

## Rabbit & the Hound

By: Mathew D. Miles

Written from the perspective of:

*Saint Valentine*

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### **The Heart of the Woods**

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“When you get a chance, write what you are about to witness and deliver it to Zara, but only after your current assignment from Venus is over”, was the instruction that Kumara gave to me. He brought his dragon signet, the staff he normally carried with him, up to the side of my head, next to my ear.

“Listen to the sounds and focus on them, then pay attention to the smallest of details that you might find once you open your eyes”, he continued on.

I began to hear the sounds of silence quickly transform into that of a tranquil forest, teeming with life. I closed my eyes and I could no longer hear Kumara speaking to me, instead the sounds filled my head and so did the memories that they carried.

I was instantly transported to a new place, where all my senses found the same experiences that my ears first received.

Looking around to gain my bearings, I could make out the coast-line of an ocean nearby to my left. On my right, above the trees, was a cliff formation just below the mountains and I recognized this place, as I have been here many times before. This was north of Skara-brae, close to the entrance to the Blighted Grove, a very dangerous corrupted vale, that most knew to stay out of.

The Blighted Grove was once an enchanted sanctuary, but now it is the home to Lady Melisande and her creations. She was once a very powerful guardian dryad, but now that place only harbors death, as she is no longer a protector of anything. The corruption she unleashed there was not the dark arts of necromancy, that of my own illusion magic or even the advanced arcane arts, for it was something else entirely. The few interactions that I have had with those that did venture inside of the Blighted Grove, tell tale of animals locked within crystals, suspended without animation, neither living or dead and for what purpose, to what end, I don't know.

Looking around my new surroundings, I was doubtful of what I was supposed to be searching for and Kumara was not very specific at all. The only instructions he gave me, was just to pay attention, so with that in mind, I moved in the direction of the mountains.

My feet I realized, as I started to take my first few steps and looked down. They were firmly planted on the ground, how disappointing I thought. My abilities were not going to be of any use where I was.

I kept taking steps forward, getting comfortable without my ability to hover off the ground and then, I noticed myself able to interact with all of my surroundings completely. The living creatures in the area, ignored me out right, as if I didn't exist. Then, A brown-bear walked past me, so close I could smell the odor from his musky fur-coat, yet it was clear he didn't notice my presence at all.

Was this an illusion or vision?

I was curious to see if I was in a dream or if I was experiencing reality in some way, only because everything did look so real. Regardless, I Knew to pay close attention to every detail, as Kumara had instructed of me and I reminded myself again, as I often get preoccupied with things that I physically interact with.

I continued on, to see what could be seen, to hear what could be heard, and to experience that which lay ahead for me to find. On my way to the edge of the forest, something caught my eye, a collection of plants that formed a magnificent natural bouquet and I stopped to appreciate this wonderful thing.

A lilac bush, in full-bloom and it had found root in the same location as a pink rose bush. The two small wild shrubs had intertwined themselves together to create quite the visual effect and it was amazing.

I made a mental note of the beautiful arrangement, as that might make for a great future gift for the realm, during my next season, if I could somehow manage to duplicate it of course.

Only judges, such as myself, have seasons and there are several Judges too. Those who make up our select order are not known by all of our members, but I do happen to know several. I continued to look upon the natural painting of colors and flowers, woven together, then I saw how special the bush and shrubbery really were. The detail of one specific rose at the top of the bouquet was very intense, as I could make out every possible shade of pink in the entire color wheel.

hues are a specialty of mine and I knew this rose had every known pink, as I gazed upon it. I could not think of another plant or flower in existence that had this very rare feature about it either. It was as if a fine gem or crystal had split apart the light to reveal all the colors, then made the decision to only show one color in a thousand possible ways.

The rose was also three times larger than the other roses spread around the rest of the shrub and the smaller ones were not the same color either. Instead, they were a mix of solid pinks and whites, as to suggest two different rose bushes. Staring at the smaller roses, I could not identify their colors, but I would revisit this at a later time, I thought.

Around the one larger rose, several miniature violet-blue syringa lilacs found their way there, to call that space their home. This breed of lilac is rather uncommon and instead of a large single grouping of blossoms, each flower had their own smaller stem. The Miniature syringa had 4 two-toned petals each, as they almost looked like a colony of butterflies that had landed to rest for a while.

Those little lilacs had somehow come to pay homage to this one larger rose, as a center piece. After closely examining the miniature syringas, I was certain their hue was 1289, a vibrant pink and blue mixture.

I also considered that there must be several types of lilac bushes that grew up in this one spot, as all the other blossoms were the typical large spear-like groupings, but each one was a different color. This should not be possible from a single plant either and that made me wonder about its origin.

Those elongated clusters of lilacs protruded away from the bush and hung away, as if they were fireworks, being launched to celebrate some great thing. I could spot a 1363 and a 1266 hue. The 1273 I found was an exceptionally brilliant example of a typical lilac and perhaps that would be my favorite one.

As I examined the colors of the bouquet further, the thing that worried me the most started to creep its way into my conscious.

I was rather perturbed about the current predicament of my friend Nicholas and my assignment of confronting him had fully blossomed in the forefront of my thinking, much in the way that the shrubberies had also done.

What bothered me the most with my new thoughts was that if Kumara was here in this realm, then why would I even be considered for such a dangerous task. Judges are not equal in strength after all or even close and some are clearly more powerful than others. The judges in the Second Plane of Existence, known as Arch Angels, are as powerful as ancient dragons, while the judges of the four seasons in our realm are created by the ancient magic of the cosmos. These judges are not ancient dragons or Arch Angels, but they are still very powerful.

Nicholas was one of those judges and how could such an important task fall to me, as to confront him. I even considered briefly that Venus made a mistake and perhaps Kumara didn't know of her error. Kumara is the Just-Judge, who has dominion over all judges, so if he was here, why would that confrontation not fall to him?

The Judges like myself are also part of mankind and this realm, even though we never age, we are not immortal either, so death is a very real possibility. I think about that often and take great care to not be foolish with my actions. We are not primary judges of a season, but instead we become focused on a specific part of the year and are created for a specific purpose. At least, that was my understanding of my own nature.

The judges of this realm often interact with Venus or maybe angels that serve Kumara, but never Kumara himself. Venus sending me on a mission was a very normal and common occurrence. Her assignments are always double-edged in nature, but I have gotten used to approaching them with care and caution over the years.

Venus is also extremely persuasive too, as I have never rejected a request of hers, though I am sure I could, I just don't know what would happen if I did. I have never had a reason to tell her no before though. The current mission I was on, for that wasn't from her, but from Kumara instead. I certainly knew that if it was from Venus, I would have told her no.

When Kumara found me, only minutes after Venus had left, he had not mentioned confronting Saint Nicholas, instead he seemed way more interested in the girl and he is still that way.

I had not seen Kumara for almost three hundred years and when I did, we had to rush off to find a little girl in a cave. Of course, it was a good thing that we did, looking back, as she was in grave danger, but I

am still left with many questions. I know there is a very important reason why Kumara is here now, I just wish he would tell me what that was or even spend a little time to help train me or anything.

Perhaps then the point of this dream, that I am in now is to do just that. That actually makes a lot of sense to me. Perhaps He had found a way to weave me into what ever occupies his time here. I should not be so quick to judge, for I don't know much and that lack of understanding would likely not produce a high degree of accuracy if I decided to latch onto it. I am sure Kumara has a plan for Saint Nicholas, even if that plan involves me, I will gladly accept my role.

Nicholas has lost his way and something needs to be done about that, of this I fully understand completely. I don't know what had caused his change, but he has become a clear danger to the people of this world.

My surroundings came into focus again and I realized that I had drifted off into thought. I forgot I was in a dream and I reminded myself to continue on, not to linger and get lost in those thoughts. Before I did though, I would make sure to examine the rest of the features of the flower bushes, so I could attempt to copy it later. Every little detail I am to pay attention to and those shrubberies have many details.

After several minutes of careful study, I did eventually identify the smaller roses as being hue 2035 and hue 1930. I walked around the display and spotted a single lilac blossom that was hue 2735, a color normally reserved for a specific purpose. How was it possible there were so many colors here? I wondered.

This got me thinking about specific purposes and my specific purpose as a judge with an illusion spell that was given to me a long time ago, called "Cupid's Arrow". It is more likely this has something to do with Zara then Nicholas, I considered.

I was supposed to train Zara in archery, but as I did, two things became quite clear to me. She wasn't very good with a bow and arrow and her true identity presented itself to me. I suspected then that Zara might be a Champion, but now that I am thinking about what happened at the PAWS Soulforge, I am quite certain she is to be a Champion.

I continue to think on this and I realized that perhaps she might even be selected by Kumara to be a judge. Maybe Kumara is picking her to replace Nicholas, I thought.

I quickly dismissed that notion with the return of a very recent memory.

I remembered why I needed to get Zara familiar with a composite bow in the first place. The memory of the ranger, spoke "2012" which is the combination of the number 20 or "*The Book of Angels*" and the number 12, the virtues themselves. I wasn't sure what that all meant then, but I am absolutely sure now, that she is to be a champion of a virtue of some kind.

I don't quite understand the memories at the PAWS Soulforge entirely or the function of the Valkyrie, but the ranger that was supposed to be the memory of the virtue of spirituality, is also the same virtue of the constellations and the very source of the illusion magic that I wield too.

Was her virtue supposed to be that of spirituality or something else? That was unclear to me.

If I am to select her as my champion, which is the custom of a judge, then she would be the one that would require my illusion spell, "Cupid's Arrow", for there could be no one else.

The spell was taught to me by the constellation Sagittarius for the day that a champion would restore the heart of virtues. It was not clear to me what that meant, but I do know the spell is for a champion to do just that and that champion must be Zara. The spell binds itself to the user, as I draw the bow in their hands. Upon firing the bow, an arrow is created and it will reflect the affinity of the champion that fires it. The magic the arrow is made from, is that which created the entire cosmos. For that was the reason she must learn from a composite bow, so she could use that specific bow, once I bestowed it unto her.

I am unsure if the bow vanishes after it is used, or if it continues on, as this is an illusion spell, that I know very little about.

I understand the nature of the champions and the judges though, for that has become clear to me over time. Champions are selected by judges and their job is to protect the heart of the virtues. Champions can only be selected by judges as well, though, I do not know how the other judges go about selecting theirs. I assume Kumara could create as many Champions as he would like, but for myself I can only create a champion to restore the heart of the virtues. It would be useful if I actually knew what that was supposed to do or how I could recognize such a thing, but perhaps it wasn't required for me to know how to restore the heart, just provide the means to do so.

In the short time, inspecting those flowers, my worried state changed quite a lot, from having to confront my old friend, as my primary assignment, to realizing that Zara was now all that mattered. I found myself no longer worried and for that I am quite thankful.

My surroundings again come into focus and I realized that I had gotten entirely lost in my thoughts, so I decided it would be good to just move on.

I looked upon the rose and lilac shrubberies one last time and turned to finish my journey, making my way to the mountains, then down the range to the entrance of the Blighted Grove. As I walked, I thought of the beautiful display once more and the revelations that came to me, so I decided that I would name those flowers after that of my purpose and that of the girls too. I would call that bouquet: The Heart of Virtues and try to recreate it when I had more time.

I eventually approached the mountains, as I came out of the end of the forest-line and I could make out the stark contrast of rocks from the cliffs that I had looked up to earlier. I checked my surroundings again and located the patch of trees that made up the Blighted Grove, further down the mountain range and moved in that direction.

### **The Young Wolf**

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Sounds in the distance began to present themselves to me, of what appeared to be from a puppy or a young dog. Further I walked, almost to the entrance to the Blighted Grove, when I eventually made out the source of those playful grunts. There, a little black and white puppy, was chirping at a tree trunk and bouncing around in jest.

Oh-yes, I said out loud, as my eyes focused on the entangled tree trunk the dog was at, for that massive grove I knew all too well, as it was the same ancient tree cluster with the large hollowed-out archway that made up the entrance to the Blighted Grove.

Something was off about the trees though, for this version looked slightly different, with a much smaller opening than I was used to seeing. Approaching the scene, I noticed the water from the mountain spring, which I expected to find infected, but instead found to be crystal-clear, as the water had absolutely no corruption to it at all.

This was the Blighted Grove alright, but well before it even existed, I came to understand. How far before, I didn't know at the time, but I knew I needed to pay attention to the smallest of details. I continued to watch to see what transpired, focusing on the little dog as he played.

The small animal laid his head down onto his front two legs and paws, with his hind legs up, then he started to wag his tail furiously and feverishly. Just then a rabbit appeared from the opening, at the base of the large trunk of this ancient overgrown tree. The rabbit stood up, on its back two legs and immediately lunged at the dog with its arms, playfully smacking the puppy on the nose. The little dog jumped up and proceeded to run in a circle, while the rabbit chased after him. The two stopped in unison and then, the rabbit turned to run in the opposite direction, while the puppy followed close behind, in a classic game of cat and mouse.

I smiled at this event, as it was quite unique to watch such a thing unfolding, but then suddenly the small dog tripped over his clumsiness and tumbled head over heels across the tall-grass, which caused me to laugh out loud.

The rabbit stopped and hopped over to the puppy, as to check to make sure that he was ok.

Somehow, those two unsuspecting animals must be friends of some kind, I considered. What a strange pair they made, I thought to myself, but continued to watch.

Without warning, a massive howl was heard from another dog, which was not so far away. That other animal I concluded must be an adult dire wolf, perhaps related to the little puppy too. The sound that this other animal made was obviously from a very large dire wolf at that and the noise startled the rabbit, forcing it back into the burrow from which it came. The little pup stood up on all fours, with his ears peaked to attention and then, he began to move in the direction of that echoing bellow.

Without any cause, the young k-9 halted its course and looked over to where I was at. Surprised by this, I inspected my surroundings, to see what could have grabbed the little dog's attention. Something indeed beckoned the curiosity of the animal, as he moving to my location.

The puppy walked right up to me and sat down on its rear end, a few feet away, as I was clearly his intended target.

How could he see me, but nothing else could? How strange a thing, I wondered?

Hello, I said, curious to see if he could hear me too.

The young wolf tilted its head to the side, then picked himself up to move a step closer, then sat back down again. I did rather like the little guy, so I kneeled down and offered out my hand. This attracted

the puppy to move closer, but instead of smelling my scent that I had offered, he proceeded to lick my face, while ignoring my earlier gesture.

I was caught off guard by the little pup's advances, which produced signs of joy as I was smiling. I reached out my hand to touch the puppy's head, as to pet and greet the young dog. Instantly as I did, without a warning of any kind, my surroundings violently shifted into a confused and chaotic vantage, much lower to the ground.

Another call from the very large beast in the distance came again. My surroundings began to shake dizzily, as I could make nothing out due to my vision being so jostled and then, head over heels I went, until suddenly everything stopped.

I began to understand what was going on, that I was somehow transported inside of this animal. The last little bit, must have been the small dog clumsily attempting to move, without the rest of himself being able to catch up to his uncoordinated efforts.

I could feel his memories too, especially that of his most recent interactions with the little rabbit. The puppy's memories became my memories and I could easily access them, as if they were from me. The little dog had many interactions with the rabbit and he was quite fond of the bunny too. It was clear to me that the two were very good friends, out each day playing and exploring their surroundings together and several times over.

The two were in-fact best friends.

Eventually the puppy made his way back to the source of the dire wolf's call and in a small clearing, under a tight grouping of brush, were three large dire wolves, one particularly larger than the other two. The large male was black and white, just like the little dog, that I shared these visions with. The two other dire wolves were solid grey and a solid off-white, both being females. Also with these bigger dogs were two small puppies, much like the one I was with, but these animals were all-black, while one had a grey spot over its right-eye.

This must be a wolf-pack consisting entirely of dogs in the same family circle, I noted to myself.

The two other puppies must be brothers to this dog, but they didn't seem to pay him any attention. I could sense that there were no tight bonds between the two of them and the dog I was with either. The larger wolf was the father and my puppy host seemed to love his dad very much, as he walked over to the pack-leader and presented himself.

The large animal nudged at the young wolf with his nose, as to welcome him back-home, while his mother, I assumed, the off-white dire wolf, made her way over to the both of us. She did not hesitate with her actions, as she picked both of us up by the back of the puppy's neck and I could tell the little guy did not appreciate to be handled in such a way.

A massive bark came from the large dire wolf, as he was indicating something to the group, then the beast started out of the camp they were all in. Everyone else followed, including the mother, with pup in her mouth and me right along with them.

The pack must be migrating, leaving this area to search for a better hunting ground, I considered and this revelation eventually would come to the puppy too.

When the young dog did come to the same understanding that I had, he fought hard to be released and cried-out, with howls of protest. The puppy could not break free from his mother's grasp on him and eventually he gave up. Now tired from the day and his struggle, the little dog closed his eyes, as darkness filled my own vision and I could no longer see.

The dog had tired himself out and was falling asleep and as he did, my own senses faded around me. The sounds were all gone now and there was an absolute silence of all things, even the dog's memories.

What was the point of all this that Kumara wanted me to see? The Just-Judge himself must have sent me on this path for a reason, so I patiently waited for any glimmer of noise, smells, sight and memories to explore further. I eventually would come to understand, but at this moment, it was still an unknown.

### **The Pack-Leader**

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Slowly, noises filled my ears again, that of panting and of the bursal of foliage, as one may expect to hear as they walk through a dense canopy. My sense of vision was the last to return and when it did, I could make out the surroundings of a forest. This forest had much different trees this time I noted to myself, as I was unsure where I was at, but it was clear to me that I was nowhere near the previous location.

Nothing was ahead of me that I could use as a marker, other than more trees and plants. I must still be with the same dog I thought, but he was different somehow. As the animal approached a soft-clearing, he stopped, turned around and I could see the other familiar dire wolves behind him.

I was no longer occupying a little puppy but a full-grown adult and I could feel it was the same animal, but several years later. Infront of us were three other wolves, two black and one black and white. It was this dog's two brothers and his father, as I could sense they were on a hunt together.

Somehow the dire wolf that I was with, was now the pack-leader of this group, though I could still tell that there was a distant relationship between him and his two siblings. The young clumsy little pup had grown into a massive beast of an animal, nearly twice the size of his father and brothers.

I knew something important was about to happen, so I waited patiently to look for the smallest of details as Kumara had instructed of me.

Something caught the dire wolf's attention, as a scent of great interest came to him. The other dogs in the group could not detect anything and I wondered if this enhanced tracking ability was the reason the little guy eventually grew up to replace his father as the head of their pack.

My host began to search the wind for the scent again and the direction it was coming from, like a blood-hound honing in on its target. Once he locked onto the smell, he let loose a menacing bark and sprinted off into that direction, slowing ever-so slightly to let his father and brothers catch up and to find the trail again, as to re-focus himself.

This continued for well over a minute and as it did, we passed several large deer that were being completely ignored, not something typical of wolves on a hunt. I then realized why this scent, this trail



he was on, seemed so crucial to the young pack-leader and with this understanding, I now knew what the important thing was.

He had recognized the smell of his rabbit friend from long ago, as I could understand that this was the very thing motivating the pack-leader to ignore all other animals. What was the rabbit doing in this part of the world, that I had come to believe was near the cave entrance to Destard, I wondered?

Eventually we made our way to the source and sure enough there was the rabbit, but a little larger than it was before, yet still the same creature. The young Dire wolf stopped and started to sniff near the fluffy white-bunny and I could tell the rabbit was very scared, then it settled down, as it recognized his old friend from another time.

The reunion would be short-lived however, as the two brothers showed up and started to circle the rabbit and the hound. These events were transpiring rather quickly and I could sense the pack-leader understood that his brothers meant to kill this rabbit. A stark warning to his brothers was issued by the dire wolf, with a commanding grunt and the hairs on the back of the dog I was with stood up. He lowered his head and began to growl at his two brothers, telling them that this rabbit was off limits. He was protecting his friend from certain death and he seemed to be fairly committed to that task.

The black wolf with the grey spot around his right-eye, was the first to attack. He ignored the pack-leader and focused entirely on the little rabbit, as to kill it.

The young black and white wolf rushed to meet his brother and knocked him down to the ground, by intercepting his advances. Noticing the betrayal, the other dog began snapping like a hyaena at our direction and he shifted his attention away from the rabbit. As the first dog came to its feet, it too ignored the rabbit entirely and now both the brothers were focused on the pack-leader and it appeared they meant to attack.

A small pause was quickly replaced by further advances from the two siblings against our position. Both the black wolves timed their attack perfectly, as one went high and the other went low. I could tell the pack-leader was not interested in harming his brothers, but to only defend the rabbit and himself from harm.

The father did eventually show up and when he found his offspring fighting, he interjected himself into the fray by tackling one of the pure black dogs. The pack-leader lowered his head and turned around, flinging the other black dog away from him. That dog skidded across the dirt patch we were all-in, while the dog I was with changed his view to that of the rabbit.

Both of the brothers, I noticed quickly turned their attention to their father and to my surprise started to attack him now.

This must be their opportunity to claim the leadership role of the wolf-pack and I understood what the true intentions of these black dire wolves really were. I remember feeling very fearful for both of the black and white dire wolves, that they didn't realize what was really at stake here and that clearly put them at a disadvantage.

Free from the advances of his brothers, the pack-leader turned his attention to the rabbit and was nudging him with his head, as to usher it away from the fight. The little rabbit began to run and both the dire wolf and I, followed the rabbit close behind.

Down a small path the rabbit ran with the pack-leader kept pushing him to run faster and when the wolf was satisfied that the little rabbit had gone far enough to be safe, we turned around. The wolf I was with, stopped briefly and gazed back upon his friend, before the rabbit had vanished into the brush, then we proceeded back the group.

When we approached the area of fighting, I could make out the father laying on the ground and not moving, as it was clear to me, that he was hurt badly or worse. The pack-leader began to understand what I had feared earlier, that these dogs were interested in something greater than simply killing a rabbit.

The emotions instantly began to flood in and I could sense a deep seeded anger that was building up in the dire wolf, as he had felt betrayed for the last time. The Young-Park leader let loose a mighty noise that instantly struck the two remaining wolfs off guard and their hair stood straight up on the back of their necks. There was going to be a major dust-up and it was also clear that there would be no holding back this time either.

I could feel as if a bell was tolling inside of the dog I was with and he was rising to meet that call without any hesitation. I thought of the virtue of valor briefly and Geoffrey the Champion of the Virtue of Valor, for answering the Bell of Courage was his great accomplishment too.

The small and brief pause in this dog, was not for a failure to act, or a desire to not stand, for this I could tell. The pack-leader was giving his brothers the first choice, as if to allow them to decide their own fates. The brothers would take their chances and seize upon that small gift, being offered to them or perhaps they thought their brother was being timid.

The first strike eventually came by the all-black wolf with the grey spot on his right-eye and he was quickly met with a fierce attack in return. A moment or two into this exchange, blood starting to pour over my left eye, as I could smell it too, from the enhanced senses of that of a dire wolf. My sight and the sight of the mighty beast I was with, had been impaired from the initial first few moments and it was clear to me that he had suffered some kind of injury above to his head. Perhaps from his brow or maybe his ear, I was unsure.

Only the right-eye was useable for vision now, for both myself and the dog I occupy. I closed my eyes to focus on the other senses of the animal I was with, as to not be distracted by the chaotic events from my own impaired-sight. It was impossible to make out any details, since everything was coming in so fast, especially with all the adrenaline, emotions and lack of vision. I worked to quiet myself and paid attention to the smallest of details, to concentrate on just the sounds, as they came in.

I could hear a lightning-quick jolt from one side, followed by the sounds of bones-breaking, then a collapsed crash to the ground, as the yips, growls, snarl and snaps compiled with the thuds, tussles, tears and bites. my surroundings rotated end over end and down-side up to up-side down, as the sounds described the fight to me.

I could not tell what dog was injured, what bone-broke or really what even was going on at all. Somehow, through all of the chaos, the young pack-leader's mouth had found its way around the throat of one of his brothers, for this I could tell.

I opened my eyes to see if I could make out which dog the pack-leader had made vulnerable, but I could not.

In a fierce and devastating motion, the pack-leader rotated his body with his head, then slung one of the wolves into the foliage, but before he did, another bone-breaking sound could be heard. The dire wolf I was with, chomped down one final time, on the vulnerable soft spot of his brother's neck, before releasing him.

There on the ground, the black wolf with the grey spot around his right-eye lay dead, then my vision, as the dogs own vision, shifted to that of the other brother.

That dog did not seem to have any further interest for this conflict or to continue as the lone survivor. Without his tandem, that he so often found strength in, because he was of little match in this fight and he knew it. The brother tucked his tail between his legs, with his head lowered, in a passive gesture and jaunted off into the woods. He had surrendered the fight and my mighty host had claimed his victory.

The Dire wolf and I hobbled over to his father and it was clear that the sound of the first bone to break was that of this dog's front right-leg. The pack-leader gingerly walked to the other dog on the ground and I could feel the pain, as if my leg was broken too. The Wolf laid down next to his dad and started to lick his face, but as he did, I could tell that his father was not moving.

There laying next to us was this dog's father and he had been killed.

The great victory the wolf had claimed as a prize, was replaced with the reality that he was badly injured, an outcast to his group, was forced to kill his own brother and his father lay dead. The only revelation or solace to these events was that his friend, the rabbit, remained among the living somewhere.

Great sadness overtook the young pack-leader and he let loose a long-winded howl, then sat down to lay next to the recently departed, refusing to move.

We laid there for several hours and in that time, it began to rain, so the young-wolf picked himself up and went about to smell his father one the last time, as to not forget him. He then followed that action with licking the face of the other dog and I could feel that there was a great bond severed between the two, as he was all alone in this world now.

The dire wolf hobbled towards the direction of the entrance of Destard, to find a place to rest and out of the rain. A few steps later, He stopped and circled around for one last look.

The rain did help to make the vision of seeing better, by cleaning the blood from the animal's left-eye, which helped me also to take in his view. The mighty beast stared at his father for a very long time, as a long-last gaze upon the one who had raised him, then he turned and slowly walked away.

### **Déjà vu**

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Near the entrance of Destard was a small cave and the wolf entered this place to rest and get out of the rain. There he turned around to keep his senses drawn towards the entrance, then he laid down and

closed his eyes. I waited for what seemed like an eternity without any vision or sight, only sounds and emotions.

Every once in a while, he would open his eyes briefly for a second or two, then close them again, unable to do anything at all. He had suffered a great loss in such a short period of time that impaired the animal, like massive weight being placed on him, that he was unable to lift away. I could tell those hours were turning into days and in this duration, I wondered how the animal could possibly survive, as he was becoming very weak in state.

I also wondered, if I was going to have enough time to complete the mission that I was on. I still had to retrieve the daemon-bone armor for Zara and I was growing impatient with all of this waiting. I had no idea how much time had elapsed, me being with this animal and I was concerned for those lost hours or possible days. I did feel very sorry for this courageous animal, but what could I have done about anything that transpired?

I was trapped inside of this wolf to only play witness and without any power to assist.

A new smell caught the attention of the wolf who was very weak now. He opened his eyes and I could make out the entrance of the cave from inside the dark place we laid in. At the arch-way was a figure, an intruder perhaps and the wolf began to growl, then he tried to stand to protect himself.

This seemed all too familiar somehow, as another figure, much taller had arrived at the cave-entrance and through the haze of our surroundings, clarity began to set in, as the focus of our vision was swiftly returning. I could see the familiar glint and glimmer of my own illusion spells being cast by this second unknown person, then the sight of the animal and myself had been completely restored. I could make out those intruders now.

I was staring at myself, standing at the cave entrance, casting the illusion spell of love and next to me was Zara. I instantly felt the magic course through the animal's body and it let down its guard, then started to whimper. Zara walked over and put her arms around the dire wolf and said:

"Love cure all things".

Another figure walked in, for it was Kumara and this was the moment that I had rescued Zara from the clutches of this very animal, only now I had a better understanding of who this dire wolf really was and how he got here.

Kumara walked over to both of us and kneeled down, then laid his hands on the head of the dire wolf, then said:

"Hello my injured friend, let me see what I can do for you", as he brought his dragon signet, the staff that he normally carried with him, up from his side and touched the animal. I could feel the ancient magic from Kumara's staff renew the young pack-leader and Kumara then said:

"Hello judge, your journey is not yet complete, so please be patient", as he stared right at me through the eyes of the wolf.

I remembered him saying this to me before and I was confused by his words at the time, as to what Kumara meant when he said that, for I was not being impatient at all.

I understood completely now, that he was speaking to me, here inside of this animal and I was amazed at the implications of this, for this thing I witness would imply much.

I could feel Kumara's magic restore the animal and strengthen every aspect of this mighty beast, to not only return him to a new state, but renew him even further, as to make the dire wolf even mightier than he was before, of this I could tell.

Kumara let loose of the animal and said:

"We shall see about your friend in due time, do not worry, but we could use your help, if you are up for it".

The dire wolf reached up and licked Kumara's face and when he did his vision became crystal clear, with a small emerald-green tint and the level of detail of his sight was absolutely-astounding. Every inch of the cave, every last small rock and line, was easily something that could be seen in the darkness now. Somehow this animal's vision was no longer limited to that of the K-9 family, but more like what an eagle would expect to have. I was truly amazed by this, for this vision was even greater than that of my own.

I began to regret my thoughts I had earlier, as in some way I had abandoned the mighty wolf during his darkest hour and I was being impatient, as Kumara had said. The things that Kumara was showing me, wasn't for my benefit I would come to understand later, but at this portion of these accounts I did begin to understand that his wasn't about me, and rededicated myself to be more focused on what I saw.

The dog stood up on all four legs and as he ushered me to the entrance of the cave, the green hue of this new vision mingled with the light coming from outside and I was over-taken by my eyes trying to adjust. I could no longer see again, but only briefly.

### **Tears of Covetous**

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My vision would return in short order, but when it did, I was not outside of the cave, as expected, but instead outside of the entrance to Covetous, the third level in-fact, for I recognized those pillars.

I was with Kumara again and he looked down to the animal and said, "Valentine, pay attention to the smallest of details", then he turned and entered the dungeon, with the dire wolf in tow.

Kumara walked into the first room on the third level and I could see what the dog could see. A dark-red hue enveloped around all the creatures and monsters of this place. As we walked through the room, the mixture of monsters, that of undead, demon and elementals shrieked out and put their hands up as if somehow, they were all blinded in some way. We simply walked past them as if they didn't matter at all, making our way to the stairs to the final level below.

I have personally never traveled to the fourth level of Covetous, as it is often understood how dangerous it was to travel there, even for the standards of a Judge such as myself, but for Kumara it was like walking across the street in the center of town.

We entered the fourth level of the dungeon and the creatures, mostly demons, were covered in the same dark-red hue, putting their hands up in the same way as the previous creatures. We walked through the hallway leading to the back of the room and I remembered that Kumara wanted me to pay close attention, so I made sure I did pay that attention and every last detail of it.

“Kumara!”, said a voice and the dire wolf turned its head to the source. There standing in the darkest corner of the room was a dragon of medium size, that glowed a vibrant-red color, not dark-red as with the other creatures.

“Hello Sudiva, it is good to see you after all these years”, Kumara said, then he continued, “I have need of your services.”

“How can I help the mighty Kumara, am I to be judged then?” Sudiva replied nervously.

“No, my friend, but I am looking for my brother, do you know anything about his disappearance”, Kumara asked.

Sudiva returned the following:

“I am sorry Kumara, for I don’t know where my father has been hiding and for hundreds of years, he has not been seen either. I neither know where he is, nor what has become of him. Also, Kumara you must know, that I had nothing to do with his actions, for his great-rage was not mine, so please do not assign me any of his blame.”

“I am not looking for Sirius, I am looking for Ladon, so what do you know Sudiva?”, Kumara casually interjected himself again.

“How can a time-traveler go missing, this makes no sense, are you sure he is actually lost,” asked Sudiva.

“What, do you know”, asked Kumara, but this time with a much sterner tone.

“All I know is The Twisted Embers of Fate was entrusted to your servant Kumara, the Arch-angel Uriel and you should know about that better than I. As for your brother, the last I heard about his exploits, was when he was with one of Tristan’s daughters, the youngest one I think, north of Wind and many years ago. To what end I do not know, for I am sorry”, replied Sudiva.

Sudiva paused a bit then asked, “have you asked your sister Venus about this”.

“I will be sure to ask her now, thank you Sudiva”, replied Kumara.

Kumara smiled to the very nervous dragon and continued on:

“Your candor has been noted, but Sudiva, I have need of your services”, insisted Kumara.

The puzzled look over Sudiva’s face was slowly replaced by shock after he seemed to understand what this meant. There was a very long period of silence, as Kumara was unwavering with this request and Sudiva was mulling something over. Sudiva then replied with the following question:

“Why?”

“It must be done so proceed now and Sudiva, when this is all over, we shall find a better use for you than this place here”, replied Kumara with his usual casual tone.

Sudiva nodded to Kumara and hesitantly opened his mouth to breath fire, as is the custom of any fire breathing red dragon. I could see emerald vapors leaving the body of Kumara and entering Sudiva's mouth and when it was over, Sudiva began to weep.

Eventually one of the tears from Sudiva fell to the ground and when it did, it was no longer water, but instead a crystal, that was glowing a bright emerald-hue.

"Thank you Sudiva, for your service here will not go over-looked", Kumara affirmed.

The dire wolf walked over to the crystal and began to examine it, which also gave me a very good look at the item too. Somehow this crystal was flawless, all lines perfectly drawn and inside of petrified tear, looked to be constellations, hundreds of them in fact.

As I kept inspecting the item, the light from the crystal began moving around like a wind storm until it settled on a specific star on a specific constellation and that star grew much more intense. The emerald green crystal started to grow much brighter as the star did and eventually my sight became consumed by this light. With each passing second it became impossible to see any longer, as my sight was being over-taken again.

The sounds of a Covetous went silent.

### **The Smallest of Gifts**

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The sounds of water began fading into the background and then my vision slowly returned.

I was staring at Kumara in an out-side surrounding, in another all too familiar landscape, for we were back at the place where these visions had first started. I was back at the place where I had witnessed the small puppy playing with the little rabbit, but the ancient tree that stood at this location before, was now how I was used to seeing it, for I was at the entrance to the Blighted Grove.

"We are almost done Valentine, please pay attention to the smallest of details", Kumara said, then he placed his hands around the ears of the dire wolf, as the animal sat down in front of him.

"Your friend, the rabbit is inside of this place, so go now and retrieve him and judge anything inside that is corrupt, as you search for your friend. Be courageous and full of valor, as the champion you have learned to become, for these are the times that valor is required. So go now, as I will be with you", Kumara instructed of the dire wolf.

The dire wolf turned and entered the Blighted Grove to find his friend, the rabbit. What we found when we entered that place was every type of natural perversion and corruption of nature. Hundreds of creatures, all glowing with the same dark-red hue as the creatures of Covetous. They instantly turned their attention to the wolf, then the mighty dire wolf let loose a loud-howl, followed by a tremendous bark that sent shock-waves through the once peaceful burrow, of another time.

High upon a root system I could see a small green-glow, then my perspective was forced away, as with the dog's own view, to find the creatures making their advances directly ahead of us. Everything from a Hydras, lashers and swamp things descended upon us.

The mighty dire wolf unleashed his attack, holding nothing and nothing was his equal.

He moved through the room destroying everything, leaving no creatures standing in his wake. The sheer power of this animal was awe inspiring.

Eventually more powerful abominations encountered our path, but they too easily fell at our feet, as the dire wolf fought with deadly precision. I have never seen that level of accuracy before, not even from the most skilled fighters of our realm. After several minutes, all things corrupt were destroyed and all those dark-red hues had faded away, leaving nothing but the green glow that was high upon a root system, that I noticed when we first entered this place.

Suddenly a faint pathway presented itself to my host and I, like footsteps being laid out for us, a trail of some kind. The dog quickly chased after it and we eventually found our way to the top of that root system.

There, waiting for us was the Lady of the house, for it was the corrupt dryad, Lady Melisande herself. She was extremely powerful and not someone to be trifled with by a simple dire wolf, even one who was in possession of such great gifts, bestowed to them by Kumara, I thought. I have heard many tales of horror and fright that ended many lives who sought this one out and I did not like our chances.

I looked around, near her feet and I could see dozens of dull-grey crystals, the same crystals that I had heard about, but have never seen. Encased inside of them were the motionless animals of this once enchanted burrow. Some of these animals were very small, while others were very large, yet all the crystals were roughly the same size.

Then I noticed it, laying over by a pile of crystals, the rabbit, but not white as before, instead a bright green color and it was the conclusion of the faint green trail too.

Something was not right, for the green rabbit was not moving and I was hoping that this bunny was not the same one we were searching for.

Oh-no, for now I could tell that the wolf recognized the scent of that rabbit as his friend. The rabbit was laying on the ground lifeless, much in the same way as the father of this mighty beast was. I had no doubt, that this little bunny was diseased and killed by Melinsande herself.

When the dire wolf noticed his friend, laying there, the same emotions consumed him as when he saw his father in that same manner and the same deep seeded anger rose up. The dire wolf unleashed a mighty and vicious bark in the direction of Lady Melisande. His bark was so loud that it even startled the lady of the house as she too was taken back by this beast.

This was not going to end well for this brave dog, I thought again, for I knew what Melinsande was and what she was capable of. That was when I heard Kumara's voice echo through the chambers, when he said:

"Ye have little faith valentine."

Lady Melisande heard this too and she turned around to search for the owner of that voice.



That was the precise moment the wolf chose to act and when the dire wolf did attack, he did so without any hesitation. To my surprise, he was able to dispatch with Lady Melisande in quick fashion, within mere seconds in-fact. There wasn't even a fight to make much of an account either.

I was very impressed by all that I watched, as this dog was truly mighty. Perhaps it was Kumara after-all, but regardless those efforts did not save the rabbit, for the wolf's friend still lay dead. All that this dog had gone through seemed to be for nothing.

The dire wolf let loose of Lady Melisande's neck and her body collapsed to the ground. He walked over to the little green bunny and began poking the body with his nose. The lifeless remains of his once best friend gave no returning signs, no reaction at all, for it was certain now that this bunny was gone.

The great animal lay down next to rabbit, to be with his friend and I was in shock this was how the story ended.

I still could not believe the rabbit was dead after all that this dog had gone through, just to save his friend. How could Kumara let this happen? What would be the point of all this? I asked of myself

I could see Kumara now.

He walked over and collected the crystals near-by, then came to kneel down next to the dog and said:

"Your friend will have a significant part to play in all this", as he lowered his staff down to the body of the dead rabbit. When his dragon signet touched the remains, what was once the shell of this little life, dematerialized into vapors, much like my illusion spells, but this was no trick.

The vapors found their way to Kumara's ancient dragon signet, merging with the staff he was carrying and I knew this was a very important thing I must witness, but I did not know why. Kumara laid the staff down on the ground and put his hand on the dog's head.

"Do not feel sad my good friend, but rejoice, for your actions and the actions of this little creature will end up playing a mighty role of things to come and things that have already been, as they might be undone to be made right again", he said.

Kumara didn't seem to warrant a response from the dire wolf, then he continued on. "For you have destroyed the corruption in this place and stood to answer the call of the Bell of Courage and you have protected the heart of virtues my mighty friend."

I understood what that meant, even if the dog didn't, for that was truly a profound statement.

"The smallest of gifts your friend was, but the mightiest of gifts he shall be, for this I promise you", said Kumara.

The dog looked up at Kumara, raised his head, then started to sniff around the staff that Kumara carried, now on the ground and he was trying to pick up the trail or the scent of his friend the rabbit. As he eventually did find the smell, the wolf laid his head over the top Kumara's signet, as if protecting, or being close to the rabbit, I don't know which.

"Your friend was forced from his home because of this corruption and not only did you save him champion, but you saved all the other animals here too. Now this place can return to what it was

intended to be, an enchanted sanctuary hidden away from the world to harbor life, so that life can prosper in peace and find harmony”, Kumara added.

Kumara looked into the young dire wolf's eyes and I found myself staring right at him again.

“Valentine, all that was ever required, was for just one to rise this entire time, for this is the very nature of the virtue of valor itself, so that truth could be known for all to see.”

I understood what he meant, for Kumara had named a champion of Valor.

With that, my senses faded and I slowly started to regain myself, then I opened my eyes. I was back in the original place that my journey first began, outside of a small cabin near Trinsic. I looked down at my feet and I was floating off the ground again, as I could feel my illusion magic course through my veins once more.

I looked over to the dire wolf standing next to Kumara, walked over to the mighty beast, then kneeled before the dog, kissed his forehead and said, “good boy and well done”.

I heard a thud and stood up, then turned around to find a bag laying on the ground. “Remember what I said Judge, pay attention to the smallest of details and present those details to Zara, but only after your mission from Venus is over”, Kumara instructed of me again.

“Here is the daemon-bone armor, in this bag, that you were hoping to retrieve, as that was a rather good idea. Take these belongings back to the girl, as you will find both her and the Archmage in the forest of Britain in four hours-time.

I retrieved the bag and began making my way back to the forest of Britain, then turned around and looked at both Kumara and the dire wolf.

“You want to know why you should make these accounts for Zara?” Asked Kumara.

Yes, I replied.

Kumara smiled back at me, then looked down at the dire wolf, then he turned his sight to me once more.

“Zara might like to find an appropriate name for our good friend here, of course.”

“Remember judge, only one was ever required to rise, when all hope seems lost, for the seeds of anew start small, but grow into something truly powerful, like our friend here, like the rose and lilac shrub you spent all that time studying”, he answered.

I nodded back to Kumara, threw the bag of daemon-bone armor over my shoulder and proceeded to meet Zara and the Archmage.

I stopped once more a few moments later, turned around to find Kumara and the dog again, then said:

Thank you.

-Saint Valentine

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**The End**

**Rabbit & the Hound**

**Sandals of Time**

**Author:** *Mathew D. Miles*

**Rabbit & the Hound:** *Part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> series entitled: "The Golden Trio"*

**About the books:** Each book within each series acts as a character in a much larger play. They will tell their own story from their own perspective written by a specific avatar in a specific way. All the books of each series will develop themes and concepts unique to each series, while the 5 series of books in total will tell a much larger story. In addition, a repeating theme is on display in every way possible within all works. They are the following:

\*To remember, is to find your way.

\*This is the story of your realm and everyone has a part to play.

**Book series:** *Sandals of Time*

Series 1: *The PAWS Soulforge and the Quest for Ladon*

Series 2: *The Star of Zara and the Quest for Ladon*

Series 3: *The Golden Trio and the Quest for Ladon*

Series 4: *Toccata and Feud and the Quest for Ladon*

Series Finale: *Succubus & Valkyries and the Quest for Ladon*

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