

Holmen de Kolmen: Holkon Rush

From the series "Long, long time ago and not true..."

Chapter 1

For the second night in a row, he woke up and ran to the only wider gap in the roof to check if everything was fine. He tried to count the silhouettes huddled together under the stone wall surrounding the farm, but it was difficult to distinguish anything in the darkness. He then lay down resignedly on his bed in the middle of a large pile of straw and tightly wrapped himself in a bearskin. Windy Holkon nights were troublesome, especially when the only obstacle for the wind was a thatched roof.

The subtle surge of anxiety that had pulled him out of bed didn't allow him to fall asleep for a long time. He listened to the hushed stillness, attuned to any sound that might emerge from beyond the roof. Only the wind penetrated through the dense mountain forest and rustled the needles. Once in a while he had the impression that a distant, ephemeral howling was coming through the even hum. In Holmen, it is whispered that hiberi come down to the valley, lured by the easy hunt....

Before, he wouldn't have cared about such tittle-tattle, but since he left home, his highest priority became security. And it hinged now on three woolly creatures vulnerable to any incursion from the outside. He spontaneously bought them at the flea market beneath the citadel. Within three minutes of conversation with a crafty trader, he let himself be convinced that it was the best opportunity one could imagine for a start. Especially now, with winter approaching, the highest quality wool in the whole Terrmenia will be in demand. 'They will bring you a handsome return!' the trader swiftly cut off his last doubts. He then wandered around with three unruly sheep, seeking to pawn them off to the community of merchants, handworkers, and shepherds. Finally, in one of the last farms situated higher up on the hillside, a certain Lark reluctantly agreed to take in four refugees.

He came across the host, as the sun reminded of itself only with an orange glow above the flattened ridge of the massif. Lark was just standing on the wall, tinkering with a dimmed lantern, its fancy appearance contrasting with the simplicity of his stone hut. The street lanterns of Holmen de Kolmen, fueled by oil with holkon sand, reached even to such a remote place, resembling guardians of morality. Suddenly, a loud sizzling noise emerged from the lamp interior, as if someone had liberally sprinkled bacon onto a heated pan. After a moment, the lamp lit up with a pale blue light, and Lark recoiled as if scalded, cursing under his breath. He jumped down and, pressing his open palm against the cold wall, measured the newcomers with a cool gaze. 'A nakker terrsk? My name is Hanor,' the newcomer broke the awkward silence, not able to withstand his intense stare. He decided not to offer his hand, seeing his suffering. 'What are you seeking here?' Lark grumbled and began wrapping his scalded hand in some beige cloth. 'Where did you get them?' he added immediately, indicating with a meaningful gesture the animals nervously circling behind him. Hanor presented his situation, dramatizing it to the extent that anybody would sympathize with him. However, Lark, despite his unusually fair complexion, revealed himself to be a man of a dark nature. He knew that as a newcomer, he didn't have much choice. 'Sheep in exchange for a place to sleep and food. I give you a month,' Lark's eyes became wider. Well, another deal of a lifetime in the span of a single day, but at least it was like a cheap inn in extravagant city of Holmen de Kolmen.

Chapter 2

Hanor was pulled out of the deepest shadows of dream by the blare of a lur, which even here on the edge of the Holmen rattled in his ears. It seemed that not even a bear in its hibernaculum behind the next mountain would have stood a chance. It is said that the lur, whose playing resounds every day at dawn from the citadel's tower, was forged entirely from holkon. It is somewhat due to the properties of this material that it possesses its incredibly pure and high-pitched sound. The bugle call sounded beautiful and dignified. However, the whole positive impression was lost by the circumstances in which the average Holmen resident consumed the piece. With an empty stomach, a full bladder and the feeling that one had been robbed of those beautiful and blissful moments of sleep in the morning.

The last few days he strolled to the stream behind the homestead and waded in the icy, swift current. He poured the crystalline liquid over his head and enjoyed a pleasant tingling sensation in his feet. He stood there, dwelling on the water that came from the heart of the massif. Somewhere high up among the peaks, a particularly ambitious, narrow trickle of crystal-clear water would, on its way down the steep slopes, merge with other streamlets and so become a spring. A brave youngster, cascading down to successively lower levels, flying headlong down cliffs, forcing its way through dense forests and meadows. By the time it reached the farm, it was already a lively and wide stream. In the town, on the other hand, it galloped through as a ranging torrent, washing over the rock of the citadel, winding a little through the town center, passing by the harbor and flowing into the bay with a vengeance. The bay, as a larger player, collected the entire aquatic tribute from this side of the mountains and submitted it to the insatiable Terrmenian Ocean.

That morning, it was not the mountain water that would finally awaken Hanor. The first omen occurred as he descended the ladder in the half-light. As he turned, a dozen terrified pairs of eyes darted towards him. The sheep stood motionless as if awaiting judgement. He shuffled to the barn exit, not wanting to risk that there was a plan behind that look. As he opened the creaking wooden door, the day greeted him with the amber glow of the sun just making its way over the massif. A gust of wind swept over him delightfully with a mountain chill. A few moments later however, a stench of digested wine pierced his nostrils - another omen, a forerunner of bad news. Lark, guarding his property like an Argus, emerged from the void with his characteristic stubborn face.

'Dug Kolmen' Hanor preempted him with a salute in Holkonian. Lark, without wrapping his mind around redundant greeting, immediately threw his cards on the table 'You best be movin' along! Those dog sons of Jugh came by,' he spat hissily at his feet. 'They're looking for scoundrels like you - no job, no report!' he tugged ostentatiously at his worn shirt. 'But what about our agreement, my sheep...' Hanor muttered uncertainly. 'Vargar!' Lark cut him off, 'I've no wish to lay eyes on you here again!'

It took Hanor a long moment to grasp the meaning of those words, but surprisingly for himself he responded with conviction, adhering to the tenet of hospitality: 'Nobody dismiss guests without breakfast!'

Lark pierced him with a look of resentment, and without breaking eye contact, shouted in his face with sour wine breath, 'Leeeenaaa!'. 'What!' The landlady's coarse voice came from inside the hut. 'Hand 'im a piece to nibble!'- Lark gasped and disappeared somewhere behind the barn.

So he followed the summons of his appetite and entered a hut made of roughly hewn stone. Its interior was lined with brown wavy bedding. In the centre stood a cracked clay oven, essential

for surviving the long and cold holkonian winters. A short, corpulent landlady was bustling about at the stove, beads of sweat on her forehead. Yet she was able to smile so warmly, that it instantly made you feel better. And this time she did not disappoint, grinning at him her even teeth and hands on her broad hips.

'Don't worry Hanor, he's furious because they've taken the lambs, the war contribution...pff...who saw it coming! You'd better look elsewhere,' he could have sworn she said it all in one breath. 'Don't you have some maiden down there?' she smiled at him rather lasciviously, which made him feel uncomfortable. 'I can take care of myself,' he answered rapidly. 'You need to eat something before you set off,' she said, and a moment later a bowl of steaming scrambled eggs in butter landed on a bench against the wall - a most perfect meal that spreading a pleasant warmth over his bowels. The strong kaffa served in a wooden mug stimulated his circulation and chased away the remnants of sleep.

Very soon he felt an urgent need to slip away from the area governed by Lark's despotic rules, so he thanked Lena for everything and accepted two solid cubes of sheep cheese and a small barrel of wine for the road. Just at the doorway the woman hugged him goodbye and wordlessly pressed a smooth cold object into his hand. When he opened his fist back in the courtyard, he could swear that he saw the bright blue gemstone glow for a moment.

- Holkon! - he thought almost shouting, his heart beating like crazy. He felt his legs soften. His mind threw multiple questions at once. 'Where did she get it? They are not well off, yet she gave me a substantial amount. Was she trying to spite Lark and make good for my sheep? After all, the first thing he'd do is accuse me of stealing.' He looked around the yard like a thief feeling someone's eyes on his back.

-I'd be scared if I were you! - Lars, despite his fair stature, came out of nowhere, again.

-But what, what, what's the matter? I haven't done anything! - Hanor shuddered and clenched his fist tighter around the gift.

-'They keep an eye on folks like you, so you'd better hide' he nodded with two fingers to his eyes and pointed at him.

- Hodio! - Hanor didn't need to be asked twice and soon found himself in the woods behind the farmhouse, where he had already taken the steep forest path to Holmen. With trembling hands, he wrapped his pass to freedom in a piece of cloth and placed it in a small pouch strapped to his thigh. He pulled it up as high as he could and drew his trousers belt tighter than usual.

Like a deserter, he set off at a run along the path that meandered across the forest slope. He had to watch out for stones and rocks sticking out everywhere. Every now and then he turned nervously behind him to make sure Lark wasn't rushing after him to claim his property. Not wanting to risk a confrontation with the angry highlander, he veered off the trail and cut sharply downwards. After a while, he almost flew down reaching the countour of the cliff. He braced himself with his legs and looked out over the abyss. Sharp rocks below, trees and the first buildings beyond. He retreated slightly, grabbed a thicker branch with his elbow and lifted his head. Although he had just miraculously escaped a kiss of death, what he saw caught his full attention.

*

Here, at his feet, in the embrace of the mountain valley, flourished Holmen de Kolmen - a harbour town nestled beside a sea inlet that cut deep into this rocky land. A wide quay, piers, carts, warehouses and porters who looked like ants from this vantage point - everything was set up to handle as many merchant ships as possible. At this hour, a line of galleys, wide and laden, was leaving the Holmen's harbour to carry the most precious possessions from the heart of the massif. Probably more than one sailor or maypole was now looking in their direction, embracing this august

city with a farewell glance.

Just beyond the docks, the buildings were rapidly thickening, squeezing into every possible nook and cranny of the basin. With a labyrinth of streets, down below it seemed to lack any reasonable arrangement. From above, however, he had the impression that he could see logic in it all, and in particular beauty. Narrow alleys writhed in a serpent dance with the river rushing to the bay. Rows of elegant red-tiled townhouses sprang up in rows. Here and there, slender pinnacled turrets rised above the buildings like stork's nests on ships, which seemed to be navigated by the monuments dotting the city.

Finally, perched on a lonely rock, the citadel towered over the town - stern, watchful, all-seeing, like Cerberus on a mountain tribune. Even from here it commanded respect and seemed inaccessible. Thick fortifications, carved into the rock, sloped down to form a single unit with the sheer cliff face. Only one slender tower looked out from above the walls - the protruding eye of the lord in charge of his territory. Looking at Holmen, which was bursting at the seams, one could confidentially say that the owner's eye was feeding the horse.

To calm down after escaping Lark's shadow, he squatted beneath a mature spruce tree, a silent witness to the city's impetuous expansion. The thick trunk sheltered him from the cold gusts of wind that rushed down the precipice. This was Ephir that continued its possessive dance down the fjord to meet the sea. It was opposed only by the light, slender langskips, which, thanks to the strenuous work of their oars, were the only ones able to reach the harbour at this hour. But soon enough, like every day, the Ephir will wrap up his windy manatees and begin to return humbly to the mountains, calmer, hummer, allowing the ships to reach the city. He is then jokingly referred to as the 'wind of the fools', although he saw nothing funny about it. Like hundreds of others pulling from every corner of Terrmenia, he had come here for his chance, entflamed by the holkon fever that consumed this isolated land from its rocky core.

Grain by grain, stone by stone, rock by rock, the greed of man has gutted the massif, ripping out its glossy entrails, about the existence of which the few inhabitants of the once village of Holmen were the last to know. When the cogs of Prince Baltan de Kolmen sailed into their peaceful land for the second time, their fate had long been sealed. The young prince, during his prior cartographic expedition, arrived in this remote region of Terrmenia and while penetrating one of the dozens of caves and caverns of Skilsund, came across a treasure long hidden by nature. As a keen geologist, he immediately recognised that he was dealing with a unique marvel.

Now Hanor too had a piece of this wealth. He fished it out of the bundle and stared at it like a long-awaited trophy. The precious cobble, which he turned investigatively in his fingers, seemed to absorb all the light falling on its crystalline surface into its interior, sparkling with all shades of blue. A curious mineral of unmatched hardness, durability, beauty and, when combined with carbon and sulphur, combustibility, all of which qualities make it such a desirable ore. Weapons refined with holkon were characterised by their deadly quality, and the jewellery in which Holmen goldsmiths set holkon became a chic jewel, coveted by all women in Terrmenia.

He must make the most of it. A second chance like this may not come again soon. When the traffic starts to pick up in a few hours, he will head down to the city and join the crowd. There will already be people who will give him a generous amount of mark coins for the raw holkon without asking any unnecessary questions. If he does not want to fall into the hands of mercenaries, the first thing he must do is to dress better, to distinguish himself from the common vagabond. Things would work out somehow from then on. He believed in luck.

*

The first stretch of Hanor's road to wealth was littered with an army of stones, between which he meandered in his well-worn leather boots. Closer and closer, the faint clamor of the city pierced the dense mountain silence with the muted tolling of the bells, the timbre of a ship's horn, some mysterious bangs and distant shouts. He felt called by Holmen, where suddenly, with the help of a barely perceptible stone in the pouch attached to his thigh, so many possibilities appeared.

At first, his steps and plans were cautious, limited to buying a set of clothes, a rucksack, a dagger, renting a room and investing the rest wisely in one commodity or another. But with the sloshing contents of the bottle, his journey and future gained momentum. As quickly as he downed the strong wine in the behemoth, in his mind he was climbing the next rungs of success. With a few shrewd decisions, he went from being a simple trader to a prosperous merchant with his own share of the holkon Mine. By the time he reached the northern outskirts of the city, he could already see himself as the ruler of Holmen, perched in a citadel rising from the hill. He was brought back to earth by the rapidly approaching stampede of horses' hooves. Four condottieri, armed to the teeth, passed him at a crawl, paying no attention to their future ruler, who for a moment looked more like a drunken vagabond than a lord of the castle.

He made his way towards the city flarkt, a patchwork of stretched canvas that stood out against the dark blue of the bay. Music, volleys of laughter and the din of the human crowd were already emanating from there, setting in motion the wheels of the city's commercial power and Hanor's commercial sense. It led him directly to the jeweller's tent. Ignoring his outward appearance and the lack of a clear plan of action, he entered the surprisingly large and well-lit space of the leather yurt. Inside, by a glass display case, an aging, corpulent man was standing in front of a young woman. In her hands in the light of the holkon lamps shimmered a necklace with a golden peacock. However the brilliance of this jewel was overshadowed by her natural grace, slender figure and painted confidence, highlighted by her neat raven-black braid.

'Dug Kolmen!' Hanor pronounced a little too loud, his voice betraying a slight drunken slur. The jeweller measured him over his colourful encrusted binoculars, that had an elongated jeweller's monocle attached to one side, resembling an one-eyed chameleon perched on his bony nose. He waved meaningfully in the direction of the exit and shouted: 'The tavern two tents ahead!' Hanor stood there mute, looking only at the girl. She gave him an indifferent look before turning her attention back to the necklace. The man, not seeing his reaction, moved towards him with a heavy step that awakened Hanor's primal instincts. "I have a nugget of holkon," Hanor said, surprisingly sober, adding, "Take it now, and I'll give you a fair price."

The man stopped directly in front of Hanor, his grey, inquisitive eyes narrowed. "Let me see," he said. Hanor slowly pulled out the blue stone, which the jeweller took with his small eager hands and moved towards the mahogany desk where magnifying glasses and small tools for precision work glittered. But he stopped halfway and groaned, 'What on earth?' He began to walk nervously and look around the oval interior of the tent, repeating over and over 'She's stolen it, stolen it...'. Finally, he pulled the exit curtain wide open and called out: 'Guards, guards!' He turned to Hanor, pointed a finger at him and said 'You must be in cahoots!'

'But, but, but I don't know her!' began Hanor, desperate to leave this place, but at the same time not wanting to part with his shining guarantee for the future.

Decisions made on the spur of the moment often have a tumultuous end, especially those made under the influence of port wine. That is why Hanor, who had decided to reclaim his property by force, broke under the hail of wooden clubs with which the guards were armed. Time had slowed and the pain no longer seemed to affect him. He felt separating from his body and was finally consumed by a nameless darkness.