

# Riders in the Dark

## I. The Scout

He was moving through the woods carefully and quietly. He didn't wish to be heard. He'd received information from reliable sources that there would be a meeting of the Ancient Ones here tonight.

He'd been here before. He knew that if he entered the forest from the east and walk straight for about twenty minutes, he'll reach an altar. An altar that was even older than the Ancient Ones.

The evening was dark and wet and he felt the mud under his feet. He knew that if it came to that, it wouldn't be easy to fight under these conditions. The forest was thick and coniferous, but, funnily enough, he could neither hear birds singing nor see any other living creature other than himself. Which meant he was on the right path. The further he went, the thicker the forest became. Any second now the last light of the day would vanish from the world.

He stopped, looked around and crouched by a tree to rest. He was very close. He peered into the woods and recalled the last time he'd been here. It wasn't a pleasant memory - he'd been pursued by vampires. He'd been very young, little more than a novice eager for the hunt. And he hadn't considered the fact that as light fades, vampires grow stronger. That was when he'd seen the Altar for the first time. He recalled the fear he'd felt then and got a chill down his spine.

He shook off the memory and carried on, feeling that he was close. In a little while he reached the edge of a precipice and then he saw it again - the ten-foot-tall marble Altar, situated at the base of the precipice. The place where, in the past, people had tried to appease the creatures which surrounded their villages by performing human sacrifice. He knew of at least fifty people who'd been sacrificed here, slaughtered like lambs. The thought unnerved him.

He peered into the dark and saw movement. A dozen shadows were closing in on the Altar. They stepped lightly and quietly. He stopped breathing. He knew they could hear him if he made any noise and became perfectly still. He was too far to hear *them*, but he knew that if he used his abilities, they'll certainly know they were not alone. Maybe if he only used one... He produced a little vial of powder from his belt, opened it, inhaled its smell and whispered:

*Fortes in fortitudine sua creatura tueris hoc et bonum illud!* (Oh, powerful creature, give me your strength and I shall use it for good!)

It didn't take long for the magic to take effect. A few seconds later he felt his sight sharpening. He only used one power because he knew that if he used more, his energy field would grow too big and they'd sense his presence. Sight was enough.

He stared at the shadowy figures gathered at the Altar. Three of them were wearing black robes and nine were wearing grey. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could read their lips - he had that skill. The black-robed shadows lowered their hoods and stared at one another. That's when he saw them! Their energy was incredibly heavy. They were Ancient Ones. His eagle eyes saw every detail, every gesture and every movement. People in the Citadel talked about them a lot. Those were the leaders of the three most powerful supernatural clans - vampires, werewolves and witches. They had gathered in one place, which was incredible.

Two women and one man. It wasn't difficult to tell them apart. They had the distinctive traits of their respective kinds. The vampire was a tall and beautiful woman with pale skin, dark hair and light green eyes. When she opened her mouth, he saw her canine teeth, which were razor sharp and longer than any man's. And when she transformed, they became twice as long and so strong they could bite a steel sword in half. The vampire said, looking condescendingly at her companions:

'Greetings, heirs of Lucifer!'

'We all know that no one wants to be here. The accursed hunters are the reason for this meeting', the werewolf replied.

He was big and long-haired, with a thick stubble. His hair and eyes were black, which was typical for his kind. Most males were big, dark-haired and black-eyed. And their skin was also darker. This werewolf's skin was jet-black. If he transformed, his muscles would bulge out and harden and his face would become wolfish, but his features would remain recognizable. The biggest change would happen to his legs. They would grow longer and break up, with a third joint appearing in the werewolf's skeleton. They weren't as fast as vampires, but they could chase their prey for hours. They could easily outrun a horse and their sense of smell was incredible.

‘The reason for this meeting is simple’ the vampire said and gave him a sharp look. ‘It’s because our protector wishes it.’

‘Observe the etiquette, please!’ the witch cackled. ‘We’re all driven by the same purpose. I know that your clans have been quarrelling for hundreds of years, but we all want to survive.’

‘That is true’ the vampire agreed.

‘Alright then, but there must be a point to this meeting! I see that you’ve all brought protection, which is perfectly understandable. Witch, you summoned us here, deep in enemy territory. Why did you do it?’ asked the werewolf.

‘Ha-ha-ha! Yes, I set up this meeting. As we all know, the hunters are becoming more and more insolent and brazen. Two moons ago they massacred an entire witch’s coven. Just eight hundred years ago man was afraid of us. This is the place where they voluntarily gave up their lives to appease us. But everything changed when The Order was created. Those annoying insects took a stand against us and our abilities and brought us to our knees. Now we are the ones who live in fear. This must change! That’s why I have a gift for you. The protector himself will soon make his feelings known.’

The witches were neutral in the conflict between the vampires and the werewolves and intervened only when they had something to gain. They possessed a variety of skills, mostly connected with the manipulation of certain aspects of a person’s magical powers. They relied on curses and spells, known collectively as *dark magic*. And they looked human. Witches and warlocks were indistinguishable from ordinary human beings. This witch was a woman of medium height, with beautiful curly auburn hair and light blue eyes which were as sly as her smile.

‘Ha-ha-ha!’ the werewolf guffawed. ‘Witches and vampires are so weak! Even your bodyguards cannot protect you. But werewolves are strong and resilient. No one has ever managed to massacre an entire pack.’

‘Hmm, maybe that’s so’ the vampire said, ‘but, as far as I know, they kill your pack leaders and without them you’re just a disorganized rabble of wolves.’

‘Watch your mouth, you pretentious bloodsucker! At least we’re not easily lured into stupid traps. Several months ago I heard that twenty vampires

were lured by a convoy of children and beheaded by hunters' said the werewolf and burst out laughing.

'Stop it!' the witch exclaimed. 'Is that why you came here? To jabber on and on and accuse each other? We've all taken casualties in our attempts to conquer human towns.'

They all grew silent.

'That's better! As we all know, hunters are capable sorcerers, which puts us at a disadvantage. They've been trained to use our weaknesses. But what would happen if they all vanished?'

'I don't understand what you mean, witch. And I'm running out of patience. I don't like to waste my time listening to nonsense!' the werewolf snapped.

'You werewolves are such impatient creatures!' the witch replied. 'But hear me out! We have a new weapon we can use against the hunters. Something they've never seen before. Something which can help us turn this war around.'

'And what is that thing?' asked the vampire.

'Actually it's two things. One is a creature that...'

'Silence!' the werewolf cried and started sniffing around. 'We have an uninvited guest. I smell a stranger.'

The hunter watching from the edge of the precipice froze. Had they sensed his presence? He'd taken great pains to mask his body odour, so how could they have smelled him?

'What is it?' the vampire asked.

'A scent that doesn't belong to either of us three. A scent I recognize. It's a hunter! Find him!' the werewolf bellowed, turning to the three hooded figures behind him.

The vampire also looked at the three figures behind her and nodded. They immediately vanished.

The hunter shuddered. How did they know? What had given him away? If he wanted to stay alive, he had to leave immediately. He slowly walked back from the edge of the precipice, trying to make as little noise as possible. He heard growling behind him, turned around and saw him - a seven-foot-tall

werewolf, with long yellow teeth and claws that looked capable of cutting metal. If he'd been a novice, he'd have wet himself by now.

The werewolf stared at him, trying to figure out if he was the intruder. The hunter realized that leaving without a fight was no longer an option. And his eagle eyes were not enough. He needed strength to battle this werewolf. His human speed would be sufficient. The monster lunged at him. The hunter easily avoided its claws, then produced another vial from his belt, looked at it and smiled. He inhaled its smell and pronounced the words to cast the spell. His eyes instantly became yellow, and his nails transformed into long and sharp claws. He'd acquired the strength of a lion. Combined with his eagle sight, this meant that the werewolf had no chance. But he had to kill him quickly and make quick his escape, because the others had to be close on his heels.

The werewolf howled. That was it! Now they knew where he was and he was running out of time. The battle must wait. Without thinking, he jumped on his feet and ran towards the path leading out of the woods. His eagle eyes helped him overcome all obstacles on his way. He saw everything very clearly and soon became aware that, in addition to the werewolf, there were two other hooded creatures chasing him, running on both sides of him and waiting for the right moment to strike. Definitely vampires. Fast and skillful vampires. They could easily overtake him, but were not ready to take that chance yet. They weren't as powerful as the werewolf, but their speed was phenomenal.

It wouldn't be easy to defeat two vampires and a werewolf. He picked up his pace, knowing that his chances would increase in the open. He saw where the forest ended in the distance. That's when the third vampire attacked him. The hunter didn't skip a beat. Without thinking, he opened his palms and flexed his fingers and his claws emerged. He had milliseconds to react and the vampire was ready. The hunter went down on his knees, slid towards the vampire, deftly grabbed his hand and twisted it away from his chest, then plunged his claws in, piercing his heart. He had to rip it out in order to kill the creature, but it was quicker just to slash his throat, which he did, with a single swift movement of his hand. The vampire didn't have time to make a sound.

Despite his victory, he had no time to lose, so he immediately headed for the clearing, thinking one down, five to go.

He finally emerged onto the clearing, bathed in faint light. He didn't see or hear any creatures near him, so maybe they'd given up. The sky had

darkened, which was bad. He looked around for his horse and saw it exactly where he'd left it. The creatures were nowhere to be seen. They were probably just regrouping in preparation for another onslaught.

He had to act quickly and inform the Order about the Ancient Ones' plans. Even though he'd activated his talisman before entering the woods, the magical interference had prevented him from sending a message. Now he pulled the talisman out of his bosom and tried again, but at that moment he heard howling and the three werewolves emerged from the forest, followed by the three vampires.

The hunter let go of the talisman and prepared for battle. He needed to think of a strategy. He had fought multiple opponents before, but werewolves and vampires had different strengths and therefore you needed different tactics to defeat them. And he was alone. He knew they couldn't attack him all at once and that gave him an advantage. He opened his palms and flexed his fingers. One of the werewolves swiped at him. He knew that if any of their blows landed, it would be over for him. Thanks to his eagle eyes, he managed to avoid the werewolf's sharp claws and aimed a blow at the beast's elbow, but one of the vampires stopped his hand and struck him, throwing him back seven feet.

They were working together and that was a problem. They were both stronger and faster than him. He had no choice. He needed speed. He produced another vial from his belt. The strength of three animals could kill him, but he was ready to take that chance. He knew enough not to mix two powerful predators, of course. He inhaled the smell and instantly felt his senses sharpening and his body becoming light and nimble. He'd acquired the swiftness of a gazelle.

He turned to the creatures and smiled. Then he attacked the closest vampire. Gazelle, lion and eagle - those animals would either save or kill him. With a swift movement of his hand, he struck the vampire's head with his claws, giving him no time to react. One of the werewolves lunged at him, but the hunter grabbed his hand and severed his tendons, then leapt behind him and pierced his heart with his claws. The werewolf fell instantly.

The other three took a step back. But the hunter was not done. He ran at the two werewolves and slayed them, slashing at their bodies with incredible ferocity and speed.

Only one vampire remained standing. He turned around and fled towards the trees. The hunter decided not to pursue him. Relieved, he started walking to his horse. His strength was about to run out and he knew that for a while he wouldn't be able to use it. He pulled out his medallion to send a message to the Order.

That's when he heard heavy footsteps behind him. He turned around and saw the most hideous monster he'd ever laid eyes on. It was a ten-foot-tall werewolf with deep scars on his face and claws that were twice as long as any other werewolf's. He had no time to react. The creature swiped at him and struck him, throwing him back. His body flew for almost twenty feet before crashing on the ground and rolling over. Half his bones were broken. He tried to get up, but a white hand with thin fingers grabbed him by the throat and pulled him up. It was the vampire woman and she was no longer beautiful. Her nose and ears had become long and pointed, her teeth looked like needles and her face was a nightmare. The only thing he recognized were her green eyes.

'Hunter, how dare you kill creatures that are superior to you and all mortal men? Now you shall die in agony!' she bellowed and bit him on the neck. He felt his life slowly draining away. 'There you go, enjoy!'

The vampire threw him like a children's toy into the werewolf's arms. The monster instantly ripped him in two and let the two halves fall on the ground.

'Are these the great hunters we are so frightened of?' the vampire asked.

'Well, at least we had some fun!' the witch said, walking out into the clearing. 'But don't underestimate them. After all he was all alone!'

'Find out his rank!' the vampire ordered, looking at the werewolf, who had turned back into his human form. He crouched over the upper half of the hunter's corpse, looked at his chevron and said:

'He was level three!'

'What? This pitiful vermin managed to slay three werewolves and two vampires? Where were your warlocks?' the vampire snarled, looking furiously at the witch.

'They were guiding your troops' she calmly answered.

'How much do you think he heard?'

‘Not enough!’ the witch replied.

‘Let’s go back. We’ve many more things to discuss and the protector can’t wait!’ the vampire said and the three shadowy figures disappeared back into the forest depths.

Translation by Emil Minchev