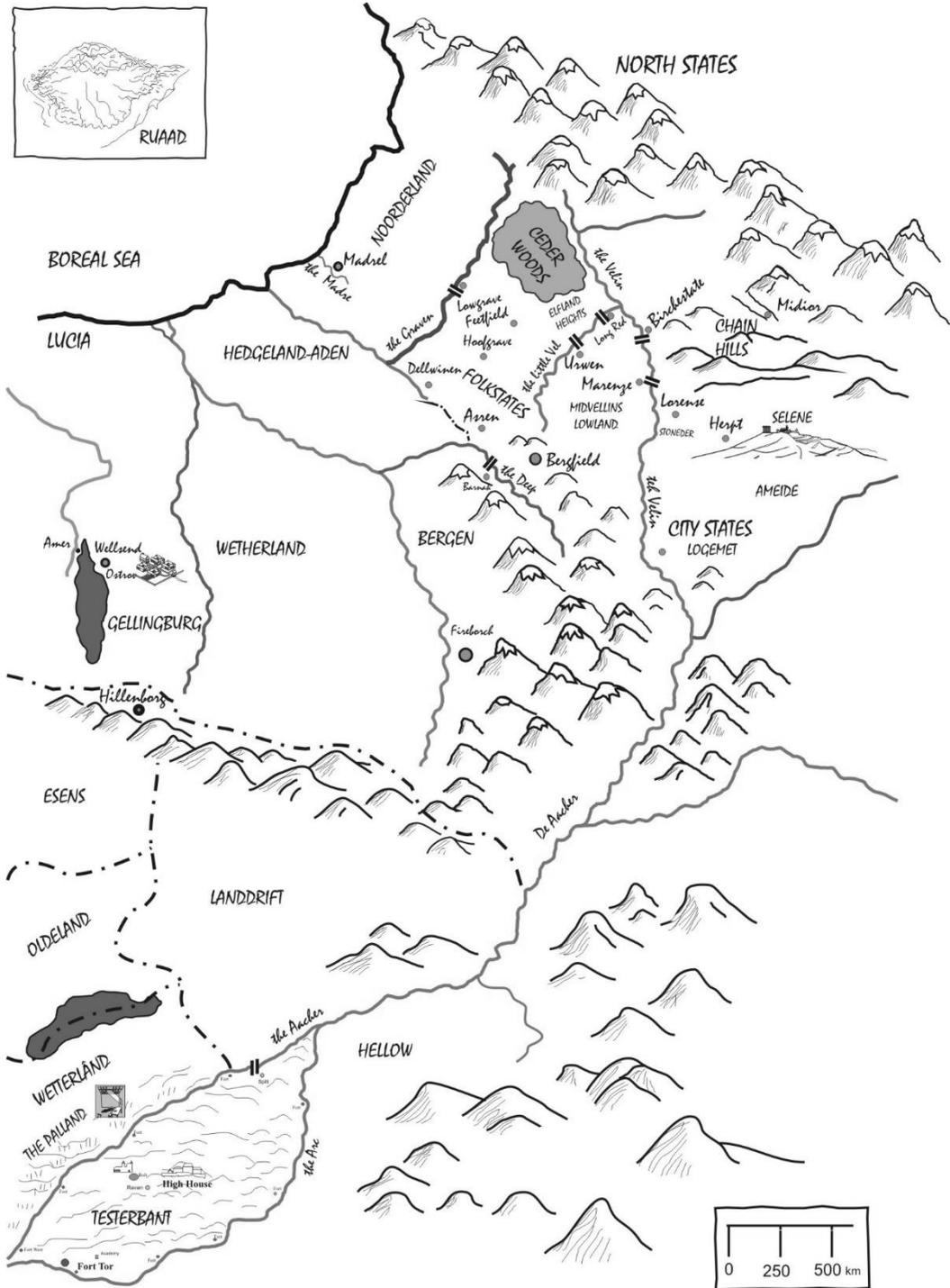
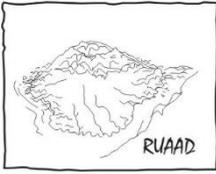
first edition.2022

Cover, interior layout, concept & design, map and reproductions:
Writing and other creative art. S. Janssen van Doorn

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ISBN 978-90-824266-5-6

PART 1. THE SUMMONED



Merciless Wrath

On a sunny afternoon in May, Sanderine Ravensworth trotted triumphantly from the woods with her gang, closely followed by her dog Panras.

They stopped. The slender horses took the reins and began to graze hurriedly. Cheerful girls' voices rippled through the valley. A red flag passed from hand to hand like a brightly colored spear.

Kristel's team slunk away into the woods.

'You tricked us and ambushed us,' it sounded indignantly in the distance.

'Do your whining with the board!' a Dragonder jeered back at them.

The gang roared with laughter. Sanderine joined in as she leaned down to stroke the shaggy wolfhound.

A sharp whistle pierced through the gaiety: three equal notes followed by a single high note. Panras spun around as if stung, and leaped joyfully up the slope. Sanderine also knew who the whistler was before even seeing him: her brother, Gert Ravensworth. She paid no attention to her best friend Fen Kleyn's disapproving look.

'Your brother, what's he doing here?'

'He came to congratulate me!' After these words, she grabbed hold of the reins and joined the wolfhound.

Gert stood waiting by his horse with a smile on his face. As soon as she reached him, she dismounted and hugged him excitedly. The blond-haired young man pushed her at arm's length and looked her over with amusement.

'Happy birthday! Fourteen. Unbelievable, you grew even taller. I'd better start gorging myself or pretty soon I will be taking orders from you! What do they feed you in Fort Tor, dung beetles?'

'Oats, crushed oats, same as the horses,' she replied, grinning. For a brief moment, a worried clouded her steel-blue eyes; then she tossed back her curly hair and burst out laughing: the wagging dog had placed its paws on her brother's shoulders and was attacking his left ear.

Gert quickly freed himself. 'Panras, down! My ear wants to stay alive! Good dog.' He patted the dog and pulled her close for a moment.

Down below, the girls deliberated for a moment and then disappeared under the trees. He noticed.

‘Come on, time is short. Let’s head for the river.’ Without waiting for her agreement, he mounted his black gelding and trotted down the slope toward the south. She caught up with him before he had reached the valley behind it.

‘Time is short? Is someone after you?’

Gert didn’t answer. She knew perfectly well that he was always in trouble for leaving the Academy of Warfare without permission.

Panras caught up with them, her tongue dangling from her mouth.

‘I spoke with Elmar,’ Gert told her as they crossed the last rise.

‘When?’

‘Six days ago. He stole the library key and dug through the Dragonder archives. He found out that we’re not as exceptional as we thought we were. Skipping a generation occurs on a regular basis. There is even a name for it: The Quiet! We couldn’t bruise an apple if we stared at it for hours!’

‘You’re saying that Bern and you will never become Destructors. Then how did Elmar turn into a Healer?’

‘What I mean is that neither will you. You will never be more than a shadow version of Asega, in every aspect.

‘I can become a Healer like our mother was.’

‘Forget it, you’re too much of a minx. We fit in a pattern. Father must have anticipated that none of us would become a threat to him. No wonder he never showed an interested in us.’

‘We will meet with him in the High House next month. I hope Boiten remains in Fireburg. Without that scumbag we might get the chance to have a normal conversation with him.’

Gert shook his head sympathetically. ‘Wake up, dreamer!’

The slope led down to the Arc River basin, which ran in a wide loop from east to west and formed the south border of the river island. Beyond the meandering river lay Hellow. The water level was low. Layers of gravel alternated with sandbanks, and large parts had already a covering of weeds.

They secured their horses to a young oak and walked over the embankment to the water. The river was quiet. Ships preferred the deeper and fast-flowing water of the Aacher River north of Testerband, paying a toll at the port city of Akron.

Panras roamed the riverside and found a washed-up birch trunk. She bounded back to them with her treasure.

Sanderine studied Gert from the side. The eighteen-year-old had the look of a sage; he took a piece of wood from the ground and hurled it away. Panras immediately dropped the birch and ran to the spot where the wood had bounced off the ground. Gert paid no attention to it. 'I'm going to graduate in Warfare in a few months. Shall I tell Father that his army is illegal and that the fortification rights lie with the Dragonders? I will absolutely not join his army. We are in peacetime now, but for how long? More and more youths from Testerband, Wetherland, Landrift and DELAND have been called to serve in his army. They will complete their training in about four years, and so will you. Are you going to join Bern and take part in a filthy war against the Peoples States and the City States to help Father seize the Glister? And then the North States? What drives him? He resents the Firstlings beyond the Northern Mountains, even though he has never met one of them.'

They crossed a pebble bank. The pebbles and shells clinked under their feet. Sanderine suddenly bent down: 'Look, I just found something to ward off the wizards!' She triumphantly held up a smooth milky-white rock. 'Amethyst! Perhaps the Glister looks just like this!'

Gert laughed and examined the stone. 'Amethyst? Nice addition to your collection.'

'Just kidding. Wish it was though. This is just a rock!'

Sanderine threw the stone away from her. Panras, who had returned in the meantime, dropped the stick in surprise and ran after it.

'Making fun of me, are we.' He shoved her. She immediately pushed back and tried to make him lose his balance. Panras jumped between them, barking loudly. Sanderine laughed and reassured the dog, embracing its shaggy head.

'Everything is fine. We're just having some fun like the old days.'

'Ernest told me that Father was a good-natured young man once. We know everything there is to know about his childhood until the moment he went on a journey by himself. When he returned, he was changed. Boiten helped him assemble an army and seize the power. Around the time that you were born, he and his uncle invaded Landrift. He conquered two lands within a three-year period! He only stopped because his funds had run out from the six-year war with the Kingdom of Bergen.'

'I heard that Boiten tortures the resistance fighters from Bergen to make them betray the Prince.'

‘If he’s smart, he’ll leave his homeland. I also want to leave. I want to go to Oldeland to study Cheronese.’

‘You will never manage to do that.’

‘Departure used to be mandatory,’ he retorted fiercely.

The drumming of horses’ hooves sounded behind them. They looked around.

‘Here come the nannies,’ Gert observed resentfully. ‘Tony, Hanky and Weepy.’

Three lightly armed men caught up with them and turned.

‘It is forbidden to engage with Dragoners in training and that applies to you as well, Gert Ravensworth.’ The captain attempted to conceal his irritation. ‘Besides, the Lord of Testerband strictly forbade you to leave the Academy.’

Gert looked up at him scornfully.

‘Military service for boys, guard posts at Tolbridge, and criminals getting careers with the Secret Force. What a nice view of the future.’

The man threw Gert a furious look. ‘Return to your horses. My men will take you back to the academy. I will escort your sister to Fort Tor.’

They turned around and were immediately fenced in by two horsemen. Sanderine turned aside. ‘It might be more respectful to ride behind us,’ she stated sharply. ‘We’re not going to escape.’

The men exchanged looks, then pulled in their horses and lined up behind them.

Shortly after, they said goodbye to each other.

‘See you in a month,’ he said before he vanished from sight.

Heading in a different direction, she realized that her little excursion would not be without consequences.

Four weeks later, the hill with the High House emerged in the landscape. The castle lay at the foot of a wooded hill range that protected Testerband in the north against floods.

Sanderine had left Panras at Fort Tor, in the care of her friend Fen. She inhaled deeply as she rode through the sycamore woodland – she loved her native ground. She made several stops at the farmsteads of old friends, taking her time to greet them. Farmers and peasants welcomed her with cups of fresh milk and handfuls of cherries.

‘Another very, very good friend? Again?’ her escorts cried out in desperation.

Beyond the woods, the road swept briefly up the hill to the gatehouse.

It was midafternoon, and the brick facade with its two towers glowed orange in the blazing sun. The High House had a square foundation with an elongated courtyard in its center. The main building was three stories high. Directly behind the gate lay the outer ward with the stables and the servant's quarters. She said goodbye to the Dragoners and entered the courtyard through a deep gateway. The castle was usually quiet, except for the month of June when the traveling court arrived to stay for two months. Everything was being dusted, shaken out, refreshed and scrubbed. Behind her, a cart loaded with barrels of wine and beer rattled over the bricks into the outer ward.

As a child, Sanderine had loved the bustle of preparations for the annual feast, but as she grew older she began to have mixed feelings about it. She didn't feel part of it.

The servants and maids greeted her warmly as she entered. She greeted them back and went in search of Elise, her chambermaid since she was eleven.

A boy with long wavy hair approached her. He was a few years older than her, and they resembled each other closely. They happily fell into each other's arms.

'Elmar. It's great to see you.'

'Welcome home. Gert hasn't arrived yet and Bern is in a meeting with Boiten and the seneschal.

She studied his face. 'There are circles under your eyes. Are you getting enough sleep?'

The young Healer had been discharged from the military service as a hopeless case, and sent home.

'I'm allowed to take care of the pigeons and falcons,' he replied quickly.

'But I'm bored out of my mind and want to travel like Mother did.'

'That would be really nice, you should ask for permission. I'll catch up with you in a bit.'

He nodded.

She entered the tower and went up the spiral staircase. Her bedroom was on the first floor.

Elise had just laid out her evening wear and bowed when she entered.

'Isxandra. You are right on schedule. Your bath will be ready in an hour. Look, this is what you will be wearing tonight. You will look wonderful in it!'

On the four-poster bed lay a ruby-red undergarment with flaring sleeves and a forest-green overgarment with long tails. On top of the overgarment lay a belt with an ornamental pin. An orange-brown cloak had similar pin.

Sanderine took the pin and carefully studied the circle with rubies and opals, and the emerald in the middle. ‘Where did this come from?’

‘I have no idea, young lady. Perhaps it belonged to your grandmother.’

Sanderine looked at the rest. ‘Red and green! Whose idea was this? Am I supposed to dress in a flag? Look, it even has the raven and the black kite embroidered on it!’ She nodded at the two small insignias below the belt.

Elise raised her hands helplessly. ‘It wasn’t my idea. I am just your maid.’

‘You never know anything.’ Sanderine turned and walked to the door. ‘Stay in the courtyard,’ Elise called after her. ‘Don’t make me go look for you!’

The feast began. The Armorial Hall buzzed with people. It unnerved her to see the waiting, bored court officials and ex-servicemen from the six-year war. A lackey by the entrance loudly announced her arrival: ‘Isxandra Antares Kellan Regina Ravensworth.’

All present turned to look at her. She was very aware that, although she was fourteen years old, she still had a child’s body. Straight as a flagpole. That’s what her mentor told her all the time. Well, here we go again, she thought dryly. How appropriate. She uncomfortably crossed through the room and searched for her brothers. Gert was standing by the table, in deep conversation with Rutger Hedgeland, the cup-bearer, a hostage now serving in her father’s court. When he saw her advancing, he slapped Gert supportively on the shoulder and disappeared to the back.

Before reaching the dais with the table, she noticed Karen Marin, who was standing beside the seneschal and the state treasurer. Sanderine promptly turned to greet her superior. The leader of the Dragoners radiated authority and was a striking presence with her stout figure. Her hair had been pinned back and she was dressed in blue and brown – the attire of women warriors.

She could easily pass for a man, Sanderine thought – a man with gentle eyes. Karen Marin had been appointed chief of the Dragoners after the demise of Asega Alisha, and had founded several Dragon Chambers

abroad. Carrier pigeons kept her informed of the latest news. Fort Tor had a pigeon loft as well.

As she greeted her, there was a spark of affection in the brown eyes before they returned to their usual reserved glare. When the chief showed no signs of starting a conversation, she next greeted the seneschal and the treasurer.

Had the Lieutenant Colonel of the Fort complained about her brazen behavior? She went to join Elmar and Gert, who had turned toward the stoic faces of the waiting guests.

‘What a boring lot,’ Sanderine remarked sullenly.

Gert nodded. ‘That’s what happens when you kick out the priest and the jester.’

They tried hard not to laugh. Elmar frowned.

The loud tap of a staff announced the arrival of the Lord of Testerband. He entered with a brisk step, accompanied by Bern and Boiten. Everyone fell silent and bowed respectfully. He nodded lastly at his children, walked to the dais and sat down behind the table. Everyone followed his example. Sanderine and her brothers were seated on his right-hand side according to age. A door opened behind her, and Rutger Hedgeland posted himself next to her father, holding a pitcher of wine.

While the servants served drinks to the guests, Sanderine studied the sequestered banners. The light of the evening sun entered through four high raised stained-glass windows, casting a colorful elongated image of the red kite, the raven, the sun and the dragon on the inner wall.

The Lord of Testerband rose from his seat, welcomed everyone and made the first toast of honor.

Sanderine observed him from the side. Elmar and she had the same nose, the same deep-set blue eyes and the same curly dark hair. Her father was handsome, but had a stern exterior. Elmar was attractive and approachable. What about her? She was ugly according to her mentor, and was looking more and more like her dog with each passing month. In reply, she had commented on her mentor’s funny little eyes and shapely round nose, and had asked her if she had had a pig for an ancestor – it had not been appreciated. She briefly felt her knees on the cold basement floor again, saw the wobbling bucket with suds and the scour brush in her hand.

The food was carried in. Large platters of steaming meat pies and roast fowls spread a delicious aroma through the hall. Bern lifted his roemer and drank to his father’s wellbeing and health before they started eating.

During the meal, Sanderine prepared herself. She was expected to make a toast to Karen Marin and the Dragoners at the end of the meal. When the moment arrived, she got to her feet, spoke with conviction and didn't spill her drink. Karen Marin thanked her and made a toast to all present. While everyone drank, Elmar got up, stepped off the dais and bowed to her father. The guests continued their conversations.

'Greetings, Elmar. Come forward and ask your question.'

'High Well-born Sir and Father. I ask you, please, to grant me permission to leave the High House and travel through Testerband to heal people.' He waited for his answer, flushed with anticipation.

Hendrik observed him attentively. 'I understand your request. How old are you?'

'I am sixteen.'

'If you accept the protection of a personal guard, I will allow you to travel across Testerband.'

Elmar shook his head unhappily. 'I don't want people to know who I am. A guard will make that impossible.'

'You are still too young. Ask me again next year.'

Elmar slunk away. Gert had been listening to the conversation and now got up. When he walked around the table and dropped to his knees, the room fell silent. Sanderine shifted uneasily in her chair.

The Lord of Testerband allowed his son to ask his question with a warning glare.

Gert stood up. 'High Well-born Sir and Father. I have tried to convince you for years that I don't belong in the Academy of Warfare. I detest war. I humbly request your permission to leave Testerband to study abroad as befits a true Ravensworth.'

'I receive regular reports that you are leaving the academy against my wishes. That you are infuriating your superiors with your insolent remarks and your stubborn behavior. Is this true?'

Gert looked up and withstood the icy stare. 'I have told you of my wish to refrain from all military affairs from the very beginning, and have asked you to relieve me of my duties. I want to go to Oldeland to study History and the Cheronese language. I ask you once again to grant me permission.'

Hendrik tapped the table with the handle of his knife. 'You are not granted permission to travel abroad. I will find you something more suitable after you have proven yourself to be trustworthy. That is my answer. Now go.'

Gert bowed quickly and returned to his seat next to Elmar. They did not look at each other.

Outside, the sun approached the horizon. Sanderine looked at the colorful shapes on the wall. The light would climb some more and then fade. The dishes and plates had been cleared in the meantime. Drinks were poured. Musicians posted themselves in a corner by the entrance. Soon, the music drowned out the chatter.

When a group of dancers rushed inside to perform, several guests left the table to watch them. Sanderine was happy to get away and walked to the front.

Bern appeared beside her and leaned over to her affectionately. ‘Good job back there.’

She nodded, pleased with the compliment.

‘I hear things about you now and then,’ he continued. ‘They say you show promise.’

Sanderine looked up in surprise. ‘Says who?’

A wide grin appeared on his face. ‘I have my sources. It’s good to show what you have to offer, but don’t overdo it. Attracting attention to yourself can be dangerous.’ He gave her a knowing look. ‘Find out who your real friends are.’

His look confused her. Was he talking about Gert? She changed the conversation to a different topic.

‘Elmar is really miserable here. Why won’t Father let him go? He won’t hurt a fly and he looks it. No one will hurt him!’

‘Healers travel with their families at his age. Our mother lives abroad and can’t help him unfortunately.’

She was confused. ‘Abroad? Didn’t she die six months after I was born?’

Bern shook his head. ‘Antares was merely declared dead.’

‘She left? Why?’

‘Living in the High House became unbearable for her. She was a famous Healer before she met Father.’

‘But what about us? Why didn’t she take us with her?’

‘Think for a moment. She wasn’t allowed to do that. Healers are wanderers. They don’t have a permanent address and they’re always on the road. Surely that’s no life for a child.’

‘Where is she now?’ The revelation had nonetheless hurt her, and her voice was fragile.

‘Her territory lies somewhere in the northwest. It’s called Wetterlând.’

‘Do Gert and Elmar know about this too?’

Bern shrugged.

‘What kind of a family is this!’

‘A notorious one, you know that.’

He was referring to his namesake Bern Ravensworth who, 347 years ago, had used the Glisters to lead the Battle of the Nations and stop the invasion of the wizards of the North States. This achievement had marked the beginning of a new era. Sanderine had been born 333 years after Bern’s Intervention.

‘Think about what I just told you and stay away from Gert.’ Bern ruffled her head affectionately and walked in the direction of Karen Marin.

Sanderine remained behind in confusion. Thibault and Garhelm, sons of Suger Wolfenstein the quartermaster, struck up a conversation with her. She talked to them absently while looked around for Gert.

After graciously cutting off the conversation, she crisscrossed the entire Hall but couldn’t find him. Worried, she went to the kitchen to ask the maids if they had seen Gert. They told her they had just seen him go in the direction of the staircase.

She searched the main building, then crossed the outer ward under the red evening sky to search through the stables.

Gert startled visibly when she entered, put away a knife. He was saddling his horse. He pulled the girth tight in the twilight.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked worriedly.

‘Sanderine.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I found out something terrible: Father has started to hate humanity.’

His eyes were large and black. Pelle, his gelding, nervously stepped sideways.

‘Deadly games are being played. One of my friends was arrested. I can’t bear the thought of what they might be doing to him.’

He grabbed her by the shoulders. ‘You must escape. You are the lawful successor of Asega Alisha. It is your responsibility as Patroness of Justice to demand an explanation from Father. But he is not going to risk that. He will send people over to hurt you! What happened to my friend will happen to your girlfriends. Escape across the border!’ He let go of her and led Pelle toward the exit.

She came after him. ‘Where are you going?’

‘I’m not going to tell you. Be quiet as a mouse outside, do you hear me?’

Distraught, she followed him to a small unguarded gate.

He removed the cross-beam and opened the heavy door. ‘Leave the beam where it is and go back to the party. Make sure that nobody sees you.’

He led Pelle through the gate, mounted and disappeared into the growing darkness below. She rushed to pull the wood door shut, then waited for him to return. It was still possible. The sky was still red.

It turned dark. She heard voices near the main gate. A cart-wheel rattled over the cobblestones – the feast was coming to an end.

She felt a strong urge to tell Bern about Gert’s departure, but the gate wasn’t locked and Gert could still change his mind. She didn’t want to get him into trouble unnecessarily.

She took the service entrance to the kitchen, entered the Armory Hall and blended in with the guests.

Elmar gave her a searching look. ‘What’s going on? There are guardsmen everywhere. Have you seen Gert?’

Her eyes suddenly burned with tears and she shook her head. ‘I’m tired. I’m going to my room.’ Her voice was brittle.

He noticed and tried to grab her by the arm, but she quickly turned away and got out of there.

Her room was opposite Gert’s bedroom. Elise helped her out of her clothes and into her nightgown. To her relief, Elise didn’t pay much attention to her, but shared the kitchen gossip and discussed the guests’ outfits. When she was finished, she left the room.

Sanderine couldn’t sleep. She listened intently for any sounds in the vicinity.

Commotion. People in the corridor. It could be Elmar, Bern or her father. Through the open window, she heard excited voices in the outer ward. Her door was opened. Someone looked inside. She was afraid to see who it was, pretended to be asleep. The door closed.

The clatter of horses’ hooves jolted her awake. It was getting light outside. A red glow announced daybreak. A starling sang on the roof. She quietly left her room and opened Gert’s door, hoping he had returned during the night. The bed was neatly made up. She closed the door again, worried. It took forever for Elise to arrive so she could go downstairs for breakfast. Elmar was there already and looked as if he had been awake all night. He did not ask her anything.

Halfway through the morning, she was sitting next to him at the back of the Court Hall. It was the Lord of Testerband's responsibility to administer justice and to resolve the disputes between the residents of his Domain. Her father made his decisions in consultation with the seneschal. Family members of suspects and victims flooded the room and slipped quietly into their seats. People whispered. The Lord of Testerband entered the room with the seneschal and Bern. They took their seats facing the public.

Bern gave her a stern look over the heads. She could not comprehend what his look meant.

Gert's chair was empty.

She focused her attention on the jurisdiction. It opened with some minor cases: a dispute about passage right, ownership rights and theft. She found no fault with her father's verdict; it observed the letter of the law and the punishments were in accordance to the offense. Most were fines and short-term compulsory labor. What she did miss was a look of interest in her father's eyes; nothing seemed to move him. Rational and cold. Is that what Gert meant when he talked about their father's hatred of humanity?

In the midst of a more serious case – a hot-tempered farmer had killed a servant in a blaze of fury and now stood sobbing with regret on the stand – the door of hall was opened. Boiten entered, directly followed by two guardsmen carrying a stretcher. Someone lay on it.

The figure was covered by an ash-grey cloth. It became quiet.

They halted at the front of the hall. Elmar stood up, hurried to the stretcher and folded back a corner of the blanket.

'He's dead,' Boiten said softly. 'He took his own life.'

Elmar stared at the balding man for a moment, then pulled the blanket further down and grabbed the wrist. The overgarment was dark red and the left hand was covered with blood. He straightened up, turned half-way round and looked at Sanderine in utter dejection. 'Gert.'

Later on, she remembered how a strong determination had taken hold of her. She coolly examined the wound in her brother's chest, lifted his left hand and noticed two deep cuts in the palm.

Boiten loomed up before her. The knife she always carried with her was already in her hand. Boiten froze. The force of the thrust would be fatal. Then, a sudden unbearable pain in her wrist made it impossible for her to continue.

She cried out in pain and let go of the handle. The knife clanked on the stone floor at Boiten's feet. He kicked it away violently. Two guardsmen grabbed hold of her. She cast Boiten a look that left nothing to the imagination.

'Murderer!' It had seemed like a dream, unreal.

Her father remained sinisterly calm.

He had questioned her in his meeting room shortly afterwards. He wanted to know what Gert had told her, wanted to know if she was involved in his plans to take over Testerband. She knew nothing about it. Sanderine found out what it was like to be interrogated by a Destructor. Her ignorance saved her.

She was sent back to Fort Tor the next day.

Deadly games are being played, Gert had said. It was all too true. She was sent to the sleeping quarters, not allowed to participate in the training. She wrecked the hall in a fit of rage. It didn't solve anything, it just got her into even more trouble. A few hours later, she betrayed her dog Panras out of utter powerlessness.

The sun disappeared behind the edge of the woods and lastly let go of green hills. The sky in the west was still bright blue. Down in a cell in Fort Tor it was getting dark.

Fen Kleyn had been given permission to visit her and burst into tears when she saw the bruises on her face. She kneeled before the cot and clutched Sanderine's hands. 'I want to help you. I am your friend, but I don't understand. To think that only three years ago, we carried you around on our shoulders. How can someone change so radically!'

Sanderine pulled her hands free. 'I can't be helped,' it sounded weakly. 'I have decided to leave.'

Andores

A few days later, she was back on her feet again. She hid the death of her brother and all that had happened deep inside herself, and filled the void with plans and preparations for her escape. In the middle of night two days later, she pitched a rope over the fort wall and headed north on foot, where somewhere the Aacher River flowed. She was sure about one thing: her future lay in Wetterlând, her mother's wandering domain. The Polar Star was her guide. She knew her native land well enough to run across the fields and meadows by night in the light of the moon. Her scouting skills came in good use. She crossed dunghills and walked through large stretches of sand-bedded streams to throw off her scent. One time, she heard the barking of dogs far behind her. She listened intently, concluded after a while that the sound was fading.

At night she moved on, following the thoroughfare to Fort Grid.

As soon as dawn showed herself she hid in a ditch or in some dense bushes. Voices startled her awake a few times, and she watched from her hiding place how guardsmen from the Secret Service – recognizable by their dark green overcoats and pointed helmets – questioned farmers and countrymen. They all held up their hands and shook their heads in denial. The horsemen's voices sounded angry, and after a short debate they disappeared behind the trees.

The moon waxed and waned. The bread she had brought with her ran out. She reached the Aacher River fourteen days later.

Right before sunrise, she removed her gear and tied it into a bundle with her belt. Then, dressed in just a sleeveless tunic, she walked into the water. The water dragged her away. The river was over three hundred feet wide. It took all of her strength to get away from the river bank. Worn-out, she let the river carry her for a while. When she regained her strength, she struggled onward and fought the wide river one stroke at a time. The water wasn't too cold, fortunately, its source being thousands of miles away.

She managed finally to reach the other side. She crawled up the sandy river bank, spent. She loosened the belt behind a river dune and spread everything around her to dry. The sun shone unhindered.

It was late in the afternoon when she awoke. She put her trousers back on, her riding boots, overgarment and gear, and looked from the crest of sand at the land behind it.

Everywhere she looked, the tops of shrubs and saplings stuck out above the sea of waving reeds. The Palland was known to be impenetrable, but the widespread swamp had apparently dried out over the past ten years. She bravely stepped down and let the vegetation enclose her.

Dried out or not, it was still treacherous. In addition to the reed plains, the no-land had countless little lakes filled with squishy bog moss.

Raised strips of land with little trees meandered in between them. The ridges were of different length but they had one thing in common: sooner or later they all led to a dead end.

The other side lay somewhere in the north, but the Pole Star was useless in this area. It was incredibly dangerous to travel by night. Using the sun as navigation, she became hopelessly lost after two days.

All of the tales about swamps turned out to be nonsense: not a single monster rose from the dregs with riddles for her to solve, nor did Tall Met show her his fishy head. They were just oldwives tales meant to scare children, she concluded. She did see some will-o'-the-wisps at night, but she didn't feel drawn toward them. Only someone with a mad cow's brain would leave solid ground to follow a speck of light.

Her opinion of the Palland changed on the fourth day, when she stepped into a deserted building to shelter from an approaching thunderstorm. It stood between some birches on a spit of land and was overgrown with vines. It looked old and forgotten. Spurred on by the pitch-black clouds, she looked for the entrance and hacked away at the tough stalks with both hands on the hilt of her sword. She noticed that she was losing her strength; she had been living on edible plants and roots for days, digging them up with her weapon.

Inside the building, she was met by a surprise. Daylight poured in through a rectangular opening in the flat roof. Mounted on a platform stood an artistic looking instrument. She walked up the three steps in amazement. Three golden eyes on a green copper pole were staring at her.

Below the eyes was an engraving of a lightning bolt, and below that a circle with ten little balls. The moon and some stars, she guessed. She put the sword away and let her index finger glide across the balls.

It became dark while she inspected the instrument. Two different sized silver shields were suspended from the pole, the smaller one in front of the larger. They were bound together by a copper wire, with the pole in between. Twelve silver beetles rested on the wire.

A bright white light filled the space for a few seconds. She looked up at the ash-grey clouds and waited. Five seconds later, an ear-splitting crack followed. She winced involuntarily, felt a sprinkle of rain on her nose. It became a little lighter. She bent over one of the bugs. Refined silver-work. Resembled a Maybug with its fan-shaped wings, but finer. She even believed she could see its determined pug nose.

A sudden blinding light, a hissing sound and then a massive thunder-clap. Lightning had struck nearby. It began to rain, and the heavy down-pour drove her to the sheltered part of the building. Water gushed over the instrument, but something else caught her attention: the larger shield slowly changed color from a silver-gray to a warm red and started to shine.

The beetles took on the same shine. Sanderine watched the marvel with open mouth. The twelve insects spread their wing cases and made a jingling sound as they freed themselves from the metal, flew up and formed a hovering cluster. And it didn't end there: the beetles on the copper wire changed color again until they shined brightly.

Twelve new insects let go of the metal and, jingling, joined the others. She moved to the exit.

The silver beetles began to glow for a third time. This could go on forever, she thought awestruck. What is it? What will it become? What if it's something sacred that no one is supposed to witness – I should get out of here. My presence is purely coincidental, but try and explain that to the beetles.

Outside, the rain and lightning continued. She ran frantically across the strip of land for a hundred yards, afraid the creatures would come after her. Then she waded haphazardly through the reeds to another rise of land and continued walking.

The storm passed.

It took an hour for her fear to subside. The distance between herself and the temple had become large enough. That night she huddled on an elevation, wet and numb with cold. She tried to sleep until she heard a jingling sound.

She got to her feet uncertainly and looked around. The creatures had left the building. About ten blazing orbs glided in a wide formation across the swamp. It was a wonderous spectacle. One of the swarms came alongside her. She made herself small, just in case. It hovered for a moment, as if hesitating, then moved closer to her. The area where she sat was flooded with the light. The other orbs floated toward her as well. She slowly straightened up.

Scared, but also curious, she reached out to touch the swarm. It immediately dispersed; beetles covered her hand, crawled up her arm. She quickly shook them off. A moment later she was completely covered in them. She searched the ground for support, cleared her eyes, and watched the glowing bugs disappear into her stomach like light spirits. Then she dreamed that the creatures changed something inside of her. When they were done, they flickered above her. She floated above the swamp, carried by a cloud of light. The dream was unsettling. It took a while before she realized that she was laying on a bundle of straw somewhere, behind a little fence. The hut was quiet. She vaguely remembered the kind voice of a woman and the clicking of a spoon against her teeth.

>>> to be continued<<<