

## War of the Vampires Part 7&8

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The time has gone for words and peace. Alice's power has faltered and now she is unable to stop the inevitable conflict. Forces on both sides gather behind their leaders banners. This war will be one of the greatest the Empire will ever see, and the fate of it all rests upon Alice, which side will she choose?

Alice felt the cold biting into her flesh, the countless insects joining in the assault. Alice wafted them away with her hand as she walked. The swamp stank; why the vampire had bought her here she would never know. On the plus side however, the vampire now had a name. She was a female, it seemed, but Alice could tell; only a woman could harbour such bitterness in her heart. The vampire's name was Al'jis, one of the few things that the two held in common, and the only attribute that the vampire had to call itself a human. She felt her foot sink below solid surface and cursed as she dragged it out of the boggy pool, sickening bubbles rising from the green liquid froth. She saw thick brambles up ahead and drew her sword; this forest was getting more fun by the minute. She hacked her way through in silence, the dead shrewd trees the only witnesses to her labour. A thick blanket of fog hung overhead, Alice raised her head to see a great black tower rising towards the stormy skies. She watched as lightning fell blow upon blow onto the great tower structure and was amazed that it kept standing. She felt the rain upon the air before it fell, an instant soaking through to her skin; because of this she felt no issue as the vampire compelled her towards the great spire.

The vampire once more had obedience from her body, the shock of betrayal and underlying hatred of being left by Shriken gave the beast a strong hold over her shocked and puzzled mind. She now relished in the manual tasks the vampire set out for her, savouring the precious moments her mind was lured away from difficult territory. She was only just beginning to come to terms with her loss, and she knew it would be several years before her heart let go of the man whom had fathered her. She approached the black tower now, its glossy stone walls rising like a fell tree from the ground. The fog seemed to linger about the tower like an overhanging moat, shrouding the gargoyles that stood guard over the high entrance. She was close enough now to make out the door, great and black, with a great iron trim, the two gargoyles on either side now given expression and charisma. The vampire once more took the lead of her body; she felt her body change at a more rapid pace, clearly something was about to happen. She stared in wonder as the two stone guardians raised their hands, and then cursed her own ignorance as she saw they were no gargoyles: great grey robes covered their bodies, fangs sticking out from behind their thick hoods. "Halt! Stranger!"

Al'jis hissed at the orderly tone "You do not bar me passage into my domain!"

The two vampires exchanged glances in puzzlement before turning back to her, the one on the right spoke this time "This is the domain of Skayak, lord of the Drykwar house, he has ruled ever since the times o-

"Since the time of my last departure, yes, I recall the challenge to see whom ruled next very well, even in my age-

The two vampires dropped to one knee in unison, their heads bowed and their hands in a queer gesture "Forgive us lady Al'jis, we did not recognise you in this fog, please allow us to escort you to lord Skayak, I'm sure the two of you will have much to discuss."

The great hall was crowded, several women held wine glasses to their lips, however the red liquid that swirled inside looked far too sinister to be anything but blood. The men spoke in quiet tones amongst themselves, few people noticed her, and only one turned his head. The two guards moved hastily to remove the residents from Al'jis's path. Alice gazed in amazement from the back of her mind: she has so much power; these people treat her as if she were a god. She took back the latter: she was a god. Al'jis smiled radiantly at the spectators, her fangs flashing a dazzling white. She moved with a caressing slowness that captivated everyone's eye; the slow movements in support of her perfect slender body. Alice nearly choked with laughter at the back of her mind: she was such a natural, heaven knows how she would cope had she taken the body of an uglier woman. The way before Al'jis was clear; she could see a tall man gliding along the embroidered carpet to meet her. The man wore elaborate red robes lined with a fine golden lace. A broad shoulder line and a high head told Alice that this must be the man the vampires referred to as Skayak. The man accepted her outstretched hand as they met, his cold dry lips brushing against her silky hand. A shiver went down her spine that could have only belonged to Al'jis, clearly she didn't relish the moment either, but her alter-ego smiled regardless. "Skayak, it has been long"

The man's face revealed a hurt spirit at the lack of formality and title; clearly he still sought the favour of his mistress,

even after so many years. "Indeed it has," he said, the moment of bitterness gone "Will you dine with me at the table?"

Alicia shook her head "No, I would however like your company for another matter" she began to lead him down the corridor as though he was the alleged guest "There are matters that the two of us must attend to."

The room and its solemn feel did nothing but dampen her spirits. The lord stood with his arms folded, his face full of malice. Alicia stood a few feet off, preferring to remain a safe distance from the pawn that she was moving. "The foolish humans believe me dead" she smiled "And I would be if it weren't for the intervention of our dear friend Shriken"

Skayak spat as he said "The man is a disgrace! A prison for one of our own, I swear it to you my queen, I will free your brother from the confines of that infernal cell!"

Alicia seemed startled by the vicious remark, though she was too controlled to show it. Alice knew the vampire feared this man, despite the loyalty he held for her "He will pay, lord Skayak, but now is not the time to make hollow threats"

Skayak's face turned from fury to satisfaction "You have a plan?"

Alicia smiled in earnest "Yes, my dear old friend, I do." She walked deeper into the tower chamber, past the great columns that divided each room. "There is a settlement that is in a far worse state than when I left it"

Skayak followed his mistress in silence, deep in thought and nodding as his mistress explained "And this place would happen to be the home of Shriken?"

Alicia flashed her white fangs "Yes, the very same" they had reached the map room now, a huge glyphic floor expanding before them. "I have stored memories of my time there, the vampire hunters have grown weak in my absence, now I have returned we must seize the advantage before they are allowed to mobilize"

Alicia stepped into the centre of the strange floor, only now did Alice see that it operated in a series of circles, twining outwards towards the walls and doors. Alicia climbed into the centre and Alice felt her begin a curious cycle in her mind. She bit her arm and began to summon vivid images of the city in her mind, they flashed by rapidly, each one flowing like the blood from her arm. The blood trickled down her sleeve to the ground; there it began to collect in the glyphs as it spread from circle to circle like a rapid infection. Alicia stepped back and Alice stared in awe.

She had heard stories as a child: about great vaults of memories that could be stored and passed on. Shriken had taught her this, only now that she stood before such a thing did she realise where he had learned that information. She had been nine. She wondered how long Shriken had been one of the vampires, whether he too had preyed on villages in times of hunger. Had he ever looked at her and thought: one day child, I will kill you? She shuddered at the thought and felt the vampire's pleasure: curse her! Couldn't she find one corner of her mind to have privacy? The vampire seemed to leave her be, its attention drawn to the image conjured in front of her.

It floated in front of them: a thin vapour that clung to the air. In this airy liquid was the home of Shriken, she saw everything that she had seen days ago, how had Alicia recalled all of this so perfectly? "Ok. Skayak the outskirts of this city are the forests of Drakwald, the roads are owned by bandits and you can expect little resistance from the Empire's troops here"

Skayak roamed the map like a hawk: scanning from the skies for prey. "There" he said pointing to a small amount of forest Alicia blinked once and the section magnified. A slightly raised hill was present, facing one of the gate houses. "That is the ideal location for any batteries we have available"

Alicia merely nodded, she was obviously not the expert tactician in the room. For the next few hours Skayak planned each tactical move. Every exit route of the enemy was cut off, every patrolling archer marked for death. He scanned every brick of the wall for chinks in the mortar. So far they had found a flimsy section in the right wall, with any luck the enemy wouldn't notice, and their batteries would breach it before it could be resealed. Soon every single regiment had a purpose, and thanks to Alice's prior knowledge of hunter tactics; they knew best way to meet them was to wear them down with wave after wave of zombies. Vargulfs would be essential in this fight, their fearful reputation and ability to fly would make them key to capturing the walls and breaking enemy morale. At the gatehouse would be the most skilled of their cavalry, the enemy would no doubt lay traps on the other side and a well placed charge was all that was needed to punch through whatever spearmen waited for them. It wasn't going to be an easy fight, the enemy would be expecting them, and had a demi-god directing their forces, the vampire could only pray that the men of the emperor broke, zombies aren't great at tacking down cities. There was only one more thing to be decided upon, and it must be honed to

perfection.

“There is the matter the psychic network; do you have someone in mind?” Al’jis asked.

Skayak nodded “I have been thinking about it since your arrival, there are several vampires who could rise to the challenge, but I was hoping that you could lead it yourself.”

Al’jis smiled “I am afraid I cannot, the battlefield will be a much more suiting place for me to be, that and I am no doubt out of practice with leading a group.”

Alice lay at the back of her mind pondering what she had heard in the last few hours: the vampire™s were going to invade, soon. They seemed to have every obstacle covered, she was thankful that the vampire hunters would be wise to the majority of these tactics. They were good, but the vampire hunters were more than capable of counteracting them. The one thing that worried her was this psychic network, what could it be? Clearly it was something the vampires could use against them, that alone was enough to be wise to it. It sounded dangerous, images of huge fields of bodies scorned by magic filled Alice™s troubled mind, she had better find out what it was, fast. She remembered how Al’jis had drawn memories from her, the way that she had punched through her mind. She began to approach the presence and pondered what to do from here. She tried to walk into the presence, but found that it simply moved away, she tried to grab the presence but found a thin shell cocooning the subconscious mind. One way or another however, she was going to find out what was inside, she remembered the first time she had tried to crack a nut, would this be any different? She brushed with her subconscious against the cage of Al’jis™ mind; she felt its strange touch, a thin misty aura that stopped her own subconscious mind connecting with its counterpart. She remembered how she had broken down Al’jis™ mind before, she had summoned forth a powerful emotion, cast it at her foe in a single uncontrolled blast. She wasn’t sure it would work, or what torture the vampire would put her through should she fail, but she had to find out, she had to know.

She thought of a small emotion: just a little spark of joy. She could feel the summoned image in the conscious part of her mind, she shaped it into an arrow, and then? The bow twanged. A torrent of knowledge and emotions tumbled out on her; memories of childhood and moments of desire. She had no idea how one could hold so much knowledge, and even less how Al’jis couldn’t know that she had access to it. She couldn’t work like this; she slowly sealed the gaping hole until only a trickle of memories came through. She smiled to herself: one would never guess the complexity of the human mind, or the sheer power it could wield. She began to try and sieve through the memories, this proved difficult even with so few, and she would need to practice this whenever she could, and then she stumbled upon it. She was pleased with herself; she had no delusions that it was her random juggling that had found the memory in question, by sheer luck Al’jis must have thought about it recently. However the moment of joy was gone, now she could see what this psychic field really was. An image was forming inside her mind similar to the one of the map in front of Al’jis; a thin misty veil within images flowed freely. She could draw from these images the nature of the field: a group of minds all linked to each other by a central mind. They seemed to function as rapid communicators, able to relay commands in seconds by transferring thoughts and images. But it was more than that obviously, with this network every mind in the army would be aware of the slightest weaknesses in lines, they would be able to counteract any assault or ambush made on them. Then a second thought crept into her mind, a thought that disturbed her greatly. She analysed the two thoughts carefully and felt a looming dread come over her, the second thought was about a similar thing to what she was doing now: mind reading. If these two could be mixed then the vampire™s would now every move of their adversaries in advance, able to set up counter-attacks before any order was given. Alice had to warn Shriken, vampire or not, he had to know about this.

Ge’dor walked into the room wearing a smug smile. The day was going well, everything was perfect. Shriken stood by a window, his ancient face deep with wrinkles. He walked up to his lord and bowed low. “My lord, we have found him” he said.

Shriken moved his lifeless eyes to his pawn; he had played his part well so far, perhaps he would have his uses “good, send word to count Elector, I’m sure the two have a lot of talking to do” Ge’dor laughed at the remark, but Shriken did not move. He was so lacking in life; a void that threatened all else. He could feel his body withering away, he knew not how

much longer he could sustain himself “And GeÅ¡dor” he paused, his eyes looking once more to the stone in the safe, then his eyes returned to GeÅ¡dor “The stone refuses to reveal its secrets, I need blood.”

GeÅ¡dor nodded “I shall send someone.” He didn’t make it to the door; Shriken pounced upon him in seconds. “so GeÅ¡dor, the stone will only accept the blood of the tainted, and you are tainted with the power of necromancy”

GeÅ¡dor struggled as Shriken pulled him towards the centre of the room; his legs flailing out, his body writhing to be free. “Let me go, let me go”

Shriken lashed out with his fist and connected with GeÅ¡dor’s jaw line. He crumpled before the clenched fist, blood trickling from his mouth. Shriken bent low over him, his fangs jutting out; it had been too long since his last feed. His razor fangs pierced the soft flesh. Blood pulsed through his mouth; fresh blood, young blood. He felt his form shifting, his skin reddened, he felt his own heart beat for the first time in millennia. He chewed on the lifeline, power and blood rushing back to him. The boy’s sacrifice had been worth it: for now he had power; power to destroy Alice.

He left the body still bleeding; the boy’s eyes had long since whitened. He had never known the truth; the fact that he had served a vampire, the fact that all he had worked for was the Empire’s demise. Shriken had taught the child necromancy, he had watched as the boy raised his parents and fell into tears as they crumbled again, after all of it, he still had not guessed. He felt no remorse for the boy, only power. Blood pulsed through his veins once more; he could feel it writhing beneath his skin. He walked over to his long locked rooms; he opened the accursed cabinet that contained his cursed items. He pulled on his old robes, black as night and as thick as armour. He placed his fell cloak around his neck; he clipped it on with his golden clasp. He stared down at the fell blade that he had once wielded, its handle built of silver, its blade of crude obsidian. He ran his finger along its length; it felt good to hold it again. He ran his hands along his face; it was really him, just like millennia ago, he had risen from the ashes!

He walked over towards the safe and saw his own youthful face reflected upon its surface. Its metal surface showed his dark silky hair, his wild red eyes. He clicked open the small chest and stared in wonder at the stone inside. Faces danced along its surface, souls of mortals long dead and the beating hearts of his fellow spectres. But it was not to free them that he had needed the stone, to bring more would be more rivals; alone he would have the power to rule the world. He dreamt of glory as he bit into his arm, his own blood trickling down his forearm and onto the surface of the stone. One drop was enough; it dripped onto the surface and spread like butter across the sphere’s surface. Shriken stepped back as the surface of the sphere turned a dark red, its surface hidden beneath an ocean of blood. The surface was shifting, like the tides of a sea, blood rippling across its surface. Shriken approached it and placed his hands upon it, his heart barely beating as he beheld the wonder before him. Instantly the red ocean began to part, a great sphere of orange light pulsing inside it. Power writhed within the stone, and Shriken tasted it. It was like nothing he had ever felt; only minutes ago he had been frail and dying, now he was young with more power than ever before. He raised the stone as high as he could. It emitted a great aura that served to fuel Shriken’s power. He laughed manically; bathing in the radiance of the stone. He raised his hand and shot a beam of pure power at the metal box that had contained the great orb. It flew across the room in pieces, its frame shattered and melted by the blast of magic. Shriken let out another manic laugh. He turned his head towards the lifeless corpse spread over his rich carpet. He thought for a second, and then pointed his hand at the corpse. A hand began to move.

Count Elector was not renowned for his mercy, nor did he intend to show it. Word had reached him of his assignment: Shriken seemed to have found a use for the hunter’s whelp. He was looking forwards to it too, his orders were not to harm him in any way, but after their last meeting he knew that wasn’t likely. He walked slowly towards his estate. Several people greeted him with gracious smiles and polite nods. He was quite well known in the city, and well liked; by day he worked as a healer of the sick, but of course people could tell that from his green robes and his jade eyes. He was lucky that his eyes could change, if anyone knew his secret his image would rapidly change. Of course the people he treated were never really saved, but no one heard about the tragic deaths of his patients’ only days after treatment. But Shriken needed him as his voice in his weakened state, and that required him to remain strong and fresh, with blood flowing through his veins. It had crossed his mind several times whether he was doing the right thing: serving a vampire whom was weaker than himself when a great host of his kin lurked only a day’s march away in Drakwald. But he knew it was too late to turn back now, Shriken was strong again, and he had given orders he needed to be completed.

He reached his estate and marched through the gates without looking at the guards, they never spoke to him, though they didn’t know, they remained highly suspicious of what really went on in Elector’s life. Of course that was understandable, leaving the house without a reason then returning each morning looking fresher than when he set out,

he knew one day they would guess, but he was prepared for when it came. He made his way across the sparse garden; there were no plants, or flowers here, though a few herbs grew on the soil. He preferred it that way; the less life in the world the better. The house was large, yet another perk of being a healer in such a city. He walked up to the oak front door and opened it, no locks on his house, few people ever ventured near it. His feet barely brushing the carpet as he entered his home. There was no one else here, why would there be? He relaxed slightly knowing this and returned to his normal form, removing his day-time clothes and walking around bare to the elements. His eyes shifted to their natural red and his fangs jutted back out from their grooves. He walked up to his rooms up a large spiral staircase and poured himself a glass of red liquid. The rich smell of blood wafted up into his nose as he lifted his glass. He drank it with pleasure, grateful for the young maid who provided it. He gladly drained another glass before walking to his shelves, black robes folded delicately on its wooden surface. He carefully picked up each garment, putting on the dark robes and thick metal plating. He looked in the large mirror and saw the back wall. He sighed, being a vampire did have its drawbacks. He carefully retrieved his sword from its innate stand; he placed it on his waist belt and looked outside: it was nearly dark, soon he would strike.

Daekon was restless as he walked around the plaza; he had to know where Alice was. He had seen the way she had served the vampire, it had tortured him to watch her take her master to his goal. He had felt his heart all apart then; she had betrayed him, all of them, her father, her friends, all had meant nothing to her. But something inside him knew Alice was still there, she would never abandon him, she had fought with him to the end, she had been ready to die with him, and love of that kind cannot be broken so easily. He had been one of the few survivorâ€™s who escaped, killing their servant captors and fleeing from their hordes. He had fought with his elites to get the women and children out, about forty of their company made it before they were forced to abandon the others. Aliceâ€™s father was amongst that forty along with himself. They were now back inside the city, back with their fellow hunters.

But Daekon and his fellows knew something was wrong, the brotherhood had closed its doors; something was happening that they werenâ€™t allowed to see. The whole mission may have been a ploy; an attempt to be rid of the few hunters who werenâ€™t in on the plan. There was a mole inside too; the vampires had known they were there, and they had been waiting, they may have even been there before them. Daekon shuddered at the thought, something very sinister was taking place in this city, and something told him he was part of it. His second man came up to him â€œDaekon, there is a man here, says his name is Caksin, reckons something has happened in the brotherhoodâ€•

Daekon kept walking as he spoke, he was a busy man â€œGood, tell him to meet me in my chambersâ€•

â€œYes sirâ€• the man scurried away into one of the many side passages.

Daekon continued his way to the office, he knew the man would be waiting for him; the secret passages and alleyways meant you could cross the plaza in minutes. He saw his chambers next to the military checkpoint and lengthened his stride; he couldnâ€™t help but feel someone was watching him. He looked out at the horizon and watched as the sun began its final plunge over the edge. He turned his gaze back to the building as the light began to hurt his eyes. He opened the door and closed it behind him after checking he hadnâ€™t been spotted. He turned to see a brute of a man standing there, two great spiked maces hanging from his waist. He eyed up his guest to make sure he was who he said he was then smiled â€œTake a seat.â€•

The man was half-ogre; that much was clear, he didnâ€™t bring up his heritage however, the news he bought could not be viewed as light-hearted by socialising. His voice was deep as he recounted his tale. â€œThe man, who employed me worked for your brotherhood, said something about a critical moment approaching and how Drakwald was something to do with it.â€•

Daekon nodded, he knew this much already from others. He drank more of his water before the man continued â€œI went along with his orders and met with another five of the order. We snuck out of the city in a military convoy, one of our number, Shak, broke away when we left the convoyâ€•

Daekon frowned; he had heard about the convoy, it sounded like the same one that had been sighted with Alice upon re-entering the city. â€œTell me, this Shak, what did he look like? Brown hair? Tall, pretty skinny?â€• He had been inside the city when the convoy had passed through the city; he had seen the man at the rear. Only he had black hair.

Caksin shook his head â€œNo, his hair was black, but the rest is true.â€•

Daekon sighed, now we know who the mole is. â€œIâ€™ve seen him; he returned to the city with the convoy, they had my wife. He punched the table hard and bit his gum, gods damn them!

Caksin looked at him mournfully, then his expression changed to thoughtful "I'm sorry, er, your wife, her name is Alice, isn't it?"

Daekon raised his head from the table and unclenched his and "You know something?" he asked hopefully. The large man began to speak in a hushed tone, Daekon leaned in, ecstatic that he finally had a lead.

It was long past dark when the guest finally left, Elector had almost fallen asleep with the boredom, but now he was gone, and now he was ready. He could see his prey's shadow in the window, drinking the last of his rich liquor. Elector felt his lips burning, he needed blood, it would only be a small bite, besides; the curse of vampirism should keep Daekon in check. He remembered the last time he had fought with this gallant warrior, that day in the village. He had been so determined to protect Alice, would he fight her now? He doubted it, but it was not his place to say so, he slowly made his way into the small crowd of people clustered around the nearby alley.

Daekon rested himself on the seat, a book in hands. He finally had a chance to relax when the door swung open. He rolled his eyes in annoyance and slammed the book onto the side-table "What the bloody hell do you want at this hour?"

A tall figure stepped into the building, its eyes a crimson red, its raven hair draping along his shoulders. Daekon grabbed his silver pistol and aimed for the creature's neck. A single shell left the gun, its deadly contents soaring towards its target. The vampire swerved sideways as the bullet sailed over its shoulder. He watched his target reload and raised his hand. The gun flew from its owner's hand, rending two fingers out of place as it sailed towards its new master. Daekon screamed as he grasped his fingers, keeling over in pain. He stared in anger at the grinning vampire and grabbed his sword. He charged forward but was stopped dead. He raised his arms and his knees were forced to the ground, he could feel his sword in his hand dangling uselessly. The vampire laughed as he struggled against his invisible shackles "Feel familiar?"

Daekon stopped squirming; his eyes piercing a hole in the vampire's head "You." With that single word the spell broke. Daekon pushed himself from his prison and flung his sword wildly at the vampire whom was barely able to stumble out of the way. Daekon slashed the creature's face; his blade drawing a line of blood from the vampire's cheek to his mouth. The vampire grabbed Daekon and bet his arm backwards, taking the sword from his hand. "Big mistake Daekon" he said as he bit into his neck. Daekon felt the two teeth sink into his neck. He felt the blood rush from him and he rolled over as world went black.

He was in the castle, he was sure of that. Maybe they had rescued him, maybe the vampire was dead. Then he remembered how he had been bitten, he could feel the wound in the side of his neck. No, if the vampire was dead then so would he, which left one option: the vampire had taken him to the castle. It seemed suicide as he was carried along the corridors, capturing someone only to take them into an even better secured fortress? He laughed at the idea. At least he was in the castle now, maybe he could find Shriken; find out what was really happening with Alice. He was lowered from the creature's back and allowed on his own two feet. He was facing a doorway, etched in gold. His first thought: Shriken. The door was opened and he and the count walked in, Elector walking over to a bottle of red wine as if he was welcome here. He looked to the window, but that wasn't Shriken. He looked similar, a more youthful Shriken from a time long gone. White teeth flashed and black robes wrapped his body. His voice was unquestionable though "Ah, Daekon, come, I have a little job for you."