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TO THE NIGHT

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Dreams Belong to the Night

by

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Part one:
DREAMS IN DARKNESS

«Revolution begins with the misfits».
Herbert George Wells

CHAPTER ONE

A light flashed in the dark.

A woman stood by the edge of the forest. Her features suggested that she was not quite fully developed. But she was indeed well grown. Strength and agility were very evident in the tall, slim body. Her thoughts returned briefly to a time when this hadn't really been that evident. She turned her attention to the forest, the one she had watched from the mountaintop above. It had an oval shape, surrounded by large fields of green grass. She saw the night between all the trees as impenetrable and threatening. Only by straining her eyes she was occasionally able to glimpse the campfire she knew was burning therein.

The wind howling in the night, seemingly coming from everywhere and nowhere roughed up her short hair. The forelock just about reached her eyebrows. The sound of drums, beating slow and thunderous, reached her, close from behind and more distant in front, on the other side of the forest. She listened, concentrating, attempting not to merely listen with her ears, but seeking beyond the thunderous beat, in the hope of hearing the other drums, those that Jonas had spoken about, that weren't sound at all.

– Listen, listen and you can hear them, he said in her mind, even as she strived to keep herself from being distracted, – the heartbeats of the gods.

She set off into the forest with a sinking feeling in her stomach, but with a fire burning in the eyes. Her point of incursion took place where the gathering of trees was the thickest and the crossing had to be from one point to the other, where there was the farthest to go, like walking the longest route possible on a circled road. It was tough, but that was how they were taught here. The girl smiled.

The wind blew along her body. Her feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. She was dressed in simple fabric, a set of warm and functional clothing making it easy to breathe. She hardly noticed its weight. The forest was breathing mystically and invitingly, but also traitorously. She knew that. Even though the journey between trees was swift she planned every step in her mind before actually taking it. Body and mind were tense. Earlier in her life, before coming here, there was no way she could have imagined that such a focus was even possible, but now it seemed almost a mundane task, like breathing. She imagined a spider spinning its web somewhere ahead. Except that she was no longer thinking in such a manner. Slowly unnecessary thoughts faded from her consciousness. The words appearing in her mind were «spider» and «ahead». She recalled that animals were supposed to think like that, in images and directions.

She took long and fluid strides across the forest bed, sliding between the trees, allowing herself to momentarily recall the first time she had crossed this shore, and to reflect over how noisy she had been. Now, she was confident that the man awaiting her ahead couldn't hear her, even though he knew she was coming.

«When you move through the shadows», he had told her, told them, «be as quiet as the shadow, be the shadow. Always expect the unexpected». He repeated it often. «You may avoid the whirlwind by crawling into a hole in the ground, but you will never be safe. It will always catch up with you».

The darkness momentarily touched her. She shivered lightly and got goose bumps all over. Understanding didn't escape her. In spite of her youth she wasn't unfamiliar with the darker shades of life.

Her foot froze on the spot where it had touched the ground. Against bare skin she felt it, the trap. She jumped, far spryer than a deer. She felt it like that, felt it had to be like that. The trap sprung the moment the foot vanished. She registered how the rope touched her toes. Tree and branches rose violently from its confines and leaves rained everywhere. There was a thunderous crack as many guns fired simultaneously and a rain of bullets, rubber bullets ignited the air above her, while she was rolling away. They were harmless, really, hollow and filled with red paint as they were, but they hurt, like Bergli had initially assured them they would. Hurt more than being hit by a real bullet.

«To die quickly doesn't hurt», he insisted. «The healing does».

Distractions made by these and other stray thoughts faded. Focus returned. She hadn't taken many steps further when the ground suddenly felt unusually soft under her foot. A pitfall. A major one. She grabbed a stick, a cleaned branch and passed the grave crouched and almost on all fours. She moved it like a blind man's stick in the air and the ground before her. It had to be done fast. She was in a hurry. Time was about to catch up with her. Metal screamed against metal and the stick was stuck. Bergli didn't play games. His students had quickly become familiar with the particularly constructed fox trap. It was made to not snap too hard, but afterwards remain firmly around any given foot or whatever it caught. The girl recalled its lessons well.

Time moved within her. Like a cat she jumped up in the nearest tree. She remained on the branch for a second or two. Nothing transpired and she jumped back down. The traps obviously increased in numbers on the ground, but were certainly even more numerous in the trees, particularly where she could easily walk from branch to branch to the target area. He who had set the traps had strived hard and knew the forest intimately. She

moved further into the forest's deep night, alert with her entire animal power.

«Lights.» She raised her head and sniffed in the air. «Right hand.»

«Fire?»

«Fire.»

Nothing more of significance transpired. She reached the open area in the forest's midst. Four small fires burned, one in each corner. Between two of them, almost at the opposite side of the clearing an old man sat on a flat rock. The long white hair reached to his shoulders. His head was bent forward and the shoulders lowered. Before the fire closest to him a sword was pushed into the ground. The girl moved with careful steps towards it. She pulled it up and lifted it above her head. In the steel's silvery surface she saw her own silver hair. She locked her eyes on the old man. His eyes seemed... haunted. He sat still, so very still, as if he had never moved at all. The skin had a thin layer of sweat. She moved towards him with the sword raised. Their eyes were like locked on to each other. Yellow leaves danced around him. Spring's juices flowed through her. The blade's silvery surface flashed, mirroring the hot fire. She turned away from him and walked towards the square's center. The fires were all exactly the same distance away from her. She placed herself there, on a small rise. A soundless whisper reached her. She heard the barely audible sound of friction against his clothes and turned abruptly. The time had come. This was the moment. She suddenly sensed the silence. The thundering drumbeat had halted. She couldn't tell the precise moment it had happened, but it had happened well after she had entered the square. She had arrived in time.

A crack, and heavy timber hanging from a rope raced through the air. She threw herself aside, just in time. The moment the log passed her she swung her sword and cut the rope that would have made the thick log swing back and forth like a pendulum. It fell harmlessly to the ground, rolling away from her, over one of the fires. The burst of embers rose in the air. She faced the old man with her feet apart. He held a little bow in his hands. Before she could even think about it, register it he had effortlessly cocked it and sent off an arrow. The arrow raced towards her. She knew it had a blunt point, but in her mind she imagined a sharp metal point that stung and tore flesh and turned red with her blood. She took one step to the side. The blade flashed as she brought it down at the passing arrow, cutting it in two. Its two harmless pieces fell silently to the ground.

He sat still once more. It seemed to her just then like he had never moved at all. In the black clothes his body seemed almost indistinct, while his face was well lit, and finally she was able to glimpse a shadow of a smile there.

In one single, swift move she threw the sword. It hit the tree right above his head with a loud crack and remained there, vibrating, deeply within the tree, within the ground. The broad smile transformed her face. Light on her feet she walked past the man in black and disappeared into the forest. In there, where she saw nothing but darkness, she imagined she could almost hear the heartbeat of the gods.

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There was a fire burning on the other side of the woods. Seven youths gathered around it, accompanying the old man. Of the seven there were four girls and three boys, something of a coincidence, according to he who had gathered them. It could just as well have been the other way around, or an even number. They kept their eyes fixed on the old one. He seemed different and in a way less imposing now than in the forest. In another way he seemed and had always seemed overwhelming. During the entire time he had trained them, pushed them at and beyond their ultimate potential they had felt an enormous amount of respect for him.

He was also a tormented man. They could see that clearly now, with their newfound awareness.

– My condolences, he, Jonas Bergli said, with his dry, hoarse voice. – Some time ago, encouraged by me, you set goals for yourself, goals you have now reached, together and as individuals.

Happy and laughing they congratulated each other. They had had a great time here and also felt sadness because it was over.

– I’ve been pushing you, and tormenting and hounding you, everything to remove layers upon layers of illusions put on you by your surroundings. I’m not sure I’ve done you any favors.

One of the boys leaned forward and spoke:

– I think I can speak for all of us in expressing my gratitude, sir, for everything you’ve done for us. We lived only... half-lives before meeting you.

– Hear, hear, one of the other boys said.

The sentiment was echoed by them all.

– But I remain curious. I believe we all are. We wonder about your motivation, about your possible ultimate intentions.

– Formal Olav, one of the girls chuckled.

The conversation was in English, the language tying them together.

– I’m not sure I have any truly satisfactory explanation to give you. Jonas Bergli breathed deeply. – I guess I saw much of myself in you. Let me say it with flowers: The simple truth is that you are rebels, strangers, odd birds, exiles in a society weaving invisible strands around a person from the cradle, strands turning to ever thicker chains as a person grows older. You

stand outside what our culture sees as holy and what a culture can't assimilate it destroys. I have enhanced this strangeness in you, instead of muting it. I've taught you to fight and you've learned to know yourself, and thereby learned compassion. Therefore you'll have an even harder life than you would otherwise have. You'll probably be forced to destroy that little soft spot inside simply to survive.

They sat outside their host's small cabin, all of them recalling the bloody hardship they had endured inside and around the old, but well kept building. It already seemed like a distant memory. In the shimmering light from the fire they saw it in a completely different light, as a source, a spring of hidden knowledge, a path to untold wonders. Their eyes were open, had been forced wide-open the last few weeks, and thus they pondered and grew at this remote, unknown place, one that could be anywhere on Earth.

– You *live* here, Anya said slowly. – But you must be rich. Otherwise you would never have been able to travel and... gather us the way you did.

– Money can be useful, even though it truly has no value at all. He shrugged. – In my search I traveled far longer and wider than you've been led to believe. I didn't decide upon any advance number. Eventually I ended up with seven. It was a better chance that way, for you to learn what you had to learn.

– But where did you get the money? Judith asked humorously.

– As I've explained there is a difference between robbing a bank and a defenseless old lady.

Laughter, a silence too deep for words.

– I don't want to say much more, he drawled. – It's important that you start drawing your own conclusions. Don't look at this as an ending, but rather yet another beginning in an unending number of beginnings. You must never stop learning, and you must do it with reason in mind. It's important not to be stuck within any one given surrounding. Life is hard, ruthless, but instead of bending to it you should challenge it. Remember that only desperate situations demand desperate actions. The present day condition of the world is pretty grim, of course, but I meant on a personal level. I can't tell you where to draw the line. You must do that yourself. But I will emphasize one thing: I'm convinced that you, sooner or later will be driven into a corner, pushed against the wall. I can't say when or how, but I know, when push comes to shove that you won't back away. One must concern oneself with oneself before concerning one self with others. There's a fine line here, you see.

He heard them mumble in agreement. He saw the frost in their eyes, of thoughts not yet fully realized. He felt a heart-wrenching compassion just then, in a way he hadn't felt for many years.

– You all did well, but Judith truly surpassed you all. She's your leader, if you should ever, ever need one. He waved with his hands. – That's it, the last class is over and done. From this point on, you're on your own. I'm through with you assholes.

– We live as we dream - alone, Anya intoned.

She was the nature child and the poet among them. They laughed some more, loud and hot chuckles mixed with worry. Increased understanding didn't necessarily lead to good things happening.

Not in the world as it was.

They ate and drank, practically gorged without gorging on food and wine, enjoying themselves. The meat they digested, an elk they grilled on the open fire, its scent, its very essence... invaded them. All seven had participated in the hunt and kill the previous day, in the enormous forest to the east. Before they nourished themselves on the proud animal Bergli led a ceremony they felt was ancient. The elk had given its life so they could live, and they felt boundless gratitude. They fed, honoring the animal, and the meat tasted so much better, better than they could ever have dreamed. This entire final day and night carried with it something magical. The memory overwhelmed them in such a way that they would never be able to forget, even though they might want to. The heat from the ground, from the Earth turned alive within them, and along with the cold from the life-hostile world outside, it made them shiver and burn. They felt close to ancient times, when humanity lived close to the fertile Earth.

The fire burned in their hearts and the blood boiled in their veins. They had learned more this short month than during their entire life previous to it. Judith was seventeen, the others not much older.

– There's so much... work to be done, Anya said. – Too much talk and not enough *action*. The world needs that, needs it desperately.

– The world is screaming for our services, Judith grinned, the intensity beneath the banter only thinly veiled.

Shouts of agreement echoed and multiplied among the small group.

– Swear that you will make a difference in the world, Judith said abruptly and with huge and eerie eyes. – Swear that you will contribute with more than phrases.

Everybody did, one by one and together.

Far more, Olav thought, added in his minds what everybody knew everybody was thinking, while toasting with Judith, looking into those huge innocent eyes of hers.

– I would have loved to help you further, beyond this modest beginning, Bergli said with regret, – both financially and otherwise, but because of various *distinct* reasons it isn't a very good idea. I'm a marked man, and if you're seen with me you will be, too. If not, and you're lucky, you could avoid it for maybe ten years or so, when you'll know better how to deal with it.

– You've evidently done a lot in your time, Anya said cheerfully. – What did you do when you were our age?

– I was a deckhand on a ship, he replied a bit preoccupied. – In those days it was one of the few ways a boy of a poor family could leave the country. Girls had, of course even fewer opportunities. But a few years later I met a group, both men and women sharing my view on life. A wonderful time followed then. I guess we didn't achieve that much, not in the grand scheme of things, but sufficient for us to become famous... or shall I say infamous. At that time rebels had even fewer ways to express their anger and everything compared to today. You should know that nothing comes easy... All of you seven will surely experience periods and moments of doubt. Then it will be more important than ever to remember why you do what you do, and that you rise to the challenge, show what you stand for. Action must follow thought, or freedom will be merely an illusion.

They knew about doubt, even if it felt like only yesterday since their eyes had started to open. They sensed what enormous odds they had against them, in a world dominated by bleak forces.

The fire rose towards the night sky and less wood remained.

– Is something the matter, Jonas? Judith asked carefully a while later.

– I'm tired, the old man admitted.

She realized he didn't mean physically tired. She moved herself closer to him and lowered her voice.

– We don't know much about you, Jonas. She spoke in Norwegian, now. That made Olav the only one who could understand anything of the conversation and he wasn't around at the moment. – What are you? Who are you?

– A kind of teacher, I suppose, Bergli replied. – Nothing resembling any ordinary one, mind you. I believe it's important, even crucial to teach youth what they aren't taught in ordinary schools.

He grinned. When he realized she wasn't satisfied with the fullness of his reply he continued.

– I left Norway after The Great War, the First World War. Yes, I am that old. I was sick and tired of «the job age» and the wave of stock speculation directly glorifying the hierarchy. I wanted to travel the world, to observe all the changes happening there. I did return to Norway occasionally, like a

salmon always returning to its birthplace, but I never felt at home there. Out there, between the borders, I gained a certain perspective, clearly unsatisfactory... in more ways than one... but better still. You see, I don't believe there is any true answer, any unified solution to the problems. No matter, they can't be solved in only a generation. I've learned that much. Teacher and student learn together, because both are in truth... both. That's the best way to learn. Remember that.

– My thanks, teacher. She put a hand on his shoulder.

The old face looked more wrinkled than ever. He was in excellent shape, but the years were like cut into his features.

Suddenly, before she could react or even notice, his eyes changed and a hand grabbed her arm, grabbed it hard.

– You are what I was hoping for, what I feared and hoped, he whispered.

– One final message: Have you noticed the bolted room beyond the wine cellar? Do you have it enshrined in your mind?

– Yes, actually I have... She strived to keep a light tone. – I've wondered what...

– A dark secret is waiting in there, he hissed. – Awaiting *you*. Something for the utter desperation and despair. When the day comes, and it will, when no other path is left for you, you'll return there and everything will be ready.

– I will remember, she said, half in a stupor. – Remember...

– Good. He loosened his grip on her. – Good...

His eyes were dead. She shuddered in a paralyzing cold. Dead!

In deep thought she left him. She realized that Jonas Bergli had died bit-by-bit, year-by-year, until there was little or nothing left. He had lived in hopelessness and despair his entire life. And now his life had ended. If it hadn't in truth ended long ago.

But that didn't have anything to do with her. Uncertain steps turned more assured. Her life was just beginning and she would enjoy it. The entire world waited for her out there.

– Our fearless leader, Olav joked when she sat down with the others.

She blushed, fully aware of the fact that she was the youngest. But it didn't really faze her, because she knew it didn't matter.

They studied the old man as he entered the cabin and closed the door behind him.

– He has said everything he wants to say, she stated firmly.

Wilhelm filled her glass and gave it to her. She sipped the wine while attempting to eye-flirt with him. It was a rather failed venture. They called him Willy. He was nice enough, but there was something about him she just didn't get.

She carefully swallowed the red wine and sensed it slip down her throat. It was different from anything she had previously tasted. Jonas had an entire, expensive collection in the cellar. It wasn't the kind of stuff you got drunk on, but she sensed a pleasant warmth spread through her body. Somebody had turned on the cassette player and she started rocking, swaying, following the music's beat.

The Storm waited for them out there...

– The world is at our feet, Olav said. She danced with him and snuggled close.

– Judith and Olav are true, she heard Anya tease them.

The night embraced them darkly. Of the fire only embers remained. The stars in his eyes were the only lights Judith could see. He ruffled her silver hair. Kissed her hard and demanding. She wetly returned his kiss. They were alone now. The others had gone to bed or spread out across the forest.

– I know about a place, he whispered into her ear. – There is soft and dry moss there. There are four special trees. They will enclose us. They will surround and isolate us.

She sensed something explosive be released within and she clung to him. Tonight she would enjoy herself, in wild and uncompromising ways. He liberated himself from her, took two steps back and reached out a hand to her. She reached out hers, and allowed him to take it, and they walked to the forest, walked so fast that her forelock was pushed back from her brow and they almost ran.