

House of Pryce

Wil Clayton

Long Shadows on a Wide Plain series

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Thank you,
Wil Clayton

Chapter 1

The head of Lord Pryce sat on the ornate carving tray, his skin shrivelled and tight after an afternoon in the oven. His illustrious beard that he had oiled and dyed everyday, was now sheared and thrown to the pale. His radiant, commanding eyes replaced by handfuls of herbs and bread that had browned and hardened, forming a crisp and fragile crust inside the eye sockets. A single, fine slice separate his scalp from the rest, held in place by a delicate crown of dough that circled the top of his head.

Valtteri took his favourite hunting knife from his belt, a heavy blade, slightly curved, and perfectly balanced by its decorative stone handle. He turned its spine to scalp and tapped it, the crown of dough crumbled. The edge of the knife wiggled its way into the incision and separated the scalp from the head revealing the delicately, steamed brain within.

The dining room became filled with the scent of cinnamon, garlic and sweet flower seeds as the steam escaped from the once Lord Pryce. A few moments later, the choking fire of burning root oil took the air from the room.

Sayjin cough and spluttered from one end of the dining table and grabbed for his bronze goblet.

“Move that thing away from me, will you?” he choked, gulping at his wine.

Sayjin reached for the cane he had found in an upstairs bedroom and went to push the tray away. Valtteri grabbed the cane before it could make contact and held it tight in his grip.

“Please, friend,” laughed Valtteri, “I want us all to celebrate in this, our first meal as the new Lords of the House.”

“A fitting tribute to our ascension to the ruling class,” smiled Nerys from the other end of the dining table, sipping from her wooden goblet.

The impostors sat around their newly claimed dining table, loudly celebrating their conquest, while the last of true named Pryce hung, silent, in the meat locker beneath the manor house. Stripped, cleaned and placed on hooks, waiting to be consumed over the months to come.

The air cleared from the dining hall and Sayjin could breathe freely, again. He looked around the walls, the room was not the largest he had seen, a table that could sit eight took up half of the space, the other half was filled by a large hearth and two well crafted leather chairs. The hearth crackled and popped as it kept the slight chill of autumn from the room.

Dark shadows danced across the stone walls, given strange shapes by animal heads and ornate wooden decorations that had been hung by the previous owners. Sayjin then looked at the head of the noble on the table and smile cut across his lips.

“A toast,” cheered Valtteri raising his golden chalice, “to the Lord Pryce who may never learnt to swing a sword, but tried to the noble end.”

“To Lord Pryce,” cheered Sayjin and Nerys.

“To the Diamond Heart for leaving us this bounty in their wake,” laughed Sayjin.

“To the Diamond Heart,” cheered the others.

“And of course, to the Council,” smiled Nerys, “and their wondrously, capricious gods for bringing this madness.”

“To the Council,” the two others cheered and all drank deep from their goblets.

“Now, my blood,” said Nerys lifting her plate to Valtteri, “the feast.”

Valtteri took a serving knife and carefully split the brain into two, shared equally between Valtteri and Nerys. A leg roast from a different, far less important, Pryce was cut into thin slices, the juices flowing rich and free as the still bloody meat was placed on the plates.

Sayjin looked down at his plate of roots and leaves, which he had picked that day from the garden just beyond the windows of the dining room. He wanted to go hunting again, but woods had become a circus since the world ended. A man hunched in the bushes, slowly tracking a deer, was now likely to take a blow to the back of head from some child with a stick.

A bleat came from between Sayjin’s legs, he looked down, their sat his new ward looking up with its light brown eyes. Sayjin took a root from his plate dangled it in front of the goat and as the creature went to bite on the bulb he pulled it away. The goat stared at him and bleated again, pitifully.

“Take it,” ordered Sayjin.

“Must that thing stay inside,” sighed Nerys as Valtteri found his seat at the middle of the table.

“Sam is our guest,” said Sayjin as he placed the root in front of the of Sam again.

Sam lunged for it. This time Sayjin saw the goat move faster, at least that was what he thought.

“That’s right,” Sayjin cheered to the goat, “you must take what’s yours.”

The goat bleated again.

“You do know Sam is a female?” said Nerys.

“It’s short for Samantha,” growled Sayjin.

That morning Sayjin and Valtteri had stood in front of the animal pen, hunting knives in hand. The yard had been emptied by the previous owners, except for a lone goat. Sayjin was determined to have a fresh kill for the grand feast and the beast that sat in front of him would do nicely.

Sayjin unlatched the gate and moved towards the goat, waiting for the beast to try and escape its confines, a last desperate attempt to live another day. But, instead, the goat just stood in front of him, its eyes unfocused, munching on a mouthful of grass. It did not run for the gate, still wide open, or try to retreat to the back of the pen as the predator approached. It just sat there, dumb and unaware.

Sayjin yelled at the beast, waving his hand in the air. The goat bleated. Sayjin made himself large and intimidating, brandishing the knife at it. The goat found another mouthful of grass.

“Run,” he shouted, “bite at me. Kick me. Do something.”

“Just slit its throat,” snapped Valtteri.

Sayjin lowered himself in front of the goat, it did not move. Sayjin stood up, disgusted.

“You do it,” snapped Sayjin.

Valtteri stepped over the small fence into the pen and grabbed the goat into a lock, it started to bleat. He placed his heavy blade to its throat and stopped for a moment.

“Why doesn’t it kick?” yelled Valtteri, “goats are wild creatures that kick and bite. This one just sits there.”

“The poor thing.”

“What?”

"This one has its fight taken from it by these damn lords," hissed Sayjin angrily and then added firmly, "what are we if we do not help?"

Valtteri put his knife to the throat the beast, not wanting any part of such nonsense.

"Stop," yelled Sayjin angrily and leapt at Valtteri.

Valtteri stunned by the sudden advancement, pulled back from the goat.

"When it is fair," said Sayjin, "I will kill it and feast upon the flesh, but not til then."

And so, Sayjin had taken in the poor creature and named it Sam. Sayjin became determined to remind the goat of what it was. It had only been a day, but he knew he was making progress when the goat had struggle to escape his arms as it was carried into the dining room.

Sayjin dangled the root in front of Sam for a third time.

"Again," he commanded.

The goat bleated and looked away, tired of the game. Sayjin sighed and chucked the root to floor and Sam snatched it up and started to munch.

"Give me the knife," said Nerys, "I'll finish it off."

"No, when the times come I will be the one to do it."

"It's the walls, I tell you, turns wild creatures into tamed men," said Valtteri placing a moist piece of grey jelly into mouth, "not that I am complaining. This one is perfectly tender."

"The masters of the house had quite the collection of spices and herbs in the cellar," said Nerys, "we will be eating well for months."

The mention of time brought a heavy silence across the table as the three sipped from their fine cups.

"That long, then?" asked Sayjin to the silence.

"Quiet," snapped Nerys.

"Well, we have had one day as Lord's of the House," shrugged Valtteri, "I suppose, tomorrow will be two."

The three were wanderers by nature, living amongst the trees, sleeping under the stars, never staying in the same place for more than a few days, that was the life they knew and loved.

While the three had cheered their taking of the manor house as great victory, all knew the truth, silently. It was a retreat from a world that had been turned on its head. The Order of the Diamond Heart, the keepers of the god's peace, had left their posts, retreating to the kingdom of the God's Isle far to the west. And with them gone, the law of gods were gone as well, men were now free, after so many generations being chained to the gods.

At first, the three had ignored the affairs of the men, they had never been held by of the laws of gods as they walked the tight jungles and jagged hills of the Stormlands and the vast, open plains of the eastern kingdoms. Unfortunately, they started to find their world invaded by the newly freed men. Now that they had been released of their bonds, the men had decided to try their hand at thievery, murder and all the other sins they had been denied for so long.

It was not that the three were fearful of the newcomers, it was more that they had become exhausted. Slaying thirty men a day was amusing when the chaos had first erupted, but after several weeks of cooking pots being knocked into fires and quiet evenings interrupted by loud idiots waving knives and screaming nonsense, the three had been forced to admit defeat. The three were skilled, but the men had the endless numbers.

"For over a hundred years we've wandered the roads of the eastern kingdoms," began Nerys, her red eyes focused on the candle that sat on the table in front of her, "corrupting the Lesser Men, turning them against each other for sport."

"Nerys, the corruptor of souls, they would cry," said Valtteri pushing his empty plate away.

"Valtteri, devourer of the innocent, they screamed as they fled," laughed Nerys, then the laughter left her face and it became dark, "but in a few days the men of the worthless gods have caused more havoc than we have with a hundred years of hard work and effort."

"Makes you feel small," laughed Valtteri.

"I don't like feeling small," she said, softly, and then added more loudly, "I'll eat till I feel large again."

Nerys stood, grabbed the tray with the remaining roast and dropped it in front of her.

Nerys had the appearance of a tall, fair skinned woman with large broad shoulder that tapered down to her a narrow waist. Her hair alternated from brown to black as it tumbled down her to shoulders and onto her large breasts. She was still dressed in her travelling clothes, a simple shirt and trousers.

Her twin, Valtteri, had a form that was in complete contrast. A large, muscular man with dark brown skin, his body square, as was his face. His black hair was cut to the scalp leaving just a hint of its existence as it glistened in the light. He wore a blue cloak made of finest thread, which he had found earlier that day. The cloth pulled tight across his shoulders, barely able to fit.

Under the cloak Valtteri wore his normal travelling clothes. He had tried to find something more elegant to wear with his new cloak, but Pryce and his sons had been slender men and after tearing apart a few shirts he, reluctantly, took back his travelling clothes.

The one thing the physical appearance of Valtteri and Nerys had in common were their large, round, red eyes. The mark of the Demon blood that flowed in their veins.

Sayjin, on the other hand, had simple, dull grey eyes, a slender, athletic form with the golden skin of the Reisu, the people who called the Stormlands home. His head natural bald and had been since he was a born.

Sayjin had stumbled across the twins, several years earlier while hunting a wild cat in the southern jungles of the Stormlands. The twins had mistaken him for an easy kill and after a few, unpleasant words and unfortunate wounds to both parties the three had become good friends.

All were efficient killers, which was on full display the previous day when they had taken the fortified manor house, protected by twelve trained guards and many more untrained nobles. Sayjin had scaled the stone walls without difficulty, easily gripping the small holes in the surface, using them to propel himself up and over without aid. As he did, Nerys and Valtteri hid amongst the trees and setting loose arrows, landing shoots, cleanly, between the small gaps in the guards armour, catching them in the eyes and throat.

Once inside the wall, Sayjin cut down those that had not retreated into the house before kicking open the large wooden gate and letting his companions enter. It was not long until the halls became stained with the blood of men, women and children. Their bargains and pleas for mercy ignored as the three butchered each one.

Those that hid were rooted by Sayjin's keen hearing. In cupboards, under beds, in crevices behind paintings. None were safe and none were spared. A few hours later, the sun

had set and the manor house lay silent except for the calm, quiet footsteps of the three. The house was now theirs.

Sam butted its head against Sayjin's hand the tip of its horn dug into his palm.

"Good," Sayjin cheered, "you're learning. Did you see that, Valtteri? I've been gored."

Sayjin placed his plate on the floor with remains of his meal.

"A Month," announced Valtteri.

"A Month?" asked Nerys.

"A month til I turn on both of you all out of restlessness," Valtteri laughed, "but for now, I will go to bed."

"Pleasant dreams, my blood," said Nerys as she always did.

"Sleep well," said Sayjin quietly his thoughts lost in the flames of the fire.

Valtteri left the room by the two large ornate doors, the sound of his heavy boots echoed down the hall, slowly growing fainter.

Nerys cut at the shrinking lump of meat on the plate in front of her. Sayjin sipped. The delicate, sweet taste of the fine wine danced in his mouth as his finger traced the curves of the goblet. The comfortable chair he sat on was stuffed with duck feathers and excepted his body, fully, within a gentle embrace. The fire was welcoming and his body soften as it warmth worked it ways through his muscles.

"The life of a lord is ours," said Sayjin to the fire, a distance in his voice.

"So it is," sighed Nerys.

Chapter 2

Valtteri stuck his head out of the attic window as Sayjin let another flaming arrow lose. The arrow sailed high and landed in the woods just beyond the walls, the tops of which were decorated with fresh, rotting corpses. Valtteri swatted at Sam who bit at his legs, trying to drive the large intruder from its room.

"What are you doing?" asked Valtteri as he struggled with Sam.

“Getting rid of the trees,” said Sayjin as he pulled another arrow from the metal bucket that was his quiver.

Sayjin had awoken that morning, Sam nestled beneath his arms, he strode over to the window and saw the forest again. Everyday, it mocked him as it continued to run free beyond the walls.

Today, Sayjin decided, he had enough of it and had proceeded to jam two planks of wood between the roof and the protrusion that covered the attic window. Convinced the planks were sturdy enough, him he had set up a bucket of arrows wrapped in cloth, another pale of lamp oil and a small brazier of coals he had found in one of the bedrooms.

All morning Sayjin had stood atop his perch and set his arrows onto the trees.

“You’re acting the fool,” said Valtteri, “get down before you fall.”

“I will when I am done.”

Sayjin released another burning arrowing into the woods, Sam bit hard into Valtteri’s leg tearing the pants and drawing blood.

“Get your beast off me,” shouted Valtteri in pain.

“Sam is one of us, now,” said Sayjin, “she does as she pleases.”

Valtteri tried to kick the goat away, but missed. Fortunately for him, Sam decided the point had been made and went back to its bed of hay in the corner of the room.

“A forest isn’t going to just catch fire,” sighed Valtteri.

“There’s a dead tree just beyond the walls,” said Sayjin pointing a brown lump amongst the green, “if I can hit that, then this whole thing’ll start burning.”

Sayjin let another arrow fly towards his target. It went wide as had all the others, but Sayjin simply reached for another.

“Don’t break your neck, we still need you in the fight.”

“These planks are tight, don’t worry.”

Valtteri lent against the window frame and looked out over the forest. It was the first time he had come up to the attic, which Sayjin and his goat had taken as their own. The size of the room did not accommodate his size, nor the stairs and hallway which led here. So, Valtteri had decided to stay on the lower levels and leave the place to the goat. But that morning, the

arrows that whistled over head had forced him up the tight stairs to see what madness had taken his friend.

Valtteri stared out into the domain of Pryce that was now his. The woods did not reach far to the north. It gave way, quickly, to hills and farmlands, the manor house sat on the forest border of the Stormlands, to the south, and the Kingdom of Douruh, to the north. The former Lord Pryce likely swore fealty to whichever of the two kings were at his gate that day, but there were no kings now, and even if there were the new Lord Pryce did not know how to kneel.

The forest stretch off to the east and had become home to a large number of Lowmen, who had started to come several weeks ago. The first of them had thought they could secure the manor house with groups of two or three. Believing the place abandoned, they leapt over the walls haphazardly using ropes and ladders, only to discover the serious error they had made. As time past, the groups became to better with their tactics and the numbers grew, three became ten and curiosity became ruthless determination.

Nerys, a week earlier, had decided she would take no more. When the Lowmen came next, she took them alive and then bound them to posts on top of the walls for all to see, their tongues cut from their mouths. The bodies would hung and screamed for days as starvation and birds set upon them. The message was quickly received by those in the forest and the attacks had stopped.

“It was the first days of summer when the Diamond Heart left,” said Valtteri, “now the chill of high winter is here.”

Sayjin did not respond, Valtteri would often talk to himself when he was listless and he talked to himself a lot these days. Sayjin focused, instead, on his target and let another arrow fly.

“So, much time has passed now. I wonder, how many of cities are still standing? I wonder, what the Lowmen doing without their gods?”

“Moving forward,” said Sayjin, “hopefully.”

“You still cling to your hopes.”

“It is all I have,” replied Sayjin and found another arrow.

“When I was young the Diamond Heart had just started to take the lands. City by city they approached from the west and each city flung opens it gates and welcomed them in. The

Diamond would bring the peace, the Lowmen cried, and free them from the wars that had taken so many,” said Valtteri, “and they did but not in the way any of us thought.

“The Heart swore fealty to the ones that sat on the thrones, saying they had come not to conquer, only to uphold the law of gods and keep the peace the Lowmen so desperately wanted. And they did, and as the years passed, the city guards became fat and lazy, the armies became small and unorganised, until the whole of the army of Galla could be hosted at a single table.

“War was done and life was good. When those of us who did not accept the chains came the Lowmen would cry for the Heart to save them and the Heart would come without question. The world was safe for one and all.”

“I know of the corruption that has swallowed my people,” spat Sayjin, “I do not need to hear it again.”

“You’re child of the Heart, like any other Lowman,” said Valtteri, “you do not know yourself or your people. There is no corruption, before the Heart it was the Emperors, before them the Saquaari, before them the Dragons, before them the Demons. Your people have not been corrupted, weakness and servitude are in your being.

“There are exceptions, such as yourself, I will concede, but such Lowman are few in the herd.”

“You may think me naive or a fool,” said Sayjin taking aim, “but I don’t care what others think of me. I won’t give up on my people. Someone must hold the last hope for our future.

“You always claim we are weak and without worth, Valtteri, but there is one thing that separates us from those that called themselves our masters. The Dragons, the Saquaari, the Heart, are all gone, while we are still here, even your kind is coming to an end, you can not deny that.”

Sayjin let an arrow flying and it hit the mark, lodging firm into the dead bark of the dead tree. The pair held waited as they watched the bark started to smoke. After a short while, though, the black cloud dissipated and the forest was left standing.

Sayjin seized another arrow from the pale and dunked the cloth into the oil.

“The Lowmen are resilient, that is true,” said Valtteri.

“If only that was enough,” sighed Sayjin.

Valtteri went back to looking at the forest in silence.

“I can tell you what is happening out there,” continued Sayjin, “my brothers make the same mistake that have been repeated throughout time. It is not that is what we must do, it is because my people do not remember their better selves. Right now, fools will be fighting over whatever scraps have survived the end.”

Valtteri just nodded and Sayjin fired another arrow.

“Those fools will become kings,” Sayjin continued, “the kings will put their faith and love into laws, gold and gods, then the laws, gold and the gods will become monsters in their own right and they will bring an end to it all, again.”

“It is your nature.”

“It isn’t,” challenged Sayjin, “it is just all that is left after so many lifetimes being told that there is nothing more. I love my people, Valtteri, even if they have lost their way.”

“I think your love blinds you.”

Sayjin was quite as he lit another arrow, steadied himself and let it fly. The arrow was caught by the wind and thrown into the green leaves of the trees.

“That was last of them,” sighed Sayjin.

“Well, at least the morning is gone, now we only have the afternoon.”

“Help me, won’t you,” said Sayjin as he handed the empty bucket to Valtteri.

“The Saquaari had a saying about the end of the world,” said Valtteri and recited the words, “When the protectors are dead and gone, then the fields will burn and the sun will turn’.”

“Of course,” laughed Sayjin, “the world would be nothing without them to rule it and yet here we are, fields unburnt, the sun, still blinding.”

Sayjin fell silent as he tried to hand Valtteri the brazier of coals, the metal slipped from his grasp and tumbled down the roof into the yard below. Sayjin shrugged at the mess below.

“Protectors?” spat Sayjin dismissively continuing his thought, “who were the Saquaari to claim themselves the protectors of anything?”

“They took what they wished when the Dragons and Demons were done slaughtering each other. The names, the lands, it was all theirs.”

“Then I proclaim myself the protector of the house,” laughed Sayjin, “and when I am gone the roof will collapse and the walls will come crumble. A statement just as true.”

Valtteri laughed as Sayjin pulled himself through the window into the attic.

“The last of the self proclaimed protectors, Valtteri,” said Sayjin, “that is what I wish for my people.”

“Well, we have done a good job with Lord Pryce, haven’t we?”

“And we are the protectors of the house.”

“The last of its protectors.”

Nerys sat in the library reading a book on engineering and machining from The First Kingdom. She always enjoyed numbers. The cold, hard truth they contained always comforted her in the madness of her existence. In fact, she had spent many nights devising a way to precisely and formally measure the fiendishness of her actions. A series of complex calculations taking into account the suffering and pain caused, increased then by a factor of how far the deeds had spread amongst the Lower Men. Her numbers were so well calculated, so joyously accurate in their measure, she knew Ka, the great engineer, would have approved.

The numbers were lost on Sayjin and Valtteri, but this did not stop her delighting in recounting her deeds concluding her tales with the exact total of her evil. Though, the joy for the numbers had left her since the retreat of the Diamond Heart.

A month earlier, she had sat, alone, in the library with the fine, wooden writing set, once owned Lord Pryce, now hers. She had taken the delicate parchment and large feather quill and attempted to calculate the depravity the Heart had wrought on the world. How much suffering and pain, over how much the time inflicted, over how the number of effected people.

The unnecessary death and mindless destruction, the grief of those left behind, the countless generations that would be left to fester.

The numbers grew larger and larger until, finally, they would no longer fit on her parchment, numbers so large she thought them unthinkable. Nerys had picked up the wooden tray of the writing set and flung it into the fire. The cold, hard numbers contained the cold, hard truth. She, her life, her deeds were all, clearly and irrefutably, irrelevant.

“When the protectors are dead and gone, my blood,” announced Valtteri as he marched into the room, Sayjin followed behind, “then fields will burst with fruit and the sun warm us with a its loving gift.”

Nerys looked up from the page in her book.

“I have decided to build this catapult,” she said, ignoring her blood, “we have the wood, I just need the iron.”

“You won’t have time for that,” said Sayjin.

“What has taken you two, now?” asked Nerys, frustrated at the interruption.

“A vision,” said Valtteri, “I have decided to join Sayjin in his noble life cause and save the Lowmen.”

“The house has driven you mad, my blood.”

“This is the moment, Nerys,” said Valtteri, “a moment to become the protectors of the Lesser Races, just as the Saquaari took the world from the Dragons, we will take the land from the gods.”

Nerys laughed and shook her head.

“The last of the damned protectors,” stated Sayjin, hardness in his voice, “we will rule like none other before, we will bring the strength back to my people.”

“Two Children, a Lesser and a goat,” puzzled Nerys.

“There are weaker men in the cities, right now, building thrones to sit upon,” said Valtteri, “why not us?”

“To what end?” sighed Nerys.

“The greatest end there could be,” smiled Sayjin.

Nerys waited.

“To prove that you, Nerys, have always been right.”

Since Sayjin had joined the twins in their travels, one disagreement had always divide them. What was the worth of the Lesser Men that clung to the land without purpose. Valtteri would always listen to Sayjin’s defence of his people before meeting it with a polite shrug or some soft words of disagreement, but Nerys was not so kind. She knew the worth of the Lesser Men. None. And she would dismiss anything else as pure nonsense.

“We will build a kingdom were the Lesser Men can be great people I have always claimed they could be,” continued Sayjin, “if such a thing is possible.”

“A chance to show you the worth of your people, Sayjin?” smiled Nerys.

“Exactly,” said Sayjin.

Nerys thought for a moment.

“But your people have no worth, I already know this,” concluded Nerys dismissively, “it would be a waste of our efforts to build such a kingdom.”

“If my people are as you say, then at least they would be in position to follow your kind as there new masters.”

“A land ruled by the Children,” said Nerys, quietly to herself.

There was a moment as Nerys face came alive.

“Oh, Sayjin,” smiled Nerys, “you know me too well. How could I refuse such a proposition?”

Nerys moved her focus from her two companions to the map on the wall. It was not an accurate map, like the ones she preferred when navigating the rivers and paths of the kingdoms, it was a symbolic map showing the manor house and the holdings that fell within the sway of Lady Pryce.

A trading post on the banks of the Sulla River with a small dock, it would have attracted some peasants and traders making it a hamlet of about thirty or so people. A hunter's lodge and tannery in a small wooded area to the south east, not fortified, it may have brought some new inhabitants in recent months or burnt to the ground by thugs, both equally as likely. The town of Finestone, the only major settlement in thirty miles, a source of men and coin, but are either of any worth now? An iron and coal mine just north in hills that would be prize to hold, but how to hold it without a sizeable force of swords and men? A vineyard that export the famous Red of Sulla vintage, if the barrels had not been plundered the wine might be suitable payment for a host of mercenaries.

Nerys was the unacknowledged leader of the three. Valtteri would often turn to her with his vague ideas and strange visions and she would find the value in them, if there was any, and devise a plan. And there was value in this vision, a value she did not want to disclose to Sayjin or her blood.

Nerys had changed in the months since she was forced behind the walls of the manor house by the gods she had ridiculed. The shame had tarnished her and her work and she was no longer satisfied with the trifling schemes that upset a handful of Lesser Men, in a unknown village in the between nothing and some place. If she was to leave her new found exile and return to the world, it would have to be for something that would make her numbers so large they would eclipse any that had come before.

"A kingdom," declared Nerys to the map.

"A kingdom," nodded Valtteri.

"The last to rule," added Sayjin.

"Then, where do we start?" asked Valtteri.

"We start by rallying the Lesser Men to our cause," declared Nerys, "I propose the following. Each of us choose a place in my broken dominion and take it in the name of the new kingdom. The ones who occupy it now must swear fealty to our house, our rule, none other."

"But there is something very important you have forgotten, my blood," said Valtteri.

"And what is that?" snapped Nerys.

"Who will be the king of this new land?"

“I did not forget, I thought it would be evident there would be no king,” said Nerys, dismissively.

“Oh no, my blood, such a title should not be given unearned. So, I suggest the first to claim a holding in the name of our new kingdom should be the one to be regent, game to lighten our heavy task.”

“But a title will be in name only,” said Sayjin, “our kingdom will not need a king or queen.”

“Of course,” smiled Valtteri.

“If you insist, as long as it is only ceremonial,” said Nerys turning from the map, “then, to demonstrate their obedience one of the Lesser Men must carry a wreath of flowers to the manor house and lay it at the front gates. No one may escort their vassal and they must place the wreath of their own freewill. Choose your colour and find one to lay to it, the game will be simple.”

“Wonderful,” laughed Valtteri enjoying the purpose he had found, “I will take the colour blue, blue flowers are much easier to find during the winter months and, I think, I will take the winery.”

“Then, red will be my colour,” said Sayjin, “I seek allies in the forest that are not on this map. It is within our domain, though, do not worry.”

“Then I will take orange,” declared Nerys, “and I will head to the town of Finestone and see what remains.”

The three agreed and the next day they prepare for their journey.

Sayjin left Sam a large plate of roots in the attic and laid down some new hay, he would not be gone for long. Sam bleated and butted Sayjin, forcefully. Sayjin nodded, approvingly, and rubbed her head before closing the door behind him.

Valtteri put his ill fitting cloak away in his closet, he would not need again it until his coronation. He then found his rapier and donned his leather. He was ready to tame the Lowmen.

Nerys sat in the library looking into the fire, thinking on the plan. She pulled the long grey hair from her head. Two hundred years had passed her. Now, she sat forgotten by a world she

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