

Lambda Beam presents...



The chronicle begins...

Written by Reactor

"I'm free" - the monkey said to the grate.

"I'm not" - the grate responded.

"I'm Locked among monkeys."

In a chronicle, the beginning is a very delicate time. A legend may be passed on by hundreds, thousands of people, certain elements might change, as years are going by, yet, some things will never change. How it all started? And when?

I don't know when was the time, where something went horribly wrong...and why it happened that way, what lead the flow of events unto a trail, which resulted in a full-blown tragedy - death, despair and fear. Things which could not be happening. Things which simply could not exist. Something have happened a long long time ago. Something terribly wrong, which ignited the fatal chain of events. The

stage was set: a hidden society - a dark secret - a beautiful young woman.

It is hard to be objective and sober in mind after what I heard about this case. I was amazed and shocked at the same time, as well as scared...something happened which simply could not happen under our world's modern, limited comprehension. And these were only small tidbits! Small, but truly shocking tidbits, which very few people know about. Yes. This incident must be kept in secrecy - God knows, what would happen, if this come to the world's knowledge.

Somehow, I'm not afraid of this. Even if the news of the incident would somehow leak out, nobody would ever believe it. I can hardly believe it either...it is very interesting to view back on today, but these events **AJD** take place....



The greatest and most well-known dark-gothic musical band in the whole world. Since 1996, Tristania grew itself out of the small town of Stavanger, where it is settled, and conquered the hitlists across the globe. The album sellings, the concerts made an astronomical profit, the beautifully composed songs attracted millions of people in each year. So marvelous, so outstandingly great the band's songs were, the term "Tristania" soon became a well-known synonym for the best musical performance - no one could have imagined, how could they produce a music so fine, so otherworldly, as if they were coming from a place far beyond our horizon...a forsaken place of dreams, a fragile land of imagination and purity...no one could answer, where they get the inspiration for such heavenly music...but Tristania quickly became one of the world's favourite musical bands - with the most talented artists. Anders Hoyvik Hidle and Rune Ostehus - the guitarists, Einar Moen - the synthesizer's wizard, Kenneth Olsson - the drummer, Kjetil Ingebrethsen - the master of harsh voices, along with Anders, and the world's most beautiful female singer ever seen...

Vibeke. Vibeke Stene.

She was unquestionably a stunning beauty - not just in the dark-gothic style, but everywhere. She definitively earned the renown and fame she received from all the Tristania-fans and non-fans - nothing could be compared to her beauty, and her heavenly voice filled every ear and heart where it sounded...and echoing there for long periods of time. She was the soul of the whole band, the most sparkling black diamond, surrounded by legions of fans. Maybe this is why it is commonly believed that one of the fans was responsible...

LOCATION: STAVANGER

DATE: 2003, DECEMBER 8.

TIME: 22:47

She was tired, and sleepy. After four or five hours of continuous work in the studio, she barely had enough energy to fix up some dinner for herself. Looking into the fridge filled with steel pots, cold food and vegetables, she decided that a salad has to do for tonight - this is what she can afford from her current energy...

Such is showbusiness. It is so fatiguing to fulfill so many wishes. The road to fame is fortune is fringed with many sharp rocks and boulders, and it is also mighty long. Finally...some peace...

Vibeke took out some vegetables, and put them onto the kitchen counter's black marble surface.

Something is still missing.

Inside one of the upper wooden cabinets, there was Vibeke's special refreshment, in a cold bottle, decorated with a tastefully made label. The source of knowledge and inspiration: the Green Fairy. A bottle of great absinthe. She carefully pulled it off the shelf, along with a small, silverly glass.

Now I only need the dripping pot - she pondered, while she took the absinthe spoon from the wooden rack above the sink. The sugar was already prepared in a hand-made porcelain jar. The pale light of the candles from the table gave the dining room a mystical atmosphere. Vibeke's tall, elegant silhouette was leaning around the kitchen counters, as she was looking for the dripping pot.

I remember now! The top of the fridge!

The pot was right there. She could remember now...last time she made a glass of absinthe, the pot had been left here. Reaching up, she gently lifted the dripping pot up...

The bell abruptly sounded.

A visitor? In this hour? - Vibeke looked towards the mahogany entry door. *Who could it be?*

Carrying the ceramic dripping pot in her soft little palm, she put her shoes on, and scurried to the front door. Through the small window of the door, she saw a familiar face, smiling.

- Sorry for the disturbing at this late hour, miss Stene, but a very important package has arrived for you. I was ordered to bring it to you as soon as possible...

- A package? For me? - Vibeke asked curiously with a faint smile, trying to abolish that drowsy feeling for a couple of seconds until she can sit back, have a dinner and an absinthe, and finally relax.

- Yes, yes, miss Stene! From Courbee Records studio!

What a strange name - Vibeke thought as she dismantled the doorlock, and opened the door. The man, dressed in the same gray-black coat with a white shirt underneath, was holding a book-sized package in his hand, wrapped with brown paper.

- Courbee Records studio? I never heard about them. What is in the package?

- It is for you, miss Stene - the man said, and handed the package over. Vibeke raised it to her eyes, and did not pay attention...until a soft, whistling sound could be heard, and a small dart stuck in her neck with a tiny sting of pain.

Vibeke sighed in surprise and quickly stepped backwards. She lapsed upon the doorsill and fallen - the package and the dripping pot fell onto the dark porch. A harsh clatter - and the darkness of the cold December night engulfed Vibeke's consciousness. The man drew closer.

- This one was for you, my sweet. And you will be hers...

12 days later. . .

Norway and the entire world were shocked and mourning since Vibeke Stene has mysteriously disappeared from her home in a late December night. The people were walking dazed and stunned about the tragedy, under the thousand fluttering black flags hanging from the lampposts. From one day to another, the lively, delightful north country became a land of ghost towns, where silent, bitter people were walking like lifeless robots. The enchantment, which have filled Stavanger by the presence of Tristania has gone.

The magical charm vanished - the only sound that could be heard was coming from the hundreds of police cars and helicopters, circling around and around the country, looking for the missing female singer of Tristania. Twelve days of day-and-night search, and they found nothing. Nothing, which could tell, who kidnapped Vibeke, and why. Thousands of policemen, soldiers, and self-volunteers were roaming the cold Norwegian landscapes and cities. The telephone dispatchers were in full-time readiness, looking for eye witnesses - even the smallest clue could be extremely valuable help. Crime technicians arrived from foreign countries, with the most advanced technologies, hoping that they could find Vibeke. But nothing. A complete blank. No fingerprint, no stench, no marks, no ransom note...simply NOTHING. Anders, Kjetil, and the others were working holes onto the floor of the police station, but the answer remained the same - no sign of Vibeke.

In the freezing evening of 19th of December, they gathered in the Castellar Tavern near the center of Stavanger for a short drink to calm their nerves, and trying to sort things out for the thousandth time. Sitting around the oak table, and looking at each other's face, their own sorrow and despair was mirrored back, mixed with the feeling of unsaid guilt about something they did not commit.

- It's no use - Anders whispered, looking at his glass of red wine. - I feel worse than ever...we shouldn't come here, this will not help any of us, nor poor Vibeke.

- Whoever did it, was a professional - Kjetil responded with a raspy voice, and shook his head.

- If only we could keep looking...

- Hogwash, Anders. We have been looking for her without a break, for ten days now. She is like...disappeared in thin air. Or I don't know.

- True. We can keep looking, but if they did not find her, how could we... - Rune pointed towards the double door of the tavern. The townspeople were looking at them with commiserating expression. They knew exactly how they were feeling.

- Why would someone kidnap her? - Anders raised his voice in anger, looking at Rune, Einar, Kenneth, and Kjetil. - Why would someone want to...harm her, who gave her heart to everyone!?

- Sssssh, Anders, I'm thinking! - Einar tried to calm her bandmate down. The aroused question was hanging in the air above them.

- No ransom note - Kenneth replied with hanging head. - An obsessed fan...maybe. Maybe she is not in Norway anymore.

- Impossible! All the ways leading out of Norway are under inspect...

- Does not matter. If she was taken out before the full alert, she can be anywhere by now. I just wish to know WHO did it...

- The agent maybe? - Einar suggested with no confidence. - We just have this guy for three months, since the previous one drugged himself to kingdom come...

- Impossible - Rune retorted, shaking his head in disbelief. - I don't like that guy too much either, but I am sure he was in Oslo at that time. The police said there are many witnesses, plus he is on the video tapes of the nearby bank and a shopping center. He was there, he simply could not kidnap Vibs.

- Then...the manager?

- Nah...this is going nowhere...

Anders drunk another gulp of wine.

- The manager was at home, with his wife and kids for the time being. Besides, none of the manager, or our agent would profit by losing Vibeke. Think about the tremendous amount of cash we lose by cancelling the tours!

- Right. Or the driver of our tour bus. Or a local citizen. Almost everyone knows where she lives. The door was open, so she must have know her kidnapper.

- She has a lot of friends. Maybe one of them...

- All of them were checked. We checked upon them personally, you remember?

- Right. - Einar nodded.

Long minutes of silence followed. The faint music coming from the tavern's CD-player - "Cease to exist" from Tristania - was floating around them gently.

- Can you believe it? - Rune was looking towards the door. - Thousands of people, and still nothing! They can't help. The damn cops couldn't help us either! When will they find Vibeke?

No answer.

- If the police, the big reward and stuff couldn't help us...couldn't help her...what hope we still have?

- Settle down, Rune, they are doing everything. They have already spent gigantic amounts of money, for nothing.

- All this fuss and questioning. I fear the worst, guys. - Einar was looking on the others with a dramatic expression.

- I'm NOT gonna give up! I will keep looking! - Anders declared.

- I still have a very last hope...

Einar Moen got acquainted with Twirl three years ago, after the Millenium Festival here in Stavanger. They met in the same place - the Castellar Tavern. He was sitting at the back table with a glass of tasty red wine, when a thin, but tall guy sit in front of him, wearing a uniform. He introduced himself as "Twirl, the Antisocial One", and started complimenting about how extremely great music Tristania is composing. He also asked Einar for a drink. After a couple of more red wines, Twirl also made a surprising offer to him.

- If y'happen to need mah services, y'can find meh at the ol'foundry. Just drop by, mah friend, if y'have a problem, and we'll help ya...

Einar could sense that this Twirl-guy is obviously up to no good most of the time, but he also knew that he admires the band for the wonderful performance. Despite this, he did not feel he will be needing his services...up until now. Twelve days, and still nothing. After all the authorities, and the civilian volunteers have failed, only the miracle could help....or the gangland.

- It's time to pay my old friend a visit...

The Annihilation Taskforce. ~ ~

Near the Stromsbru Bridge, lies the industrial zone of Stavanger. Unlike the main districts of the city, the industrial zone looked like a barren wasteland of stone and steel. Silhouettes of tall factory buildings, halting cranes, watch towers, rain-etched scaffolds made of iron were looking down on the street crowd from behind tall concrete fences. The entire landscape was so disconcerting, under the dirty, cloudy sky, that it seemed to be worlds apart from the lively community of Stavanger. A perfect spot for industrial-gothic artists...and mobsters like Twirl, the "Antisocial One"...

A textile factory, an oil refinery, a power plant, several warehouses, two steelworks, and of course...the old foundry, which has been abandoned for the past five years. Einar stopped his car in front of the main gate, and got out. He walked to the two-storey high rusty steel gates, and tried to push them open...

Locked.

Or better, welded shut. It's impossible to open these gates without a tank.

Then let's try the workmen entrance.

From left of the gate, there was a thick steel door, painted all black, with a **"WARNING! SECURED AREA! DO NOT ENTER"** sign plate attached to its surface. The knob did turn, when Einar tried it, but the door did not move. It seemed that it is locked.

Twirl said if I need his help, I should come here. Maybe he already left this place?

Looking for a tiny gap to peek through, he walked towards the main gate. The surface was stained with marks of rust, but there were no peeking holes anywhere. He walked back to the workmen's entrance, and started to rap. The sound of rapping could be clearly heard, but no response came. Perhaps nobody is at home?

Maybe Twirl also left this place. After all, it was five years ago... - Einar contemplated, while looking at the sign on the door. But this sign looks all new. As if someone put this here just a month ago. He might still be here...somewhere. I am pretty sure, he said the foundry...

After four or five minutes waiting under the dark front lamp of the workmen entrance, Einar decided to rap again. Just then...footsteps were approaching from the other side of the door. Einar quickly put his ear next to the black steel. Yes...someone is coming.

- Who the heck are you? What are y'doing here!? - a booming and aggressive voice blared from the other side of the door.

Flinching from the unfriendly tone, Einar responded leisurely.

- I am Einar Moen, from Tristania. I am looking for a guy by the name of "Twirl".

Surprised silence followed Einar's utterance.

- From what??? - the voice asked, this time, not so aggressively, but rather curiously. - You can't be serious! I gotta see this!

Swishing of key chains could be heard, followed by the click of the doorlock. Then the door creakingly opened.

Some kind of guard was standing in front of Einar Moen, dressed in jeans, and dark brown leather coat. In his left hand, he was holding a machinegun - Einar quickly stepped backwards, when he saw the weapon. A bearded face was looking at him, with a pair of gloomy eyes.

- Whoa! You're really Einar Moen from Tristania. I heard what's happened to ya. Where are the others?

- At home, and at the police station - Einar replied. - Only I came here to see Twirl. Is he here?

- Gimme a sec - the bloke lowered his weapon, and fished out a walkie-talkie from his jeans pocket.

- Hey boss. Einar Moen is here from Tristania. He wants to see ya.

- Let him in. Now. - a voice responded from the contraption.

The guard put the walkie-talkie away, and pointed towards the pale blue building of the foundry across the facility railways.

- Good thing y're not a cop, huh. We have ran out of gravestones. Ok, follow me.

Einar Moen patiently waited until the guard locked the door, and turned towards the seemingly abandoned foundry building. They were walking across the long, empty courtyard

filled with metal scrap, car wrecks, the old facility railway tracks, where a rusty locomotive was still waiting for a transfer, which shall never arrive...

The foundry's outskirts were flooded by various metal structures, scaffoldings, drainpipes (most of them were broken), dozens of non-functioning forklifts and barrows. The foundry itself was exactly like an industrial gothic artwork, with its millions of catwalks, fire ladders, and the chimneys. Einar's escort got around the main gate, ventured through a chain link fence - this was locked with a padlock. Behind the fence, a terribly broken tilt-hammer was sitting in the mud - they had to get around it. Piles of thrown-out scrap metal followed. And finally - a door on the side of this wing of the foundry. Looked like a guard post, or a loading bay.

The bloke turned the rusty knob, and went inside. Einar followed him.

They entered a dark, unlit corridor made of steel. Openings of ventilation shafts and small compartments with shelves were in the iron walls. Most of the ceiling neonlights were broken and non-functioning. Empty bottles were piled up near the wall, in cardboard boxes. A pick head. A bottle full of nasty smelling liquid.

- Hey guys! Look what I found! - the guard shouted, when he turned to the left in the first corridors junction. Einar guessed they're going to the lunch hall of the foundry. Excited voices came from there.

Following his escort, Einar Moen stepped inside. It was some kind of mess hall, or meeting room indeed. Under flickering white neonlights, eight small, rectangular tables were sitting, with several old chairs, wooden crates, and anything which can be sit on. The room itself had quite an irregular shape - the right side had elevated ramps, and some stairs across the floor. Old counters, cans, kitchen-like utensils, and many small metal cabinets were assembled against the wall. The air was full of cigarette smoke. And beyond the smoke, at least 25-30 blokes were sitting at the tables, the counters, or simply on the steel floor. Their expressions, motley dresses and appearance suggested that they are either war refugees, or criminals - and this is their hideout.

Einar warily stepped in the meeting room, when the guard stopped at the closest table.

- Hey boss! Here's your guest!

One of the blokes rose from his chair, and walked up to Einar through the smoke. Though he have seen him only once, Einar quickly recognized the face.

- Twirl!

- Precisely, m'friend! - Twirl replied, smiling, and shook hands with Einar Moen. - Welcome to the AniTa Headquarters. Come, have a seat.

Einar - feeling much safer and better - stepped inside the meeting room, and accepted Twirl's own chair, which he offered. Twirl's chums also came closer with their sitting contraptions to better to see the famous guest they had. Murmuring between each other, and looking somewhat puzzled at Einar, as if they were planning something against him, was quite a frightening situation under the neonlights. But Einar had trust in Twirl.

- Fancy a drink, Einar mate? Sorry, we have only vodka here.

- No, thank you. I came here, because of Vibeke...

- Aaa, yea...we know about it. We're terribly sorry what have happened. Vibeke gone missin', aye? And nobody knowz who did it, or why...

- Correct. This is why I was searching for you. Seeing that neither the police, nor the thousand other helpful volunteers could find Vibeke, you are our last hope.

- We? Finding Vibeke? - a gruffly-looking middle-aged guy asked from the second table.

- Shush now, Thantar. - Twirl turned to the direction of the second table for a second. Then, he looked on Einar. - Y'did well comin' 'ere, Einar mate. Those yellow-bellied asshole cops don't give a damn 'bout Vibeke, or anythin' else. Why would they bother, if they get paid at the end of ze month anywayz, yaaa? Ok, lis'n to me, Einar mate. If y'wanna have a job well done, don't rely on the fucking asshole cops. Here y'can find da best guyz for dirty work. I'm the current leader of da Annihilation Taskforce gang. Or simply "AniTā".

- Annihilation Taskforce - the young, podgy fella repeated. - You might have heard of us...the cops know us as "Alliance".

- Alliance. Hm. Yes, I remember I have seen this in the newspaper quite a few times. Were you involved in some kind of blackmailing, theft or something?

- We're in a lot of thingz, m'friend. - Twirl responded, shrugging. - It's a dog-eat-dog world outta there. We're just little thingz tryin' to make a life...in our own wayz. This 'ere is our home. Nobody knows we're here. I hope y'won't tell anyone...

- Of course I will not! - Einar said. - You said that you can help me with matters. This is a very serious one, Twirl. Why would you help me?

- I have plenty o'good reasonz, m'friend. First of all, I am a militarist, as you could guess. I spent four yearz at da military, but mah lifestyle was the militarism for yearz before that. And, m'friend, you're a goth.

- So?

- Militarists and goths are friends, and allies wit' each other, y'know...

- I did not know about this...but it feels quite nice. - Einar replied, wondering about when he heard that dark-gothic people and militarists are allies.

I haven't met a true militarist for quite a long time ago. - he concured.

- Secondly, we all love Vibeke here. The least we can do iz tryin' to find her. Izn't that right, fellas?

- Of course, boss, we all love Vibeke, and Tristania! - the chums responded.

- Lemme introduce y'to mah gang - Twirl got up from his chair. - Don't be scared, they're good guyz, and ready to help ya and Vibeke. These folkz here are Korolev an' Hirll. The guyz at that table are Keydon, Thantar, Phantele, Mestengo and Reenshaw. At the wall, y'can see Iverclaud. He wuz an assassin before. That guy over there killed at least three people, his name iz Taegen. And the others are Flaeron, Blista, Sonnel, an' Percival. The otherz aren't here right now, they'll be returnin' at the evening.

- Erm...I see... - Einar looked around in the smoke-filled meeting room carefully. - And what are they?

- All kindz of criminalz, m'friend. Thiefs, burglars, robbers, murderers. This here iz our shelter - the colony.

- Looks a little bit...deserted... - Einar took a quick look around the big meeting room, with the stacked up garbage around. It was clear that this equipment was not used for at least two or three years.

- A lil'bit yellow, a lil'bit sour, but it's ours - Twirl concured, quoting the lines from the famous "Witness" movie. - We're safe here from da filthy cops, and everyone else's prying eyes.

- Right, right. If they would know we're here, they'd easily detain all of us...and the Annihilation Taskforce would be no more... - Sonnel stated, and started searching for another box of cigarette.

- So m'friend Einar, we could help ya, if y'keep our little secret. - Twirl leaned forward on the table, gazing Einar's eyes.

- I will not tell your presence to anybody, you have my word. - Einar swore. - But how could you help me finding poor Vibes?

- Pure logic, m'friend. Take meself - I am a bad guy. Or take Sonnel, or Mestengo...or Thantar. We're all criminals. Rapists, robbers, murderers, Mestengo here is a computer hacker. Got it? So then. The asshole who kidnapped Vibeke is also a bad guy. All we need to do is think wit' his brain, and we'll get Vibeke back in no time.

- Wow, this should work... - Einar sighed with his hope rapidly growing cold.

- OK, enough small talk. Tell me 'bout the detalis of this Vibeke-kidnapping.

- The door was opened from the inside, so probably Vibbs knew the guy, who did this, and let him in. The clues inside her house suggested that she was going to eat dinner, and drink absinthe afterwards. The police found all these in the kitchen. Her money, telephone, and valuables were not touched. And since no ransom note was found, the motive was absolutely not a ransom for her life. Something else...

- Any clues or fingerprints, or...

- Nothing. Not even shoeprints in the mud, or car tire tracks. Kjetil said whoever did it, was a professional. Without a trace.

Twirl frowned upon this statement, and lighted a cigarette. He knew that he can not find anything useful about something, which have been chewed by various high-ranked police officers hunderds of times, but he tried the impossible.

- Ok. It's clear that Vibeke let him in. Hmmmmm. Y'have a lot of employees' 'round your band. Perhaps one of them?

- I don't think so, Twirl. - Einar shook his head. - The police interrogated all our employees, all of them have clear alibi for that evening.

- What alibi exactly?

- Our agent was in Oslo at that time. We have lots of eye witnesses and recorded video from two different sources. A bank, and a local shopping center. The manager was at home with his wife and kids. The stage technicians, our driver, the bodyguards...they have verified alibi, they were all on duty, or at home. No exceptions.

- In Oslo, huh? How did he went to Oslo?

- By car, of course. How else?

- Ok. And why?

- He was visiting a concert organizer, but he said he was not home.

- Fellas, y'come here this instant! - Twirl spinned in his chair, towards his henchmen. - We're trying to sort thingz out, y're not givin' too much help 'round 'ere!

Without questioning, Twirl's buddies slowly got up, and bringing their various type of seats, they encircled the small steel table. The smoke of their cigarettes filled the air with bitter, stinging stench.

- What's it, boss? - Iverclaud asked.

- Use yer headz, boyz! We're looking fer the one who'z responsible for kidnapping Vibeke. It must be one of their workmen. So Einar, what wuz wit' that agent-guy?

- I said, he went to Oslo to meet with a concert organizer, then he came back.

- On those videos, can y'see him wit' the car?

- No, only on foot. But it is definitively him. Also we have many eye witnesses.

A brief pause came, only the soft rattling of the facility's air filtration system could be heard.

- Maybe Vibeke was in that car... - Keydon presumed. He was not a particularly clever criminal - mostly he did pickpocketing and robbing people. - That agent kidnapped Vibeke, and then quickly went to Oslo to have an alibi.

- Impossible. Vibeke left her phone behind, she had a call from a friend of hers around 9 PM. No car can travel THAT fast from Stavanger to Oslo.

- Then the police was mistaken about the time of kidnapping. Maybe it was at a later time...

- Vibeke's night gowns were also there. She disappeared in the same dress she wore all day. - Einar confuted.

- I don't like this agent-thing, not one bit! - Reenshaw accompanied Keydon's idea. - Nobody goes away in the middle of the night just to meet some producer.

- It stinks, but he was there, I can not say he is lying, because he is not.

- He'z got a point. I don't like this tall-tale either. - Twirl concluded, and threw the fag away.
- Y'tell meh Einar mater, how long y'had this agent? Do y'had trust in him?

Near the stairs, Phantele started to walk back and forth. He seemed to be bored.

- We had him for three months. We know him as a trustworthy, honest person.

- Three months? Not good. What's his name?

- His name is Arve Teenick.

- Hey y'Hirll! - Twirl turned towards the bearded, hulking guy, who was prolifically yawning at the rim of the second table. - I seem to be borin' ya. Y'go upstairs into da command control, and search da Internetz fer this guy. I wanna see some photoz of him.

- Right away, boss! - Hirll slowly stood up, and walked out of the meeting room through the front door.

- And what'z happened with the agent y'had earlier?

- And his name was?

- Eilif Medard.

Another pause came in the conversation. Twirl's Alliance operatives' head were turning towards a small, bald bloke with a scratchmark on his forehead. He was sitting on an old plastic beer rack, and seemed kinda confused.

- Iverclaud! Weren't you hired for that hit? I remember a guy, named Eilif Medard you told as about... - Phantele stopped dilly-dallying around, near Einar Moen's back.

- Yes. If my memory works fine – which usually does so – then I was hired by someone to kill this Eilif Medard off. It was in September...

- Looks like the death of your previous agent was not an accident – Reenshaw remarked in his monotonous tone, while he was picking his nails with a switchblade.

Einar turned towards Iverclaud, their eyes met.

- So it was not an accident after all – Einar contemplated loudly so every Alliance operative could hear it. – Eilif Medard was killed by someone. Did you do it?

- No. I cancelled the hit. – Iverclaud disavowed. – But there are numerous other assassins out there, Einar Moen.

- Who was the contractor?

- Beats me – Iverclaud shrugged. – The assassin and the contractor can never see each other. Those are the rules.

- Relax, m'friend, it wazn't mah trusty Iverclaud – Twirl added his opinion. – Someone else made up his mind, though, and killed yer agent. And then came yer new one...

- I remember we found this Arve Teenick fairly quickly, it cut a dash for Anders and Rune, and for me, too. Or should I say...he found as pretty quickly.

- Pretty damn fast, huh? – Reenshaw said, grinning. Then the grin turned into a scorn. – Somethin' is fishy around this Arve-guy. I wanna see him.

- Hirll should be back with those photos any time now – Phantele nodded towards the entrance of the meeting room. – I agree with Chainsaw here. This new agent of yours stinks!

Rubbing his chin, Twirl were looking on the ceiling. The neon lights started to flicker again. The low humming of the air vents was soothing. Einar Moen – despite the fact that he was surrounded by criminals – started to feel better already.

I knew I should visit Twirl. He is thinking with a criminal's head, he might stumble upon facts and hidden signs which the police could not find so important, and therefore, these signs got neglected...

- So Twirl, how long you have been a militarist? – Einar turned back towards Twirl, who was smiling back on him, showing as much friendship as possible.

- Since I was 12, m'friend.

- When we met, you never told me you are a militarist...and you're an ally of dark-goths, like me, or Vibeke...

- I never told ya alright – Twirl agreed. – But now is the time fer me to prove mah loyalty, no? And m'friendz too. B'sides, I had quite many dark-gothic girlfriendz, they have surely teached me how to be a good friend of yourz.

- This sounds really committed, Twirl, and good to hear indeed. What about you? – Einar swept his gaze around the Annihilation Taskforce operatives.

The operatives looked back on Einar with sympathy.

- What do you mean? – Taegen frowned. – Just because we're criminals, why should we hate everyone? Especially such great artists? We are not militarists, like the boss, but we still would like to help you, and rescue Vibeke.

- Taegen is right – Thantar said, and stinted Einar's shoulder promisingly. – Twirl gathered us, we shall follow him. And I also like your band, especially the first two albums.

Einar smiled up on Thantar.

- Twirl gathered you...here?

- That's right, Einar Moen! – Thantar replied. – This is his colony, he bought this old foundry. Of course, not legally...but...doesn't matter. He gave us shelter here, and thus, we're a loving community since then.

- Yea! – Iverclaud burped. – A loving family!

Harsh laughing arouse, even Einar smiled a little bit – a small, but honest smile.

The sound of approaching footsteps came from the opening. Hirll arrived back with a paper. A man's photo was printed onto it.

- This is your agent? – he held the picture in front of Einar's eyes.

- Yes, he is the one. – Einar confirmed.

- Alright guyz, y'all take a look on this here picture, and tell me if y've seen this guy before somewhere. I suspect Arve Teenick is behind the kidnapping of Vibeke, but we don't have any proofs yet. Y're visitin' quite a few places 'round this here city, when y're outside of this here colony. Y'might have some knowledge 'bout him. I can't believe he just "happened to be" ready so quicklike after the band's previous agent has been killed, to take his place.

- Maybe it was not him after all – Keydon suggested. – Maybe this Teenick has a duplicate in Oslo, or something...

- This has been discussed among the policemen as well – Einar responded. – It may be so, but in this case, that duplicate must have been a real well-prepared one. The bank's ATM showed that it was his own credit card he used to pick up some money.

The AniTa members were studying the paper with the photos. First, Twirl took a look on the longish face of Arve Teenick, then the other operatives. Keydon, Iverclaud, Mestengo, Sonnel, and then Phantele...

- I've seen this guy here in that night – Phantele said slowly. – Y'not gonna believe, what I saw...

- Well? – every face turned towards Phantele. He was still standing, with a strange physiognomy.

- That night, I was out in Stavanger. I bought some weed, and decided to smoke it in an alleyway, near the Viste Gata. I felt a little bit weary, so I thought what the hell, I'm not in a

hurry, so I just sit down, where the cops will not see me, and smoke the weed, I can get back to the colony next day anyways. So, I was sitting near some kind of garage, there were tenements around, and a small basketball course, or what. I smoked some of the weed, it was a pretty good one...

- And then? – Twirl interrupted.

- Well I was just sitting there, enjoying the sweet life, and then I saw something at the back of the basketball court. There were dumpsters there, and bushes, I saw something red. I was a tad trippy, but I leaned out from behind the garage to see better. I don't know what I have seen...some kind of red squirming in mid-air. It was red, and quite wide...

- You were trippy. You were MUCH too trippy! – Mestengo exclaimed.

- Shut your hole! So I've seen this red glowing...something, and a man came out of it. I've seen it in the red light. And then that red thing dissipated in thin air, and I sat back. I was sure it was just the weed, so I sit back into the shadows and started searching for the rest of my goodies. And then, the guy on the photo came out from behind the garage, walked right past me, and went away.

- Interesting story, no doubt. – Einar looked at Phantele. – But why are you so sure it was our agent?

- The hair. It was blond, and was very similar to the one on the picture Hirll just printed. And he also had a necklace, I saw it in the streetlamp light.

- And that red glowing thing? – Einar enquired.

- Hell, I don't really know, I was a little bit dizzy, and stuff, like always, but I don't think that was just a vision. That red glowing stuff was there in mid-air, and the agent simply came out of it. And then, the red stuff was gone.

Twirl shook his head in disbelief.

- This is just plain silly. People can't just come out of nowhere through glowing red squirms. Are y'sure y'saw this, Phantele?

- This is what I saw! – Phantele protested. – But if you don't believe me, you don't have to.

- Well if he was teleporting, he could do that many kilometers to Oslo and back – Reenshaw said.

Einar looked at Twirl with growing recognition.

- Looks to me that our beloved agent has some secrets indeed...

- Y'got that right, Einar mate! – Twirl agreed. – One or two strange thing wouldn't be so suspicious, but that's just too many. If I believe what Phantele says, then this guy simply teleported here somehow...

- How?

- I don't know...and I can't believe it either. But we can't afford to dismiss it.

The operatives looked at their leader.

- What are we gonna do now, boss? – Hirll asked.

- What? – Twirl stood up. – You, Hirll, Thantar and Iverclaud come wit' me. Keydon, Phantele, Mestengo, go down to ze cellar, and grab some weaponz. I think it's time to visit this Arve-guy, and poke around at his home. I wanna see this teleporting trick wit' mah own eyes.

- Wait, Twirl! – Einar stood up too. – What are you planning? Breaking into his house? With weapons?

- We've did this before countless times, don't worry.

- But it is pointless. The police have been there for at least three times, and found no evidence.

- Thawwuz da police, m'friend. – Twirl retorted. – And we're his OWN kind.

- But the weapons...! – Einar would continue to oppose, but Twirl interrupted quickly.

- Just a few of our toyz. Some silenced PCVs, and mah dagger. We don't need heavy firepower 'ere. So guyz, no "sznajper" riflez, no Sabrines, all we need is a few handgunz.

- Got it – Mestengo, Keydon and Phantele hurried out of the meeting room to the weapons' stash.

- You really want to break inside Arve's house? – Einar looked on Twirl like he would have arrived from planet Mars. – You can not be serious!

- Y'got better idea? – Twirl retorted with twitching eyebrows. – Lis'n, friend, we know this Arve has somethin' to do wit' the disappearance of Vibeke. The least we can do is to poke around in his house. B'sides, y'don't need to come, so y'll stay clean of this...operation...

- Operation! You hear that, Einar? – Iverclaud started to laugh.
- Y'got a problem 'ere, mah men Iverclaud? – Twirl turned towards his comrade.
- Course not, boss, it was just plain funny. – Iverclaud quickly retreated.
- Good to hear that – Twirl acknowledged Iverclaud's self-control. – So Einar, don't worry 'bout us, we'll just take a little look 'round yer agent's house, and see what we can find 'ere. Y'should return to the other band memberz, we'll be in touch. If we find somethin', I'll just drop y'a call. Can I have yer phone number?
- Um...sure... - Einar responded, and dictated the number to Twirl.
- Splendid, m'friend. Y'll see y'can count on us. But remember yer promise! Don't tell anythin' 'bout us, not even to yer fellow members, y'hear me? If they ask y'bout us, just tell'em y'have this very special friend who'll help y'locatin' Vibeke. Aye?

With wrinkling his forehead, Einar tried to understand Twirl's strange, fragmented speech. *Where did he learn to speak Norwegian like this?* – he contemplated, but hadn't say a thing. Instead, he reached out for Twirl's hand.

- You got a deal, Twirl. I will keep my word...and I...*we* are counting on you.

Twirl shook his head, with a wide smile.

- Ver' good, m'friend! We'll do this by the book, y'won't get into any trouble. Just go back to the other band memberz, and let us do the dirty stuff. Me, Hirll, Iverclaud and Thantar will sneak inside, and take a quick look 'round, while Arve is asleep. Y'should also get some sleep, Einar mate, y'look quite tired...
- I will. Thanks for your kind help again, Twirl.

Hide'n'seek...

Not far from the suburbs of Stavanger, the Steingata street is reaching far away into the distance. Scenic little villas are sitting on both side, proportioned with a general store, a post office, and some bus stops. For the last twelve days, the otherwise lively street become deserted – and not because the approaching Christmas. Just like the band itself, the denizens of Stavanger were shocked by the tragic turn of events...it's almost Christmas Eve, and they still haven't found Vibeke. The deep silence of the night street is only interrupted by the sound of police car sirens, or a helicopter. A perfect night for an espionage mission...

The unmarked, white van stopped at the nearby park aside, and four men jumped out, wearing masks and dressed in all identical black. Two of them had holsters on their belts, along with walkie-talkies – “communications devices” as Twirl would say. They also wore black leather gloves, except the guy who drove the unmarked van here...

- Alrighty, guyz, this is the address. Einar mate said that Arve lives in a white house wit' number 85, opposite this park. We must move real quick-like.

The second masked guy did a quick inspection of the street. The sounds of city traffic dulled into low humming from the background. All windows were black on the houses nearby, the cars were sitting in front of them as if they were also sleeping. No stars were visible, nor the moon. Snow was falling gently on the concrete, pieces of heavenly fluff were sparking in the bright light of the streetlamps, and died into cold kissmarks from the sky. The temperature was not low enough to give the snow the possibility of surviving yet...

- Car at nine o'clock! – a familiar voice arrived from behind the mask, and the four terrorist-looking guys hide behind the van. A police car, with its lights turned off. It rolled slowly and majestically along the empty Steingata street, giving them a really uneasy feeling.

- It's not good out there, boss, damn cops, they're everywhere – another familiar voice said between the four masked men. – Since Vibeke is gone, this damn city is a fuckin' cop land. I hope you know what you got us into, Twirl!

- Y'relax Iverclaud, evry'thin' is under control...

22:24. The Annihilation Taskforce has arrived.

Hirll waited at the back of the van until the police car was swallowed by the distance, and quickly waved towards the three other guys.

- Coast is clear. Let's move!

Twirl calculated precisely. The number 85. house was almost exactly opposite their van – quite a spectacular one. The bright white walls of the house were decorated with large brown carved beams, the fence was made of ashlar and forged iron. It was not a particularly big house – Einar Moen said that Arve lives alone, why would he need a bigger house?

They were nothing more than a black flash in the stream of streetlight. Not making a sound, all four of them were exactly at the fence gate. Twirl tried it – locked.

- Climb. Hurry!

Afraid, yet, excited, they climbed through the fence. Even if they did it a thousand times before (except Twirl, who never did burglary before), they still felt that gripping stress inside...the excitement, the smell of danger...

- No dogs? – Hirll whispered.

- If y'see one, let him have it. – Twirl quickly solved the problems of Arve having a guard dog.

With crouching run, they were at the dark brown porch door. Twirl tried this one as well, but as he could have guessed, it was also locked.

- Ok, Thantar, it's yer turn.

Twirl took a step aside, and let Thantar solve the locked door – which he did under three minutes with his set of lockpicks.

- Cover me while I open this – Thantar ordered. Twirl, Iverclaud and Hirll quickly made a defensive formation around their buddy.

A soft click, and the lock was opened.

- Ok, we may proceed.

Without the slightest sound, they all stepped inside the house, and Iverclaud closed the door with his gloved hands. No fingerprints left.

- Alrighty, we made it inside. – Twirl murmured. – Arve must be at the upper storey, but be extremely careful. Use yer flaslightz only if y're sure there's no one else 'round.

Through the small foyer, they stepped into the living room, filled with thick darkness, they only saw silhouettes. None of the streetlights were powerful enough to pour some light into this area.

Using the tiny light on his switchblade, Twirl silently infiltrated the lower floor. An empty dining room with wooden furniture, cupboards, a somewhat wide living room, four sofas inside, and a small table made of glass. A whole set of black credenzas. Papers, small gifts, some shiny objects inside. And a writing desk at the corner of the room. Nobody is here, except them.

- Disperse.

Hirll began to explore the kitchen, Thantar was looking around in the dining room – there was an L-shaped staircase at the end of the dining table, leading to the upper floor. Iverclaud and Twirl began investigation in the living room of the house. Iverclaud quickly put his gloves on.

They were working in absolute silence – even the breath of a fly could be heard. Iverclaud opened the trussy glass cabinets on the credenza, trying to find something between the many paper snippets, bills, contracts, and rubbish. Letters, letters, letters, from unknown people across the country. Many pieces of white paper in a blue folder. Nothing interesting here.

Hirll and the others weren't doing any better either. Twirl removed some pictures from the wall, and books from the shelves, hoping that there is a safe behind – without any luck. Iverclaud also had enough of the stack of papers he found in the credenza, so he continued searching for clues somewhere else. He opened the second cabinet...

- Hey guys! Look what I found!

Twirl and the others immediately sneaked there – Hirll almost fell over a small footstool near the toilet door. Iverclaud was standing in front of the open cabinet, and pointed inside.

A set of golden chalices he was pointing at. Plus, at least four boxes of jewels. Not just jewels – there were gemstones, golden nuggets, and valuable brooches as well.

- *Baz'meg* Iverclaud, this worths a fortune! – Hirll sighed.

- Right on – Thantar agreed. – Shall we have some?

- Ok, but just one. – Twirl nodded. – We're not here fer plunderin' y'know. And make sure y'have yer gloves on.

Everyone put some jewels away into their pockets, carefully, not making a sound. The last one was Twirl – he found a pair of beautiful earrings, with emeralds inside.

- Hey guyz! – he whispered. – Since when men wear such stuff?

- Maybe it's not his...he might had a wife, and this is a...memory, I don't know... - Thantar didn't really care about Arve after he found so valuable treasure.

- See boss? It was not even hidden. It was just...put in here. – Iverclaud pointed at the chalices and the jewellery boxes. The knick-knackery was not organized in any pattern, as they should be, it was like they were just thrown inside the cabinet.

- Strange... - Twirl agreed. – At least we could profit from our lil'adventure 'ere...

In this second, the sharp sound of crackling electricity came from behind the door opposite the dining room...followed by a strong stream of red light from under...

- Quick! Under the sofa!

The sci-fi-like electrical sound effects died – footsteps followed. Faint, but rhythmical footsteps, and the doorknob turned...they were already under the sofas by then.

- Did you see it? – Iverclaud whispered to Hirll laying next to him. – Just out of nowhere...

- Yea – Hirll responded with light voice.

The door opened, and the lights of the dining room flared up. From under the nearest sofa, Twirl could clearly see the corpulent shape of Arve Teenick. He was carrying a white bag with tinkling stuff inside. Arve looked around, and walked towards the staircase, taking a quick look on the wall clock.

- Great, I still have three more hours left.

He walked to the kitchen. The sound of flowing water the operatives heard minutes later, followed by gulping. Twirl saw that Arve was drinking something near the window. A sound of speeding car could be heard outside.

- That's it boys, keep looking. You will never find Vibeke.

This was what they were looking for. Twirl quickly crawled out from under the sofa, and drew his silenced PCV. Arve quickly spinned, flabbergasted and scared.

- Who are you!? What are you doing here? – he started to run towards the door he just opened. Twirl aimed perfectly – the shot hit Arve's right leg.

- Sorry for the late disturbing – Twirl grinned. – The birdz on da treez tweeted that y'know somethin' 'bout Vibeke's unfortunate missin', so we decided to drop by...

Arve was sitting on the floor, besetting his bleeding leg, his face is filled with terror and recognition. He just spilled his own beans...

- You...you shot me! You shot me! – he shouted in anger and pain.

- Yeah, and if you don't shut up this instant, I'll kill ya! – Twirl growled, aiming his PCV to Arve's head.

With some thuds and fumbling sounds, Iverclaud, Hirll and Thantar crawled out from under the other three sofas. They stood aside Twirl, looking down at Arve, Vibeke's abductor, who was sitting on the floor tiles, moaning.

- So m'men, he wuz the one – Twirl looked briefly on his loyal operatives. – Y'heard him.

- Yea, boss! – Hirll responded.

- What should we do? – Thantar asked.

- Well, I think we should ask the nice man a few questionz. What do y'think 'bout this?

- Sounds good enough to me – Thantar said.

- Me too! – Iverclaud seemed to be overjoyed by the apprehension of Arve. – Can I try?

- I will not say anything to you, or your asslickers! – Arve hissed.

- We'll see 'bout that – Twirl grinned back. – Ok, Iverclaud, make him change his mind.

Iverclaud had much better tools than words. Unsheathing his knife, he started to walk towards Arve. When he opened his mouth to shout – a heavy militarist brogue hit his face.

- Boom! Headshot! – Hirll laughed.

Blood started to gush out of Arve's mouth and nose. Before he could get up, Iverclaud kicked him again. This was enough – the agent fell on the floor with a short gurgle, into a pool of his own blood. Iverclaud was not even started to get sweaty. He looked at Twirl, puzzled.

- Did I kill him?

- Luckily, not. – Twirl went closer, putting his PCV away. – Let's put him on the sofa, then we can ask those questionz. Hirll, you turn off that light here, we don't wanna any witnesses, aye?

Without further hesitation, Thantar lifted the unconscious agent from the floor, and dragged him into the living room, where Twirl was walking. He was holding something in his hand.

- What are you doing, boss? – Iverclaud asked.

- I'm callin' Einar Moen. After all, Vibeke is *his* bandmate...

- What about the others?

- I think we should keep the rest of the band outta this... - Thantar moaned, while he tossed the agent's body onto the sofa behind the glass table. – Isn't that right, boss?

- Very well put, Thantar. – Twirl said, while he was checking the phone. – Damn it. No signal.

He turned his cellphone off, then turned it on again. He started to dial Einar's number...but still no success. It was like the signal got lost somewhere after Twirl pressed the last button.

- Ok, this thing doesn't work. Iverclaud, you try it.

- But I don't have my mobile, I left it at the colony...

- Why? – Twirl frowned. – I told y'to ALWAYS carry yer phone wit' y'self!!!

- I know, but I downed the batteries, it needs to be recharged... - Iverclaud plead.

- So then, Hirll...

- Right away, boss! – Hirll took Twirl's cellphone and after memorizing the number, he tried the call on his own phone. Meanwhile, Iverclaud was checking on the agent – he was still sitting on the sofa, where he was thrown.

- Hmmm – Hirll was looking at his phone. – This one is also dead. No signal, as you said it.

- Strange... - Twirl put away his cellphone. – Well then, Iverclaud, y'get back into that van, and bring Einar Moen here.

- Me??? – Iverclaud acted like he can't hear well.

- Since you're the driver, y'got to bring him here. Look for him in the Castellar.

- Aww, all right... - it was clear that Iverclaud would rather stay here, interrogate the agent, or better, plunder some more jewels from the cabinet. But he knew that this operation is much

too important. The city is filled with cops. One small mistake – and there goes Twirl's careful planning up in smoke.

- Don'tcha worry, Iver, by the time y'get back 'ere, he'll be talkin', and y'can have a lil' fun wit' him.

Leaving the lounge, Iverclaud strolled through the dining room...and stopped at the door.

- This is where he came from – nodded towards the sofas with his head. – Let's check it out.

He opened the door – and immediately retreated! The red light filled the dining room.

Behind the door, in the dark of the cellar, after a few stone steps, an oval shaped bright red form was squirming in front of the surprised operatives' eyes – a bright red vortex hanging in mid-air, floating and rolling in total silence.

- *Bazmeg*, Twirl, Phantele was right... - Iverclaud whispered.

- What are y'waitin' for? – Twirl said loudly, trying to believe what he just saw. – Bring him here, and I mean *right now!!!*

Without another word, Iverclaud stumbled out to the vestibule. The slam of the door could be heard – nothing else. Hirll, Thantar and Twirl were looking at the red glowing spiral, hypnotized.

- So this is why our phones failed – Twirl put it down, still stunned by the view.

- What the fuck is that, boss? – Hirll couldn't tear his gaze away, he mumbled his words like he saw a miracle...which he just did.

- I...have no idea, Hirll... - Twirl muttered, frozen in place. – Close that door.

Hirll slowly regained his senses from the depths of shock, and gently closed the cellar door.

- Much better – Twirl sighed, and turned at Thantar. – Y'keep an eye on our host, Hirll will guard this door. And I think I will use the toilet...

The Castellar was closed, Iverclaud had no other choices but to return to Arve's house, and ask for Einar's phone number. After Twirl gave his cellphone, and an advice that he should try to call Einar farther, the connection was successfully established. Twirl was right – the presence of that strange entity jammed everyone's cellphones around. Einar Moen drove real quickly, when Iverclaud mentioned that they found out that indeed their agent kidnapped Vibeke. In less than thirteen minutes, they were all sitting in the lounge under bright lights, around the perpetrator. As soon as Einar arrived, the interrogation began. Arve already came

back from the blackout caused by Iverclaud's brogues, his blood-stained face was written all over with the red letters of fear for his life.

- We trusted in you, Arve. – Einar looked at his agent with hatred. – You deceived us, you deceived the police for your own selfish goal. I would like you to tell me, where is Vibeke, and why did you kidnap her.

No response. The agent remained silent, his eyes were filled with loathing. There was no reason of disavowing – the Annihilation Taskforce operatives heard what they heard, and he was caught because of his big mouth. He would never thought that Tristania will send his own kind against him, and they were waiting and eavesdropping here for God knows how long time, under the sofas...

- My patience for ya is wearin' thin! – Twirl raised his voice, looking at the agent. – Y'better tell us what did y'do wit' Vibeke!

Still no response.

- Alrighty, this is goin' nowhere. Thantar – your go.

Thantar grabbed his dagger, and turned towards Arve, who was determined that he will not say anything.

- If you are not talking, then I am afraid I need to operate here... - he raised the dagger, and leaned forward, so he can push the blade against Arve's abdomen. – Last chance, scum-sucker. Will you talk, or should I cut the information out on my own!?

Sweatdrops appeared on Arve's forehead. If he dares to attack Thantar – Iverclaud's finger movement on the trigger will suddenly end his life...

With a quick slash, Thantar cut two buttons down of the agent's shirt. Arve groaned, and tried to draw even more backwards, among the colorful pillows of the sofa. The blood from his wounded leg already soaked the valance through.

- Why would I tell anything? – he croaked with fear in his voice. – You are going to kill me anyhow.

- Wrong – Twirl stood up, and gestured towards Thantar that he should sit back. – I'm alwayz a man of mah wordz, so I hereby promise y'that if y'tell us everythin' we wanna know, we'll let y'go. After all, we're here fer Vibeke, not fer ya.

The expression of the agent showed that he didn't believe a word Twirl said.

- The boss is right – Iverclaud said. – You think he would have that many friends amongst us, criminals, if he would not keep his word?

- Y'can be sure 'bout that – Twirl continued. – If I promise somethin', it'll be kept, y'can count on that. B'sides, it'z betta to lose yer work than losin' yer life...and trust me, this guy 'ere is no joke, he killed someone just fer fun couple o' yearz ago...

- If we tell everybody what you did, you will wish we should have killed you – Hirll added.

- Even if I would tell you, nobody would believe it. – Arve shook his head, looking at Einar Moen and the others.

- Too little too late, we've seen yer lil'surprise in da cellar – Twirl smiled, but this smile was mighty cruel. – We're also interested in that stuff in yer cellar. I bet it's some kind of portal, aye?

Einar Moen took a short look towards the closed cellar door. Twirl already showed him what is behind. The faint red light was flourishing around the rims of the door.

- Now, please tell us what we want to hear – Hirll tried in a relatively quiet tone.

- You are all pricks! – Arve hissed back.

- Been there, done that... - Hirll dabbed, but he was not smiling anymore. – Don't make Thantar use his own technics...!

- Ok, let's try it again, shall we? – Twirl sat on the sofa again, and leaned back. – Who do you work for?

- Go through the gate – Arve pointed towards the cellar with a tired gesture. – And find out, if you want your Vibeke back...

- Look 'ere, young man – Twirl leaned forward on this pronouncement. – I told y'that I'll spare yer life if y'spit out what y're hidin'. Otherwise, it'z curtainz for ya, sonny! Hirll! Y'go over 'ere and check out what'z in the nice man'z bag.

- Going.

Hirll slowly walked through the lounge, to the staircase, where the white bag was. He opened the bag...

- Wooooo, guys, someone made a clean-up at the Stavanger museum? Or what the fuck is that?

- What'z in da bag, mah men Hirll? – Twirl arouse to see better.

- Gold, guys, gold! A chalice, a golden crucifix, some kind of golden headwear...hm... - Hirll grabbed the bag, and poured its contents onto the floortiles. – Here, see for yourself!

In the lounge's ceiling light, Einar and the Alliance members saw an amazing collection of extremely valuable golden objects. Chalice, plates, candles, jewels, even some crowns.

- Hmmm – Twirl smiled upon the treasure. – Nice catch indeed. May I ask where did y'get those from? – he turned his attention on the agent.

- These are theirs, not mine! – the agent murmured.

- Whose? I couldn't hear ya... - Twirl leaned through the table.

- Even if I would tell you, they would kill me for it. - Arve groaned.

- And if you don't tell, then *we* will. – Twirl retorted angrily. His patience was running extremely low, he got tired of this interrogation. He wanted answers, just like Einar, Iverclaud, and the others.

- Enough of this babbling, y'hear me? – he continued. – We have yer little gate, and yer treasure, even if y'don't say anythin', we'll still go to find Vibeke, but 'fore that, we'll kill ya real quick-like. But if y'tell us a nice lil'bed-time story, I'll let y'live.

Arve took a couple of deep breaths. He knew that Twirl really means it. Einar Moen would not kill him, but this mobsters who overpowered him...they will.

- Ok, then lis'n to this, y'maggot. If y'don't start to squeal this instant, we're goin' to show that nice lil'gate y'got on da cellar to everyone. That stuff lookz really interestin' fer me, I bet some of our scientists or military leaderz could use it. I wuz at da military fer yearz, I know this kind of stuff...

- Cha! That gate will dissipate in two hours! – the agent dabbed.

- True, but we can make photos with our mobiles. – Thantar replied confidently. – And we have you here.

- After what you did, I do not think that you would like to see, what the denizens want to do with you. – Einar said calmly, but menacingly. – Am I right, our dear agent?

This did it. Arve slowly nodded, showing that he is ready to cooperate.

- I can't let this secret to leak out, so I tell everything I know...if you let me go afterwards. If you *really* want to save her, you must hurry.

- So then – Twirl chained his arms together. – I’m all earz.

Arve took another deep breath. Not because the burning miasma of pain in his leg, but he saw Einar Moen’s expression. According to Einar Moen, he will not make it out of this room in one piece...

- There is a hidden organization out there. – Arve started in a low, stuttering voice. – It’s called the *Courbée Dominate*, as far as I know, and it’s very big...not just big, enormous. Some kind of covenant, or...er...empire, which exists in secrecy since...since I don’t know. It’s like a cult, or a sect, with supernatural powers in their possession.

- A cult? – Einar asked.

- Yes...but as you all saw it, their magic powers are *real*.

Nobody said anything. That squirming portal in the cellar was solid proof, as a rock.

- If they could create stuff...like that thing in your cellar...then they are capable of doing much more than this. – Einar contemplated. – Who is in charge of this Courbée Dominate? And where is it?

- I don’t know where it is exactly – Arve shook his head. – They are living in a huge settlement somewhere. They call it “falanster”. I was never in that falanster before, since I’m not one of them, but they told me that they have a falanster hidden somewhere.

- Where???

- Hell, I would tell you if I would know! – Arve harrumphed. – They created these gates for me, I don’t know where they lead! Only the Empress knows, she is the ruler of this Courbée Dominate.

- What Empress... - Einar started, but Thantar interrupted him.

- If you wouldn’t know where these gates lead, you wouldn’t use them. Trying to set us up, huh?

- Don’t look at me, I don’t have any kind of power to create passageways like this! – the agent continued to demur. – These are controlled by the Empress, and her serveants, only they know this kind of stuff. We had an agreement about I need to capture Vibeke for them, and in return, they gave me all this treasure...and a promise that I might join them.

- Relax, Thantar, he’z tellin’ da truth – Twirl dabbed. – Ok, go on, pal.

- I would like to hear more about this Empress and her serveants. – Einar asked again softly.

- I haven't see her, or her serveants, who can create these gates, but I know they exist. This whole Courbée Dominate cult seems to be ruled by this Empress. Her name is Diana, at least, the Courbée Dominate guys I met were mentioning her as Empress Diana. About the serveants...I only know a few...

- How did they get their powers? – Einar continued.

- When I asked one of the serveants, he said that it started after the thirteenth century, I can't remember the exact date, they didn't tell me, but I'm sure that servant meant the Middle Ages. Some guy in the Middle Ages found one or more grimoires, and...

- What's a grimoire? – Twirl asked.

- I know – Einar replied. – It is a spellbook. A collection of spells, magicks, and everything that is supernatural. There were lot of grimoires in the Middle Ages, most of them worked...this is why the Catholic Church decided to destroy all of them.

- Lookz az if they did a louzy job destroyin' all of them – Twirl remarked with a little smirk.
– Some of them're still in one piece, an' workin' well.

- With the spells in those grimoires – Arve continued – they were able to do all kinds of different magic tricks, which were real, and this gave them power above the everyday people, the weather, the time, and things like this. At first, this Courbée Dominate was a small community, for witches, mages, and who-knows-whats seeking refuge. Maybe this is what started the witch-burnings, and the inquisition...

- Hm – Iverclaud seemed to be fascinated.

- So this Courbée Dominate was some kind of shelter for everyone who ran away from the inquisition, because they had magic powers. They were living somewhere in a secret place, away from everyone, so they could keep their secrets. And when the Catholic Church ordered the grimoires to be burned, they decided to keep some for themselves for later using. I don't know what kind of spells these grimoires filled with, but this gateway-opening trick is one of them...

- Charming – Einar nodded bitterly. – Continue, please.

- They are living in a falanster...it's a big city-state, as I heard. But I don't know where this falanster is, it must be kept as a secret, no outsiders allowed. If it is really that big, it must be filled with Courbée Dominate serveants.

- What a strange name – Hirll commented. – What does it mean?

- I don't know – Arve looked at the big bearded gangster. – It sounds like French. I don't speak French.

- Ok, so what's up wit' that Empress bitch? – Twirl asked. – Why she wanted Vibeke?

- When I asked those servants, they said that Vibeke is needed for some kind of special task, or spell. A guy said that she might be sacrificed or something...

- WHAT??? – Einar jumped up from the sofa.

- They said she is going to be sacrificed, or something, that is all I know! – Arve's face turned into even more pale.

- I would kill you with my own hands, you maggot! – Einar growled, and clenched his fists in his helpless outrage. – If she dies...*you* will die too!

- Please Einar, let him speak! – Twirl tried to calm his friend down. He needed more information first, and then...

Now Einar took some deep breaths, and sit back. He needed all his willpower not to jump and tear this squishy little wimp apart.

- Y'said Vibeke'll be sacrificed – Twirl turned his attention on the trembling agent. – For what purpose?

- I don't know, they didn't tell me! – the agent replied, still shaking.

- What if she has been already sacrificed? – Einar looked at Twirl with despair.

- No, she is still alive. – Arve said. – The servant, who killed your previous agent said that she is needed in the time of the winter solstice, and they gave me two weeks to kidnap Vibeke. They also never thought it will be so easy...this is why I got two weeks.

- The winter solstice? – Einar asked. – We still have one day left.

- Not much time. Less than 24 hours. – Thantar stated.

- Why is she needed for the winter solstice? – Einar looked at the ex-agent.

- I don't know, they just told me that she must be in the falanster by the time of the winter solstice. Tonight is the longest night, must be some kind of spell condition...

- Whaddid I just tell ya? – Twirl growled. – Don't lie to us, or y'gonna *get* it!

- You promised me something, I promised something! – the agent reparteed. – I am not lying! You will know it by the time you reach them!

- Alrighty...we'll see 'bout that...

- So then, you said, Vibeke is needed for some kind of spell which can only be “activated” in the winter solstice? – Einar summarized in a form of a question.

- Possibly – Arve replied. – I have never seen those grimoires, but if they can make things like that gateway, I must believe in it...

- I saw them too, and I still can't believe... - Hirll wrinkled his forehead.

- It is a real gateway – Einar argued with Hirll. – Touch it if you dare!

- No, thanks.

- An' what kind of spell iz that? – Twirl asked from the agent.

- I told you, I don't know! I was only told to bring Vibeke to them. So they opened this gate for me, and I took Vibeke out to that forest. The falanster must be somewhere behind. – Arve shrugged.

- You and your filthy Courbée Dominate! – Einar hissed. – If this falanster is really that big, Vibeke can be everywhere.

- So what? – it was Twirl's turn to shrug. – If we could locate its position, I just drop a phoney-call to da autoritiez, and 'ere...problem solved!

- You can't do that! – Arve argued, and grimaced in pain, when he accidentally moved his wounded leg.

- This time he is right – Einar nodded. – We can not involve the police, or the army...or anybody else.

- Why not? – Thantar enquired. Twirl was cudgeling his brain upon the agent's exclamation, but Thantar seemed to be pretty confident. – They can rescue Vibeke in no time...

- Ehhh, Einar mate iz right – Twirl stated quickly. – He is absolutely right.

Iverclaud and Hirll seemed to be puzzled by this argument about whether or not they should alert the police upon finding the falanster.

- Ok, let's put it in this way – Twirl stood up, while gesticulating with the PCV in his hand. – Suppose the Courbée Dominate finds out that the police is on 'em, and they could kill Vibeke, just for fun. But there's a bigger problem. We all know our politicians, the leaders of the nation, or the filthy freemasons and the ruling elite of the world...ok, it may seem as a conspiracy theory at first glance, but you get my point. If these grimoires get out of there, into the possession of the wrong hands, they could make much bigger havoc than a few thousand of cultists...

Einar was thinking along the same line. He nodded.

- We can't let this supernatural stuff leak out of the falanster, or else it's doomsday for all of us. Not for just you, Einar, or me, or my friends...but everyone. Imagine...the word would spread like a disease, every government would want to have such teleporting technology, and all the other hocus-pocus. If this magic stuff gets in their filthy hands, it will give them limitless power above us, we're just little things in their eyes. We can't let anyone know about this stuff.

- As long as none of the authorities believe in this kind of stuff, we are safe. – Einar concluded. – If they sniff out that this hidden cult with history managed to build up an own society with true magic powers, they would want such...umm...technology too. And the other countries too. It would result in a full-blown world war, or even worse. You are right, Twirl, we must not let anyone know about what powers the Courbée Dominate possess.

- Yea, those typical run-of-the-mill asshole son-of-a-bitch politicians would immediately launch their neatly disguised campaign against everyone, even their own people...

- We're already living controlled – Twirl commented. – And it gets just worse and worse. I don't want to know what the rulers of the world would do with these kinds of magical stuff.

Iverclaud scratched his head.

- OK, but then, who should rescue Vibeke?

- We. – Twirl said, plain and simple.

Arve emitted a short, contemptful laugh.

- You got a problem over 'ere, sonny? – Twirl turned towards the agent.

- Perhaps you weren't listening – Arve said. – There are *thousands* of servants there. How many men you got?

- Thousands??? – Einar leaned forwards. – You must be kidding, right?

- If you don't believe me, go, and check it out! – Arve shrugged. – I was not lying to you.

- Thousands of Courbée Dominate initiates... - Twirl sighed. – The falanster must be friggin' big...

- How come nobody discovered them so far, if there are THAT many people? – Einar asked.

- Because nobody knows where to look for them – Arve responded. – And even if one or two people found them, the Courbée Dominate servants made sure they will not be squealing to anyone. They are patrolling outside the falanster, in the woods...and they are hiding from the rest of the world.

- How? I really want to know this. – Iverclaud asked.

- They are not using any of our common services, that's how. – Arve explained. – They don't use power lines, water piping, communications, or anything, so they attract no attention from the state.

- Sounds harsh – Hirll contemplated. – I couldn't live without a nice hot shower at the end of the day...

- How could they survive without factories, and electricity? – Einar enquired.

- They can retrieve what they need, through those gates. – Arve responded. – They could break into any secured area, snatch some goodies, and then vanish again. It's no big deal.

- Cunning little pests... - Twirl admitted reluctantly. – But if they don't use any of these modern thingz, why do we need to fear'em? They've only got shieldz and swordz...

- No, they all have firearms. – Arve confuted. – I saw it. Pistols and heavier guns as well. Even the Rokkinoks.

- What's a Rokkinok? – the question came from Twirl of course.

- Those are...beings, which are not human. – Arve started to explain. – Not zombies...something worse. I suppose they were also created by the Empress, and they...they are animals! Just animals.

- I would need to hear more details about them – Einar asked.

- Sure, sure. I don't know how these Rokkinoks are created, but I've seen them. They are short, their entire body is gray, and they look like humans, but they aren't humans. It's like they are mere puppets, with very little free will on their own. The servant who took Vibeke

away said that the Rokkinoks are great, because they are loyal, they never eat or sleep, or have any kind of problems we humans have...

- Yep, those are called zombies. – Thantar said.

- No, not zombies, not at all...they are really dumb, as I saw, they could not do anything without someone telling them what to do, so these Rokkinoks are all very stupid. But they are very quick, they can fight pretty well as I heard, and they were armed with pistols. Not just one, but two pistols. Some other Rokkinoks have explosives strapped on their abdomen. They were designed to blow up themselves along with an intruder they see.

- These are Drones, not zombies. – Twirl concluded. – Interesting. One more reason why we should not let anyone to know about this Courbée Dominate. Imagine these single-brained Drones roaming in cities, and killing everyone in their way just because some freak told them so...!

- It would definitively lead to a catastrophe – Einar nodded.

- I've seen some of them – Arve continued. – They were really acting like puppets, who have no free will or emotions, or anything. Many of them are scouting around the falanster, they are perfect for guard duties...if the serveant was right about them.

- Drones and Suicide Drones, that's just great. – Twirl shook his head. – I would like to see what oppression could they mean to us...

This just sounded far too overly self-confident. Einar looked at Twirl with doubts.

- He said there are *thousands*, Twirl. Why are you so sure...?

- M'friend, I haven't spend many yearz at da military for no reasonz! – Twirl smiled. – A smart guy can overpower a thousand idiotz. Brainz, m'friend, not brawn!

- Twirl has a point – Thantar agreed.

- B'sides, if there are *really* thousands of Courbée Dominate assholes, at least we won't have an ammo shortage...

- We??? – Iverclaud looked at Twirl. – What do you mean?

- Ye, we. – Twirl confirmed. – If we can't involve anyone outsiderz of this mission, it's up to us to rescue Vibeke. Think 'bout it, Iverclaud, there may be gold, just like what we found in da cabinetz...

- Thieves! – Arve roared.

- Y'betta shut yer hole, creep! – Twirl growled back. – So Iverclaud, *we* get to help Einar, and find Vibeke.

- You can't be serious, boss! – Iverclaud remonstrated. – There are only thirty of us! What kind of rescue could be perform against thousands of assholes with firearms!?

Thantar and Hirll didn't say a thing, but their expression showed they also have their doubts about the outcome of this operation.

- Y're forgettin' somethin'. These Courbée Dominate assholes has nothin' to warn'em. No security cameras, no GPS satellite uplink, no phones, no nothin'. If we sneak inside da falanster, an' lay low, they won't notice us...

- It's still too much! – Iverclaud continued to harrumph, but Twirl dabbed him.

- B'sides, we're professionals in our...ahemm....job. They're just a couple o'scumbagz and mindless Drones wit' all kindz of weaponz. This is their weak spot, they're no match for us. An' this time, m'friendz, no law enforcement. We can do whatever we want!

- What about you? – Thantar asked.

- I'll personally lead da attack. – Twirl responded. – But first, we got to collect moar of our men. We'll need moar men and heavy firepower fer this job.

- Hmmmmm – Einar was thinking about the upcoming adventure of rescuing poor Vibeke. – Arve, what kind of security this falanster has exactly?

- Well as I said, there are patrols of Courbée Dominate serveants, Drones, and there are also minefields around the falanster. But not too many.

- Mines – Hirll repeated. – This sounds bad.

Twirl was contemplating on Arve's statement about the mines.

- If there are minefields around, how could you take Vibeke to the falanster, and arrive back?

- I never took Vibeke to the falanster – Arve admitted. – I just took her to the forest, where that gate opens, and met with the Courbée Dominate serveants. They took her away. I'm not allowed in the falanster yet, I told you...

- You don't even know where the entrance is? – Einar asked.

- There are very few entrances, all of them are heavily guarded, that is all I know. – Arve replied.

- Once we're there, we can find the entrance. – Twirl said. – Alrighty, anythin' else y'know 'bout'em?

- This is all I know! – Arve held his hands up. – I swear!

- Hmmm...ver' well... - Twirl was looking at Einar, pensively. – I'm alwayz a man of mah wordz, so I'll keep mah promise. Y'kept yourz, I'll keep mine. I will not kill ya.

Arve eased the belly upon hearing this. After all, he *did* tell everything he knew, and if these street thugs are foolish enough to actually go after Vibeke, the tripmines, and the Courbée Dominate serveants will stop them...he had complete confidence in that they will not make it in the falanster alive.

- However – Twirl looked on Arve, with a wolf-like grin on his face. – Thantar, Hirll or Iverclaud didn't promise y'anythin'. Or m'friend Einar Moen. Take care of him, boyz!

By the time Arve perceived Twirl's words, he was lying on the floor, fists and kicks were pummeling him. Before he could shout, Hirll's all mighty boots wadded his word.

- Quiet, guyz, don't wake the neighbourz! – Twirl murmured, grinning, feeling that he was so generous to his friends, especially Einar. He kept his word, he promised that he will not lay a finger on him...but the others did not promise anything.

A few minutes later, after the traitorous agent have been sleined and stabbed to death, they turned off the light in the room (they didn't want to attract any attention), and started to sort the information out. Hirll went for a second to check on the red shimmering gateway. It was still there, silently squirming in the reddish blackness.

- We can't call anyone to rescue Vibeke. – Iverclaud concluded. – If they sniff out the Courbée Dominate's secrets, we'll have a much bigger problem in our hand.

- Y'got that right, mate! – Twirl agreed. – It's only them, and us. We don't need any help from filthy cops.

- I would reconsider it – Hirll was still filled with doubts. – We don't even know where we will go through the gate. We don't even know how can we get back here. We know nothing about them...

- We know more than anybody else – Twirl retorted. – An'we have da element of surprize. Those assholes don't even know we exist...and we got'em now. We know where Vibeke is. Our skills are also much betta than theirz.

- I disagree – Thantar interposed.

- We don't have any other choice, mate. – Twirl looked at Thantar in the darkness. – An' rememba, we're 'bout to bring some heavy reinforcements from da colony. An' firepower.

- How much we should bring?

- Twenty men.

- That's too many! We'll have only eight more at the colony then! – Thantar confuted. Iverclaud agreed with him.

- Twenty men will be enough, y'shoulda have more faith in our operatives! With you and me, that'll be twenty-four men. And that's final!

It looked like that Iverclaud and Thantar would affix something, but then, they just sighed. They knew Vibeke has very short time left.

- Hirll, y'go to da colony, and bring me twenty men. Mestengo, and other seven men must stay at the colony. Tell Mestengo that he, an' his men must stay at the command control, near the radio. They must always be ready to respond, and when I say "always", I mean "always"!!! Someone must stay at the radio, and establish a communicationz link wit' us. Y'got that?

- Yes. Mestengo will never leave the radio. He will be there with his boys, and when you call him, he will respond, no matter what.

- If the communicationz link breaks, me must do everythin' to restore connection wit' us. He is a computer hacker, so it should be a baby-sittin' job fer him.

- Ok. Anything else?

- Empty da weaponz lockups. We'll need ALL firepower, bulletz, and gear we can get. They should also pack provisions, drinks, and...how many portable communicationz devices we have?

- Only two, which are usable for greater distances.

- Ok then, bring me that two communicationz devices. And weaponz, bulletz, all kindz of equipment. Tell'em to put on some bullet proof vests as well, we're goin' a friggin' war zone here.

- Equipment, and bullet proof vests.

- Boss, Nolaw got some white phosphorus grenades for us last week! – Thantar interrupted.
- Great, tell Nolaw to give us da grenadez as well. Make sure y’bring Nolaw as well. We’ll need all firepowerz we could get.
- But Twirl, if they bring all weapons and bullets from the colony, what will be left for Mestengo and his men?
- Well, spare some for them of course. B’sides, we got promise that we’ll get a new stash of weaponz an ammo soon, so Mestengo will be fine wit’ a machinegun an’ some pistols. Leave seven clips for’em, it should be enough, but we need all other weaponz and ammo. And those white phosphor grenadez. Make sure everyone’ll have somethin’ to fight wit’...
- I don’t know if we have enough guns for twenty men...
- Bullshit, we have lots of weaponz hidden in the machinery roomz of the foundry. If y’run out of gunz, then, arm the rest of the assault team wit’ knives, or grenadez, or anythin’ y’find. I don’wanna send anyone in the warzone naked.
- You sure this is a good idea? – Hirll stepped backwards, to the house’s door.
- There’ll be no rulez on this playground, y’hear me? Everyone is a target, we’ll need twenty men wit’ weaponz loaded. I don’care which twenty y’bring, but there MUST be at least twenty men. If someone afraids, choose somebody else. Nobody is forced to come wit’ us, if he don’wanna.
- Really? – Iverclaud smiled on Twirl.
- Ya, really. – Twirl concluded. – I thought I can count on ya, but if y’re really that pussy, just go home and rest yer ass.
- All right, all right, I’ll accompany you! – Iverclaud finally made his mind.
- What about you, Hirll?
- I’m coming.
- Thantar?
- Me too, I’m the best locksmith you can get. With my lockpicks, there’ll be no locked doors.
- Good to hear this – Twirl smiled.

- I'm coming too – Einar Moen said quickly.

- You? – Twirl was looking on Einar Moen like he was Blackbeard's ghost. – I wanted y'to return to da band, this is far too dangerous.

- I care not, Twirl – Einar stepped forward. – Vibeke's life is in danger, and if you risk your life for her, I want to follow you. I would do anything to bring back Vibeke safe and sound.

- We can't always protect y'm'friend! – Twirl shook his head. – If y'got killed, Tristania is over!

- Without Vibeke, Tristania is over as well, this does not make a difference, if they kill me.

Twirl seemed to be deliberating over Einar's motivations.

- Lis'n Einar mate, I know how y'feel, but...

- But nothing. If you really want to help me, Twirl, you must let me to go with you. I want to select my own fate, you have selected yours.

- But Einar mate, we don't even have enough weaponz...

- Give me your dagger then.

- Hmmm....

Twirl quickly turned towards the dining room.

- What are y'waitin' for Hirll!? Go get da boyz, pronto!

- Okay, okay, I'm going! – he turned tail, and the sound of a closed door floated through the darkness.

Silence filled the house. Twirl, Einar, and the Alliance operatives were all thinking about the upcoming great battles for Vibeke...and for the Tristania band.

- We really need to...? – a faint voice asked from one of the standing black masses.

- Yeh, Iverclaud. This is the *only* way.

- ...

- Einar mate?

- Yes?

- Here it is.

A black tentacle reached out towards Einar's silhouette, holding a silverly blade.

- I've this dagger since I joined the military. It'll bring y'luck. Accept this as a gift from me...a militarist.

- Thank you, Twirl. – Einar could hardly find his voice after he closed his wrist around the hilt. It was a big, and needle-sharp dagger indeed. He never killed anybody before...but this night is different. It was no time to debate over legal and moral questions – Vibeke was held captive, she must be saved at all costs...

- Y're welcomed – Twirl said. – I'd like y'to hop out home, eat some, an' see if y'can bring somethin' useful wit' y'self. Don'worry 'bout us, we'll be fine here. That dickwad will not tell anything to anyone.

- Good advice, Twirl. I will be back shortly.

A few steps, and he was outside, in the cold December air. The snow was still falling from the ink-coloured sky, the lights of Stavanger were twinkling in his eyes. Audacity filled his body as he climbed through the fence, and quickly started to run across the Steingata.

Hold on, Vibs, rescue is on its way!

20 minutes later. . .

Nobody saw Einar Moen, when he arrived home. He quickly ran inside the house, and looked around for something he could use.

First thing's first...

He went to the fridge, and fixed a midnight snack for himself. The upcoming night seemed to be the longest of all – longer than thousand concerts. He needed all his body strength, so he started to eat, hoping that it will not be his last dinner...

No time for absinthe, he looked at the kitchen table, where he finished his meal. *I need to arrive back quickly.*

Strolling the house, Einar did not find anything, which could be helpful in firefights and rescue missions, except a flashlight. Closer inspection revealed that the flashlight has plenty of energy left – so he put it away. But then...what else? He did not have any firearms, and even the biggest knife proved to be small, compared to Twirl's dagger.

And then he saw it.

The Holy Bible. It was on the shelf, above his bed, where he put it many years ago. He got this Holy Bible from Vibeke, after the towering success of the Widow's Weeds album. A very old Bible – Vibeke never told him, where she got it, but it was very old...and precious. Dark red leather coat, brownish pages, a golden lace.

A sinful place awaits me. This Bible...from Vibeke...it ought to be useful.

He unslung the Bible, and rushed back to the deceased agent's house.

Twenty-four brave men...

By the time Einar arrived, everyone was waiting in the reddish-darkness of the dining room, completely filling in the small room. Twenty-four criminals in the dining room, the living room – away from the cellar. The cellar door was open, the ominous-looking gateway vortex was still there, hovering and squirming in silence. The stench of hundred cigarettes and alcoholics filled the house...but who cares? They will soon all vanish in thin air.

- Huh – Einar panted, as he stumbled across the doorsill. – I got back as fast as I could...
- Y'got back just in time, m'friend! – Twirl stepped out of the crowd. – What did y'bring?
- A flashlight, and a Bible. – Einar showed his hands.
- A Bible? – a short, robustic guy with mask on his head roared. – Heh, for what?
- This is the Bible I got from Vibeke years before, when Widow's Weeds came out, and it is very valuable. Not everyone has a colony stuffed with firearms! – Einar retorted.

Indeed, every gangster in the house had something in his hand. PCV pistols, Suomi machineguns, shotguns, assault rifles, even some sniper rifles. Einar started to feel kind of uneasy, between this many crooks armed to the teeth.

- Guys, please welcome Einar Moen from Tristania!

Many faint "hello"-s arrived from the hedge of gunmen, some of them shook hands with him. As Einar's eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness, they could see they are all wearing bullet proof vests, black dresses, masks – except Twirl – and holding many different kind of weapons. On their belt, Einar saw daggers, switchblades, binoculars, and some neatly-made packages – perhaps first-aid kits, perhaps explosives. Backpacks on their backs, ropes, and of course, ebony black gloves.

A well-prepared squadron ready to rescue Vibeke.

Are they ready?

Twirl was overjoyed about Einar could see his best men, all dressed up and ready to go – he was very proud of them, and he hoped Einar will like what he sees.

- Well, whadd'ya think, Einar mate? – Twirl smiled. – Y'won't get any better than these guys! They'll crush those Courbée Dominate fucklings wit' their bare fists!

- You did your best, Twirl. – Einar tried to smile back, but the feeling of fear burned his inside like an acid. He is walking straight into a crossfire, he knew it. Twirl, and his comrades may have got used to killing people, but he saw doubts on several faces.

Not I am the only one, who can not see clearly. Like a pilot, who is leaving his plane with a parachute which may or may not work. Quandary. We are going into a great war. How many of us will make it outside? And Vibeke?

- I am not entirely sure, Twirl... - Einar muttered before he realized he is speaking. - ...but I see fear on your men's faces.

- This iz da first time we're doin' a big job – Twirl agreed. – I know what ya thinkin' 'bout, but lemme assure y'that they won't retreat. Izn't that right fellas?

- Right, right, right boss!

- Come 'ere, Einar mate, I have somethin' for ya. – Twirl gave some kind of coat to Einar.

- What is this, Twirl?

- A flak jacket, m'friend. We didn't have moar bulletproof vests, but this should help ya survive. Live longer, live better, aye? Put it on, I say.

Einar quickly pulled on the flak jacket. It had dark camouflage colours, many small pockets he seen near the neck of the jacket. One of the lower pockets was big enough – he put the Bible in it, and sealed the pocket with the zip. The flashlight was put in the other pocket.

Twirl put his arms behind his back, where a huge, bulky weapon was hanging down, and stood in front of the glowing red fissure gate.

- Ok, lis'n up everybody. We're headin' into enemy territory. Y'know what to do. Find Vibeke, and kill everyone that's movin'. And this time, no police! Everyone iz a target, guyz. If y'see someone movin', shoot first, ask questionz neva.

A short pause, and he continued.

- We don't have much time, from what we heard, Vibeke will be executed in less than twenty-four hours, so we must move real quick-like. We know that the agent has kidnapped Vibeke, and took him to some kind of hidden society, who knows and uses all kindz of magicks. This is no joke, as y'can see, this is very real, so our lil' journey will be a real tough one.

- I see it – a strong voice murmured from the line of gunmen.

- What oppression we're talkin' about here, boss? – Einar recognized Phantele's voice.

- I kid y'not, guyz – Twirl continued. – There will be thousandz of various assholes. This Courbée Dominate was hidden fer a ver' long time, there are many initiates 'ere, all of them are targetz for ya. They live in a falanster, it's like a big city-state. We'll need to sneak inside, an' find Vibeke.

- We are risking our very lives for a WOMAN? – Nolaw groaned.

- There's much more inside da falanster than just "a woman" – Twirl said loudly. – Heapz of gold, and lots of valuables, which we could grab. And there are the grimoires too, those spellbooks, which contain all these hocus-pocus. We gotta find the grimoires, if we could, and steal'em. B'sides, Vibeke Stene is not "just a woman". So there y'have it. Y'can have all da gold y'want, I need Vibeke and da grimoires.

- Ok, boss, got the picture. – Nolaw commented.

- So guyz, we'll need to work togetha. I'll personally lead y'all. There are minefieldz 'round the falanster, and many initiates are scoutin' da forest, along wit' those Drones, so be on yer guard. If they see ya, make sure y'll be the first one to shoot. Lis'n here, guyz, this is extremely important to find and rescue Vibeke. I don't care how many assholes y'kill, she *must be rescued*. Workin' together as a team will make sure we'll survive, our adversary aren't trained soldierz, so they'll be just a small time...

- They could use magicks... - Kolermigon suggested.

- No magic can stop da bulletz from our gunz, Kol - Twirl responded. He took a deep breath, and continued the briefing. – We'll be on our own, guyz, no outsiders allowed. We can't let anyone lay their filthy lil'paws on that kind of magic power. We'll be in touch wit' Mestengo, he iz at the colony, and will navigate us through radio communicationz, if he can. This operation mustn't be scrubbed, guyz. No one iz takin' any chances, no one try to be da hero! Y'got that?

- Affirmative.

- An' don't forget to cover each otherz back! No one wanderz off alone, we gotta stick together. Y'understood?

- We will be on each other, like stink on shit. – Keydon repeated. – Sure thing, boss!

- Ok then, guyz. Get yer weaponz loaded – we're goin' in!

- Courbée Dominate, here we come! – Iverclaud shouted, and quickly inspected his Suomi machinegun.

Without wasting any more time, Twirl bravely walked towards the red squirming gate.

- It feels kinda nice and warm, guys... - he murmured. – Ok, y’follow me. When y’arrive, defensive positionz.

He stepped through the red vortex, and disappeared without a trace.

- Okay, Annihilation Taskforce, forward march! – Hirll quickly assumed command. – One by one!

The line of gunman slowly dispersed, as the Alliance members were walking down the three little stairs of the cellar, stepped through the whirling vortex, and vanished. Einar also went closer, but Keydon pushed him back.

- You last. We gotta fortify our position first.

Einar nodded, and stepped back. After all, he had only a dagger.

Slowly, one by one, all twenty-four Alliance operatives vanished in the gateway. He was the only one, who left at this side of the portal. Stepping in front of the red squirming time-space anomaly was like standing at the very rim of a tall cliff. He felt that his soul is sailing on the great ocean of fear, in the worst storm...

He took a look behind himself – the dining room, the staircase, the muddy footprints of the Alliance members. Even though they arrived with a truck, they still got their feet wet. Do they still exist???

Einar walked back to the front door, and locked it. Then, he returned to the fissure gate, and closed the cellar door. And now...it’s time...

Hold on, Vibeke. I am coming!

A deep breath – hopefully not the last. He clenched his fists, and stepped into the spinning gate. His field of vision suddenly filled with colorful particles – like a fragments of a dream at morning – and the gate absorbed him...

♦♦♦this is how it started♦♦♦