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Enter Enderby

Blek did not look like he was on a quest. He was no knight in shining armor, but a pale, stern man, and his war steed was an old rickety Skoda. And he was not looking for a Holy Grail either. Or maybe he was.

He started to appreciate the village only when he was halfway through it. It didn't look like a village: a sod roof shed here, a wooden cabin there, a house half hidden among the trees that could be either. The buildings were so far apart that the term 'settlement' could only be tentatively be applied. It was all traditional houses, wood on stone, half sunken into the earth, with small windows that had shutters but often no glass. The only thing that seemed connect them, except for the ever present darkness of the forest, was the road, a narrow track with some gravel but mostly mud, which snaked around and over the hills. A sign labeled the village 'Enderby'. It could be my kind of place, he thought.

He drove slowly on, taking in the scenery and using his sixth sense. His search went beyond sights and sounds, down into the ground, into the roots of the site. The place had a peculiar feel to it: old yet somehow vibrant, an odd contrast. Could it be what he was looking for?

Yet the settlement was so small that soon he was almost out of it again. When he rounded the last bend he suddenly spotted a house that was out of tune with the rest. It was painted pink, with a black and white yin/yang symbol on the door, which had a sign over it that said "Fornes Magiske Butikk". Tibetan prayer flags fluttered in the wind and tones of some Native American song, heavily infused with monotonous drumming, drifted down the ramp.

Ridiculous city magic crap! Instantly the spell was broken. He made ready to proceed down the road, glancing back at the house in his rear view mirror. Such a mess, somebody must have *deliberately* gobbled it together, his mind joked. Then on a whim he changed his mind, decided to riposte and pay it a visit. So he parked the car, climbed the ramp and entered the shop. Immediately he was assaulted by a heavy cloud of incense. The shop was small, crammed with healing crystals, runic tablets, aluminum amulets and talismans, colored and scented candles, ordinary branches posing as cheap divining rods. The usual stuff. So it really was just another junk store. Yet he had already walked into it, so he persevered and perused the rambleware.

In the back a beader parted and the owner entered the room. It was an old woman, a bit plump, with keen eyes, a round wrinkled face and a smile that once would have been attractive. "Hei! I'm Fornе. Welcome in Fornе's Magic Shop! How can I help you?"

"Oh, I'm just browsing a bit," Blek said, turning away from her.

"What are you looking for? A good luck charm, a healing stone? Or something for your love?"

"I don't think you have anything worth its ..., anything interesting to me." He turned back to the woman, who had taken up position behind the counter, heavily leaning on it with two outspread arms. He was considering how to retreat without too much fuss when something caught his eye: a golden or gold-alloy amulet, made of interlocking gripping beasts, hanging from her neck. His trained eye recognized it as viking art, yet not belonging to any of the six traditional styles. It could be something genuine. "What's that?"

She grasped the amulet, looked down at it and back up. "That's my personal talisman, my pilatterion."

Her knowledge of Greek was not very good. He came closer. "It looks old, ancient even." The bitch probably did not have the faintest idea of its worth. Greed got the better of him. "I want it."

She backed off a little. "It is not for sale."

"I said I want it. I will give you 150 krone for it."

She was looking left and right like she was trying to find something among her wares that could protect her. "It is not for sale."

With a speed that belied his age, he darted forward, grabbed the amulet and yanked it off her, breaking its cord. Fornе was pulled forward and smacked her head on the counter. She looked up with fiery eyes, though managed to restrain a look of fear or anger. A little blood welled up from her lip. Blek tossed the money on the wood and marched out of the shop.

His tread was unconcerned. He had sensed right away that the woman was an outsider in the village, an alien. In a village like this his position was as strong as hers. She would not cause any trouble.

He got back into his car and resumed his journey, content in his gains. However within minutes he noticed smoke coming from the engine. The car was old and prone to such problems. He knew he would not make it to the next town, so he turned around and drove back to Enderby. On the way through he had spotted a fuel pump that seemed to act as a garage too. When he parked his car the mechanic, a young man with a calm aura, sauntered up to him. "Overheated engine?"

"Obviously," replied Blek.

"Lemme have a look." He donned his working gloves, opened the lid, poked and probed the engine for quite a while. "At first I suspected a broken radiator or something like that. All too common with Skoda. That would have cost you 8,000, maybe 9,000 krone. But no, it is your transmission. It is completely worn out, you should replace it. Surely you will have seen this coming? It will cost you 75,000, possibly 100,000 krone. I don't think it is worth it."

Blek *had* seen it coming, more than the technician could know. In a way, the car reflects myself somewhat, he mused. But it was just a shell. "I'll sell it to you for scrap. How about 3,000?"

"More like 2,000. It is a Skoda."

"Done." Money changed hands.

Blek looked around. "When is the next bus?"

"Friday."

Maybe this is my kind of town, Blek thought. "It seems I will remain here for a while. Is there a hotel here?"

"You can try Bjarne's Oak Hostel. It is not really a hotel, but the only place of public lodging here."

Bjarne was an old man, older than himself, both in body and spirit. Like the proprietor, the room was dull, sour and businesslike, which suited Blek's needs well. As soon as the other had left he checked the walls, the floor, the cupboards, the whole for wires, trails and echoes. To his satisfaction, the survey yielded nothing. He went back to lounge, dined on leek soup with bread and retired early to his room. There were still an hour or two to kill before nightfall, so he pulled out the amulet and studied it in detail.

It was a remarkable piece of craftsmanship. The smith had woven a long thin gold bar into a mesh that was mostly regular but contained several delightful anomalies. Segments had been made into gripping beasts, which hunted and yapped at each other. He searched for a starting point and an end, but could not find any; apparently the pattern went on endlessly. When the talisman was tilted in any direction, it revealed new patterns that made the thing seem to come alive. It reminded him of viking art but was subtly different. It was not the work of a modern smith. He would have sensed that. It was clearly ancient.

If his spirit would not have been disciplined by long training, he would have jumped up and down with excitement. This could be the key towards his goal! It had the proper age, the essence of skill, the robustness. It could serve as his vessel, his guard, his heart. A fylaktírio indeed! His instincts had been right, this was the place. But in order to use the amulet as he intended to, he first needed to truly make it his own. He lacked the means to analyze it fully; that would have to wait until he was back home.

Meanwhile night had come down on the village, so he went to bed. As usual, he experienced his well known dreams again, which marched down the road of the hours in their familiar order. The elf in the woods, the bully in the form of the boar and the endless chase, the cliff, the trek through the barren desert and the home that he could never reach. However despite his discipline images of the amulet inserted themselves. The gripping beasts engaged in some kind of dance that distorted the others. He tried to arrange them but they kept slipping out of his grasp.

Flashback: Old Leather

"This is something that you cannot learn from books," Karl Leðr said. For a moment Blek feared that the old man would toss the costly tome away and wreck the old worn cover and pages. "Though a good book can tell a story by itself, both through words and its being." He gently laid it aside. Then he walked out onto the porch. "Look at yonder field. The farmer rakes the soil with the harrow behind his tractor, a thing of the industrial age. His ancestors did likewise, using horsepower, and the earliest peasants were forced to use their own muscles. Yet all of them follow the same lines over and around the hill, the ones that were used by the very first farmers, some 6,000 years ago. In all that time they have never changed. Every year the soil has been turned upside down, fertilized with animal dung, dead fish and even human semen. This soil breathes cultivation, agriculture is its very being. If you go out there you will see the furrows, smell fresh earth, feel the grains and roots and earth worms. But you must ... sense beyond the present, into the past. That is where they are, buried and half forgotten, but still at hand."

He glanced sideways. "You are not convinced. Come." Together they walked to the field. Leðr stooped and dug his hand into the soil. "Close your eyes. Shut out the sounds of the twittering birds who know nothing of the past. Feel, smell, then abandon those senses too. Use a, what shall I call it, sixth sense." He sat, waiting, appearing lost in thought. After a while a smile formed on his face. "Aahh ... There they are: the trauma of the rape of pretty Tófa; Ketil who broke his neck on that rock when he was still young, though he lived two

centuries earlier; the forgotten silver of Ragny, from a time when there were no kings."

Blek tried to copy, focusing his mind to the utmost though he did not know how. "I sense none of them. Those dead, should I summon them? The book describes a ritual -"

"Your only experience with the dead is by summoning vengeful spirits and madmen!" Leðr interrupted. "Those are not the kind of dead you want to summon, what you should want is to keep them away. That's what our ancestors did: break their weapons, tie their toes together, pin them tight with a stake, cut their heads off. No one wants an ancestor haunting the place. But the vast majority of the dead does not belong to that category, they are meek. You can call them, but they will not come. So, you must go to them instead."

"How?"

He sighed. "The dead slide away from the living. They are no longer bound to life and shy away from it. Most of them seek the comfort of the cold dark earth. To mingle with them, you must become like them. No wild energetic displays of strength or speed, but slow movements; no cozy warmth but empty coldness; no joyful light but sullen darkness."

"I have read about that," Blek remarked. "Some necromancers wear the clothes of deceased people and eat decayed food. Those ceremonies can last for days, weeks."

"Empty symbols, meaningless repetition. You must become like the dead, not dead yourself! Now your practice with pranayama will be useful. Breathe little, though not stop all together. You will also need to get more accustomed to cold and darkness."

He stood up. "I have an assignment for you. Spend a night in the mausoleum of the Bunter family. Do not bring food, drink or something to occupy yourself with. When you are there, don't go rummaging about, even if you are cold, tired or bored. Just sit there, let your body sleep and keep your mind tranquil. Do not act, only observe."

"That sounds difficult," Blek reflected.

"It is difficult, very. You must essentially diminish your life, your existence. Let's see if you can last one night. Later you must go the even greater lengths. Here is a magic talisman that will help you a bit." He handed over a small fossil, which looked like a petrified animal, half curled up, its species unrecognizable to an untrained eye.

That night Blek broke into the crypt, some time after dusk. He closed the door behind him. Darkness and silence engulfed him, as if he was properly entombed. It was a chilling feeling, but that was just what he needed, he thought. He installed himself on a slab of stone. Then he lowered his heart rate and descended into a state of half-sleep, while taking care not to actually doze off.

Maybe it was the help of the talisman, maybe his earlier training. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the mental darkness peeled back. One by one he detected the ghosts of the family that had been buried in the mausoleum in the last few decades. He thought he detected hints of their ancestors too, but was not sure. He did not see or hear them, but felt echoes of their moods upon death: despaired, acquiesced, painful. He managed to refrain from disturbing them by doing as he was told, keeping a low profile.

The trouble was that they absolutely did nothing. They neither spoke nor moved. All was quiet, still, chilly and dark. He endured it for several hours but increasingly got numb, tired and itchy, until he could not stand it anymore. He rearranged a leg to get some feeling into it again. Immediately the 'images' of the dead faded away, like flimsy wisps of fog in the wind. Blast. He felt like a predatory animal who had stalked towards his prey, only to step on a twig at the last moment. He tried again but could not control his body, so left the tomb and greeted the stars again. He resolved to try again in the coming week.

Graves

The next day he set out to explore the village in earnest. Maybe if the amulet came from the area, there were more treasures to be found. Perhaps even something that would enlighten the origin of the artifact.

Of course he sought out the local church. That turned out to be a small, though handsome stave church, its pillars propping up a cascade of small rooflets. He scrutinized its pillar carvings and was disappointed to see it was all the usual political and christian iconography with lions and horn blowing heroes. Neither gripping beasts here, nor dragons or half human animals.

He left the church and visited the main attraction: the graveyard, where he wandered around at random. This was a different world from the warm wood and candles of the church. Short cut grass guarded by cold weathered gray stones, silent and brooding. Here lies Johannes Kirkegård, * 3-6-1914 †5-11-1973;

Mathilde Kirkegård, * 12-1-1968 † 11-10-1976; Birla Husmor, * 4-5-1891 † 28-9-1958, R.I.P. dear mother; et cetera. The oldest person on the graveyard had died somewhere in 1894, but the dates and name were illegible. None of them spoke to him. Only their offspring had left well-wishes in the form of photos and other mementos, equally stagnant. The single movement came from a few crows that were hopping around, looking for scraps of food hidden among the dead leaves and branches. He kept sauntering around the place, thinking, hoping for inspiration.

His musings were interrupted by the appearance of the local priest, a small man with cow eyes, a face like a plank and some gray fishnet hair hanging from his chin. "Welcome sir, welcome in the House of God. I see that you take an interest in our graves?"

For a moment, Blek kept staring at a gravestone to straighten his face. When he turned, his outlook was serene. "Graves always sober me," he said. "They confront us with our mortality."

"Yes, the body is mortal. The flesh grows, lusts and withers in the endless cycle of generations. But the soul does not. In the end we can all look forward to sit at the feet of God."

The sales pitch was beginning again. Blek cut it short. "A graveyard mostly is a place for looking *backward*, remembering and honoring the dead. Here lie our parents, our ancestors. Here are our roots. Surely you are aware of this? Enderby does not strike me as a place that blindly runs with the torrents of modernity."

"Except for that pink house down the road," he added on a whim.

He had struck a resonating note. "Don't get me started on that new age nonsense! Those fools mix Christianity with pagan symbolism and rituals they have concocted from their own twisted fantasies. Even the stuff that is not inspired by satanism is harmful, as it clouds people's vision of God!" The priest took a deep breath and sobered himself. "But you are right. Our bones lie here. Did you know that this graveyard dates back to the Middle Ages? The oldest graves could be from the 11th century."

"Old, though not ancient," Blek reflected. "There were people in this land before that time. Pagans, yes, but Norse nonetheless. A handful of chiefs obtained a ship burial. Where are the others, I often wonder. Are their bones right under our feet? Churches are often built over ancient temples."

The priest wagged his finger. "No, this church was founded by Eirik Kolott, away from the pagan shrine, to make a fresh start. We are certain of it, as it was written down by his successor. The viking site is half a kilometer north of here."

"I have never heard about a pagan sanctuary in this area."

"It was only discovered half a year ago. We notified the university in Trondheim, twice, but they have not yet come. Apparently they are busy in other places. Maybe it is because it is small, but there was a shrine there, a grave mound and possibly some minor graves."

Blek could not completely hide his excitement. "Could you take me there? I am a trained archaeologist. I would like to do some professional investigation. It is so rare to find a pristine site that has not been spoiled by hordes of tourists and treasure seekers."

"I would love that!" exclaimed the priest. "It is seldom that we meet educated people who show an interest in our village. Let me lock the sacristy, get my boots and then we'll visit the place."

"I don't have any equipment with me at present. Do you have a shovel, a measuring tape, a compass and a flashlight that I could borrow?"

"Of course, follow me!"

The first stop was at the house of the priest, who identified himself as Lauge Maðr. While he exchanged his priestly robes for a coat and trekking boots he blurted the discovery of his newfound friend to his wife and their children, three blond jumplings ranging from six to ten years of age. It being a holiday week, all were free. The whole gang was fired by Maðr's story and accompanied them to the mound. The children bombarded Blek with questions. "Are you really an argeologist?" "Can I help with the digging, please?" "If we find a viking sword, can we keep it?"

Blek had trouble hiding his resentment. "The word is 'archaeologist'" "Yes, as long as you are careful." "No, that will go to the museum."

At the scene, he realized why the place had been hidden for so long. It lay deep in the forest and was overgrown with trees, except for a massive boulder that towered two meters into the air and looked a bit like a stooping troll. There was a small hillock, possibly a grave mound, and the presence of other graves could not be ruled out.

Blek prowled around, deliberately glanced over things that looked interesting to him, prodded and scrutinized boring rocks and trees in detail and generally tried to radiate an air of aloof professionalism. Nonetheless his entourage followed his every move. He had to get rid of them. So he sent the oldest child away to fetch an axe, ordered the other two to look for ultramarine stones and had the priest dig a hole at a

random location. However the kid was back in half an hour, flushed with excitement and exertion; the workers continued to dig up pebbles with the smallest hints of blue; the hole got deeper and deeper and the wife brought lunch to sustain their labor. Blek realized that the project was going to take time.

But he was a patient man. He had the locals work hard while he took measurements of everything and everything, in all dimensions. During the few breaks he lectured them with about the vikings, not with tales from the sagas, but with long descriptions of wood carving techniques, homing in on every dull detail.

At the end of the day the family was covered in sweat and dirt like a gang of dwarfs and Blek had a half a notebook full of incomprehensible scribbles and sketches. "We have nothing to show for it, but trust me, we have made progress!" he announced. "With God's blessing, tomorrow we will continue our hard labor."

The family deliberated and offered him to stay at their house. He rejected the offer, saying that he needed solitude for sifting his notes. They seemed relieved at that and dragged themselves home to clean up and eat.

At the hotel, Blek left the gibberish undisturbed and pondered how to proceed. At night, his dreams were again disturbed. He dreamt of viking warriors, uttering sardonical remarks just before they died, after having their legs cut off or their bellies pierced by rivals.

Flashback: Illusions

The look on the face of the police officer leaned more towards disdain than skepticism. "I don't believe in hocus pocus, mister. I only admit you to participate because of your recommendation."

"I hope I can dismiss your doubts," Blek replied. "But everything depends on the situation. The traces might be disturbed by ley lines, poltergeists or stray tomte. But there are any, I will find them."

The officer preceded him to the house, walking with a swagger that was reinforced by the jangling of handcuffs, pistol and radio. I must take care not to grow too famous, Blek thought. Too much attention might turn him from hunter into prey. But for the moment his 'recommendation' fulfilled its purpose.

When they approached the main entrance Blek made a show of stopping and looking confused. "Not here. There is a presence that disturbs my senses." Which was partially true, as the magical ward blocked him from entering.

He circled the house, sniffing and peering and probing. Finally he homed in on piece of wall at the back, near a small extension. "Here," he said. "We must go in here."

The policemen were confused. "There is a door not two meters next to you."

"Things are not always what they seem. Break through here."

It took some time for the men to call up a construction company that had the tools to break through the wall. In the meanwhile Blek wandered around a bit, trying to look connected to the spirit world. The builders arrived and brought hammers, crowbars and a jackhammer that made short work of the bricks. When the dust had settled a bit Blek was the first to stick his head into the hole. Unseen by the bystanders he pulled a doll from his pocket and stuck it into the rubble, then visibly retrieved it. "Aha! A trauma-vessel! Let's see what it can tell us." He engaged in elaborate pantomime with the doll, then flung it to the ground as if he had received an electric shock. "Aw! Blasted spirit." His eyes followed the direction of the head of the doll and then he set off in the same direction. The policemen, divided into skeptics and fools, followed him. He led them to a tree of the nearby woods, felt it and glanced upward.

"Look! A body!" exclaimed one of the men.

"You searched the entire premises for hours, but none of you ever bothered to look up?" he asked sarcastically.

One of the policemen clambered up with the help of the construction workers the body was carefully lowered to the ground. The chief officer grudgingly congratulated Blek on his success. There were forms to be filled with fake data, standard questions to be answered by vague statements and then he was free to go. It had not been Blek's sixth sense that guided them to the body; he had hoisted it up himself the night before. Fingerprints might have given him away, but who would take fingerprints of someone who helped in the investigation? He returned to his hotel room and took an afternoon nap.

In the night he returned to the crime scene. Barricade tape did not stop him, and the house's magical barriers, now neatly punctured at the rear, neither. Now he used his senses to seek what he was looking for: something that bore the weight of many years, of hopes, joys and disappointments. It was hidden in a stash under the floor, under a loose tile, another thing that the police had missed. Eagerly he retrieved the book and browsed through it, his eyes flying over the text like a vulture homing in on a meal. Mundane events like

family visits, marriages and purchases were mixed with philosophizing, sometimes bordering on reverie. Nowhere was there any concrete method or formula for transcendence of mortality, just theories and whims. The final verdict was in the beginning: the diary was only 81 years old, barely reaching back to the 19th century.

Blast. Another failure. But he would continue his search.

Going down

In the morning it appeared that his tactics were starting to bear fruit. The youngest child did not turn up at the dig site. Apparently she had to visit a friend. Blek had the others toil away again, why he walked around with the measurement tape and made more notes. It was not all for show. He was listening for the whispers of the ancients, gauging traces of essences, triangulating the heart of the site. It was difficult work in the daylight, with all the fuss around him. He felt like a policeman recording all the facts but not coming an inch closer to solving the murder mystery. But at least the family was being worn down. The second child got bored in the afternoon and skulked away, leaving only the eldest and her father to work. After a second day of cutting timber, digging through rocky soil and tree roots without finding anything, both were spent. That night Blek slept soundly.

The next morning only the adult turned up. Blek assigned him to do more heavy tasks. The site started to resemble a true archaeological dig, with ditches everywhere. Their architect, like an experienced general on campaign, stuck to his plans.

Mid morning a villager came up who addressed the priest. "Lauge, you must come! They want to have Forne's burial in the afternoon."

"So soon? As if we are muslims here! Excuse me, mr. Blek, I have religious duties to attend to."

"Forne, dead?" Blek echoed.

"She ran the shop on the outskirts of the village. You know, the ugly pink new age shop? She died the day before yesterday of cardiac arrest. Despite her quirks, she was a good woman. I have to prepare for the funeral." He looked pleased with an excuse to get out of his ditch.

For moment panic gripped Blek, then he realized that nobody had seen him enter the shop. His mood turned around in an instant. Now he was finally going to be alone on the site! And yet, the woman ... curiosity overcame him. "I'll attend the funeral too. I don't know this woman, but I sense her loss affects the whole village."

"I do appreciate that," Maðr said. "The rites will keep me busy the whole day, I'm afraid."

Blek did not really need to change his clothes because he always dressed in black. But he bought new ones anyway, as the old ones were getting smelly. He also bought a small bouquet of flowers and joined the villagers at the funeral. It was not a large crowd, though it was well possible they were all present. The mechanic was there, the hostel owner and some thirty other people. The family was represented by a young woman, a pretty damsel who seemed out of place in the solemn crowd. She was the first to throw some earth on the coffin after it had been lowered into the grave.

"That is Nyrrí, her niece," Maðr's son said. "She came all the way from the big city!"

Blek reflected that she resembled Forne quite a lot, with changes in the right places. Less fat, no wrinkles, firm breasts. This is how that old woman should have looked like! he thought. Of course such a pretty little damsel would never take an interest in an old gray man like him. Though maybe that was about to change ... When the funeral was over he prepared to go back to the viking mound. The boy wanted to come too, but after Blek told him that he would have to take over the digging from his father, mumbled that his mother had some chores for him to do and scampered off.

Good. Blek first went to the supermarket, spent a small fortune on akvavit and only then went back to the digging site. Now his real measurements came into play. He had formed a good estimate of the dimensions and location of the grave under the large mound and was quite certain of the position of the entrance. The light was already fading, so he worked fast in excavating it. After two hours, half hidden in the twilight, he uncovered it.

Instead of trying to pry open the ancient stone door, he uncorked one of his bottles and sprinkled a libation of liquor along the edges. "Awaken, oh lord, hear and heed my call! I bring thee a gift of life water. Spirits to raise spirits! I call thee from thy cold home, to lavish thine thirst on liquid fire. Come forth, to -"

Some primeval sense, chilling has back, alerted him of something nearby. He stopped abruptly, turned and saw a dark shape sitting on the nearby heap of sand. It was a burly man with very pale skin that shone dull

in the waning light.

"Drinck!" he demanded. Blek thought he recognized the newcomer. Had he seen him in the crowd at the funeral? Uncertain what to do, he tossed the half empty bottle to the man, who downed it in one long amazingly big gulp. It seemed that his skin started to flush. "More!" he demanded.

"First you must impart your knowledge to me. I offer you drink; you must bring me food. I want the fruits of the goddess.

The man came closer. Blek could smell his stale breath. "You wanne keep going past the grave? Zhat'ss easyyi, lookat me!"

"No, I don't want to drag myself to the grave, or beyond. I want the bloom, the pulse, the potency."

The other gripped Blek's left arm, digging his fingers deep into his flesh, spilling more of his morbid reek over him. "Hic! Firsst, more drinck!"

Blek quickly pulled out a second bottle with his right hand and held it out of his reach. "Careful now! Release me or I will drop it!"

The brute snorted and tried to grab the bottle, but Blek turned with his movement. The other tried left and right, again and again, so it looked like they were dancing a funeral waltz on the grave together.

"Foolll!" the man exclaimed. "I am bound to this plaze. Thatt is not what you sseek. To become truly new, you muzt go to ye oldest plaz!"

The joy of achievement paralyzed Blek. "Where is that?"

The man yanked the bottle from his hands and gulped it down as fast as the first one. "Go you to the sspring up the mountain. Yonder, right under the Kvennavagn there. Thattis Freyja's lundr; otherss resideded ther before her." He started to sing. "De roots a-growing, the winds a-blowing, the leavez a-fflowing, pearlies greenandred! Oh so sweet on the tongue, tales of time whenner laif was young!"

Blek turned his gaze towards the mountain, which stood like a silent giant under the starlight. An ancient grove, yes! That was where he must go.

Flashback: The shaman

He certainly looked the part: gray beard down to his crotch, leather coat patched a hundred times over, helmet with antlers. But Blek had more eyes for the dagger, which was never far from a hand. What was the saying again? Where the wolf's ears are, the wolf's teeth are close. But he kept his calm and waited for the shaman's reply.

"Seiðr? Casting galdrar, reweaving the threads of fate? I am afraid that that is a path to nowhere." He puffed his pipe, wafting the stench of something that was definitely not tobacco towards Blek.

"Yet people say you are a seiðmaðr, and a potent one too."

"People say many things. Which does not make them true, unless it is said by many people, fools that they are. If too many dream a dream, it takes on shape. But Death is no fool. He will not heed prayers, dances, sacrifices or anything else you can throw at him." He grinned widely while saying it, showing a row of sharp teeth.

Blek's shoulders sagged. It had taken years of searching, bribing shady characters, following false leads, evading the police and exhausting himself to find this man, to stumble on yet another dead end.

"At least you are right in ignoring the antics of the neo-pagans. They are utterly ignorant. Lighting bonfires and singing silly songs, pah! Seiðr is old, much older than books and fairy-tales. Nowadays nobody really knows how it worked. But my guess is that it had little to do with what you are after. The ancestors were far too busy with fertility, wealth and war. Their lives were short and harsh. It was the *others* that were enduring, living among the peoples: elves, some trolls, landdisir. And the gods, of course." He grinned again. "You could become an einheri and sit at Óðinn's side in Valhöll! Though I think a life of endless fighting and boozing would not accommodate you. Also, you don't like like a warrior."

Blek rolled up his sleeve. The shaman's hand immediately went to his dagger, but he stopped when he saw a scar that ran almost the entire length of Blek's lower arm. "I fought with a troll once. I sought wisdom but met only hunger and sharp claws. My sword bounced off his skin like it was stone. I survived only because I fled with my tail between my legs. Indeed, no place in Valhöll for me."

The old man put out his pipe. "There are four ways: technology, stretching, anchoring and rejuvenation."

He stood up, joints creaking, and started to pace around the room. "The modern -" he shivered "- way is to become a cyborg. This is not my field. Though it seems that nowadays they can replace limbs, organs even even circulatory systems, nobody has been able to mechanize the brain. I doubt that they ever will be able

to; in my view there is more to a soul than connecting neurons."

He continued pacing. "The second method is the simplest. With proper diet, breathing and the right potions you can extend your life. Years, decades, perhaps even a century. Mind over body, as they say! But over time the strand of your life will get thinner and thinner, until there is little difference with death."

"The third way. Anchoring means discarding your body and locking your soul into a phylactery." He picked up piece of amber and tossed it over. "You would become a *lik*, essentially a spirit, of human origin. This is high magic, though some would call it low. But, as we have already seen, the rituals to accomplish that have been lost. Rediscovering them may take more than a lifetime.

He stooped down towards Blek. "You could try rejuvenation. After all, you are Norse, no? Obtain the apples of Iðunn. If there are still some to be found, it is in this country."

Blek noticed that the dagger was still in its sheath. "How do I go about that?"

"Scour the country for remnants of the past. Rune stones, graves, amulets, or better still the ancient holy places. They will be hard to find, their auras buried under the centuries. You said you have some skill in *dauðvit*, no? Look in the valleys, the groves, where life grows green."

Going up

He was weary from his work and the strange encounter, but his spirit was fired up. Finally, after all his searching and hunting, the chance of an opening! Ignoring the scratches of the branches, which stabbed him in the dark, he plodded on through the forest, climbing higher and higher towards the place the drunkard had pointed out.

Meanwhile the forest thinned and gradually the trees shrunk to shrubs, then grass. The temperature went down, an icy wind cut through his clothes. The cold he was used to, but not the steep slopes with their treacherous crevices and loose pebbles. Climbing a mountain in the dark. Only a fool would attempt that, or a man possessed.

He realized that though the pale man had given him a general direction, his target could be hidden anywhere among the rocky tresses of the mountain. He fished his rune stones out of his pocket. They did not carry Futhark characters, but syllables. And the phonetics did not come from Old Norse, but from Au, the oldest language. Older than Proto-Germanic, older than Proto-Indo-European. To speak the language one had to yoke with the earth. One extra rune was needed, a native one. So he took his knife and with stiff fingers cut a branch from a nearby willow. Using the tip, he carved out a tiny syllable: *Ūð*.

Then he cast the whole lot and scrutinized the pattern. Giant orthogonal to green ... Giant might refer to the mountain or something else. Green was aligned with female, interesting. They were more less grouped with Sun. That could mean south. He decided to veer his course left, to the southern slope.

It was not the easiest part of the mountain. There was more climbing than walking to do. His hands chafed on the unyielding rocks. The cold invaded his body, slowly, stealthily creeping through his veins. Even the sober Blek, so accustomed to darkness, chill and silence started to falter. He stumbled and fell several times. Still, he pushed on, driven by his craving.

But his movements became slower and more erratic. He had to rest for a moment and soon after again. Clouds had dissipated and the stars were bright in the clean air. Such pretty little lights, in many ways like his desire. They looked like he could just pick them out of the sky, but he knew they were far out of his reach. A man could stare at them for an eternity. He closed his eyes for a moment, still seeing them. To rest here and watch those pretty stars, if only a moment, possibly a few more ...

No! This was the opposite of his goal. His training took over and with effort he pulled himself upright, resumed walking. The slope became steeper and steeper, forcing him to steer even more to the left and descend again, back to where the skin of the mountain was haired with green, though it appeared gray in the starlight. He guessed that his route was taking him back in the direction of the village. Quite suddenly two giant shapes loomed in the dark, like *jötunn* bending over him. Closer, they turned out to be only two sturdy rocky cliffs, as if they were petrified trolls.

Beyond them was a dale that was sheltered from the worst of the wind. The trees were higher here, shielding lesser vegetation from the cold also. In the center ran a mountain stream, fed by a small waterfall. He smelled various resins and herbs, berries too, though the season was not yet late. Could this be the place?

The sun started to shine red in the east, but the light was still too faint to discern the species of the trees by sight. He determined their kind by touching the leaves. Birch, pine, spruce, something that probably was

aspen, more birch ... Finally he felt something round, hard and smooth, with just a dimple ... He thought he saw a woman among the greenery. Immediately he became wary. A *rådande*? Would he have to fight? Then he recognized her: Nyrri, the shopkeeper's niece. Though it could be that it was only his foggy mind imprinting her image on the woman. He walked up to her and asked: "What are you doing here?"

She gave him one of those vague feminine smiles. "To collect my things."

"They are at the shop."

"Not everything." She stood up, with a supple grace that made a ripple of her limbs and mesmerized him.

"Searching for fruit, eh?"

She was really very young and pretty. He no longer cared whether she was a *rådande*, family of the shopkeeper or *Iðunn* herself. He reached out to her with his bony arms.

A faint smile washed over her face. Before his tired muscles could react, she produced a small club and whacked it against his left temple. It did not even hurt much.

While his consciousness was ebbing away, she plucked the amulet from his neck. "Goodbye, Blek. You know, I am not so different from you. I just walk another route. You, rest in ... Well, rest."

Going away

When he came to the sun had climbed significantly, but the height still enforced stiff cold. In the daylight the dale seemed not so special anymore. The two *jötunn* stones looked smaller, the trees were all ordinary mountain rooters, the smell of berries was gone. The light enabled him to conduct his search quickly. It yielded nothing, it was a dead end. What had lured him there was gone. Still in his bones he felt he had grazed his goal by the width of a hair.

Feeling numb he forced his legs in motion and descended the mountain, towards the village. He steered towards the eastern edge, where the magic shop was located. It was closed. Become a burglar and loot the place for anything useful? But when he peered through the window he saw that the building had already been emptied.

The noon sun had trouble finding him, trudging along the road, in the shade of the countless trees. Only a handful of cars passed him by. He raised his thumb but none stopped, some even seemed to accelerate.

A motorcycle driver was so startled by the black ghost that suddenly loomed in his view that he swerved off the road, plunged into a ditch, was catapulted over his front wheel and crashed into one of the trees. Blek sauntered over to the man, checked his pulse and determined that he was stone dead. He removed his helmet, put it on his own head, dragged the motorcycle out of the ditch and drove off. The tails of his black coat flapped fiercely in the turbulence, so that he looked like one of the Riders of the Apocalypse.

Enderby had proven to be not the end, just another step in his quest. But somewhere out there, there was a woman with cheeks like rosy apples. He sensed her fragrance like a wolf on the hunt. Sooner or later, he would find her.