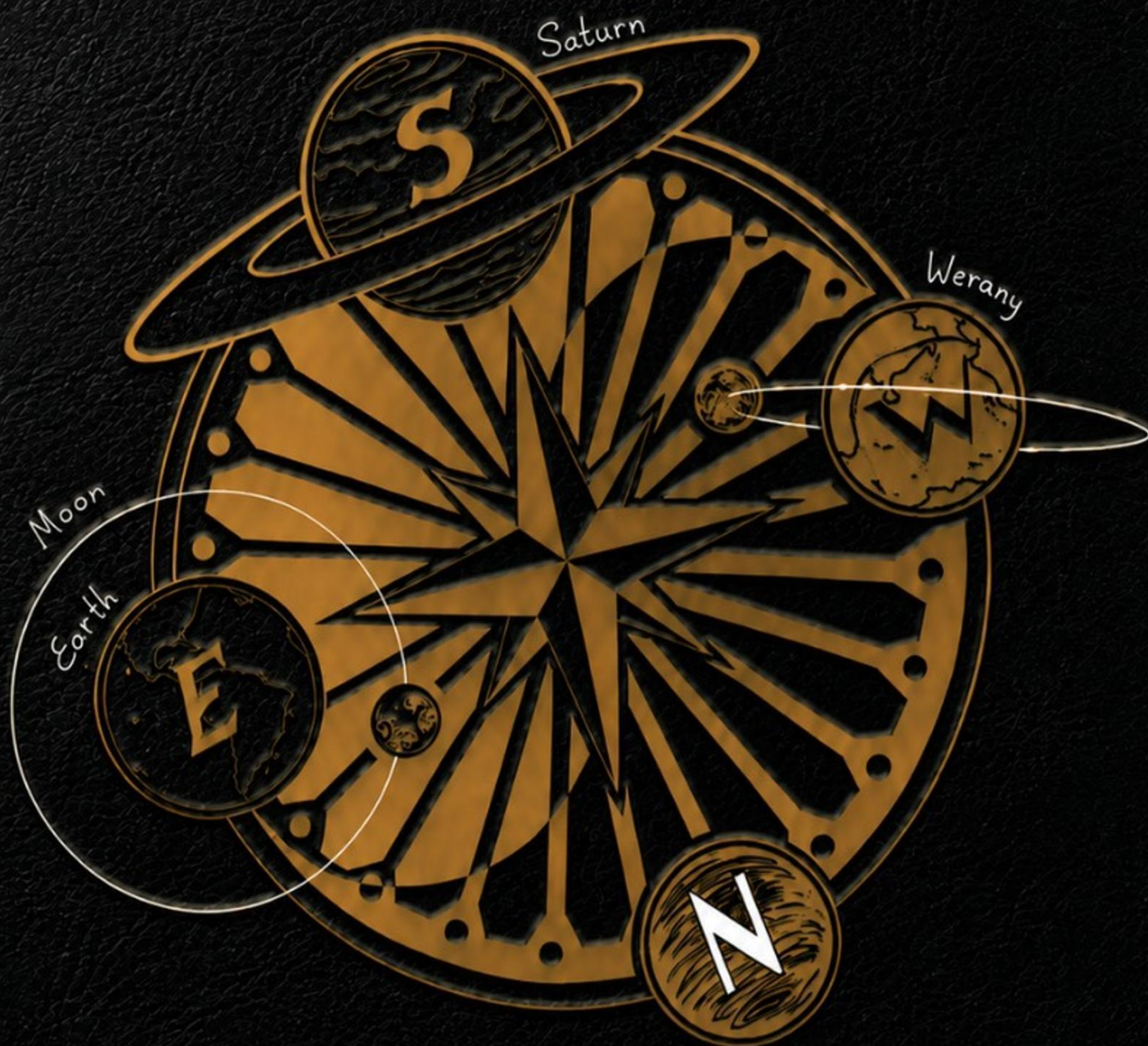


ALEKSEI ZELEPUKIN



JOURNEY BEYOND THE EDGE

СОДЕРЖИТ
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БРАНЬ

18+

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Journey Beyond the Edge

«Автор»

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He came for her in a dockside brothel reeking of cheap ale and human despair. She followed him, desperate to escape the life she hated. Neither of them knew that this encounter would mark the beginning of a journey between worlds—where names, destinies, and even reality itself can change. But a single choice can alter even what fate has decreed—if the love is true.

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Алексей Зелепукин
Journey Beyond the Edge

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Chapter One: The Storm

“Christians. Someone strikes you on one cheek, you offer him the other. How did anything like that ever catch on?” The enormous fair-haired warrior gave a contemptuous snort as he wiped dried blood from the blade of an equally massive battle-ax. “That religion makes men weak.”

The warrior spat heartily over the side of the ushkuynik.

The sun had not yet risen above the sea, but the darkness was already retreating. A following wind snapped the sailcloth, made the wooden blocks chatter and the taut rigging creak, driving the vessel onward.

Heavy with cargo, the longboat sliced through the smooth water like a knife, hurrying home to the north.

The waves protested noisily, flinging up spray and bleeding white foam beneath the wooden ship crammed with plundered gold and silver.

The old, nearly bald Viking seated opposite him merely smiled and continued sorting bundles of dried herbs. He was shorter than the strapping berserker but no narrower across the shoulders, and the muscles beneath his sun-darkened skin resembled steel cables.

“You’re simply young, Hergen. Young and foolish. Remember how that scrawny Saxon fought. He had neither gold nor livestock, yet he stood alone against six of ours. Alone.”

“You mean the peasant who wounded the jarl with a pitchfork? I still took his head off.”

The warrior dipped his rag into the blood-reddened water in a wooden tub and resumed scrubbing his ax.

“You did.” The healer carefully tied another bundle of herbs with twine. “You—a man whose profession is killing, a man who lives by his ax—are boasting of your victory over a plowman whose weapon left a mark upon your face and nearly sent our chieftain to Valhalla? A glorious victory indeed.”

The healer’s words stung. The berserker gripped his ax haft until his knuckles cracked, but the old man paid no attention and continued:

“Be that as it may, the jarl spared the man’s woman. No one laid so much as a finger on her. That was what the peasant fought for. That was what he died for. Which means he won his battle. Religion does not make men weak or strong. The more a man possesses, the more he fears losing it. Wealth is the true source of weakness. Love is the source of strength. That is why he tossed you around like blind pups.”

“Love...” The fair-haired Viking’s face twisted into a contemptuous smirk. “Blind pups, is it? I twisted my ankle beside that church. Do you know how many Angles I cut down there?”

“They were defending their lives. The peasant stood ready to die. He meant to take as many of us with him as he could.”

“Gods, you’re tedious, Eric. How is the way I treat women supposed to make me stronger? Unless the woman is a Valkyrie...” The berserker tilted his head toward the heavens. “They’re watching me. One of them is destined to be mine—a winged maiden of war who will carry my soul to the halls of Gladsheim.”

“Not one of those heavenly warriors would spare you a glance,” Eric said with a chuckle.

The giant’s outrage was immediate. The berserker’s patience snapped. He flung the rags aside, surged to his feet, and raised his ax—but the elderly healer’s dagger was faster. Steel flashed, and the blade came to rest against Hergen’s throat. Eric’s voice turned hard and merciless.

“Sit down, pup. Move again and I’ll knock that empty head off your shoulders like the cap from a mushroom.”

Several more Vikings turned toward the commotion.

Eric's eyes, blue as a clear summer sky, burned with fire. They held neither fear of the mighty giant nor any promise of mercy—only the indifference of an executioner or a seasoned predator.

Panic suddenly seized Hergen. A chill ran through his body and paralyzed his limbs, as though Hel herself were looking at him through Eric's eyes.

For a moment, every sound died. The warriors froze, awaiting the outcome.

"Easy, Eric. Put away the dagger. We have more than one battle ahead of us, and Hergen will still be useful. I ask mercy for my warrior. Forgive him." Despite the blood-soaked bandages around his chest, the jarl's voice remained powerful and commanding.

The elderly healer obeyed. The jarl turned to the giant.

"And you—before you threaten a man, learn whom you are threatening. Go below and help Kvasha with the coins."

Hergen stared at the ship's healer in bewilderment but heeded his chieftain's words.

The giant muttered an apology, vented his rage upon the water tub, and headed toward the stern.

The jarl climbed onto the raised platform at the bow and peered into the distance. He drew a deep breath, then doubled over in pain. Fresh blood spread across his bandages in a damp stain.

The healer sprang up and rushed toward him.

The jarl merely raised one hand to stop him. Eric inhaled and was about to return to the herbs laid out across a rowing bench, but the chieftain spoke before he could.

"Wait, Eric. Stay with me. Dawn will come soon. It is beautiful above a stormy sea. And the smell—such freshness. Breathing it makes me feel free. I wonder, is there a sea in Valhalla? Can heroes savor the caress of a gentle breeze, brushing their brows like a virgin's first awkward kiss?"

"I have never been to Valhalla, my prince. But I am certain it contains more than a hall filled with sweat and the reek of stale drink. Heroes should not spend eternity carousing and indulging their appetites. Though, admittedly, a little indulgence now and then would do no harm."

"What did you and my finest champion quarrel over?" The jarl tore his gaze from the horizon.

"The usual. I tried to bestow wisdom upon someone who had no need of it. Forgive me, my prince. The fault was mine."

"You still mean to disembark upon that deserted island?"

"Each of us has his own purpose. You needed a healer for the voyage; I needed a ship that would pass Buyan. A bargain is worth more than coin, my prince. I kept my promise. Now it is your turn."

"And I have kept mine. I calculated your share of the expedition as fairly as I could. Here is what you requested, down to the last coin."

The prince handed the healer a small but tightly packed purse.

"Thank you, Jarl of Windale. All that remains is to set foot upon the island, and our bargain will be fulfilled." Eric tucked the purse inside his tunic.

"Why do you want those tokens? They may be gold, but they aren't real money. A trader will pay no more than scrap value for them. You should have taken a candlestick instead. It weighs more."

"Thank you, Jarl. But what is worthless here may be a vast fortune elsewhere. Take the word of a pilgrim—a wandering minstrel. Some questions are better left unanswered."

Unable to withstand the healer's blue-eyed gaze, the jarl lowered his head.

"There is no changing your mind?"

The healer merely shook his head.

"Then now is as good a time as any..." Sadness entered the chieftain's voice. Once more, he breathed in the fresh wind as deeply as his bandages allowed, then roared, "To the helm! Set a course east!"

The Vikings leaned upon the steering oar. The ushkuynik groaned through its taut rigging and began to change tack, its sail flapping in protest.

For three days, the longboat held its course toward the dawn. For three days, the sail hung from the yard like a discarded cloak. Exhausted by rowing, the Vikings began to grumble. The horizon remained clear; only in the far distance did sea and sky merge in a blue-gray haze.

Determined to honor his word, the chieftain had turned the vessel east toward the mysterious island, but it seemed the gods themselves opposed the landing. The wind died the instant the helmsman aligned the bow with the rising sun. The sail sagged like a hanged man from a tree limb. The war drum began to pound, and the Vikings bent to their oars. It fell silent only when the sun surrendered the heavenly hall to the yellow-faced moon and a myriad stars. Each morning, as soon as pink streaks began to lighten the sky, the clatter of spoons gave way to the thunder of the drum and the splash of resentful waves.

Their chieftain's will drove the warriors to plunge their oars again and again into the mirrored surface of the deep. By the zenith of the third day, the northerners were drained by relentless rowing and the midday heat. The jarl signaled a halt. The drum had scarcely fallen silent when clouds spread across the northern sky. A hard, gusting wind struck the vessel broadside.

A horn wailed. While the warriors tied themselves down with ropes, the chieftain rushed to help the helmsman.

"Bring her around! Bow into the wind!" The captain's roar rose above the howl of the sea. "Secure the cargo! The sai—"

The first great wave heaved the longboat aside. The steering oar slammed into the chieftain's chest and knocked him from his feet. Eric caught him with one shoulder. The old Viking remained upright and preserved his dignity, but a fit of bloody coughing robbed him of the power to command.

Moments later, the storm broke.

The ship pitched from side to side like a yellow leaf in a mountain stream. Waves rose one above another, threatening to swamp it. They tore shields from the gunwales and licked everything unsecured from the deck. The sail bellied and dragged the frail vessel onward, forcing the bow dangerously low. Tons of water crashed aboard and swept one of the crew into the sea.

Prayers mingled with groans.

"The sail!" the chieftain whispered through bloodied lips. "Take down the sail... It will drown us all..."

The helmsman repeated the order through the shrieking wind and pounding waves, but his voice could not carry above the storm. Eric clung to the steering oar, helping hold the bow toward the approaching wall of water.

The crew huddled along the gunwales, pressed into the benches and gripping their ropes with the hands of dead men.

Lightning flashed. Thor struck the sea close by.

A wave hurled the helmsman against the starboard side. At the bow, it tore away the sacred light—a bronze lamp bearing the flame bestowed by the Keepers.

"It's a sign! Turn back! We can go no farther!" someone shouted among the warriors.

Eric recognized Hergen's voice. The jarl cast the healer a sidelong glance, clenched his teeth, and forced himself upright.

"Turn her around, my prince," Eric muttered. He passed the steering oar to the gray-haired Viking, drew his dagger, and clamped the blade between his teeth.

A wave struck the vessel and rolled away, yielding its place to the next. The healer sprinted across the water-slick planks toward the mast. The knots in the tackles had drawn impossibly tight. There was no time to cut so many ropes. A new wall of water towered above the longboat like an immense cliff.

With the agility of a wildcat, the old healer climbed the mast and leaped down onto the straining canvas. The sail split with a deafening crack and collapsed. Eric plunged toward the deck, but the

onrushing wave caught him in its embrace and lowered him gently beside the gunwale where Hergen sat.

The jarl hauled upon the steering oar and turned the longboat west.

At once, the storm moved on toward the east, leaving behind a sea scarcely troubled by ripples.

The crew released a collective breath and began offering prayers to the gods.

The prince stared at Eric in disbelief.

“Have you changed your mind?”

“Hergen is right. It is a sign.” The healer gestured toward the empty hook at the bow.

The chieftain surrendered the steering oar to the helmsman, who had returned to his station, and wiped blood from his lips with one sleeve.

“I thought you did not believe in signs.”

“The heavens oppose your voyage to the island. I cannot bear the deaths of your clan upon my conscience. This is my road alone, my prince.” The healer smiled. “We will part at the first port.”

“When sickness struck down nearly all of Windale, you were the only man who did not fear the contagion. You nursed my people back to health. When Brunhilda could not deliver her child and even the Keepers began praying for the souls of my wife and son, you cut open her belly with your dagger and drew out my heir. I remember how your hands trembled while you stitched her closed. Because of you, I am not merely a happy father but still a husband. How could I look my wife in the eyes if she knew I had failed to keep my promise? How could any man aboard this ship dare return home knowing his debt of honor remained unpaid?” The jarl swept one hand toward his warriors.

“You are a great healer, Eric. Every man aboard this vessel will follow you, even if you mean to pay a visit to Hel herself.”

“There is no need to go that far, my prince. I did not fight disease in Windale merely to see its men die now. I will manage alone. Our roads must part.”

“Whatever else may be true, you saved the ship and her crew, and the sea itself refused to let you fall. I have never witnessed such wonders, healer. At least allow me to buy you a cup and a whore in port.”

“At our age, whores are already—”

“Agree, Eric. The passion of Saxon girls is the stuff of legend.” The chieftain placed his right hand upon the healer’s shoulder. “And you hardly need me to lecture you on the dangers of abstinence.”

The crew erupted in laughter. Eric merely smiled.

“I have never been to Saxony, and I have never paid a girl for her favors.”

“What kind of sailor has never bought love?” Hergen began, then fell silent beneath the elderly warrior’s heavy gaze.

“Even whores give themselves to me for love. Do you know why? Because after a storm, my breeches don’t reek of shit.”

The crew collapsed with laughter. The prince’s finest champion jumped up and bolted below, leaving brown streaks behind him.

“Healing is not your only talent.” The jarl smiled. “We go together. I speak a little Saxon.”

“Saxon girls should be the last thing on your mind, my prince. That bandage needs changing. The steering oar hit you hard.”

“It is not merely an oar, Eric. It is the rudder.”

Chapter Two: Blue-Eyes

The small harbor at the river's mouth had neither fortifications nor a garrison. Soil deposited by the river formed a natural breakwater, while the main channel served as a fairway. Cattails and reeds crowded the shore, concealing wooden piers that reached far out over the water. Beyond them huddled the little cottages of fishermen and craftsmen. Behind those rose a stone giant of a building—an inn, marketplace, and tavern all in one. The town itself began at its walls, enclosed by a low palisade of thin, widely spaced logs. It was small even by the standards of the age, but it had a ruler and something that could, with sufficient generosity, be called a guard.

When the longboat made fast, the townspeople drew back. Legends of the northern seafarers' savagery and bloodlust had circulated for years. The legends had gathered rumors and tall tales until they became myths and the stuff of minstrels' songs. No one in these parts had ever actually seen a Norseman; the little town lay far from the main trade routes.

The terrified guards bunched together beside the gate, uncertain what to do. The town reeve had vanished in some unknown direction, leaving the master of the market—who also happened to own the inn—to receive the visitors. Despite his considerable paunch, the man still carried himself like a soldier. A former knight, perhaps, or a mercenary. His old, battered mail shirt was plainly too tight around the waist, though a broad leather belt with copper plates cinched it in. A long hand-and-a-half sword hung at his side.

Hergen looked back at the chieftain and waited for an order.

The gray-haired jarl tucked his ax into his belt and tapped the purse hanging beside it.

The enormous Viking stepped toward the Saxon warriors and bellowed in broken Saxon, "We come as guests. We trade, you profit. At morning we leave. But food and women for sale—we can get other way too."

The champion rested one hand on the back of his ax, leaving little doubt what that other way might be. The garrison shuddered as one, the metal rivets of their armor scraping and clicking. Hergen smiled and continued.

"You have place for eating, wine, and enjoying women for sale?"

The berserker's manner of speaking bewildered the innkeeper, but only for a moment. Then the merchant in him awoke.

"Food and women cost money. Wine most of all."

"No worry. We have payment. You take Angle gold?" Hergen poured a handful of islanders' gold and silver coins into his palm.

The old fighter hissed something to his assistant, who promptly dashed inside.

"Guests are always welcome. Rich and generous ones even more so. I am glad this did not end in bloodshed."

The garrison parted to let the Norsemen through. The smell of civilization rolled out of the gate, making Eric press a flower-oil-soaked cloth to his nose. Behind the walls, the world seemed to shrivel, contracting into a jumble of small thatch-roofed hovels with pigpens, flimsy fences hung with clay pots, the ceaseless barking of dogs, and the shrieks and laughter of children. Somewhere in the distance a smith's trip hammer pounded, while laundry snapped on lines. Young and old alike had come out to stare at their terrifying yet legendary visitors.

"I don't like these walls," Hergen rasped as he matched the chieftain's pace. "Stay here too long and some little bastard will jump out of an alley with a knife. And far too many of those sorry warriors remained by the gate."

The gray-haired jarl turned to the healer walking on his left.

"What do you think? Do you believe it is an ambush too?"

Eric shook his head.

“They are not fools. They will not put their wives and children at risk. Ours is neither the first ship to enter this bay nor the last. They can defend themselves, certainly, but I doubt they would dare attack us openly. Still, I would advise against drinking too much or wandering alone. That would be dangerous even for Hergen.”

“There is our inn.” The chieftain nodded toward its sign. “Ale, sausage, and tits.” He grinned. “Come. We’ll find you the cleverest one.”

Eric started to object, but the jarl’s hand settled on his shoulder.

“I have thought long and hard about what you said, healer. As I understand it, you joined this voyage only because you needed tokens.”

“You are perceptive, my prince. That is exactly so. I would not lie to you.”

“Then take these.” The chieftain snatched the purse Hergen had flaunted at the gate and thrust it into Eric’s hands. “And do not argue. The crew collected it to thank you for the sail you ruined. I expect you have another use for your own.”

Eric nodded and slipped the purse into his breeches.

The jarl smiled. “As for the girls—pay no mind if they are grubby or plain. No ordinary woman sells her body of her own free will. But they certainly know their trade.”

By the time the doors of the inn opened onto the depths of the tavern, a crowd of women of negotiable virtue was already waiting for the Norsemen. Having heard of their guests’ wealth, the women had dressed in their finest clothes.

Blue-Eyes caught Eric’s attention at once, as though none of the other girls existed. Perhaps it was a karmic bond, perhaps witchcraft, perhaps something else entirely—but the seasoned healer’s heart began beating faster, and his breathing grew uneven. Even Hergen noticed the change in the older man, though he never had a chance to comment. The jarl elbowed him in the ribs.

“Choose. Tonight, you are the hero.” The prince nudged Eric forward.

As if at a signal, the women began displaying their charms. One lifted her skirt to reveal shapely thighs; another thrust out her ample breasts in hopes of securing a customer. All of them did so except Blue-Eyes. The red-haired girl merely lowered her head and stared at the floor.

Of all the women flaunting themselves, Eric chose her: a slim, long-legged girl with a wasp waist and breasts that were still almost childlike.

There was something achingly familiar about her, something dear to him, and the braid that fell to her waist worked more powerfully than any love potion.

“Are you certain?” the jarl asked. “Look—the second one from the right, the one with the big tits. She surely knows how to please a man. Or the last one in the row, that black-haired beauty. Just look at those lips. I shudder to imagine what she could do to your brother with them. How do you feel about kisses below the belt?”

Eric shook his head at the prince’s suggestion and pointed to Blue-Eyes.

“That one for my friend,” the prince growled. “And those two for me.” He indicated the women he had recommended to Eric.

The proprietress clapped her hands, and the girls led their guests away to their rooms.

Blue-Eyes closed the door behind her guest and lit a pine splint.

She moved with an almost unnatural grace, every gesture mesmerizing. Her room smelled nothing like the tavern below. Some sort of incense smoldered in a plain clay cup.

The healer’s keen nose recognized sandalwood and rose petals.

He crossed the little room with heavy steps and dropped onto the bed.

“Your friend said you don’t speak our language. So what am I supposed to do with you? How am I meant to know what you want?” the girl muttered as she undressed. “I hope men in your country

don't favor perversions. I could never fight off a brute your size if you decided to try something depraved. I can't even ask your name. What do you want, you uncouth savage?"

She slipped off the last of her clothes and stepped into the splinter's light.

"Undo your braid, if you please," the northerner murmured without the slightest accent as he made himself comfortable on the bed.

The girl gasped.

"You... But your friend... and I..." She stammered, covering her face in embarrassment.

"Keep my knowledge of your language to yourself and do as I ask, and I will pay double."

She shifted from foot to foot, considering the offer.

Double was tempting indeed. The proprietress and her brothers would never learn of it, and she might buy something tastier than the tavern's watery gruel.

Still, the northerner's request made her wary. There was no telling what he meant by *do as I ask*.

She studied her guest, trying to decide whether he resembled the sort of deviant who left bruises and scars after a private encounter.

"Let down your hair, beautiful," the northerner repeated, and the prostitute—long accustomed to curses and abuse—blushed.

He looked stern enough to make her knees tremble, yet he was courteous even while buying her. At last, she made up her mind.

"Triple, and I'll do whatever you desire."

Eric smiled and placed three silver coins on the bedside table.

The girl recoiled. Her services cost five coppers, while what lay before her now was nearly a king's ransom.

For a moment she wondered whether the foreigner had misunderstood her after all—and had not understood the price.

Or had he?

She picked up one coin. It was oval, with the portrait of a young, still-beardless man stamped on its face.

"What strange money. I've never seen coins like these."

"They are Amosian. That handsome fellow is the lord of Anshatukash Castle, His Highness Asmodeus of Angren."

"I've never heard of either," she whispered, using the words to conceal the argument raging inside her.

To hell with it. He can hardly be worse than the foulmouthed sailors from the southern lands, the redhead thought. For that much money, she could endure whatever followed. Even injuries might prove useful: restoring her looks would take time, which meant a week or two without having to stare into the drunken faces of customers.

She exhaled, her decision made, and hurried to unweave her braid.

"Do not rush. Slowly. Let me enjoy your grace," Eric whispered, captivated by the sight.

She obeyed. Once her hair spilled across her sun-browned shoulders, she took a hesitant step toward him.

He did not spring at her like a starving beast. Somehow that frightened her more, not less.

"Are you going to stare all night, or will you undress? Or do people where you come from do it in their clothes? They say it's cold up north. Do you ever bathe?"

Eric smiled and rose from the bed.

"Every seventh day, on the fifth day of the week." His leather breastpiece, studded with metal plates, struck the floor with a clatter, revealing the ridges of powerful muscle beneath his linen shirt. "Do not be afraid, Blue-Eyes. I will not hurt you."

Growing bolder, the girl lowered the hands shielding her breasts and began working the wooden buttons of his shirt through their loops.

His compliments and his body, seemingly carved from living rock, awakened a desire low in her belly that she had long forgotten.

Sex had become work to her, and the sudden spark of genuine longing came as a welcome surprise. The giant whispered strange yet impossibly pleasing words into her ear, as though she were not a harbor whore but a lady of noble birth.

She was ill at ease, but the foreigner's sincerity had its effect. She pressed herself against the broad, peculiar scar crossing his chest and breathed in his scent. He smelled of salt and sea, of waves and wind—nothing like the men who had come to her before.

“Who are you?” she whispered, only to forget the question when his lips touched her neck.

The northerner knew precisely what he was doing. A trail of kisses descended lower and lower, drawing ragged breaths from her. It was as though his lips were tracing strange runes across her body, reawakening sensations that had almost died.

Somehow, this barbarian had kindled a genuine fire within her.

When he lifted her by the thighs and began kissing her breasts, she wanted with every part of herself to feel him inside her. For the first time it was more than a duty. For the first time, she truly desired it.

The barbarian played her as a master bard played a lute, melting her soul while her body grew slick with need.

Eric laid her upon the bed. The girl parted her legs in invitation, but he stretched out beside her and continued his caresses. His fingers drifted over her mound and then a little lower, barely brushing the wet folds at her entrance.

She arched into his touch.

“Come inside me,” she whispered, but the northerner returned to her nipples, circling them with his tongue.

His fingers began a slow dance around her clitoris, teasing the entrance to her sex from time to time.

Overcome by fierce desire, the girl wrapped one hand around the thick shaft of his cock, no longer able to resist either instinct or longing.

“God, you’re so... I want you. I can’t bear it anymore. Please,” she whispered as though delirious, surrendering to a passion she had almost forgotten.

Her sex opened, aching to be filled. It occurred to her that at that moment she would agree to absolutely anything this frightening yet maddeningly tender northerner might suggest.

“What a fiery creature you are,” Eric whispered, playing with her clitoris and savoring the way the young beauty moaned and writhed beneath his touch.

“Do whatever you want—only take me at last, my lord,” she pleaded through bitten lips, and the northerner covered her with his body.

Not like all those half-drunken louts. He barely touched her; she felt the heat of his skin rather than his weight, and it inflamed her further.

His cock entered her slick sex to the hilt, and the oldest dance of all began—the true tango of life.

She wrapped her arms around the giant's neck. As his thrusts grew harder and faster, she locked her legs around his hips.

For the first time in her life, a man was making love to her instead of using her. For the first time, she felt like a woman someone desired rather than a scrap of meat tossed to hungry dogs for a few copper coins.

For all his tenderness, the giant was no clumsy calf. His thrusts were as powerful as a battering ram striking a city gate and as steady as the roll of a drum.

How desperately she wanted to press herself into this strange man, to merge with him and become one, to surrender completely and dissolve into the moment. The sensations flooded her mind

until she had no strength left to resist. A hoarse moan escaped her as she shuddered through her climax and went limp in the barbarian's powerful arms.

Sweet euphoria still coursed through her veins, but she was determined to thank the northerner for the feelings he had given her—for the bliss that had made her feel like the happiest woman alive.

Moving such a powerful body was like trying to shift a mountain, but she attempted to roll him onto his back, and he yielded. He let her take command and close her lips around the head of his cock.

Her tongue traced patterns over the velvet flesh, and the stern northerner could not suppress a groan of pleasure.

His size made it impossible to take him fully into her mouth, but she used her hands with practiced skill, rapidly bringing the barbarian to his release.

A few minutes later, a powerful jet of seed struck her palate. The redhead smiled in triumph, deeply satisfied that, if only for a little while, she had gained mastery over this mighty brute.

Inflamed by his intimacy with the blue-eyed beauty, Eric embraced her and buried his face in her silky, flame-colored hair.

The young Saxon's body radiated health. She smelled pleasantly of hay and fresh bread. Eric drew a deep breath, trying to memorize the fragrance of meadow grass and flowers.

The pine splint had almost burned itself out. Its fading flame barely held back the darkness of the hovel, deepening the warm tones of Blue-Eyes's sun-browned skin and beautifully accenting her dusky pink nipples.

Unable to resist, the northerner combed his fingers through her hair, savoring its softness.

"You'll tangle it, and then it'll be nothing but rats' nests. Customers don't like filthy, unkempt little scarecrows. I never should've agreed to undo my braid."

The girl pulled away and crawled out from beneath the healer's arm, which was as enormous and heavy as the paw of a brown bear.

She sat on the mattress with her back to the flame and began straightening her long hair. Eric merely smiled, picked up his bag from the floor, and rummaged inside it.

"What are you up to?" she asked warily. Then a finely worked bone comb flashed in his hand, decorated with silver inlay and a delicate openwork pattern.

"What is that?" she breathed, unable to tear her eyes away.

"A gift. A comb." The Viking held it out to her.

"You give presents without even asking a girl's name? Who are you, a rich man or a madman?" she grumbled, though she snatched the comb before the barbarian could change his mind.

She turned it over in her hands, then drew it through her hair.

"Is this what your women use?"

"Almost," he answered so quietly she could barely hear him, admiring her grace and the mischievous fire in her eyes.

"My name is Maniva," she whispered, lowering her gaze.

"A strange name for a Saxon." Eric's eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"I'm not a Saxon. My ship was caught in a storm. I washed ashore unconscious. But that's a long story." She paused, curiosity overcoming caution. "Is it true that all northern women have beards, and the only difference between them and the men is their tits? Big tits?" She glanced down at her own barely rounded breasts.

"Of course not." The Norseman laughed, stroking his beard. "And their tits come in every size. You should leave this trade. Get away from here. Find a husband."

The cheerful spark in her eyes died at once.

"Who would marry a harbor whore? One with neither money nor maidenhood?"

"Money..." The warrior sighed heavily. "Today you have it, tomorrow your pocket is empty, and the day after that it is nearly tearing beneath the weight of coins again. I have a little. I can help you with that. And as for maidenhood—think of yourself as experienced now. You know how to

please a man. If I weren't bound for that damned island, perhaps I would take you myself. But what would you want with an old bald man? You need someone younger. More spirited."

Eric drew a worn old purse filled with unfamiliar coins from his bag and offered it to her. She drew back distrustfully.

"Are you some kind of sorcerer? Who ever heard of a man scattering gifts and money like this?"

"No sorcerer. But the business awaiting me is a dark one, and I will have no use for coins there. If fortune favors me, perhaps you will remember me with a kind word. And beyond the Edge..." His voice suddenly turned sorrowful, as though he had remembered something dear. "Perhaps that kind word will lend me strength. Take it. Do not be afraid. Leave this place before some drunken fool maims you or kills you."

Heavy footsteps sounded outside the door.

The girl burst into tears and began bowing to him, the words scarcely more than movements of her lips.

"I'm a fool. Forgive me, sinner that I am. Forgive this wretched, faithless beast."

At that moment, the door crashed open and several hulking men burst into the room.

The Viking moved first. He hurled a pillow at the lead intruder. The man raised his arms to protect his head and immediately took a monstrous blow to the liver. He dropped as though scythed down, howling in pain.

The second man caught a straight punch to the nose. Bone crunched sickeningly, and blood sprayed across the hovel's rough plank floor. He doubled over and met the healer's knee. The robber flew into the corner like an empty sack.

The third brute was luckier than the others. His blade sliced the skin of Eric's shoulder. That was the end of the Saxon's good fortune. The healer kicked him in the stomach and shattered a stool over his head.

"Who are they?" The Viking stood naked over the fallen robbers, a broken stool leg in his hand.

"Vincent Crooked-Hand. He and his brothers run everything here. All the girls belong to him. We pay them tribute."

"Then why burst in like this if you are earning money for him?"

"The mistress whispered that you were some foreign prince and told me to keep you occupied. I owe them money. They ordered me to hold you here while they robbed you—or they would cut me to pieces. But you were so... With you, I forgot everything in the world. Forgot about them too. You made me feel like a woman." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Forgive me. You're the only man who ever treated a fallen woman like me... and then you gave me a gift, and I..."

The girl broke down completely.

"How much do you owe?"

"A great deal. A quarter short of a gold piece."

"For what? That would buy three sheep." One of the Viking's brows rose in astonishment.

"Protection, shelter, food..." Her crying subsided, though her shoulders still trembled.

The Viking picked up a dagger from the floor.

"You owe no one anything now, Maniva. Take the money and leave. Be gone before dawn."

"But they..."

"Go, child. You need not see what happens next. I doubt these men will ever harm anyone again."

Maniva threw on her rough shift, clutched the comb and purse in her hands, and fled the room. Only a choked-off scream and a final rasp behind her told her she was free.

Chapter Three: The Knights of Wingrod

The commotion brought the entire longboat crew running. Naked or barely covered, they burst into Eric's room with weapons at the ready.

The jarl came first. He still had an erection, but fury blazed in his eyes and a battle-ax gleamed in his hands.

At the sight of the bodies and blood, his first question was what had happened.

"Self-defense, my king. But now I know why Thor did not allow us to reach the island." The healer had already donned his armor, and the hilt of a long dagger protruded from his broad belt. "I have found what I was seeking. You kept your word, my prince. Our roads part here."

"But we are in Saxony. They still fear us here on the coast, but go farther west and everyone you meet will try to kill you."

"Trying and succeeding are not the same, my prince. You know that as well as I do. Your longboat is heavy with silver. The men are weary, and their wives await them at home. Thank you for everything."

Eric bowed to the jarl.

"So be it, my friend. But know this: the gates of the Storm Wind will always stand open to you."

Eric slung his bag over one shoulder and left the room.

Maniva ran blindly onward without choosing a road or looking back. She felt free, almost winged. Her feet carried her away from the wretched cesspit of the harbor town and into the endless openness of fields bordered by the dark wall of an evergreen forest. Her arms clutched the strange visitor's gifts to her breast.

She lost all sense of time and kept running wherever her eyes led her. Yet her strength did not fade. With every step, she seemed to gain more of it. The fields of rye ended, and meadow grasses filled the air with their fragrance. Maniva wanted to laugh and weep at once.

To her left, a river flashed like a blue gemstone. The glitter of waves rolling steadily along that enormous azure serpent awakened both thirst and an irresistible desire to wash herself clean. Without hesitation, she left the path and headed toward the water.

Beside a large wild hawthorn bush, she undressed and stepped into the river's refreshing coolness. The water seemed to wash away the filth of men's sweaty hands—men who had paid robbers for the right to touch her. It could not restore her virginity, of course, but it did grant her a measure of peace.

After splashing and swimming to her heart's content, she was about to return to shore when men's voices stopped her cold and sent her scrambling for cover.

Her heart froze with fear. Terror locked her muscles and stole her breath.

"Arnaur, you're mad!" shouted one of the men, who wore an unfamiliar leather tunic. "This is the Belgeste—the Mermaids' River. Going near it is suicide."

"Since when does a brave knight of Wingrod fear children's tales? Next you'll tell me you believe in demons and werewolves."

"You shouldn't mock folk legends, Ar. There's no smoke without fire. Mermaids take the form of maidens, lure warriors into the river, and drown them."

"All nonsense. Stories invented by men who never learned to swim. Besides, we've spent four months chasing the Wolves through these woods in hopes of catching the Beast of Nelum. At this point, my cock rises at the mere mention of a woman's tits. I'd tumble even a mermaid right now."

The man called Arnaur swung down from his horse and strode straight toward the hawthorn bushes. Maniva filled her lungs and slipped beneath the surface.

“Look. Someone left clothes here.” The man in mail picked up Maniva’s rough shift, and the comb fell from its folds. “Well, now. A woman’s things.”

“Ar, mermaid enchantments work on everyone. They don’t care whom they drag under, peasant or knight.”

“Wait, Eridan. Something is wrong. These rags plainly belong to a serf.” Bone flashed with silver trim in the man’s hand. “But the comb is fit for royalty, and the purse is full—not with copper either.”

Arnaur poured the coins back into the purse, drew his sword, and advanced toward the bushes.

Maniva clenched her teeth. The air in her lungs was running out. Her head began to spin, but emerging from the water seemed no less dangerous. Experience had taught her that much.

“Ar, don’t...” pleaded his companion, Eridan.

“It is certainly a woman. The gods sent her to us. I am sick with hunger for a woman’s touch, and I will not leave without having her—even if she is Fauna herself.”

Her air was gone. Instinct drove Maniva back to the surface for a breath. She rose to her full height, gulping air like a horse run to exhaustion.

“There is my prize. And you doubted my luck.” Arnaur’s lips spread into a predatory leer that barely resembled a smile.

The warrior devoured her with his eyes but did not dare enter the water.

“Come now, redhead. Don’t be shy. We’ll have ourselves a tumble. I may even return your little comb—and perhaps a few of the coins.”

Maniva shook her head.

“I would sooner feed myself to the mermaids than spread my legs for you, highborn bastard.”

“Hear that, Eridan? She curses like a peasant girl. Peasant girls are strong. There’s enough of this one for both of us.” Arnaur turned back to Maniva. “Come out. We promise to be gentle. Don’t we, Eri? We’ll be gentle?”

Arnaur stepped toward the water without taking his eyes from Maniva’s naked body.

“Don’t go silent, Eri. You wouldn’t kill a beauty like—”

The knight took another step toward the river, but his friend’s silence finally made him turn.

At that very instant, Eric’s dagger found the knight’s heart.

“Neither of you will kill her!” the Viking growled through clenched teeth, driving the dagger into the knight’s chest again and again. The blade glowed blue as it pierced steel armor as though it were paper.

Maniva stood frozen at the sight of death. Eric had impressed her back at the house of red lanterns by the harbor, but watching him strike down a seemingly invincible armored knight with a single motion was beyond comprehension. Reason told her that a man who handed out costly gifts and took lives with equal ease was dangerous. Very dangerous.

Why is he here? Why did he come after me? If he only wants his gifts back, that would be fine. But what if he wants something from me? What could I possibly give him? He must be a sorcerer—but sorcerers hunt virgins. Harbor whores are far too spoiled for them...

“Maniva, come ashore. These waters are dangerous. They did not earn their evil reputation for nothing.”

The healer’s voice broke through her thoughts and pulled her from her stupor, but the redhead made no move to leave the river. She was already judging whether she had the strength to swim across and overcome the swift current—and which was more dangerous: reaching the opposite bank naked or remaining with this very strange giant.

“Why are you here? If you came to take back your gifts, they’re on the bank. I haven’t spent a cent.”

Eric stepped closer to the shore. Maniva sank deeper into the water.

“I came to help you.”

“Why would someone like you help someone like me?”

Eric wiped the knight’s blood from his dagger, sheathed it, and crouched down.

“Come out, and I swear by all the gods that I will tell you everything. Though afterward, you will most likely decide I am mad.”

“Tell me now. I can hear perfectly well, and I swim at least as well as you do. You won’t catch me in the water. You have no bow, and you won’t want to throw your dagger into the river.”

Eric glanced around. The dead knight’s spear lay nearby. Maniva followed his gaze and was seized by terror, but the northerner did not reach for the weapon. Instead, he nearly pleaded with her.

“Maniva, please...”

“Start talking. Then I’ll decide which way to go.”

The girl straightened and planted her hands on her hips.

Eric nearly burst out laughing at the sight of a naked young woman dictating terms while standing waist-deep in a river. He could see she was far from comfortable. Her nipples had hardened and lengthened, and arousal was plainly not the cause.

“If you fall ill, I will never forgive myself,” the Viking said. Rising, he moved farther inland. “I am only asking you to come out. You can always dive back in. Are you wounded? Did those monsters hurt you?”

The healer’s composure vanished when he noticed a scarlet streak on her shoulder.

“I don’t think so.” His alarm infected her. “Why do you ask? Is this another trick?”

“There is blood on your shoulder.” He pointed toward her left arm. “And the creatures here are highly sensitive to blood. Come out.”

“You killed two knights without a second thought, yet you fear fairy tales?”

“Monsters are harder to deal with. And those two may have friends nearby. Meeting them would do us little good. Come out, please. You are bleeding.” Irritation was gathering in Eric’s voice.

Maniva examined herself and laughed.

“That isn’t blood. It’s dye. My hair is gray. If I don’t color it, customers refuse to sleep with an old witch.”

“You? An old witch?”

“In Saxony, people believe witches gather on Bald Mountain at Oncrest and fornicate with virgin youths, then bathe in their blood to regain their youth. Only the gray in their hair can’t be hidden.”

“Is that why you shave?” Eric asked, lowering his gaze to her groin.

Maniva blushed and covered herself with one hand.

“Dye is expensive. Shaving is easier than coloring everything.”

“Since when have Saxons been unable to tell silver from gray?”

“Many of my customers have never seen silver in their lives. After last year’s drought, people forgot even the sound of copper. Sometimes I had to work for food.”

“I swear by all the gods that I will not harm you. You are already freezing. Come ashore.”

Maniva had heard many vows in her short life. For some reason, she believed this one.

But the moment she started toward the bank, the water behind her erupted in foam and several revolting brown tentacles burst from the river.

Something slick and slimy wrapped itself around her waist. The air filled with the stench of muck and rot. Maniva screamed. The river monster seemed to have been waiting for that: another tentacle, thinner and pinker than the rest, coiled around her throat.

Everything that followed unfolded like a dream.

Eric hurled Arnaur's spear. The blade struck something behind her with a wet crunch. The monster's grip loosened at once. The tentacle released her neck, but a claw embedded in it tore open an artery.

Blood spurted from the wound.

Maniva tried to breathe and could not. The terror of approaching death overwhelmed her will. All she managed was to press her hands to the wound, bathing them in her own blood.

Only a savage grief for all the years she would never live burned in her soul. There was so much she had not done. Perhaps she had been wrong to flee the life given to her.

Time slowed, as though suspended in thick jelly.

Eric swept her into his arms, carried her ashore, and laid her on her back. Her throat burned with hideous pain. She could feel her life draining away with her blood. Despite the summer heat, she grew terribly cold. Only the warmth of the healer's heavy palms upon the wound seemed to hold her soul inside her body.

"Easy. Everything will be all right." Eric clamped one hand over the wound in her throat. "Look at me. Maniva, look at me! You are a daughter of the Demiurge. I have searched too long to let you go now."

The girl tore her gaze from her blood-covered hands and stared into the healer's eyes, gray as a brooding sky.

He began to whisper.

The speech was strange and incomprehensible, full of harsh, shuffling sounds that plainly belonged to some alien tongue. The muscles in the Viking's neck bulged. His entire body tensed as though he had seized hold of something and refused to release it. Several drops of blood fell from his nose into his beard.

Eric growled like a wild beast.

"She is coming with me. You have no power over her. Withdraw, or we will both regret it. I swear by Shakespeare, I will leave not one stone of this plot standing upon another!"

Only the wind answered, striking the warrior's face and tossing his beard.

The pain in Maniva's neck vanished. All that remained was the warmth of the northerner's callused, heavy hands.

He breathed a sigh of relief, and his expression cleared. Eric's eyes were blue now, like a bottomless summer sky.

Maniva tried to inhale. It worked. Then she did it again and again, gulping fresh air like a harbor drunk gulping new wine on the morning after a binge.

She wanted to shout with joy, but only a whisper escaped her lips.

She touched her mouth with both hands.

"Forgive me," Eric said. "That was the price. You cannot take something without giving anything in return. The spirit of death had no desire to accept my payment."

Chapter Four: The Werewolf

Still unable to believe what had happened, Maniva ran her hands over herself.

Not a trace of the wound remained. Eric gathered her clothes and helped her dress. He also fashioned her hair into something resembling a braid and secured it with the bone comb.

“There. Much better. But we truly must go. The entire war band will be here soon. Those two were most likely scouts, and the riders of Wingrod hate nothing more than finding the bodies of murdered comrades.”

Maniva tried to ask a question, but Eric pressed one finger to her lips.

“Be patient. You must not strain your vocal cords right now, or you may lose your voice altogether. You wanted to ask how I know the knights are coming?”

She nodded.

“Look there.” Eric pointed east. “A pillar of dust, and the ravens have started raising a clamor. We cannot hear the hounds yet, which means we still have a head start. We were fortunate it was only a hermit squid that attacked you. Those creatures rarely migrate.”

Eric searched the bodies. From inside one knight’s tunic, he drew a scroll bearing a large wax seal. The discovery plainly pleased him; he smiled as he turned to the girl.

“You have a few minutes while I drag the bodies closer to the water. Then we must leave.”

Maniva was still reeling. Only minutes ago she had been drowning in her own blood, and now she was expected to go somewhere with this strange man.

“What is Wingrod? I’ve never heard of it. What are another principality’s soldiers doing in these woods? And what was that paper you took from the dead man? Why do you need it? Saxons don’t look kindly upon looting.”

“This?” Eric waved the scroll. “Wingrod has been sealed. No one may enter or leave the city without an order signed by the citadel’s commandant. And the elixirs and tinctures made by their healers would be useful to you. At the very least, I could be sure you would not lose your voice permanently.”

“Saxony has plenty of herb women. One is supposed to live near the edge of this very forest.”

“You are no longer in Saxony, Maniva. Your spark is stronger than I believed. That is what the squid sensed.”

“I ran barely two leagues from the harbor.” She pointed north. “We should still be able to see—” Her whisper died.

Nothing remained of the familiar landscape. Where ship masts should have risen in the distance, a mighty cliff towered instead. Behind it, an impenetrable wilderness blackened the horizon.

“Those are the Margelon Thickets,” Eric said. “The domain of the Beast of Nelum, king of the werewolves. Beyond them lie the lands of the minotaurs.”

“The what? What are minotaurs?”

“It does not matter. We must go. The Belgeste is our guiding thread. We follow it downstream.” Eric gestured along the river. “Wingrod is not far. Without healing salves, your voice may vanish forever.”

Maniva’s thoughts tangled hopelessly. Minotaurs, werewolves, a strange mountain, virgin forest... *Perhaps I have a fever. Or perhaps that northerner put something in last night’s ale. Whatever the truth, he has saved my life, so I should follow his instructions—at least until the drunkenness passes, or whatever poison that healer made me drink wears off.*

Meanwhile, the northerner led one of the horses to the water’s edge, where the knights’ bodies lay, and felled the animal with a sharp blow to the neck. The horse reared and screamed. At the sound, tentacles Maniva recognized rose from the water. They coiled around the mount and dragged it beneath the surface.

Eric returned to the other horse and began adjusting its girth.

Maniva tore her gaze from the feeding monster and approached him.

“Can you ride?” the northerner asked at once.

Maniva shook her head. A fresh breeze scattered her curls across her shoulders, and Eric went still at the sight.

“What?” she asked with a quiet laugh, watching him stand openmouthed.

That soft, nearly soundless laughter brought Eric back to himself.

“It isn’t difficult. Better than fleeing on foot, at any rate. Climb onto the buckskin. I’ll give you a lift,” Eric muttered, taking the horse by the bridle.

The animal obeyed, and a moment later the Norseman had swung Maniva into the campaign saddle.

Eric walked quickly, leading the horse by the bridle. Swaying in the saddle, Maniva was terrified she would fall from the graceful, powerful animal. After a time, however, she grew accustomed to it. Her body found the rhythm and began rocking with the horse’s stride, freeing her mind to think.

One moment she reviewed the events of the previous day, trying to understand and accept everything that had happened. The next, she found herself studying her strange companion. There was something deeply unusual about him—frightening and enchanting at once. He was plainly no ordinary mortal.

She watched Eric, admiring the man’s strength and grace. Then she devised a plan of escape. Then memory carried her back to the night when this strange northerner had awakened feeling within her.

The cycle continued until sleep closed her eyes and she nearly fell from the horse. Eric reacted in time, catching her in his powerful arms.

“You’re exhausted. Forgive me—I didn’t think. We’ll make camp. You probably haven’t eaten since morning, and I’ve been dragging you across the countryside.”

“I didn’t think either. I grabbed your gifts and ran. Just as you told me.”

“Forgive an old fool,” Eric muttered, avoiding her eyes.

Maniva helped the healer spread a blanket bearing the emblem of the knights of Wingrod beneath a thicket of lilacs. Eric removed a saddlebag from the horse. To their good fortune, it contained a fresh loaf of bread, a ring of dried sausage, a wedge of cheese, and several eggs.

Eric laid everything directly upon the blanket and rubbed his hands together.

“Enough for a feast. Only one problem—nothing to drink. We’ll have to eat it dry.”

He broke the bread and sausage in half, then cut the cheese into slices. The smell made Maniva’s stomach growl like a kitten.

But she had barely taken her first bite when a war horn sounded in the nearby woodland. Several male voices raised a battle cry in the distance. Hounds barked, and a wolf howled.

Arnaur’s horse reared and bolted.

Eric seized the blanket by its corners and dragged it deeper into the bushes. Maniva hurried after him. He had barely concealed her beneath his dark green cloak when an enormous black wolf with a silver ruff burst into the clearing. An arrow protruded from its shoulder, and a pack of hounds raced close behind.

The beast stopped for an instant and turned its head toward the hidden travelers, nostrils working.

“It caught a scent. Whether ours or the sausage’s remains to be seen,” the healer whispered as he drew his dagger.

The answer surprised Maniva so much she could not help herself.

“Is there a difference?”

Eric nodded without taking his eyes from the motionless opponents.

“If it smells only the sausage, it will assume there is an ambush, a snare, or a trap and keep its distance. If it smells us...”

“What can one wolf do against a pack that size—even a huge one?”

Eric merely smirked.

A moment later, the hounds attacked, trusting in their superior numbers. The great wolf seemed to have been waiting for exactly that. Its jaws snapped several times, and two of the boldest dogs dropped to the ground. The rest hesitated.

Then the wolf rose onto its hind legs and charged the pack.

Maniva gasped loudly enough to make the werewolf turn toward them.

The hounds attacked as one. Howls, yelps, and snarls merged into a savage cacophony.

The dogs managed to drag the creature down, and one nearly closed its jaws around the werewolf’s throat.

Nearly.

The wolf fought both as a beast and as a man, and that gave it an undeniable advantage. Throwing the enormous wolfhound from its body, the werewolf broke the dog’s neck with a single wrench of its forelimbs—arms or paws—and then kicked two more aside.

Eric turned to Maniva and whispered almost directly into her ear.

“That is a werewolf—a Gwendal. If it charges us, promise you will run straight for the river. You said you were a strong swimmer.”

Maniva nodded.

“Then dive in and swim to the other side. Do not look back and do not stop, no matter what happens. Werewolves are afraid of water. Understand?”

She nodded again, though her heart sank. In truth, she could barely keep herself afloat, but she was too frightened to tell him.

“What about you?”

“The battle will reveal the plan. I don’t know how the Claw will behave. I have never fought a two-faced one before.”

Maniva held her breath, afraid the slightest sound might draw the predator’s attention again. She felt the healer tense beside her, gripping his dagger, and suddenly she was warm and calm. She wanted to press her entire body against him—not as she had at the inn. This was different.

She knew in her heart that this northerner would fight anyone for her. And for his sake, she would throw herself into the river and swim simply because she had promised. Resolve filled her small heart with courage.

Having finished with the hounds, the wolf rose onto its hind legs and looked once more toward the bush where Eric and Maniva hid.

“When I shout, run.” The northerner’s voice was commanding again, allowing no argument.

The wolf bared its teeth and flattened its ears. Eric stood to his full height.

“Easy, Gray One! I am no enemy of yours, but I will not surrender one of my own without a fight!” the Norseman shouted, raising the hand that held his dagger.

The strange steel appeared woven from myriad strands of impossibly fine wire and gleamed with a blue cast.

The wolf crouched to spring, judging the moment of attack and the time it would need to cross the distance.

Then a hunting horn sounded close by.

The beast howled as though uttering a battle cry, dropped to all fours, and bounded away.

Eric disappeared behind the bushes.

Moments later, cavalry burst from the forest—a war band of twenty lances, perhaps thirty—and thundered after the beast.

Once the hoofbeats had faded and the dust raised by the hunters settled, Eric spread out the blanket and bit into the sausage as though nothing had happened.

Maniva followed his example.

The ordeal had left her shaking as if with fever. She wanted to laugh and cry at once. To master the storm inside her, she sank her teeth into the sausage.

"You are no coward. That is good. But next time, do as I tell you," the healer grumbled, brushing crumbs from his beard. "I said, *When I shout, run.*"

Maniva felt ashamed.

"I can't swim. Not really. I can barely keep myself above water." She took another bite to keep from blurting out anything else.

The sausage had an unfamiliar yet wonderful flavor. Maniva bit off an enormous piece and chewed, savoring the moment. A strange feeling filled her heart: the joy of being alive, the happiness of a survivor, and the dignity of an honest person all swept over her at once.

"Good?"

"Vewy. Wha' kind of food is this? Never tasted anyfing so good," she mumbled around her mouthful.

"I'll teach you to make it. It isn't difficult." Eric smiled. "How are you? Were you badly frightened?"

"Not with you."

"Swallow first. There is no hurry. Talking with your mouth full is dangerous—you could choke." He sighed. "A shame about the horse. We'll have to walk now."

Maniva swallowed before taking another bite.

"That's all right. We'll buy one in Wingrod. You said it wasn't far."

"We cannot. First, the pass has been ruined. Second, no one will be admitted until the king returns from the hunt."

"You knew we couldn't enter Wingrod, so you spread the pass beneath us like a tablecloth? But how? Who are you?"

"That is not important right now. We still cannot remain here. We have to move on."

"Where?"

"Anywhere far from here. If I remember correctly, these meadows will be drenched in blood in about two hours."

"How can you remember something that hasn't happened yet?" Maniva was growing angry. She disliked the way the healer withheld what he knew.

"I have read the prophecies."

"You really are a sorcerer." Maniva snatched up the salt and flung it into Eric's face.

He swore. Maniva covered her face with both hands, a reflex beaten into her during her years in the brothel. But the blow that usually put a harbor whore back in her place never came.

She lowered her hands and cautiously opened her eyes.

The northerner sat opposite her, smiling just as he had in that little room. The strange sensation began stirring inside her once more, as though a swarm of butterflies had suddenly taken wing in her belly.

"You know, sometimes I regret that I am not," Eric said. He brushed himself off, trying to gather the scattered crystals into a pile on his enormous palm.

The sight touched her, and her fear disappeared.

"I'm sorry..."

"Salt is dearer than gold in these lands," the northerner grumbled. "We'll have to go around Eridan, though the road through it would have been shortest."

"So where do we go now?"

“Ostos is our only choice. I can hardly present you to Asmodeus dressed like this. We need to find suitable clothing, and the only decent market in the neighboring worlds is in Ostos. We could visit the Magmars, of course, but the minotaurs are in rut there, and the food is completely unsalted. So Ostos is best.”

The girl did not dare ask any more questions. Every answer only produced several new ones. One thing, at least, was clear: they were going to a market or a fair.

Chapter Five: Ostos

The sun had passed its zenith and the day had tipped into afternoon, though it was difficult to be more precise. The sun was already running homeward, down toward the rim of the horizon. The dome of the sky was far bluer here than Maniva was accustomed to, and a light breeze herded flocks of snow-white clouds across it.

The river fled toward the horizon like a ribbon of polished sapphire, vanishing among open fields framed by small groves. Maniva felt as though an eternity had passed since she left the brothel, and that she and Eric had been trudging on foot for just as long. The sun insisted otherwise.

She had never considered herself weak. She had walked everywhere all her life. Yet now she felt exhausted and battered.

“How much farther?” Maniva rasped.

Eric looked back.

“We can stop if you like. We still have some cheese and blood sausage. Not much, certainly, but enough to quiet our stomachs. Hunting is out of the question. The woods are full of game, but these are royal lands, and we cannot afford trouble with Trumvel’s guard. Besides, dressing a carcass would take two hours. Then a fire and cooking. We would lose half a day. By then, we could already be in Ostos.”

“Isn’t there a faster way? A village might have a horse and cart. You gave me money. It should be enough.” She offered him the purse.

“A farm mare would never survive this journey. I’m not even certain that knight’s mount could have managed it. Whichever way you turn it, all things happen for the best.” The northerner smiled.

“How could a horse fail to survive a road?” Maniva asked, wondering yet again whether something was wrong with Eric’s mind.

“You believe that is still the Belgeste?” He pointed at the river.

“Of course.” She stared at him, though unease began writhing in her soul.

“It is the Turben now. That”—he gestured toward the forest—“is the Krumbel. And over there”—the healer swept one hand eastward—“the Keepers’ Tower stands among the Fields.”

Maniva followed his hand. To her astonishment, the outlines of buildings and the spire of a tower shimmered in the distance.

“How do you know that? How did we get here? The river never left our sight. What is happening?”

“What kind of forest grew along the banks of the Belgeste?” the healer asked with a smile.

“Oaks, just like Saxony.” She answered without thinking.

“Correct. And here?” Eric smiled mysteriously again.

Maniva nearly gasped as she peered into the distance. A pine forest stood beyond the river, its enormous trees reaching toward the clouds as they fought one another for a place beneath the sun.

“That is impossible.” She regarded Eric warily once more. “Where have you brought me—and why?”

The healer sat upon an enormous boulder beside the trade road, which was paved with cobbles and river stones.

“A road is a road in every world. The same is true of rivers and forests. Your mind will not accept a sudden transformation. Neither you nor even I can close our eyes in a forest and step directly into a jungle or a desert.”

“What are jungles and deserts?” The innocence in her gaze stirred strings in the northerner’s soul that had long been silent.

“It does not matter. What matters is that we cannot step directly onto a mountaintop or into the sands. Our minds would reject it. That is why the journey always takes time. Do you remember what you felt while running from the harbor town?”

“Hmm.” The girl rubbed her forehead as she searched her memory. “I wanted open space and freedom. I never wanted to see that miserable gray wall again, never smell the endless reek of fish, pig shit, and stale drink.” The last memory made her shudder.

“You exchanged the town and its walls for the forests of Wingrod. That is how you entered another reality. Then I changed the forest bordering the river, and here we are. Next I would alter the horizon, paint in mountains, replace the pines with plane trees and acacias, and *voilà*—no longer the wall of Karnogod, but the bastions of Ostos. I do not know how else to explain it.”

The man cut a generous piece of sausage, laid it on a slice of bread, and handed it to her. While she ate, he began carving the cheese into thin slices.

“I learned this in Ember. One of its princes revealed the secret to me. I have wandered from world to world ever since. Even for me, changing too many things at once is difficult. Though...” Eric considered her. “If you can imagine a white, blazing sun and a haze of heat above a stone road—if you can remember the stifling air of a bathhouse—I can complete the rest. We may reach Ostos much sooner.”

The girl laughed soundlessly. “You mean that if I picture all of that in my mind, then we...”

“You understand correctly. Close your eyes and try.”

She obeyed.

Maniva remembered the heat of the bathhouse on Thursdays, when she and the other girls were forced to pleasure the local governor. The shimmering heat was easier. It visited her dreams during the long, cold northern nights: scorching air and a merciless white sun.

She remembered nothing of her life before the shipwreck, yet those dreams had always followed her.

Maniva squeezed her eyes shut with all her strength and summoned the image: heat shimmering above a road, the white sun cruel and searing.

When she opened her eyes, a hot gust of sand-laden wind struck her face.

The river still carried its waters into the distance, but poplars and plane trees had replaced the pines. The grass beneath her feet had yellowed and withered. Stones heated by the long summer day made the air quiver above the largest boulders.

Her gaze returned to Eric, then traveled beyond him along the river. At its bend, a city of snow-white stone now rose before them.

Maniva lifted one hand and pointed toward the wharf, asking a silent question.

The northerner answered as though nothing remarkable had occurred.

“That is Ostos, City of the Seven Trade Routes. That is where we are going.”

Chapter Six: New Clothes

The stalls of Ostos groaned beneath their wares. There seemed no end to the wonders on display, from exotic fruits that might have been gathered in the gardens of Eden to exquisitely wrought masterpieces of the artisan's craft.

Maniva gazed at everything in delight and sampled every fruit and sweet offered to her, while the healer grumbled without pause.

"Keep gobbling samples and you won't be able to eat supper. And where am I supposed to find breakfast for you on the road? Come along."

The northerner was forever dragging her away—sometimes by the elbow, sometimes by the scruff of her neck—from mountains of persimmons and peaches, apples and pears.

"Smell it!" the girl breathed in rapture as she examined a fig. "And what are these berries?"

"Try one, honored lady. I charge nothing for a taste. Not a strawberry—half sugar, half honey. If you like them, I'll give you a discount," another vendor coaxed, until the stern gaze of Eric's blue eyes stopped the flow of words.

The bazaar blazed with variety. The competing cries of hawkers blended into a strange melody.

The market itself was divided into several sections. At the entrance, peasants sold produce beneath the open sky directly from carts and wagons. Farther on, visiting merchants and traders from distant lands worked beneath rows of makeshift awnings. Beyond them, where the bazaar met the street of craftsmen and artisans, local masters sold their creations directly through the windows of their homes and workshops.

Eric moved confidently through the clamoring crowd toward the artisans' quarter. The slight, blue-eyed girl with silver hair could barely keep pace.

Then her gaze fell upon a strange fruit armored in brown scales, with bright yellow flesh and a divine fragrance, and she nearly lost sight of him. Fortunately, Eric looked back in time and returned to the stall.

"That is a pineapple, a fruit from the shores of Afrikania," the Viking said, taking her by the elbow again. "Food fit for the gods when it is ripe. Come. We will settle the matter of your clothes and have supper. By evening the crowds will thin, the merchants will be far more accommodating, and the prices kinder."

Maniva tore her gaze from the marvel and looked up at him.

"These fruits are expensive. I promise you will taste one today, but there is no reason to overpay. The foreign traders do business around the clock. Seamstresses and craftsmen close at sunset."

The girl nodded and stepped away from the stall.

They passed carpets, melons, and watermelons. Maniva studied clay pots and chased-metal lamps with equal fascination. When they reached the butcher's rows, where sellers lazily swatted wasps from meat hanging on hooks, she stopped dead, eyes wide.

"What is it? Did someone steal your purse?" the Norseman began.

She shook her head.

"What happened?" Eric was genuinely alarmed now.

"I feel as though I've been here before—or somewhere very much like it."

Eric exhaled in relief.

"An eastern bazaar is difficult to forget. But our memories do not always come from the past. Sometimes they come from the future. How do you think all those prophecies and predictions are written?"

"I don't know. What is *written*?"

"Come. I'll explain as we walk."

Eric took her hand and led her deeper into the trading rows.

By the time weapons and armor appeared upon the stalls, the crush of bodies had almost vanished.

“Now we can talk without risking further damage to your voice. Do you truly not know how to read?”

“I don’t even know what it is. But if you show me, I’ll learn quickly. An Arab once showed me the riding position, and I did it almost perfectly the first time.” Her eyes shone with eagerness to impress him.

The northerner scratched the back of his head.

“Far to the south, where summer lasts all year, there is a country whose people invented special marks for recording sounds. Letters.”

Maniva stared at him without understanding.

“Like runes, only for people. Ordinary people—not sorcerers, mages, or wizards. The marks can be placed together to form words. Those words can be written down and read again later.”

“Why would anyone need that? You can simply speak.”

Eric stroked his beard.

“Suppose we were far apart and I needed to tell you something. I could write it and tie the message to a carrier bird. It would fly to you, and you could hear my words from hundreds or thousands of leagues away.”

“But what does that have to do with my remembering this place? For example, if that is veal”—she pointed toward the butcher’s stall, then raised her hand toward a cluster of tents—“there should be a game seller around that corner.”

“Memory is a remarkable thing.”

“I can’t remember something I have never seen.”

“Things belonging to the same world synchronize.”

“What does *sin-cro... sin-cro-nize* mean?”

“Like singers finding the same beat. They sound together and complete one another, like music.”

“I’m not sure I understand. Is it like joining in with a song you’ve never heard before, simply because you like it?”

Eric nodded.

“And what does that have to do with memories?”

“You belong to your world, and an eastern bazaar belongs to it as well. Think of this as a verse you recognized by instinct.”

“You are such a strange man, Eric. Who are you really?”

“What matters is that I am not your enemy. Come. We should hurry.”

“How can I trust you when you don’t trust me?” Maniva pouted.

“I will tell you tonight. It is a long story.”

“Then tell it in a few words. I won’t move until I know.”

The northerner considered this for a moment. Then verses reached her ears:

Now he is Shadow—

a shadow without a soul.

All Five Gods are dead;

they are no more,

and Magic has departed.

Only Her trace

exploded through the worlds.

The chosen bear the mark of shards.

Through night he wanders,

searching for the light.

Unseen, through all eternity,

he walks.

Now he roams

from world to world,

still hoping to discover

another soul

in whom the sacred fire of Magic

yet glows like a dying coal.

“Now come. The finest workshops close at noon. We have very little time.”

The northerner turned abruptly and strode into the maze of stalls.

Ten minutes later, they reached the artisans’ quarter. There were no street vendors here, no hawkers deafening passersby with their cries. The roar of the market had dwindled almost to silence, and the street stood nearly empty. There were only the craftsmen’s homes and their wares.

Guards in full battle armor stood here and there, bearing enormous forged shields and long spears. Several noble citizens strolled decorously among windows flung wide, behind which artisans had displayed their masterpieces.

The healer stopped at a window filled with fabrics and gestured for Maniva to inspect the goods.

There was everything imaginable: brocade embroidered in gold, silk finer than anything she had ever seen, even sailcloth as thick and strong as armor. At first, the girl did not understand what the northerner wanted of her. Then he pointed to a bolt of the finest, nearly transparent material, and she was struck speechless.

It seemed woven by goddesses. Arabesques of unknown runes intertwined in strange patterns, glittering beneath the sun and blooming into flowers of unearthly beauty.

A dark-haired girl with dozens of thin braids emerged from the hovel and unwound the fabric with a cat’s quickness. Its enchanted pattern shimmered in the sunlight, yet in shadow the cloth appeared completely transparent.

“Arnodian silk. You will find nothing like it anywhere else,” said the shop’s gray-bearded owner. “Soft as a second skin, light as a spiderweb.”

The braided girl placed the fabric in Maniva’s hands. The merchant had not lied. It weighed almost nothing, and touching it was intoxicatingly pleasant.

“Strong as dragon scales,” the weaver continued, while the girl stabbed at it with a pair of shears.

Maniva did not know what she was expected to do. But the eyes of a woman accustomed to rags burned with longing to possess it.

Eric watched her as if waiting for something, his face masked in indifference.

“The pattern is woven from adamant,” the merchant said. “The sorcerers of Garaer spin its threads from moonstones. See how it shines beneath the sun, like your companion’s silver hair. One could make armor from this cloth—or a nightgown fit for the princess of Agroba. The High Priestess of the Faceless herself wears a chemise made from it, and she is the greatest beauty in the Sultanate.”

Maniva pressed the material to her cheek and nearly wept. Its touch was as tender as a mother’s kiss.

“Careful! Soil it and you’ll have to buy it,” the gray-bearded merchant called arrogantly.

Maniva began to return the bolt, but the northerner’s voice made her press her face into it once more.

“Look closely, my lady. You will be the one wearing it. You must conquer the heart of the ruler of Nuskam.”

Then he turned toward the merchant.

“You judge customers by their clothes instead of the weight of their purses? Reckless behavior for a tradesman.”

With those words, he jingled the coins in a large, weighty purse.

The merchant’s practiced ear recognized the sound of gold. But the purse had already vanished into the healer’s pack, wiping the smile from the old man’s face.

“How much?” Eric’s voice was cold and indifferent.

“For you alone, honored sir, I will part with the bolt for three hundred dinars,” the merchant said conspiratorially.

“For that price, old man, one could buy a war galley. Have you added an extra zero?”

“Consider the quality. There are two hundred dinars’ worth of adamant in it, without even counting the labor.”

“One hundred,” Eric replied after a brief pause.

“Surely you are mocking a poor old man.” The merchant put on an injured expression. “Two hundred ninety. I cannot go lower. I paid two hundred eighty myself. The purest adamant. This is a respectable shop. The High Priestess herself—”

“Adamant is black. Mithril shines silver. Either you were deceived, or you are deliberately trying to deceive me.”

“Metals are not my specialty, good sir. I am no smith. I may have been mistaken. But the fabric truly is strong. Not even your dagger could pierce it.” The old man refused to yield.

“If nothing can pierce it, how did you cut it and sew the priestess’s chemise? Come, Maniva. There are other fabric shops here. Perhaps their merchants are more honest!”

Eric nearly shouted the final words, attracting the attention of a guard.

“Very well, most honored sir. For you alone, I will surrender the material for two hundred eighty.”

“One hundred fifty.”

“You will ruin me. I have a family. My daughter needs a dowry. My eldest is preparing to marry, and I must gather coins for the bride-price. My wife is ill.”

Maniva reached into her bag, but the Viking’s hand stopped her.

“One hundred eighty—if the cloth withstands a blow from my dagger,” Eric persisted, drawing the weapon.

The guard at the corner lowered his visor and began walking toward them.

“Let us agree to this: if the cloth holds, you pay me two hundred fifty. If it does not, you take the bolt for nothing.”

The merchant had barely finished speaking when the healer's dagger effortlessly sliced away a corner of the fabric and returned to its sheath.

The merchant lost the power of speech. He clutched his head, muttering again and again, "They cheated me..." Tears of despair gathered in the old man's eyes. "I invested everything I had in that material. I am ruined."

With a victorious smile, the Viking took the bolt from the dark-haired assistant's hands.

"Greed destroys. You have lived to gray hairs without learning the simplest truth. You should have accepted what you were offered."

Clutching his heart, the old man sank onto the bench beside the entrance.

"I will pay three hundred if you make my companion a dress from this cloth by evening," Eric said with a grin, addressing the dark-haired girl.

The old man could not believe what he had heard. His daughter looked at him. Then, scarcely believing their fortune, he nearly dropped to his knees before the strange healer and his companion.

"She will sew it, great lord. She will. What style does my lord desire?"

Eric nodded toward Maniva.

"I'm not accustomed to dresses. I'd rather have something simple. A shift, perhaps, or a wrap." Her face shone with happiness.

The purse of coins landed on the counter with a heavy slap.

"Make her a wrap—something like the toga nobles wear on Khmarg. Comfortable enough to sleep in, yet respectable enough for an audience with the sultan on a sunny day."

Eric turned to Maniva. "Come. We'll find something better suited to travel. The leatherworkers are just beyond the alley."

Reluctantly, Maniva surrendered the fabric and hurried after the northerner.

The teahouse welcomed them with the enchanting fragrance of meat and onions sizzling in a vast cauldron. An enormous, corpulent man wielded a cleaver with surprising skill as he chopped carrots.

At his nod, a large-breasted woman of about thirty-five hurried toward the guests. She seated them upon a peculiar raised platform covered in cushions, with a carved table on short legs at its center, then rushed back to the kitchen.

The northerner settled calmly among the cushions and gestured for Maniva to join him.

"Don't be shy. Make yourself comfortable. This is Ostos. People eat seated here, and they take their time."

With childish enthusiasm, Maniva hopped onto the platform and dropped beside him.

The girl paid almost no attention to the sideways looks from the other patrons. Eric could not say the same.

"We'll eat, collect the dress, and buy you clothes for the road. Then we'll visit a jeweler and wash properly at the baths. I know a place—Anan's. Magnificent pools, hot water, incense. You'll like it," the Viking said dreamily.

Maniva's happiness vanished. She lowered her head in sorrow.

"What happened, child? Why are you sad?"

She did not answer, only looked away with tears in her eyes.

"Don't go silent. What is wrong? Where did your good mood go?"

"I thought you were different, but you're just like every other man."

"Slow down. What exactly happened?"

"I thought you were a man who kept his word, but you scatter promises you never mean to fulfill. I could have bought it myself. What good is gold if I'm not allowed to spend it?"

“You mean the pineapple? We will buy one. Your gold is special. Those are Amosian coins. You’ll need them to purchase passage into the palace at Nuskam; Asmodeus’s chambers are guarded day and night. Travelers between worlds are not especially welcome in that reality. Any other coin would be more likely to take you to a dungeon than home. Forget about your money until you reach Angren.”

“Do you mean to sell me to him?”

Eric burst out laughing.

“I don’t understand you at all,” Maniva continued. “You call a harbor whore the ruler of a country that doesn’t exist, then haggle with a tailor, yet pay the full price when you could have taken the cloth for nothing. You’re deadly dangerous, but for some reason I feel perfectly safe beside you. What kind of creature are you?”

The woman in the white apron brought a large platter of fragrant samsa, their golden sides and flaky pastry promising delight. A teapot appeared beside them, along with two peculiar cups and a bowl of sweets.

Eric said something in a language Maniva did not understand and handed the woman a pair of coins. She nodded repeatedly and hurried out of the teahouse courtyard.

“First of all, that was not Arnodorian silk. It was ferro cloth. Eat your samsa.”

“Samsa...” The girl savored every syllable as though tasting it. Something about the word felt profoundly familiar—so familiar that her mouth began to water.

“Meat pastries. They’re made with mutton fat. Once it cools, it will be inedible.” Eric bit off half a samsa at once and continued while chewing. “Ferro thread is a rare material, won with enormous difficulty in only one world. The stubborn filament drawn from immense mineral masses is used to make both armor and the only weapons capable of cutting through that armor. Perhaps six or seven smiths know the secret—certainly fewer than ten. The knowledge passes from generation to generation, only within their families.”

“So your dagger...” Maniva whispered.

“Yes. A gift from my old friend Heras, a master from the village of Utar. This dagger will pierce any armor—anything at all, provided the blade is long enough. So the cloth is worth far more than he asked, especially with defensive and strengthening runes hammered into self-repairing enchantments. Believe me, that fabric is worth an entire fleet. Do you understand?”

Eric had plainly worked himself into a fervor. He showered her with words she had never heard, but Maniva listened without revealing her confusion. She simply admired this oversized man, who now spoke with all the passion of a child.

“When properly worked, ferro thread is stronger than diamond, adamant, or mithril.”

“I’ve never heard of ferro. But I have heard tales of myth-ril and adamant.” Maniva sank her sharp white teeth eagerly into the side of the eastern pastry.

“Hardly surprising, considering the labor involved and the rarity of ferro masses. Even the finest smith may spend a full year making a single set, perhaps longer.”

“And where did you learn the art of love?” Maniva asked with a sly smile, turning the conversation toward a subject she understood better.

At that moment, a young man in very strange clothes joined them at the dastarkhan. Maniva had never seen anything cut in such a fashion. His light white shirt was covered with unfamiliar plants, while his trousers barely reached his knees.

“Well, what have we here? Eric, is that truly you?”

The guest snapped his fingers, and time froze around them. He smirked when Eric favored him with nothing more than a glance.

Maniva could still hear and see everything, yet not one muscle would obey her. It was as though she had been imprisoned inside her own body.

“What do you want, Iblis?”

“I brought your order. The dress.”

“I did not ask you to. We could have collected it after supper.”

“Only the Chosen are worthy of wearing that cloth, Eric the Wanderer.”

“Is that why your secret worshipers sell it in the marketplace?”

“That is another matter. Let us return to your companion. The spirit of death has already told half Bohemia how you promised to tear his plot apart.” The man in the peculiar clothes studied Maniva appreciatively. “The Dragon’s Mark would look perfect against such lovely breasts. Don’t you agree?”

“I do not.”

“A pity. Defying gods is an expensive habit.”

“Is that a threat?” the northerner growled.

“Give me the maiden. Her story may never be born at all, and here she is almost home. What makes me any less worthy?”

The guest transformed, revealing his true diabolical nature. The air filled with the stench of sulfur.

“Mortals must—” the horned creature began.

“No one owes anything to anyone!” Eric roared, striking the table with his fist.

Maniva blinked.

The guest plainly noticed.

He sprang to his feet.

“One way or another, she will be mine. And you will regret refusing me.”

The demon swept his membranous wings and dissolved into space.

The spell broke, and time resumed its course.

“What was that?” Maniva asked when she could speak again.

“It does not matter. We must hurry. Gods do not make empty promises.”

The northerner closed the door of their room, then used greenish chalk to draw strange symbols upon the jamb and the window frames.

Their chamber in the caravanserai was spacious enough, though neither its furniture nor its decoration could be called luxurious. Yet feather mattresses lay upon the beds, and to Maniva—who remembered sleeping on nothing but straw—the sight seemed fit for a queen.

“A real feather bed!” The girl sprang onto her feet and dropped onto the mattress again. Her laughter, soft as the murmur of the first timid stream of spring meltwater, filled the room.

“Are you all right?” the Viking asked.

“The Princess and the Pea. I’ve heard that tale so many times. For as long as I can remember, I dreamed of sitting on a real feather bed just once. It’s wonderful. Thank you—and thank you for the pineapple too. It truly was like magic.”

“*Magic...*” The northerner rolled his eyes. “Says the girl who crossed the boundary of reality under her own power. If not for the comb, I would still be searching the forests of Saxony for you.”

“Speaking of the comb, why did you give it to me in the harbor brothel?”

“It is your comb. Matter from one reality is drawn like a magnet toward matter from the same reality. That is also how I found the cloth for your dress.”

At those words, the girl rose from the bed and turned in a circle to display the garment once more. The splinter’s light was very weak, making the fabric nearly transparent and concealing none of her charms. Her blue eyes shone with genuine happiness.

“And if I’m not the woman you seek? What if I’m only a whore from... what was it? Ambrosia?”

“Amosia,” Eric corrected. “Incidentally, doors and mirrors are the simplest ways to travel between worlds.”

“Any door? Even a wardrobe door?” Maniva asked, sitting upon the bed. Candlelight washed over her body, outlining her nipples through the transparent gown.

“You should not have refused traveling clothes. In that dress, by splinter light, you might as well be naked,” the Viking muttered, losing the thread of his thought.

“Do you like me?” Coquetry rang in her whisper. She saw the answer in the blush spreading across the face of the seemingly unfeeling, savage Norseman. “I’m a harbor prostitute. In my old life, I spent only a few hours each day wearing clothes.”

The Viking clenched his jaw. He remembered their night together and longed to repeat it.

Maniva rejoiced. She was not alone in being tormented by desire for this mighty and very strange northerner—if northerner he truly was. She decided that did not matter now. She was desired. Dreams came true.

Mischievous happiness flashed in her eyes, and she pretended renewed interest in his explanation.

“Forgive me. What were you saying about doors?”

“Doors. They are the easiest way. Come here. Check your bag again. Is everything inside—the comb, the coins?”

Maniva nodded.

Eric drew the sheathed dagger from his belt and offered it to her.

“The Black Paladin will come to Amosia. Learn to wield this. The fate of the entire world will rest in your hands.”

Maniva accepted the gift, immediately drew the blade, and pressed its point against the northerner’s chest.

“One should never entrust such a dangerous weapon to an unfamiliar woman,” she whispered.

The Viking merely smiled.

“A weapon does not kill. The person holding it kills, Maniva. One day, you will have to fight gods—and not only for your own life. Put the dagger away before you hurt yourself by accident.”

The blade returned to the prison of its sheath.

“Are you not afraid of death at all?”

“How shall I put it?” The man stroked his beard. “Let us say I am afraid of a life lived in vain.”

Eric resumed rummaging through his bag.

“Where are they? Never mind. I’ll find them later. Now, back to doors. Behind any door—and especially a mirrored one—you may imagine the place you wish to reach. Mirrors are easier because you will look the same in every world. You need not remember the particular features of the door through which you will pass the Veil, only what lies beyond it. Give me your hand. I’ll try to step directly into the Tower.”

Maniva obeyed.

Eric closed his eyes, pushed open the wardrobe door, and attempted to walk inside. No portal appeared. His forehead struck the wardrobe’s back wall with a solid thud, and he fell to the floor. Thick, dark red blood began dripping from his split brow.

Pressing a handkerchief to the cut, Eric tried several more times, with no greater success.

The girl rose from the feather bed and approached him.

“I am too old to believe in miracles. You tried, and I am very grateful for everything—the dress, the strange fruit with its strange name, and the beautiful tale about traveling between worlds. You saved me from a monster and stopped those warriors from violating me. But I truly do not believe in miracles.”

“Finding yourself in this city did not trouble you? Nor the creature that attacked you?”

“Sailors told me about cities like this and terrible water monsters too. I had never left the walls of the harbor town before. I thought Ostos was farther away, of course. Once a foreigner came to me whose skin was dark as oak bark. He said he came from a city like this. Perhaps it simply takes

longer to reach by sea? What I mean is, you don't have to do any of this. I will do anything you ask of me anyway."

The girl leaned toward Eric's lips, but he merely drew her against his chest.

"I do not want it to be out of gratitude."

"You truly are a strange man. You awakened the woman in me. I want you..."

Maniva's whisper was cut short by a deafening crash as the entrance door flew from its hinges.

Chapter Seven: Uninvited Guests

Three men in very strange clothing burst into the room. For some reason, they reminded Maniva of beetles, with black backs and white bellies.

Eric immediately shielded her with his body.

“Leave, or you will regret it,” the Viking all but growled.

“Damned Coven. What luck. The informant was right.” The shortest of the three wore a peculiar hat shaped like a cooking pot. He drew a strange metal tube mounted on a carved wooden grip from inside his coat and aimed it at Eric.

The girl’s heart hammered with the premonition of disaster.

Eric did not react.

“I am Inspector Winnegat. In the name of the Holy Beacon’s Covenant of Inquisition, you are under arrest. You stand accused of interspatial magic, sorcery, and corruption. You and that mavka will come with us.”

“You and your curs are going to turn around and get the hell out of here while I’m still asking nicely.”

“Not very bright, are you? But what can one expect from a savage barbarian? What did this witch promise you, that you would risk your life against three inquisitors?”

“So... now I know what happened to the door.” Eric moved between Maniva and the intruders once more.

At the mention of the Holy Inquisition, Maniva was seized by blind terror. A moan of despair escaped her throat. She remembered girls writhing in the flames of inquisitorial pyres.

Her hand found the northerner’s gift.

Better to deny myself paradise through suicide than endure the inquisitors’ torture chambers. People said not even Hell contained torments so ingenious.

“Silver bullets, barbarian,” Winnegat continued. “Neither spells nor magic can save you from them. But if you refuse, so be it. He needs only the woman.”

The man in black shifted the tube toward Eric.

A deafening crack sounded, and smoke engulfed the room.

Eric compressed like a spring, then felled Winnegat with a sweeping blow that slammed him against the floorboards. His companions instantly drew their own tubes. Two more reports thundered, and the smoke became impenetrable.

Something invisible whistled past Maniva’s face and buried itself in the wall, leaving a neat round hole. She drew the dagger and held it before her in trembling hands.

Eric is alone in there against all those bastards. If he falls, they will tear Maniva apart in the Inquisition’s dungeons.

She clenched her teeth.

“Hounds of Iblis,” Eric snarled as one of the fallen men rose, twisted his displaced head back into place, and charged the northerner again.

Winnegat only laughed.

“Maniva—the window! Run!”

Eric’s shout awakened something ancient within her. His fearlessness before the god’s immortal messengers—and his willingness to sacrifice himself—restored her strength.

Suddenly, her fear vanished. Confidence, courage, and valor seemed to pour into her through the blade. She could hear the breath of the fighting men with perfect clarity.

She could feel their hearts beating even through the curtain of smoke.

Maniva plunged into the fight. The dagger tore open one inquisitor’s side and found another’s heart.

Nearby, stool boards cracked as they smashed through Winnegat's skull. He fell again, but regeneration had already begun knitting the damage closed.

The struggle subsided into groans and the crash of falling bodies, then into pleas for help and a dying man's rasp. The Viking's enormous shadow moved through the smoke.

"Immortality does not protect you from pain, does it, Winnegat?"

As though understanding what the northerner intended, the inquisitor began to wail.

"What are you doing? Mercy! I recognize you. We are alike."

"Refusing to shave your beard and smoking a pipe does not make us alike. Who sent you?"

"Mavkas are spawn of Hell. You cannot hide her from Iblis. She belongs—"

"She is not a thing."

Maniva stared at her companion and no longer recognized him. Before her stood a cruel and merciless killer, a monster more terrifying than Iblis's servants.

Another shot rang out, and the wounded minion went still.

"Silver bullets..." Eric smiled. "They work on you as well."

The inquisitor's words dissolved into a single inarticulate scream.

Smoke swallowed the room once more.

Maniva shuddered. Everything inside her rebelled against the deliberate slaughter of helpless men, enemies though they were.

"Don't... Stop."

She rushed toward Eric, the bloodied dagger sweeping through an arc. A droplet flew from its point. The air filled with the smell of a thunderstorm, and a line of radiance shone where the blade had cut through space.

The northerner cast aside his weapon and approached her.

"Are you hurt?"

Maniva shook her head. Her Eric stood before her again—gentle and kind.

"We have to leave. Now."

The girl nodded and clutched her bag.

"Please, don't become like them," she whispered, stroking the warrior's face with both hands.

"Finish what you began..."

The northerner took the silver-haired girl's hand and completed the portal rune.

The glow turned opaque, yet through it they could almost discern what waited on the other side.

Maniva gasped and nearly dropped the dagger.

"Do you believe me now?" Eric asked.

She nodded rapidly, shivering. Beyond the shimmer stood enormous ancient trees with snow-white bark and crimson leaves. The fragrance of fallen leaves and rain-wet earth joined the odors of ozone, spilled blood, and burned powder.

The Viking draped his cloak around the girl, bundled her like a disobedient child, lifted her into his arms, and stepped into the portal's glittering haze—leaving the howling inquisitor behind in a caravanseraï room reeking of smoke, blood, and death.

Chapter Eight: The Demiurge

When they emerged from the rift onto the edge of a forest, Maniva became violently ill. Her stomach turned inside out. Nausea and retching gave way to uncontrollable coughing.

Eric lowered her to the ground. Clutching her belly, she vomited everything she had eaten at supper. A painful spasm knotted her stomach. She remained on her knees, hands planted blindly against the earth, swaying.

“What is happening to me?” she whispered, barely audible, accepting a handkerchief from Eric.

“Recoil—the consequence of the magic you used. It happens to everyone the first time.”

Maniva looked up at the man standing beside her. She still could not believe any of this. Since spending the night with this bald, bearded northerner, she had nearly been eaten by a river demon and almost seized by the Inquisition.

“It is unpleasant, but it passes quickly. Drink. This will help.” Eric offered her a small leather flask.

She swallowed. An herbal infusion in mead swept the foul taste from her mouth.

Could all of it truly be real? Magic? These reflected worlds?

Maniva’s mind refused to accept what was happening. Something inside her rebelled, yet she could no longer ignore what she had witnessed. The hope that her former life had merely been the result of malicious enchantments cast by jealous enemies both thrilled and frightened her.

If the northerner is telling the truth, then I am a very noble lady.

Her heart beat faster and more joyfully. Never again would she spread her legs for money. The thought filled her with warmth and comfort, and a dream took shape in her soul—a happy marriage, a loving husband, and children, of course.

“I wonder what Asmodeus, ruler of Nuskam, is like,” she said aloud as she rose.

“Too human for a Sovereign. The people there consider him a demon.”

“And is he?” Maniva’s whisper trembled.

“You will learn for yourself. But only you can tame his temper and ease his sorrow, Maniva.”

The man suddenly swayed and braced one hand against the trunk of an enormous white-barked tree.

“Is that recoil too?”

“I need to sit down. Got a little winded...”

The moment Eric finished speaking, the forest’s silence was torn apart by cawing.

He spread his cloak upon the grass and motioned for the girl to sit, then practically collapsed onto it himself. Maniva’s attention fixed on the cloak—not the cloak itself, but the damp brown patch at its left edge.

Blood. It was unmistakably blood. And it was not hers.

“You’re wounded?”

Eric smiled and settled onto the cloak.

“Nothing serious. A scratch. I’ll sleep, and it will pass.” His face was pale, and both hands clutched his right side. Blood seeped between his fingers. “Chilly here after the heat of Ostos. Perhaps you could make a little fire...”

“You’re bleeding! You’re a healer—do something!”

“Yes... One cannot always heal oneself, especially while unconscious,” Eric whispered, and closed his eyes.

“Damn it. Damn it,” Maniva cursed.

She knew that after a knife fight, people first tried to stop the bleeding by binding the wound. Then—then they summoned a healer.

Ravens gathered in the tree beneath which Eric lay, filling the area with piercing cries.

The girl tore a strip from the cloak. She did not dare draw the dagger, nor did she risk disturbing Eric. Instead, she stuffed the cloth between the northerner's body and armor.

"He needs a healer—but where am I supposed to find one?" She looked around.

A light breeze scattered the rain clouds. The sun emerged, casting rainbow glints through the large drops left upon the already colorful fallen leaves. Yellowing wheat fields stretched in the distance. Their neat squares spoke of farmers' labor, which meant a village must be nearby. And where there was a settlement, there would surely be a wise woman—perhaps even a proper medical practitioner. If the village was large, it would certainly have one.

Maniva did not deliberate for long. Her companion's weakening breath left her no choice. She bound her ferro tunic with a broad woolen scarf, tucked the dagger behind her back, threw a leather rain cape over her shoulders, and ran for help.

At last she exhausted herself and slowed to a walk. Her legs refused to obey from sheer fatigue.

Evening was approaching. Only a narrow strip of woodland separated her from the village lights. Most likely, it was all that remained of a once-mighty forest. Enormous ancient trees grew there, their trunks having defeated generations of woodcutters' axes.

Maniva pressed on along the beaten path, rustling through leaves that had begun to fall. Only the harsh cries of ravens disturbed the silence. She had never seen such enormous birds. A suspicion smoldered within her that the creatures were following her, flitting from branch to branch.

Fear for Eric battled the despair rising in her chest. There was no sign of anyone nearby. The girl crouched down and nearly wept from helplessness.

The ravens cawed joyfully as they gathered in the nearest tree.

That enraged her. She hated her own helplessness and those triumphant creatures alike.

"I won't give up. I won't surrender Eric to them. I only need help," she whispered through clenched teeth. "Just a little help."

She rose and cried out to the gray, overcast sky.

"Father Sky! Help me! I don't ask you for much, but I desperately need your help now!"

Only a whisper emerged from her lips. The forgotten wound began aching terribly, and she seized her throat.

The ravens hopped down to lower branches.

Without thinking, Maniva snatched a stout stick from the ground and hurled it at them.

The flock rose into the air, cawing indignantly.

Watching the strange birds, she took several more steps—then froze when she glimpsed a figure sitting upon a massive boulder almost beside her.

Who is it? Enemy or friend?

She stood motionless, trying to make out a possible adversary.

It was a long-bearded old man in a most peculiar robe, an improbable mixture of Slavic wise man and Asian dervish. The staff upon which he leaned looked more like a weapon than a walking stick.

Maniva placed one hand on the dagger's hilt.

Crouching low and striving for silence, she began approaching the stranger.

But autumn was more than a weeping sky reflected beneath one's feet. It was also a carpet of fallen leaves and treacherously loud dead branches. One snapped beneath her step.

The old man did not even turn around.

"Hello." His voice rolled through the forest's silence like thunder.

"Good evening," the girl whispered, emerging from behind a screen of wild raspberry bushes.

“It has been a long time since these lands received visitors. Listen to the crystalline silence. And the view—truly magical, like something from a fairy tale.” Leaning on his staff, the old man rose. “But everyone wants dragons nowadays...”

He waved one hand and sighed heavily.

“Honored sir, I desperately need help. My friend is wounded. I need a wagon and a healer.”

“Come closer and we’ll talk. There is no sense shouting across the countryside. I have grown old, and though your voice possesses authority, it lacks strength. My ears can no longer make you out.”

Maniva stepped closer and repeated her plea.

“I am a healer. What do you need the wagon for?”

“To bring my friend here. He’s enormous. I can’t carry him.”

“Well, if the mountain will not come to Muhammad, Muhammad must go to the mountain,” the old man muttered.

“What do you mean, good sir? Who is Muhammad?”

“Never mind. Just an expression. Where is your friend?”

“At the edge of the forest, beside the fork in the road.”

“Who wounded him there? Bandits and robbers have not been seen here for years. Predators and trolls do not venture so near my borders. I taught them better.”

Maniva did not know how to answer, but every instinct warned her against delay.

“Honored sir, could we ask questions along the way? Eric is bleeding to death. Every moment matters, and I already lost so much time getting here.”

“Bleeding to death? Then we must hurry.”

The old man struck the ground with his staff and rose. He could barely hobble, and tears filled Maniva’s eyes.

“Too soon for tears, daughter. Pay no mind to the fact that I’m feeble and lame. I am still a wizard.”

The old man traced a strange symbol in the air with his staff. At once, the forest lit with the portal glow Maniva already recognized. Within the haze of blazing energy, Eric lay beneath an oak tree.

“Yours?” the old man asked.

She nodded.

“Then let us hurry.” He lifted a leather pack from the ground and hobbled toward the portal.

Eric remained unconscious, and the stain at his side had grown enormous. Maniva rushed to him.

“Your betrothed?” the old man asked.

“No. More like my savior.”

The old man crouched beside the wounded northerner and began taking small bottles from his bag.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” He suddenly turned toward the girl. “Local women do not have hair like yours. Nor are you from our world, though magic seems familiar to you. Who are you, to wear a master’s ferro armor and open portals, yet be unable to heal a wound yourself?”

“I’m not an enchantress. Please, help him. I’ll do anything for you—pay in gold or with my body.”

“Not your betrothed, yet for him you’re prepared to humiliate yourself and fight,” the old man muttered.

He uncorked a vessel and held it beneath the northerner’s nose. Eric woke, provoking indignant cries from the enormous ravens in the oak. The old man poured a cloudy, translucent liquid with a greenish cast into the wound. It hissed.

Eric jerked away and clutched his side.

“Easy, easy. Frisky one, aren’t you?” the old man chattered irritably, trying to add more liquid. The Viking caught his wrist.

“What is that?” the northerner rasped.

“Hydrogen peroxide, as if that would mean anything to you,” the old man grumbled. Then, more loudly, he added, “Boiled-down cow piss. Helps with healing.”

Eric’s expression hardened. He drew a small knife from his boot and pressed it to the old man’s throat.

“This is what comes of helping people. Everyone wants to cut your throat,” the elder complained, pressing a black object against the northerner’s chest. It resembled the Inquisition’s tubes, though it was smaller and made entirely from some unfamiliar material.

“Lower the knife. This magical artifact will take your life. I can pull the trigger even if you try to slit my throat.” The old man’s voice suddenly possessed strength and authority.

Eric did not lower the blade.

“I do not care. Her life matters more. You will not harm her. Who are you, and where are we?”

“I did not come to hurt anyone. She called me for help—dragged me straight off the couch, somehow...”

Eric lowered the knife and collapsed back to the ground, utterly spent.

“What a peculiar pair you are,” the old man muttered. He shooed the ravens from the tree and added, “Your company is no less peculiar. I haven’t seen demons in a thousand years, and now an entire flock arrives at once. Demons bring no good. No good at all.”

The old man rose, tucked the artifact into the belt of his robe, and effortlessly lifted the Viking onto one shoulder. Then he turned to Maniva.

“Did you memorize the symbol?”

The girl nodded timidly.

“Then take the staff and draw the rune. I will open the portal.”

“I promise nothing, but we need to lay him on the couch. I can’t even examine the wound properly here.” The old man opened the door and entered a lopsided hut.

Maniva whispered something into the northerner’s ear. Eric crawled toward the bed, leaving a broad trail of blood across the clay floor.

“I’ll need your help, beautiful.” The old man’s voice became forceful and serious again. “A great deal of boiled water and clean cloth.”

Maniva seized a bucket and ran to the well.

The old man turned toward Eric.

“Who are you, and what are you searching for in this world everyone has forgotten? And how did a Viking acquire a gunshot wound?”

“How did a village healer acquire a weapon from another world?”

“I knew it. What is your name?”

“Eric.”

“And there?”

“Why do you need to know?”

“For crying out loud, this happens to be my world. You barged in and dragged infernal creatures behind you. I don’t know what those birds are or where they came from, but they reek of sulfur from a mile away. And your maiden tore me from my favorite television program and dragged me into this frozen, clammy autumn. I suffer from chronic bronchitis, I’ll have you know.”

“They are valravns—half-human, half-raven demonic entities capable of crossing space and time,” Eric interrupted.

“Then I was right...”

“Will you tell me where we are?”

“You refuse to answer my question, yet demand an answer to yours? How did you get here at all?”

“I don’t know. There was a fight. The blade was bathed in blood and cut through space. We were thrown here.”

“You did not choose the destination?”

“She opened the portal.”

“But she’s only...”

“She is not *only* anything.”

“You? You gave her an essence—but it does not belong to you. What are you doing?”

At that moment, Maniva returned to the hut, set down the buckets, and darted outside again for firewood.

“What if it damages her—”

“It will not. I am only a guide.”

“She is already in love with you. Have you thought about what will become of her? Have you thought about anything at all? Had I known who you were, I would have left you to die at the forest’s edge. You’re a bastard. One does not steal from one’s own kind.”

“That would not have worked. I am immortal, as are you. I may have lost my power to create, but immortality cannot be lost. You sealed yourself away from the world in search of peace, and you dare reproach me? Why, when your hands could still accomplish great things?”

“I am tired, Eric. I prefer peace.”

“How can you say that? I defended Patroclus’s body, fought beside Leonidas at Thermopylae, and rode as a Companion cavalryman against the tents of Darius. I wielded a rapier at La Rochelle and swung a sword beneath the walls of Jerusalem. I charged at Osowiec Fortress, defended Tarnodan from creatures beyond the looking glass, and fought beside Sir Apraxis at the rifts.”

“Pain, death, suffering...”

“Yes—pain, suffering, wounds upon the soul. But I was there. I fought evil, vileness, and the callousness of human hearts. I learned to be a man. By shutting yourself inside this little paradise, you denied your descendants the chance to stand beside you and see the world through your eyes. You can still strike the strings of a reader’s soul. You are a Demiurge. A writer—a master of words, a master of creation. Only you decide what your stories will become. Only you decide what you wish to awaken in human hearts.”

“It is easy for you to judge.”

“No, it is not. That is why I have spent recent years roaming the worlds in search of inspiration. Maniva is not merely a girl. She is a key—the key to a beautiful and instructive tale of the Knight of Five Worlds. I desperately want that story to be written. That is why I must continue. I must bring her to the place where she belongs.”

Maniva entered the hut again. Both men fell silent. The girl skillfully kindled a fire and poured the water from the buckets into a large copper cauldron.

The men remained silent while the old man lowered his instruments into the boiling water. Maniva had seen similar tools, though larger, beside the executioners in the town square. Her hand returned to the dagger.

“This will hurt him—badly. Your dagger won’t help. Bind his hands and hold him so he cannot move. You’re slight and thin; better climb on top of him at once. Unless...”

Maniva obeyed without hesitation. Her sapphire-blue eyes fixed upon the Viking’s. They were close again, their bodies pressed together, though not as they had been in the harbor brothel.

The old man approached, clicking a peculiar pair of forceps whose ends were flat.

He dipped them into a jug of alcohol, filling the room with the sharp scent of spirits.

“Want a swallow?” The hut’s owner offered Eric the jug.

The northerner shook his head.

“Ready?” the old man asked.

Eric nodded.

Pain tore through his body again. While the physician probed the bloody hole gaping in his side, the northerner stared into Maniva’s eyes. There was so much compassion and warmth in them, so much tenderness and hope, that the stern warrior—hardened by battles and journeys—nearly lost himself in their depths.

He felt the girl trying to seize control of his consciousness and take part of his pain into herself. Tears glimmered in the northerner’s eyes.

“Let me in,” she whispered. “I can help. I know how. It will hurt less.”

“How I envy Asmodeus,” the northerner murmured.

He felt more than her tender body upon his own, more than the pressure of her hardened nipples. She warmed him with a compassion braided strangely with passion. Their souls touched like parallel worlds—a green ray cast eastward as the compass of morality broke, every convention and restraint falling away.

She carried him into celestial distances upon the wind of scorching blizzards that bound North to South, upon a breeze that bore sand from West to East—toward the center of all worlds, where:

In an unimagined blue expanse,

attending words no ear has known,

the blood grows sweetly, sweetly still—

where young hearts burn more fiercely

than a thousand blazing suns.

Primal power radiated from her, healing the wanderer’s soul, worn ragged by life and the routine of existence.

Eric nearly forgot the old man, the wound, and the pain. There were only the two of them, and what passed between them was more than the joining of bodies. She seemed to touch his soul with some ancient and mighty enchantment.

“Brace yourself, Norseman. I found it. I’m going to pull. Try not even to breathe. Then I’ll have to sew the wound shut. Ready? On three.”

“One... two...”

Maniva sealed her lips over his.

God, there was something in that touch unlike anything the Viking had known in his long and eventful life. He dissolved into her and forgot how to breathe. The pain vanished. Maniva thrust it into the farthest recesses of his awareness.

Her kiss carried him beyond the boundaries of creation. Once more, he soared with her through the gardens of paradise, where flowers gave forth their fragrance, angels sang, and love reigned.

Then searing pain extinguished his consciousness.

“Well done. You managed it.” The old man showed Maniva a small bloodied sphere. “We were fortunate it was silver. There will be no infection. Climb down. He has lost consciousness. It is like sleep—or being struck from behind with a mallet. I will need your help again. Hold the candle. I still have to stitch him up.”

Maniva took the candlestick.

A large bloody cavity gaped in Eric’s side, like the hole left in the wall after the Inquisition’s tube had thundered.

The old man rolled up his sleeves and took out a curved needle threaded with silk. His stitches were even and assured, as though he were mending a hole in a trouser leg rather than sewing flesh.

Watching every motion, Maniva swore she would learn to do the same.

The firewood in the hearth had nearly burned away. Eric slept peacefully beneath the woolen blanket Maniva had tucked around him. The exhausted old man sat upon a stool.

He had done it. After so many years, his hands still remembered. He had done everything correctly.

The elder hunched as though a mountain rested upon his shoulders and lowered his head into bloodstained palms trembling from strain.

“Is something wrong?” Maniva asked, instantly alert.

“Everything is well. He will live.” A large tear rolled down the old man’s cheek.

“Then why are you crying?”

“I can heal again,” he breathed. “You restored my gift. But who needs a doctor who spends his days digging through manure?”

“Everyone. People need kindness, and you hand it out like sweets on a holiday. You are a great master.”

“If only. This world is forgotten and scarcely knows visitors. Without them, it will wither.”

“Perhaps it is only because autumn has come. The roads are mud. Hardly the best season for travel.”

“Your words bring hope, Maniva. You are like a beacon in the dark. I hope you are right. I have never liked autumn—rain, puddles, damp, grayness.”

“That is because you only look at your feet.” The girl smiled. “Lift your head and tear your gaze from the mortal earth, and you will see it—the wealth of colors, the falling leaves, the harvest festival. All of that is autumn.”

“Walk with your head thrown back and you’ll soon fall face-first into the mud,” the old man replied, though his mood had plainly improved.

“But you are right. No one becomes a prince without getting dirty.”

“A prince?”

“Why not? This is not Narnia, of course.” He spread his hands. “But people may come here in search of Magic.”

“I don’t know. Magic is wonderful, certainly, but I wanted to find friends. I always dreamed of that.”

“Is freedom from the chains of loneliness—and gaining the loyalty and devotion of other people—not a MIRACLE?”

“Fine, call it a miracle. But what does magic have to do with it? I’m no wizard or enchantress. It’s easy for you and Eric: wave a staff, mutter a spell...”

The man studied her closely.

“Magic is not sleight of hand beneath volleys of fireworks. Turning what is desired into what is real—that is true Magic. People often forget that wonder is still alive. We perform miracles without noticing them. Our thoughts possess no matter, yet through magic we transform them into tangible things—pictures, words, statues—and no one finds it remarkable. Then those embodied thoughts produce the immaterial once more: emotion within other people.

“Consciousness cannot be touched or measured. Science cannot explain or command it. Our ego is our capacity to feel. We ourselves are already miracles. *You* are a true miracle.

“Not every sorcerer can share another person’s pain. Magic lives inside everyone—especially you.”

“Everything is simple in fairy tales,” the girl sighed. “You say *abracadabra*, or *at the pike’s command*...”

“You need no incantation to make Magic. It is far simpler. Or do you believe Eric is a fearsome warrior in his own world as well?”

The girl sat beside the old man on the bench.

“I don’t know. In my world, I was a harbor whore selling her body for two coppers—until he came for me.”

The old man set his staff aside.

“For a fly, the entire world is a heap of dung and filth. For a bee, it is an endless carpet of flowers. We choose the world in which we live. Learn to see beauty, and you will recognize the good in people and value it. You will find friends in no time. See only flaws, and you will remain mired in loneliness forever.”

“Do you know what Eric was in his world? Have you met him before?”

“I doubt it. But I am certain that he and I come from the same world.”

“What is the sorcerers’ native world like?”

“Probably much like every other—only duller. That is why we wander through worlds until we learn to value what is real. Until we discover our true dream, one for which we can overcome our own Vanity and Pride. One worth dying for. And that becomes possible only when we learn to see Souls rather than faces.”

“That all sounds needlessly complicated to me. Why make difficult what is perfectly simple?”

“Perfectly simple for you. You already know how to see souls. That is why you are so precious to him. Let us sleep. Our conversation will not improve Eric’s health.”

He glanced toward the wounded man.

“And judging by that wound—and those ravens—you will need all the strength you can gather.”

Chapter Nine: Buyan

Maniva packed the provisions their host had given them for the road while the two men stood beside the sagging, weather-beaten fence.

"I have already done everything I could for you. I gave you food for the journey. I saved you from death. Yet instead of showing gratitude, you demand still more."

Eric smirked.

"I am immortal, as are you. I may have lost my ability to create, but immortality cannot be taken from me in these worlds. You have shut yourself away and sought peace. Why, when the power to accomplish great deeds remains in your hands?"

"I am tired, Eric. Peace is dearer to me."

"How can you say that? Remember the books you read as a child. Surely we read the same ones. I will not even speak of imaginary worlds. But I was there. I fought the evil, vileness, and callousness of human souls. What would I have become without the wisdom of pages faded by time? You remember their rustle. That shiver of anticipation. Of course you do. Such things cannot be forgotten."

"I burned out. This world is my refuge." Leaning on his staff, the old man swept his gaze across the land.

"You can still strike the strings of a reader's soul." Eric made a sharp gesture and immediately doubled over in pain.

"My stories will never be published." The old man noticed nothing. His eyes remained fixed on the distance, as though his thoughts had carried him elsewhere. "It is not easy to accept that I am a voice no one will ever hear."

"No, it is not. That is why I have spent recent years prowling the worlds in search of inspiration. Maniva is more than a girl. She is a key—the key to a beautiful and instructive story about the Knight of Five Worlds. I want desperately for that story to be written. So I must go. I must bring her where she belongs."

"There is one more thing I can do. I have a boat hidden at the river's mouth—a sturdy sea skiff. You will have to row a few hundred yards before you can raise the sail."

"Buyan cannot be reached so easily."

"Have you never read Pushkin? *By the curved seashore stands a green oak; a golden chain...*" The old man grinned.

"Lukomorye is Buyan?"

"Yes. The simplest road into the worlds of fairy tales. That is where you need to go. A yellow-brick path leads from the coast to the stone."

"The Road of Melpomene," Eric whispered.

"A safe journey, pilgrim. And perhaps, if..."

"You helped me. You have the right to ask."

"If by chance you meet my muse along the way, I would..." The old man faltered, embarrassed to confess his need.

"How will I recognize her?"

"Hair the color of ripe wheat spills over her shoulders, and the blue of heaven shines in her eyes. Scarlet lips, a gentle nature, and a strong name—Vera."

The old man sighed heavily.

"You know the rules, Demiurge."

"Yes, yes. Of course." The elder hurriedly searched his pockets.

When he withdrew his hand, an earring glimmered upon his open palm—a small sapphire set in silver.

“It is hers. She lost it when she left. I should have stopped her then, or run after her. But foolish pride seized me.” A tear shone in his eyes. “Without her, everything became hateful. Time stopped.”

“If I meet her, I know where to find you.”

The old man took a leather-bound book from the table and offered it to Eric. The northerner raised a questioning brow.

“A primer for Maniva. You were right, wanderer. In doing good, we only become richer.”

At that moment, Maniva appeared in the doorway with a bundle clutched in her slender arms. The burden was so heavy that her body bowed beneath it.

Something stabbed inside Eric. His heart lurched. He rushed toward Maniva to take the weight.

“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t carry it. They stitched a hole in your side only yesterday. What if the stitches tear? What if you die on the road? What am I supposed to do then?” The girl held out one warning hand and lowered the bundle to the ground.

“I am stronger than I look, future ruler of Angren. Besides, our journey will be across the sea. Hand it over, and let us go to the shore.”

First, an enormous oak appeared on the horizon, with a massive chain glittering in the sun. Then the bulk of the island rose behind it.

“Look how enormous it is,” Maniva whispered, unable to tear her eyes from the tree whose crown reached into the heavens.

“Yggdrasil, the Tree of Eternal Life. But we should circle the island. All manner of unclean creatures infest Lukomorye.”

“What do you mean?”

“Precisely what I said. Leshies, mermaids—and the domain of Bayun the Cat. Do you know how many stories have been lost here? That creature devours them. Any author who falls beneath his spell loses the bond with his muse. Bayun consumes her and makes her his slave. Each time he circles the oak along its chain, he tells another story or sings another song, making the Path of Melpomene harder to find.”

“Why would he do that?” The girl was frightened.

“Long ago, when authors wrote decent fairy tales, he rewarded them with magical gifts. Then his favorite—the man he considered a friend—told people about Lukomorye. Everyone who could hold a pen came pouring in. At first, the cat rejoiced. But writers and poets began using his gifts for personal gain and twisting the stories themselves. He grew furious, because it was killing the tree. Now he tells the stories himself, trying to heal the wounds inflicted by failed writers and graphomaniacs.”

A roll of thunder interrupted Eric.

“We must hurry. Nothing is worse than being caught in a storm near the coast. The rocks will smash us to pieces. Will you help me? I’ll row; you hold the rudder over.”

Maniva nodded and moved toward the stern.

Buyan greeted them beneath the gloom of a gray, rain-laden sky. The silver forest bordering the shore rustled—or rather, rang—with leaves of glass.

The boat’s bow ground into peculiar fine sand that looked more like powdered bone.

“A very strange place. Where are we?”

“That does not matter. What matters is staying away from that beauty.” Eric gestured toward the silver trees. “It is deadly to you.”

The forest swayed and chimed with its crystal leaves, greeting the Viking like an old acquaintance.

“What are you, really?”

“Does it matter who I am when you do not even know who you are?”

“With you, I feel special.”

“You are special.” Another crash of thunder drowned his words.

“And who am I, according to you?” The girl stepped close to him. He drew back slightly and released a heavy sigh.

“You are Maniva, mother of the future Sovereign of Amosia. I came to return you home—to your castle, Anshatukash.”

“You must be drunk or mad. No such city exists. No such country exists.”

“Not in this world. But you are not from this world either. You are the axis of the story, the incarnation of love in that dimension. You simply lost your way between worlds.”

“But I don’t want to go to the Sovereign. I want to stay with you.”

“I am not your destiny, and in truth, I deeply regret that. But...” Eric fell silent and listened. “Tell me—you hear that song too, don’t you?”

Maniva closed her eyes and listened. Beneath the wash of waves and whisper of reeds, she heard a timid voice, achingly familiar, singing a wondrous song:

The storm will open

the gates to another world,

and rain will trace

the Wanderer’s road.

But your guardians

will bar his way

and close the gate,

keeping watch over your sleep...

“Mother? Mother!” the girl cried, but only a faint whisper left her lips. She touched the scar upon her throat.

“Shh.” The Viking placed a finger against her lips. “You will become her. Everything in its time. Just listen—and remember.”

Maniva closed her eyes again. The first drops of rain began beating out a rhythm like drums, and the song grew stronger.

My sovereign demon,

cast sorrow aside.

Within my embrace

you will find peace.

Let every trouble recede

beneath my song;

like a wild she-wolf,

I guard your rest...

At the next roll of thunder, the girl silently joined the refrain, moving only her lips.
Within the realm of dreams

I guard your peace,

and stars in heaven

dance for us.

A world of darkness and sorrow

may close around us,

but my voice will scatter

every fear forever.

Sleep—I keep watch,

though a thousand years may pass.

Sleep—I stand guard,

though thousands of years may pass...

Lightning flashed. The sea shuddered, and the roar of the raging ocean carried the song onward:
My voice and my heart

are yours forever.

Love is my shield,

my sun and my light.

Beyond the darkness of clouds,

a radiant dawn awaits us.

Through the blackest night,

I will keep you safe...

Tears streamed down the silver-haired beauty's cheeks, mingling with the rain. Her lips trembled, and Eric heard Maniva's own voice:

In silence I guard

your sleep like a wall.

I alone will sever

the road between worlds.

I will call to the heavens,

whispering your name.

Sleep, my hero.

Do not fear the storm.

Within the realm of dreams

I guard your peace,

and stars in heaven

dance for us.

The girl rose to her full height. Lightning stabbed mercilessly into the raging waves. Wind scattered the silver of her hair, and rain lashed her shoulders as though washing away every sin forced upon her by need in another dimension.

Her eyes, black as a warm July night, burned with fire.

She sang.

Her voice had returned, and with it, her magic.

Her clothing began shining with every color of the rainbow, answering the words of her song.

A world of darkness and sorrow

may close around us,

but my voice will scatter

every fear forever.

Sleep—I keep watch,

though a thousand years may pass.

Sleep—I stand guard,

though thousands of years may pass.

Her voice gained strength and authority. The elements retreated. First, the clouds—having spent their entire arsenal—trudged together toward the horizon beneath the shepherd wind, still giving birth to lightning and thunder whenever they collided.

The waves slowly subsided. Enchanted by the miraculous melody, the ocean fell asleep.

My sovereign demon,

cast sorrow aside.

Within my embrace

you will find peace.

Let every trouble recede

beneath my song;

like a wild she-wolf,

I guard your rest.

My voice and my heart

are yours forever.

Love is my shield,

my sun and my light.

Beyond the darkness of clouds,

a radiant dawn awaits us.

At those words, sunlight flooded the shore, filling the silver forest with playful sparks. The waves fell completely still, and now the ocean crept over the sand toward the enchantress's feet like a gentle kitten.

Eric watched without looking away. He had succeeded. He had done it.

The girl continued singing as she spun in a dance.

Through the blackest night,

I will keep you safe.

In silence I guard

your sleep like a wall.

I alone will sever

the road between worlds.

I will call to the heavens,

whispering your name.

Sleep, my hero.

Do not fear the storm.

By the final lines, Eric too was weeping.

"I found you—the one in whose heart the sacred fire of Magic still glows like an ember." The fearsome warrior wiped his face with his sleeve. Tears shone in his eyes, but he smiled. "How long I have searched for you."

The girl stepped toward him and kissed his cheek.

“Thank you for everything. Now who are you?”

“A guide. A pathfinder. A seeker. But I do not hunt treasure or track escaped slaves and criminals. I seek the inspiration lost among the worlds. I return magic to the land of fantasy. I teach creators to fly.”

“Then you are...” The girl looked into the warrior’s eyes, trying to reach the deepest hidden chamber of Eric’s soul.

He stroked her cheek.

“No. I broke my Demiurge’s wings long ago. Now I can only help others build their worlds. She needs you. She is waiting for your return. There is a portal inside the cavern grotto. It leads to the center of all worlds. Only you can open its gate. I will take you home.”

Eric drew a magnificent pair of gloves from his bag. Intricate silver patterns twined across their thin black leather.

“My last gift to you. Come. The Mistress of Dragons awaits. We should not keep the Great Mother waiting.”

The Viking lifted the bag of remaining provisions and a heavy wrapped bundle from the boat. He looked at the girl.

“Where did this come from?”

“The old man said it was the key to the portal. I thought you knew.” Her eyes widened in surprise.

The man unwound the cloth, revealing an enormous two-handed sword.

“A peculiar key. I wonder what kind of lock we will have to open with it.” He shrugged. “Well, war is no disaster. Maneuvers are what matter.”

Maniva stared at him without understanding.

Eric waved it away and smiled.

“Am I completely stupid?”

“No. You simply resemble your mother very closely.”

“But I don’t remember her at all...”

“The road is long. I’ll tell you about her as we travel.”

“Very, very long?”

“Long enough for me to weary you with advice and moral instruction. Incidentally, this is yours.” Eric handed Maniva *The Demiurge’s Primer*. “I will teach you to record sounds and read them.”

Chapter Ten: A New Beginning

The guardian of the portal gave a choking rasp and toppled back into the abyss from which it had crawled.

Eric wearily released the enormous sword and slowly lowered himself onto a fragment of a column, one hand pressed against the weeping wound in his side. Maniva rushed to him.

“Are you all right?”

Eric shook his head.

“That does not matter. The way is clear.” The warrior’s voice trembled.

Maniva looked toward the portal glowing in the depths.

“I have to go through there?” The radiance beckoned to her. She felt its magical call upon her skin, yet she did not want to leave.

Eric nodded.

“It leads to the Compass Rose. She will carry you home.”

“Will you come with me? I’m frightened.” Tears filled the girl’s eyes.

Using the sword like a crutch, Eric forced himself to his feet.

“Only as far as the portal. I may go no farther.”

“But why?” Maniva lowered her head, trying to hide the emotions raging within her. “You could...”

Eric interrupted before she could finish.

“You will forget me the moment you return to your own dimension.” He made no attempt to hide what he felt. “When I set out to find you, I was only trying to fill the emptiness here.” The Viking struck his chest with a bloodied fist. “You restored my soul. You made my heart beat again. You reminded me what joy and happiness feel like. I am deeply grateful to you for that.”

The warrior leaned one shoulder against the portal.

The sword rang against the stones as it slipped from his exhausted hand. Eric rubbed his palms furiously against the hem of his shirt until no trace of blood remained. Maniva stood beside him as though waiting for something.

The warrior gently stroked her silver hair.

“And now it hurts to know that we must part forever.” Grief closed around his chest like a vise and made it difficult to breathe. “I... I could not bear to see you in another man’s arms.”

“You mean we...?” The girl did not raise her eyes to her stern guide.

“Yes,” Eric whispered, scarcely audible as he swallowed the knot rising in his throat.

“And you?” She lifted her head and looked into the northerner’s eyes, blue and pure as the sky.

“I will remember you always, Maniva. It is time.” His hand settled upon her shoulder and gently urged her toward the portal.

“Wait.” The girl placed her left hand upon the warrior’s shoulder. “If I’m going to forget anyway, kiss me. I want you to remember me as I am now—not as that whore from the harbor brothel.”

“I never thought of you as a whore, Maniva. Even in those rags, in that little room, you were a beacon—a sorceress who restored my faith in love.”

Eric brushed an unwilling tear from his cheek.

“Go. It is time. Only do not look back, or the portal may—”

The girl wrapped her arms around the warrior’s powerful neck.

Their lips met, releasing all the passion they had longed to give one another, knowing this would be their final intimacy.

Eric never remembered how long the kiss lasted. But he would forever remember the strawberry taste of her lips, her final gaze filled with gratitude and tenderness, and her last words dissolving into the portal’s crackle:

“Don’t forget me...”

The warrior’s heart missed a beat when he saw Maniva turn back after all within the portal’s fading shimmer. A sense of irreparable disaster seized his soul.

“Look out!” Eric managed to shout as the figure of a walking corpse rose beside her.

Without a moment’s thought, he hurled himself into the closing passage between worlds.

Chapter Eleven

The highway wound away like a serpent and vanished among fields of golden wheat. The outriders were already looking forward to the feast that would mark the collection of taxes from the newly acquired lands. The dangerous stretch through the forest lay behind them. Ahead was open country, and on the horizon loomed an outpost of the Duke of Balintia's watch—a loyal vassal of His Majesty Elizar the Fifth.

The foot soldiers trudging behind the treasure wagons had taken off their helmets and slung their shields across their backs.

"Two or three more hours and we're home. Safe behind Krumdel's white stone walls," the captain of the guard told them wearily. He was a broad-shouldered young man with brown eyes.

Rising in his stirrups, he bellowed, "Close ranks, brothers! Just a little farther!"

The rear guard quickened its pace.

The carriage bearing the royal deputy traveled near the very end of the column. Behind it, in no particular hurry, rode the treasurer's personal guards.

That infuriated the captain more than anything. Mercenaries. Careless and insolent, they ignored every rule and table of rank, believing themselves above both. The captain reined in his stallion and waited for the carriage to draw level with him.

The heavenly orb poured its still-gentle light across the land, though its heat was already beginning to bite. White clouds drifted through the sky like the vast castles of celestial rulers. It seemed like paradise on earth—a feeling made all the stronger by the danger they believed they had left behind.

"I told you it was all nonsense..." the treasurer began, leaning out the carriage window.

Then a flock of birds burst from behind the sheaves at the edge of the field.

"Column, halt!" Eygar shouted. Perhaps his gut warned him. Perhaps experience from a score of battles did.

"Halt? What do you mean, halt? It's nearly noon. This is no time for a rest. Keep moving!" the treasurer shrilled.

But the procession stopped.

At that very instant, crossbow arms snapped. There was no mistaking the whistle of heavy bolts.

"Shields up! Archers to the flank! String your bows!"

The captain's roar was drowned beneath the hammering of iron heads against armor.

Wounded horses screamed. Several knights fell, bristling with bolts like pincushions.

"Lock shields!" the captain yelled, spurring his horse and pressing himself low against its mane. His squad of ten was already racing after him toward the haystacks, from behind which another swarm of arrows rose into the sky.

The captain jerked the reins and brought his mount rearing.

Just in time.

A rank of spearmen rose to meet the charge.

"Goblins! Get the convoy out of here! Everyone else, to me!" the captain roared at the sergeant commanding the treasurer's personal guard.

This time the mercenary's arrogance vanished from his face, and he rushed to obey.

"For the Duke!"

The captain's sword crashed down upon the first spearman. Several pikes scraped across his mount's barding at once. Eygar drove in his spurs, forcing the horse to rear again and strike an unwary goblin with its hooves.

The knights of Balintia were already galloping toward their captain, visors lowered. The light-cavalry vanguard wheeled around as well and came at full speed, bristling with long lances.

Hooves crashed into the ragged formation of short, stocky creatures clad in armor made of bone.

The carriage drivers did not wait to see how the skirmish ended. They whipped the horses forward and fled for the safety of the fort, surrounded by mercenaries who had forgotten all about their employer's carriage.

The knights drove straight into the disordered mass of spearmen, hacking left and right.

Victory was close. The captain had already raised a triumphant cry when the screams of draft horses and the howling of wolves told him he had miscalculated.

Wolf riders struck the unprotected convoy. Nearly all the mercenaries died in the first rush. Only a handful of swordsmen from the guard still fought desperately against fangs and bone axes, but the wagons were already in the raiders' hands.

"The convoy! Everyone back to the wagons!" Eygar shouted, abandoning his pursuit of the goblins.

The vanguard riders and the knights of Balintia raced toward the carts. Too late. Nimble, quick-handed orcs had stuffed the treasure into their saddlebags and were fleeing toward the ancient depths of the Bogveri Forest.

The deputy's carriage rolled up beside the captain.

"A brave warrior, certainly. A fine swordsman. And stupid as a cork. You were supposed to protect *me*! We can collect the gold again with a new tax—there are plenty of peasants. His Majesty has only one deputy. When we reach the city, you will surrender your sword and report to the pigsties. You will shovel manure, and until every coin you lost has been repaid, you and your men will take your meals with the swine!"

Red-faced from the terror he had endured, the deputy poured his rage upon the soldiers.

"But the fairy was in there..." the officer protested. "Allow me to take a detachment after the raiders and bring her back."

That only fed the furnace of the official's fury.

"Do you truly believe a creature that small—even one endowed with magic—can set Samsara in motion again? The Great Wheel of Souls? Are you prepared to abandon your commission, condemn your family to starvation, and pursue the raiders alone? And for what? So the soulless will cease being born in Virania? Brainless fool. It is the punishment of the gods!"

The captain shook his head.

"Then do not contradict me, unless you want me to charge you with heresy and throw you to the Inquisition. You are not even fit to shovel pig shit. I said we return to the city."

Chapter Twelve

The Glamour

Another evening found the young duke lingering in the library until long after dark—until the candles in the candelabra had melted so low that their light could no longer hold back the gathering dusk.

The broad-shouldered, blue-eyed ruler of Katatida turned the pages of ancient folios without purpose, seeking only to postpone his return to the bed where his young princess awaited him. In recent days, his wife's obsession with bearing a daughter had grown absurd. The bills from healers and physicians of every description already equaled the payroll of Arpven's personal guard—the strongest citadel on this bank of the Tariman.

His citadel.

Having left every concern for domestic comfort to the servants, the ruler of Katatida's wife now spent all her time surrounded by fortune-tellers, seers, and healers.

The duke tucked a stray lock of red hair back beneath his nightcap and set the book aside. A storm raged beyond windows that looked more like arrow slits. Arrows of rain drummed a strange rhythm against the tower's blood-red copper roof, beneath whose dome the library lay. A flash of lightning flooded the young ruler's refuge with white fire, followed by a deafening crack of thunder.

Lafren flinched despite himself.

The mica panes rattled, and a scroll veiled in dust and cobwebs fell from a shelf. The wood of its case had rotted through. It split upon striking the floor, exposing the yellow flesh of papyrus covered in crimson hieroglyphs.

The ruler rose to his full six feet and rolled his stiff shoulders. A heavy candlestick fashioned in the shape of a seven-headed dragon rested easily in his broad palm. Lafren picked up the scroll and studied the shelves, trying to determine where the ancient manuscript had fallen from.

In vain.

Every upper shelf was packed with books standing as straight and orderly as soldiers in a battle line.

Hm. So be it. I'll give the chronicler something to puzzle over in the morning.

Lafren meant to leave the scroll upon the escritoire. At that moment, however, its case crumbled completely, allowing the papyrus to unfurl and reveal ancient runes and cuneiform script. The duke brought the candelabrum closer and tried to read the strange inscriptions. Some symbols were familiar. He could guess at the meaning of others, and his keen mind deciphered a few more. Most of the text remained a mystery.

How old are you? They stopped using papyrus during the reign of Ornar the Merciful, and that was two hundred years ago—if not more...

The duke returned to the shelves and took down a chronicle. Pages whispered once again. He had remembered correctly, and the lessons beaten into him at the temple between brutal training sessions had been precise. Hieroglyphs were outlawed after Feonir's great-grandson, Tomus the Brilliant, discovered the recipe for the poison used to taint Arpven's wells during the Sorcerers' Rebellion.

The ruler put the chronicle back. If there was one lesson the Knights Templar had thrashed into the young paladin's mind, it was this. No wonder the fallen scroll troubled the former Outbearer—the Wanderer of the Oath.

Cuneiform was outlawed by Feonir the Great himself because the witches' grimoires were believed to have been written in it. So this scroll must be three hundred years old. Perhaps even older?

The bronze base of the candelabrum rang against the oak desktop, pinning the papyrus in place. The duke tried to unroll the ancient sheet and accidentally sliced his finger. A drop of blood struck the compressed fibers.

The writing came alive.

The hieroglyphs flowed together, becoming something almost visible: a living vision that told of an ancient sorceress. Lafren returned to his chair.

No rain shall cleanse the blood-red moon.

Once every score of years,

O dreadful, ravenous fate,

To her the appointed tithe of blood

Must still be paid.

Upon the altar they shall lay

The heiress of the Vine,

In whose veins runs

The blood of mighty kings.

And the dark lord shall set Akhtare free,

Dispelling the glamour

Of spectral shadows...

Lafren never noticed himself drifting off. Then the small ventilation window flew open with a clang beneath a gust of wind and another crash of thunder. The ancient papyrus collapsed into dust as though it had never existed. Only a fine gray residue remained upon the ruler's fingers.

The duke started awake. The candles had almost burned out, and the little window beneath the library vault creaked resentfully as the wind rocked it back and forth.

The ruler rubbed his eyes, closed the book, and carried the candelabrum downstairs to his wife's bedchamber, muttering, "The things a man can imagine..."

Erna was waiting for her husband. Her translucent nightgown did nothing to conceal the enticing curves of her young body. She reclined upon their marriage bed in the company of two very young maids and a healer who was no longer young and was nearly naked, with magnificent, rounded breasts.

Those breasts. How many times had Lafren cursed himself for staring at the nipples visible beneath the healer's thin linen?

The northern herbalist wore an enormous wolf pelt over her shoulders and a linen tunic beneath it. She showed no embarrassment over her bare thighs or almost naked breasts.

That only infuriated him more.

Erna caught her husband staring at the herbalist's tits, and fresh venom entered her voice.

"So you've finally decided to appear. I was beginning to think I'd freeze tonight. And I hope you haven't forgotten your marital duty."

"I'm not entirely convinced you're cold." The duke's tone made his opinion of strangers in the marriage bed quite plain. "What happened? Why do I find anyone but you in my bedchamber at this hour? And what is that stench?"

“Evshan grass soaked in tears,” one of the maids whispered, bowing low. “It smells harsh, Your Grace, but the infusion helps with burns.”

Lafren looked at his wife.

“You burned yourself? How?”

“I was trying to keep warm! I keep telling you—our bed is too cold. And I was bored and alone!”

“It was the storm, Your Grace,” the healer put in acidly. “Her Highness was frightened. And very, very lonely.”

“Open your mouth once more without permission and you and your herbs will be fed to the livestock,” Lafren said slowly, reminding the commoner of her place.

“But—” the princess began, trying to defend her friend.

“And if you show me such disrespect again, you will take up residence with the Sisters of Silence.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” his wife hissed.

“Not even war with the entire North would stop me. Would you care to find out?”

Rage seized the duke, and two strides carried him from the threshold to the bed. The room emptied of unnecessary company at once. The women understood that quarrels between husband and wife were ordinary enough, but when the marriage belonged to a royal house, witnesses simply did not exist. The winged mice caged above the city gates cared little what secrets their fresh meat had once possessed.

“Is this how you keep your promises?” The princess burst into tears. “I wait for you while you vanish half the night, no one knows where. You promised to do anything for me. To pull the stars down from the heavens. I don’t need stars! All I want is the chance to bear a child, and you—you scream at the servants who came to calm me while you were gone. If you’d been here when the thunder started, I would have found peace and safety in your arms!”

Her tears became hysterical sobs.

“Don’t you love me anymore? Tonight was auspicious. I might have conceived a girl. The healer said so. She brought herbs and scented candles and everything.”

“The room reeks of sex!” Lafren growled. “Do not forget that I am still a paladin.”

“How dare you! I waited for you. The potion heightened my desire, and now you accuse me of adultery because you can smell my passion?”

Tears streamed down the young woman’s cheeks, and sobs shook her body.

“Forgive me,” Lafren whispered, putting his arms around her shoulders. “It’s just that lately the devil knows what has been happening. Nomads in the west are slaughtering entire villages and burning the fields. Burmila is gripped by panic. People are afraid to leave their homes—they say some man-eating beast has appeared in the forest. And in the south—”

“I went to the temple. The wise women asked for a sacrifice in return for their blessing. They promised that if you... then I would conceive.”

The duke drew her closer.

“Was the burn bad?” he whispered in her ear.

Erna held up the reddened pads of her right fingers.

“Call a servant next time. We don’t feed them all for nothing.” The duke blew gently across the princess’s palm.

Erna stopped crying. Her lips found his.

The kiss did not last long. She pulled the nightgown over her head and bared herself to her husband.

“Take me. Water me with your seed,” the princess whispered as she tugged off his shirt. She lay back and spread her legs.

It had been a long time since Lafren had felt his old passion for Erna. He felt like a breeding bull, and he wanted more than sex. He wanted passion. The duke loosened the cord at his waist

and lowered his trousers. His spear resembled a dangling noose more than a weapon, but Erna was undeterred. She took him in both hands and began to work him vigorously, never once using her lips. It only deepened his sense that they were mating rather than making love.

Lafren pushed the thought away and covered his wife with his body. His lips touched her throat, then traveled down toward her breasts and their pale pink areolas. His tongue had barely circled one hardened nipple when Erna flinched and pulled her breast away.

“Don’t. Not like that.”

The manhood that had only begun to gather strength went limp again.

Erna was already breathing hard. She locked her legs around her husband’s hips.

“Not like that. Take me like a conqueror,” the princess whispered.

He caught her wrists and pinned them above her head. She submitted with the obedience of a slave. With his free hand, Lafren pinched her nipple. Erna writhed beneath him and begged him to enter her. His hand slid lower, toward her sex, and his fingers sank into the molten mouth of the furnace.

Her arousal passed into him. The ruler did not hesitate.

Her body admitted him.

“Yes, my lord.”

Erna moaned and began to move with him. Her nails dug into his broad back, leaving scarlet scratches.

Lafren thrust with a measured, almost monotonous rhythm, like an athlete at practice.

“Yes... yes,” the princess breathed, arching beneath him. “Please... more.”

Her moans grew louder. Her legs tightened around his torso with strength astonishing in so delicate a creature. The duke turned Erna onto her stomach. She raised her hips, and he entered her again, allowing her to close her legs. Her sex clenched tightly around him. He gripped her buttocks and drove his hips forward several times.

“Yes...” escaped Erna’s lips, and Lafren quickened his pace. The duke’s finger touched her anus and slipped slightly inside. The young woman convulsed in orgasm. Lafren came a moment later.

It brought him neither bliss nor sweet oblivion. Only the exhaustion of a duty performed settled over him, and his soul seemed to sink beneath the dark scum of a marsh.

Spent, Lafren collapsed beside her.

The princess lifted her hips higher, arching like a cat.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“The healer said I should stay like this for a while after intercourse. It makes it easier for the seed to find its way.”

For some reason, that sentence enraged Lafren. He pulled on his trousers, shoved his bare feet into his shoes, and left the bedchamber, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter Thirteen

Waking hurt.

I forced my eyelids apart. A bent sprig of wild rosemary swayed in the breeze inches from my face, while an industrious bee plotted its approach to a flower. Bright sunlight caressed the earth and drew tiny rainbows from the beads of dew.

I tried to move. Pain answered from every part of my body, and nausea surged into my throat. My stomach cramped, forcing my knees toward my chest. I meant to groan, but all that came from my lips was a strange growl.

“Errrr.”

My body scarcely obeyed me. It felt like someone else’s. With an effort, I sat up and looked around. To my right, the snowcapped peaks of a mountain range held up the sky above densely forested slopes. To my left and straight ahead, beyond a narrow stand of trees, the steppe stretched all the way to the horizon—a boundless green sea of grass rolling in the wind.

I looked down at my hands.

They were enormous.

And for some reason, they were blue-green.

One part of my mind accepted this as perfectly ordinary. Another recoiled from it.

My thoughts tangled. I had the distinct impression that someone else was locked inside this body with me. As though I wasn’t me at all.

Who am I, anyway?

My head began to ache from useless attempts to revive a memory that someone seemed to have erased. I knew a great many things about the world around me, yet absolutely nothing about myself.

A faint breeze carried the coolness of the forest—and a savage, unfamiliar stench.

With a tremendous effort, I made the body rise and stagger away from the foul-smelling clearing. I swayed so badly that my feet could barely keep me upright.

A hundred paces from where I had awakened, I realized the clearing had never been the source of the smell.

It was me.

I shuddered, and nausea rose again. My mouth tasted as though a hundred cats had used it for a litter box. I desperately needed water, and something had to be done about the stink. Through the slim white trunks of young trees crowned with strange green curls, I glimpsed the blue gleam of water.

Taking enormous strides, I headed toward a bend in the river.

It was only a small stream. I waded in up to my waist and stopped beside a granite boulder jutting from the water.

Or rather, the body stopped on its own, ignoring every order and intention I gave it.

My empty stomach tightened with a sudden, inexplicable thrill.

The body bent and plunged headfirst into the water.

Only then did I see the tail of an enormous fish.

Guided by instinct, my hands seized it by the gills. The fish thrashed desperately, twisting and beating the water with its tail. My massive fists smashed it against the edge of the boulder.

Its soft, faintly sweet flesh melted in my mouth. The migraine eased, and my stomach rumbled its approval of the offering.

Fish. Doesn’t taste like much, but it kills hunger quickly, my subconscious observed, filling the holes in my knowledge one grain at a time.

The wind died. Ripples faded from the river, leaving its surface smooth as a mirror.

An unfamiliar and thoroughly repulsive head appeared in the reflection: enormous, with a broad mouth, a wide brow, and tiny eyes. The creature was unnaturally tall, with huge hands endowed with terrifying strength. Its strange blue-green skin was covered in black tattoos.

What the hell is this? This can't be happening.

Some instinct told me that the creature was not me—or at least not the me my subconscious remembered.

The eye of the heavenly orb slipped behind a snow-white cloud. The water turned clear. I could see a crayfish stirring along the bottom, and there a school of strange little fish circled beside a large bush of weeds.

Water weeds. Plants that grow underwater, my memory supplied. Whether underwater plants grew in bushes, it could not say.

A bush it is, then.

While I tried to remember what a cluster of weeds was properly called, the cloud continued across the sky and sunlight brought the glitter back to the water.

Gentle. Not burning yet. Or already?

The thought filled me with horror. Sunlight could be dangerous. I remembered that much. I could not remember why, only that I must not remain beneath it for long.

And is that even the sun?

I shuddered.

Driven by a terror I could not name, I rushed beneath the forest canopy and sat on a broad old stump.

Where am I?

I remembered nothing. Nothing at all. Like a drunk coming out of a monstrous bender. There was only pain—savage and burning, though not physical. A strange sense of irreparable loss gnawed at me from within.

Wait. I knew what a hangover felt like.

I ran a hand across the stump. The tree had not fallen. Someone had cut it down.

A human.

But the notches were much too small.

“Course too small. Nasty man-things and their nasty iron,” a rough voice said inside my head.

I tried to turn toward the speaker, but something resisted me. Someone seemed to be exerting every scrap of mental strength to seize control of my body.

“This my body! You stranger here. Me Er, cave troll. My head usually quiet. You break in, then think so loud! You must leave.”

Startled, I raised my eyes toward the sky. It was so blue—blue like home. Sunlight poured into the clearing through the thick leaves of the white-barked trees. I lifted my head, trying to look around and understand who was speaking, where I was, and what in hell was happening.

I clapped both hands over my head, trying to cover my ears. They were not where I thought ears ought to be.

“You not troll. Me troll. You extra here. Get out!” Er growled, and my fist suddenly smashed into the stump.

“That’s it. I’ve finally lost my mind. Schizophrenia,” I muttered.

“Me not skit-so-frenia! Me troll. You extra! Get out!” the troll howled.

For no reason I could control, I slammed my head against a black rock protruding from the ground.

Stars blotted out the landscape. The pain was unbearable, and a lump was clearly rising on my forehead.

“What the hell? Where are you? Come out! I’ll find you and kill you!” I bellowed.

“Brazen body-thief climb into my body, now throw me out? I show you—”

I jerked backward and launched my head at the boulder.

Instinct moved first. I thrust my hands out and braced with all my strength, trying to stop the collision.

“Hey! Stop!”

“No! You crawl out of my body! Or me smash head on rock and pull you out with fingers!”

“That obviously won’t drive me out!” At last, the meaning of the words inside my head began to sink in. “So you’re in here too? Inside me?”

“You inside me.”

The owner of the body arched his back, preparing to strike the stone again.

“Wait. That won’t help. You won’t drive me out—you’ll just kill both of us!” I shouted in my thoughts.

“You think too much. Make my head hurt!” the troll shot back. “Worse than fight with rock.”

“If I’m not you and you’re not me—”

The voice cut me off.

“Cursed body-thief. Get out of my head.”

The body obeyed his will and drew back for another blow. I strained my arms to keep us as far from the granite as possible. A concussion was not part of my plans. A strange struggle for control of the body began.

Despite his slow, broken speech, my opponent had no intention of surrendering.

He drove our fist into our own knee. While the pain distracted me, he smashed our head against the rock again.

The world went dark.

A creature appeared before me in a reek of brimstone. It had a goat’s beard, crooked legs, and small ram’s horns curling from its temples.

“Listen to me, clever boy,” the dark one began imperiously, making no effort to hide his irritation. “Try that suicide nonsense again—or find any other way to shirk your service to Evil—and I will put you to work beside the fire hyena. You’ll spend eternity feeding wood beneath the cauldrons.”

“I’m not trying to kill myself.”

“I saw what you were doing with my own eyes. Consider yourself warned. This is your last chance to prove your loyalty. Fail me again and you will never see the Wheel for all eternity, much less the Rose. No shard will ever raise you again.”

Rage showed in every movement of the demon.

“If it were up to me, you would have been boiling in a cauldron long ago. Your fall damned you. Your soul belongs to me.”

Er was plainly terrified of the little dark creature, though I thought I could break it in half with a single blow. Whatever the reason, my bodily neighbor curled up inside himself, and control passed to me. The sudden freedom threw me off balance, and I fell facedown in the grass.

The goat-bearded creature bent over us until its ram’s horns almost touched my forehead.

“You will do as I command. One way or another. Do you understand me?”

Er, something about this stinks. Let me talk to him.

The troll grunted something. I chose to take it as permission.

“You dark one trick. Soul not yours if no free will,” I said.

The troll’s speech apparatus mangled my thoughts like a broken translator.

The dark one fixed me with a suspicious stare. I decided to use his hesitation to learn whatever I could.

“I remember nothing. Memory empty, like just born.”

“Only strange loss feeling,” Er added aloud, jabbing a finger at our chest. “Like hole here.”

“I care nothing for your holes. You are my weapon. Your task is to sow terror and fear.”

“He only—” Er searched for a word to finish the thought. The right one flew out of his head like a bird startled from its nest.

“Me... me... man!” I forced out.

“A human?” the dark one finished for me, then burst out laughing. “The Master was right about you. He promised I would not regret this.”

“Hu... man,” I repeated in the troll’s language, forcing the disobedient tongue to form the familiar word.

“No. You are not human. You failed your Trial spectacularly. Look at yourself. You are a troll, a cave-dwelling monster. A man-eater. Nothing more than a beast. I gave you this reality, and you are my servant. Do not presume to exercise a will of your own.”

The dark one flicked his tail.

“There is a village at the river bend. When you grow hungry, the body will tell you what to do. By sunset, I want not one stone left standing upon another.”

“Now there man-things in iron. With biting smoke and flying sticks. They bite me in head, and then—”

Er never finished.

“Agsbest brought his war band. Everything is proceeding according to plan,” the goat-bearded creature muttered.

Then he vanished into a haze of blue smoke as though he had never existed. Only a lingering stench—somehow even fouler than my own—remained to mark his visit.

I’m not human anymore. My thoughts drifted as slowly as clouds in windless air. It took a tremendous effort to make my mind work. *So I used to be one... and I failed something. Probably something fragile.*

I studied my enormous hands again.

“If fragile, you probably break it,” Er added aloud. “Must fix broken thing, and then... then my head quiet again.”

“Listen. I don’t know who I am or why I’m here with you. And I like it every bit as much as you do. We have to find some way—”

“Me know way.”

The troll drew our head back toward the rock again.

“Fine! Have it!” I shouted and smashed our forehead against the stone myself.

It was a terrible blow. The skin of my forehead burned, and the savage pain nearly paralyzed us both.

“Well? Did it help? You like that? Want another?” I remembered how Er had cowered before the goat-bearded creature. “Come on! You’ll be the one explaining it to the dark one. I don’t remember a damned thing. Let’s do it. I can keep going. Come on, let’s kill ourselves.”

“Cannot kill self. You right. Must find other way.”

We sat beside the rock in silence, hating each other. I also tried to understand what sort of lunacy was happening, and the splitting pain in my skull did not help. I cannot say how long we sat there, but it felt like an eternity. Even the insects that had fallen silent during our battle with the rock began circling above the grass again.

Then satisfied shouts shattered the quiet. Strange green-skinned creatures emerged among smaller gray beings with large pointed ears.

I rolled onto my stomach and hid, uncertain how to react.

“Those orcs. Small ones goblins. Meat tough and stinky. Not so good as pink-skins, but stop hunger. Me want eat,” Er said, awakening inside me.

Several dozen newcomers settled at the edge of the woods. They dropped bundles from their hips and bags from their shoulders, then began cutting dry trees and fallen branches for a fire.

While I was still trying to understand what was happening, Er seized control of our body.

The troll sprang to his feet and charged. One tremendous punch drove the nearest orc into the ground. The others scattered. Only one raised an ax and attacked. The enormous weapon nearly ended my journey, scraping across our skin. The orc cried out—perhaps a battle cry, perhaps a spell.

Er froze.

I had no desire to die. Instinct took over.

My instinct.

I slipped aside and drove a knee into the overextended orc. Ribs cracked. The strength of the troll's body was colossal. When the strangers saw that their chieftain's magic had failed, they abandoned their burdens and fled in every direction.

Er stirred inside me, grumbling with annoyance.

"You useful after all. Me cannot fight shaman spell. You split him quick, save hide, find breakfast."

With practiced ease, Er tore an arm from the fallen orc's shoulder and began eating it like a chicken leg.

I shuddered.

Er suppressed my urge to vomit.

"You foolish. Meat good. Meat make strong."

Our teeth tore away a substantial piece of flesh and began to chew.

But it doesn't have to be raw.

"Me always eat while warm. Dead meat cold and tough." Er tore away another juicy mouthful. An almost animal pleasure spread from our filling stomach through the rest of the body. "You get used to it. Troll not eat grass. We not cows."

"There have to be other ways," I protested.

Our argument was interrupted without ceremony.

"Ways to do what?" A strange hum and flutter sounded beside our ear.

The troll swatted at it. The nimble little flyer simply hovered beside the other ear.

"A way to do what? And I've certainly never seen a troll who could speak, much less one who talks to himself."

"My neighbor not like troll food," Er replied while I tried to determine who owned the thin little voice and waved at the creature circling our head.

"Stop that. I am neither a fly nor a gadfly. I am grateful that you chased off the kidnappers who stole me from the people who had already captured me, but don't expect too much gratitude. I escaped the cage myself, so technically speaking—"

"You can split me and loud horrible talker? Maybe then me not obey goat-beard. Me go back cave and sleep."

"Talker? Split you? Where is he?"

"Cursed body-thief climb in my head and not leave."

"Now that is interesting. I thought your tribe was close to extinction, and here I find two at once—in the same body." Her voice buzzed beside our other ear.

"Not two. Me troll. Me Er. Talker not troll. He remember nothing, not even name. Show up this morning. Wake me almost noon. Think and think and think. Me afraid head burst."

"For your information, I didn't ask to be here!" I began.

Er parried neatly.

"If you remember nothing, how you know? Maybe you ask. Maybe goat-beard put you here to punish me."

"I don't know. I remember nothing before today. I only know I lost something important, and it left a hole in my heart."

"Only one thing can leave a hole in the heart," the little voice chirped to the beat of fluttering wings.

“What thing?” I felt curiosity awaken inside Er.

“Angels call it heaven’s delight. Demons call it hell’s torment. Only humans—”

The troll’s lips lacked the necessary flexibility. I strained, forcing the tongue to obey. Slowly, clumsily, we managed to pronounce the word.

“Love,” I finished.

“Love,” the little voice echoed. “But love is not always a reward.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Humans. Those are man-things?” Er cut in. “If you know their name humans, then you also Man. Sneaky little man climb into my ear while me sleep. Or you wizard who shot biting smoke at me by village last night? Come out!”

Er roared and prepared to smash our head against the nearest boulder. Fortunately for him, the clearing was littered with them.

“What?” the owner of the tiny voice whispered in horror.

“You deaf? If wings not rustle, you hear everything. You buzz by ear like mosquito.”

“Let me speak to the Man.”

The girl’s words offended Er deeply. He bellowed.

“The Wheel of Samsara has almost stopped,” she said. “Human souls have nearly ceased returning to the world.”

The buzzing fell silent. A tiny girl dressed in flower petals landed on the stone beside the stump, dragonfly wings rising from her back.

“Seven of every eight newborns have no soul. They are born dead. An epidemic of stillbirths is the scourge of these lands. Please don’t be angry. Let me speak to your guest. It is terribly important. Please.”

She pressed her hands together as if in prayer and bowed her red head.

“You not bland. You know respect. Me agree.”

Pleased with himself, Er withdrew into the depths of our subconscious, leaving me alone with the outer world and the strange little girl.

“Is it true?” the flower fairy asked, her voice trembling. “Everything Er said—is it true?”

I nodded with the head Er and I shared.

“It’s true. I remember nothing. Absolutely nothing. As if I never existed before today.”

The girl peered into the troll’s eyes and chanted:

The vicious circle of the ages

An unbidden guest shall break.

In another’s shape

He shall come into the light.

Through love

He shall shatter

The chains of all creation.

The veil shall fall,

The roads shall open,

And a singing voice shall guide the lovers

To the Everlasting Rose...

“What Rose?” I asked. “Goat-beard kept talking about some flower too.”

“He really is from the humans. A true Man, if he knows nothing of the Windblown Flower,” Er grumbled from his hiding place.

I could almost hear gears grinding inside our skull as the troll attempted to think.

“That why orc spell not work on you.”

“Call me Man if you want.”

I turned to the tiny winged fairy.

“And who are you? I don’t remember you either.”

“I am a woodland fairy. Since you rescued me, I owe you a life-debt. In your terms, that makes me your guardian angel—and, while I’m at it, your conscience.”

“Go away. Not now. No need conscience. No time for you. Man broke memory. Must fix. You interfere,” Er complained.

“And how exactly do you intend to repair a memory?” A delightful, mocking smile flashed across the winged girl’s face.

“Memory in head,” the troll growled. “Me hit head on rock and remember how fix memory.”

The woodland fairy scarcely had time to open her mouth before the troll smashed his head with all his strength against an enormous boulder on the riverbank.

The stone split with a crack beneath the monstrous blow.

“Why is your answer to everything hitting your head against a rock?” I snapped at Er.

“Me help, Man. So you leave sooner. Besides, me always do this when forget thing.”

We collapsed onto our backside. My skull rang like a church bell. The beast rubbed the swelling lump on our forehead.

“Did it work?” the fairy asked sweetly.

The blue monster shook his head.

“Not work. Head hurt worse. But pain here gone.”

I pointed at our chest.

“What hurt there?”

“Not hurt. Empty. Man lose more than memory.” Er’s voice suddenly grew sad. “Troll think that memory... but memory should be in head.”

Er rose and scratched the back of our skull thoughtfully.

“We can puzzle that out later,” the fairy said irritably. “You truly remember nothing?”

“Me remember everything. Man remember nothing.” Er shook our head. “Three moons ago Goat-beard come. Say me his servant and must obey. Then he cure my wife, and she birth proper heir. Gods’ punishment touch us too. He send me to village of man-things. Tell me smash and rage. Give soul-crystal, tell me gather dead souls inside—especially human females and little children. Then he make medicine from fear and pain for soul of my heir.”

Er stood.

“In our mountains, only troll with heir is true troll. More offspring, more respect from other trolls. Me and wife try seven times. Seven times she give birth to dead stone.”

Burning, unbearable pain filled the troll’s mind and cut into me like a knife. His suffering was immense. Despair and hope had driven this strange creature into his bargain with Goat-beard.

For an instant, the monster’s dreams opened before me.

A cave. Coals crackling in a hearth at the center of the grotto. A troll woman working at a stone butchering slab. Er sitting close to the fire, telling stories to their children.

The vision vanished.

“By village there were men on stallions, all in iron, no flavor at all. They throw biting wood at me from strange...” Er fell silent, searching for words.

“Show me. Maybe I can help,” I said quietly.

“How you help if remember nothing? Fine.”

Er concentrated. An image formed in my mind: a man clad in plate armor, holding a crossbow.

“Those are bolts. Crossbow arrows.”

“Sneaky liar. You know man-thing weapons?”

“I’m not lying. You showed me, and I remembered.”

“That can happen with amnesia,” the fairy said.

Amnesia is a loss of memory resulting from trauma or some other incident, knowledge surfaced in my mind.

Er spoke it aloud.

The winged girl stared at us in shock.

“How do you possess the knowledge of demiurges? What are you?”

“Head empty like drum. Then Man remember. Bearded one tell him, ‘Not human anymore.’”

“Which means I used to be one. But I broke it,” I added, slowly growing accustomed to the way Er’s vocal cords interpreted my thoughts.

“Who are your demiurges?”

“You not butt in when me talk to conscience,” Er growled and punched our own body.

It dawned on me that this had become the same contest males of every race and species eventually reduced themselves to: comparing cocks.

Without hesitation, I threw us flat on the ground. The impact drove the air from our lungs, and rings—or perhaps stars—swam before our eyes.

“You two are going to kill each other,” the girl cried in alarm. Power entered her voice. “The dark one will be delighted. Do you want to remain his slaves forever? Through every incarnation, across a thousand worlds and ten thousand lives, you would never wash away that brand.”

Her words struck us like a bucket of cold water.

“Perhaps fate gave you this ordeal for a reason. And instead of helping one another, you are measuring your little pricks to see whose is longer. The trouble is, you only have one between you. Just as you share one life in this world. You had better think about how to mend whatever happened.”

“How can I mend it when I can’t even remember what I broke? I remember nothing. Not who I am, not where I am. Not even my name.”

“Why do you need an old sound? I am Er. You are Man.”

“Then I shall call you Luder,” the fairy said. “In the southern tongue it means *two-natured*. Who you choose to be is for you alone to decide. You can remain slaves of the dark one, or live by your own rules. But if you choose freedom, you will have enemies everywhere. No one likes willfulness or disobedience. As for where you are...”

She snorted and shook droplets of water from her wings.

“For you, this is reality. The world in which you will live this lifetime. You are in the Kingdom of Karesia, within the lands of the Duke of Balintia. Why drag yourself into the wilderness of creation?”

“Help me. Just give me the short version. I don’t want to be a pawn in someone else’s game when I don’t even understand the rules.”

I fell silent beneath the fairy’s appraising stare.

“You have a point. Without knowing the rules, you’ll break your neck in no time—and Er’s along with it. That would be a stain on my reputation, since I am your Guardian now.” The fairy scratched the tousled mass of hair atop her head. “You would think nothing could be easier than guarding one of the strongest and nearly indestructible beings on Radeon. But I know someone who may be able to help us.”

“Who?” Er and I asked together.

“The Oracle knows many secrets,” the winged girl squeaked mysteriously.

“But he does not reveal them to everyone,” Goat-beard’s voice said behind us. “A witless brute and a fairy. A most impressive pair. Unfortunately, whoever asks the question must answer the Sphinx’s riddle. He has no chance. Even I would not dare go there. And why should a magical creature meddle in the affairs of lesser mortals? I thought your kind remained neutral.”

“You have no authority to question me. I will answer to the demiurges.”

The fairy planted herself upon the troll’s shoulder, hands on hips.

“So that is how it is.” The bearded shadow stroked his beard. “This creature is not worth the trouble, little one. I am Lord Shazar, the right hand of Kolymar. Even your High One is no equal of mine.”

Darkness filled the demon’s eyes.

“You hold no more power here than I do,” the fairy replied, dispersing the darkness with a snap of her fingers.

“A sorceress so young should not make enemies so powerful,” the dark one hissed.

“It was not my choice. But I will not break my word. I will not surrender Luder to you.”

“Luder? You have already named him? Trolls are not pets. He is accursed, his soul branded by grievous sin. He is mine by definition.”

“If he were truly yours, you would never have released him from the hyena. Out of our way, dark one.”

The voice of a fairy no larger than an ordinary dragonfly carried the power of spring thunder.

“On your knees, Er,” the dark one growled.

But the ogrin shook his bearded head.

“Me not your slave.”

“Then you have made your choice?” Goat-beard asked.

The monster nodded.

“Me choose mend my past. Me not serve you.”

“So be it. Return what is not yours, and our bargain is dissolved. We shall see how this ends.”

The dark one smiled. “But remember, blue-skin: my servants live in luxury. They bring down the mighty. They make history. I can give you every treasure in this world—gold, jewels, power.”

“Why troll need those? Me cannot eat them.” Er pulled a blue crystal from his belt and threw it at the dark one. “Troll is man, and man earns respect himself—from gods and kin.”

“I should have left you more brains,” the dark one said bitterly. “I will turn your existence into hell. All Virania will hunt you.”

“Me not need existence. Me want live. Me want...” Er growled.

My thoughts caught upon the strange name of the land. It sounded like a distant echo from a story forgotten long ago.

“You cannot frighten us,” the little fairy interrupted. “You are a common Whisperer, a relic of the Sundering. If the High Circle still existed—”

“How foolish youth can be.” The demon laughed. “I am no mere Whisperer. I am a Tuner of Souls.”

“And yet you have not advanced very far in your calling,” the fairy said. “Seven thousand years across realities beyond counting, and you have proved nothing—to either the Creator or your master.”

The barb struck home. The dark one flew into a rage.

“You will regret your insolence!” he hissed and dissolved into a yellow cloud of sulfurous gas.

“You are brave, Veronica,” I said admiringly.

“More likely foolish, just like you. The entire army of darkness will rise against us. Every mortal corrupted by vice. All the undead and unclean things left from the reign of King Gastan.”

“Me not fear darkness or man-things!” Er roared. “Me agree help Veronica and Man. Me earn respect.”

“Even with you, brave Er, our chances are miserable.”

“But we have a chance,” I cried. “So we have to try.”

“Find lost thing, even if thousand lives.” The troll lumbered toward the forest. “More interesting than serve dark bearded goat. We go your Oracle. Me not know way.”

“Then west. The worlds touch beneath a green ray in the east. If we walk toward sunset, we cannot miss the emerald gleam.”

Luder rose and followed the tiny fairy fluttering ahead of him.

Chapter Fifteen

Lullaby

The torches in the citadel corridors had nearly burned out. Driven on by disappointment, the duke strode through the halls, waking dozing sentries and frightening the bats. Lines from his dream kept circling through his mind:

*Once every twenty years, O ravenous fate,
She must bring forth her tribute of blood...*

Whose words were they—words as ancient as Tariman itself? And the sorceress's face emerging from the hieroglyphs, young and infinitely old at once. He tried to banish the vision and concentrate on his surroundings, but the sorceress's image seemed to haunt him, appearing in every shadow and every dark recess.

Lafren took a captured sword from the wall, a trophy won by one of his ancestors, and tested the blade with a few sharp swings before hacking at the stuffed cave bear nearby. The predator's straw-packed skull and the thick pole supporting its head were sheared clean through. The steel had kept its edge better than the duke had kept his passion.

The sense of power steadied him, and the visions receded. But he had no desire to return to the bedchamber. He decided to drown his bitterness and disappointment in wine and headed for the cellar.

He had descended only a few steps of the spiral staircase when he caught the painfully familiar scent of essential thistle salt. The ruler stopped and raised his sword. He would have recognized that fragrance even amid all the perfumes in a shop during a scented-water sale.

"Thistle," Lafren whispered.

That was how the linens had smelled in the old temple where an aged hermit had brought him when Lafren was still little more than a boy.

The citadel's wine cellar rivaled the vaults of the High Temple in size: the same enormous casks built into the walls, the same racks of bottles and amphorae, the same smells of wood and damp. There was no counting the hours Lafren had spent in such labyrinths during his apprenticeship.

His mentor's favorite punishment had been war against the rats. The offending novice was given nothing but a stick. Utter darkness, narrow passages, claws scraping over stone—once the mentor's footsteps faded into the black, the mind could conjure any horror it pleased.

Lafren shuddered at the memory of the dungeon's brazen little mistresses brushing cold against his skin. Yet that ordeal had cured the future paladin of his fear of the dark. Before long, the seven-year-old boy had learned to strike by sound and find his way by touch. The cellar had first become his punishment, then his refuge, and finally his domain. Sometimes he even misbehaved on purpose just to return to the darkness. Down there he was no clumsy little boy. Down there, he was lord and master.

The rats soon learned that the scent of thistle meant death. The paladins of the order used essence salt as a ward, though in truth it was merely a by-product left over from making the fragrant water that sold faster than it could be bottled. And how many cuts and scrapes had gathering it in the Baniada Mountains left on his skin? Too many to count.

But even that was not what mattered.

It was how his mother had smelled on her final day.

She had poured an entire vial of the impossibly expensive distillate over Lafren, locked her son in the cellar, and ordered him to keep silent—no matter what he heard.

The storm had been unlike anything the world had ever seen. It seemed the heavens themselves were cracking beneath the torrents of lightning. Thunder shook the walls. The tempest had caught

the king's cousin and his family at a hunting lodge on their way to the capital. Rain lashed down as if the gods had once again decided to wash every living thing from the face of Izendar.

Warriors and courtiers alike had huddled around the old hearth, whose flames warmed the house and gave them the light of hope. Lafren, only five years old, pressed himself against his mother. Dismissing the nursemaid, she lifted her son into her arms.

"Everything will be all right. It's only a storm," the princess whispered like a prayer as she rocked him, and Lafren almost believed her.

Almost.

An agonized scream outside heralded the arrival of a new disaster. His father drew his weapon and rushed out, the guards racing after him. Soon Uvandi's battle cry drowned beneath the roar of the rain. Steel rang. Mortally wounded men screamed. Yet every sound dissolved into a strange noise like pigs feeding noisily at a trough.

The princess held her son tighter.

"Whatever happens, whatever you hear, you must stay quiet. All right? We'll play a game, you and I. Would you like that?"

But Princess Katatida's blue eyes were grave. Lafren nodded.

She drew an emerald vial on a fine gold chain from beneath her dress.

"I'm going to sprinkle you with a magic potion. It will turn you to stone, and you must sit very still and quiet, like a mountain. Then I'll go find Papa and ask him to look for you. If you win, we'll travel to Borona this summer, and I'll let you choose a real dagger. Do we have a bargain?"

Young Lafren nodded again. For the dream of owning a true weapon, he would have done anything.

His mother pulled aside a reed mat and raised the cellar hatch. Drops of the "magic" potion spattered the boy. Only years later did he realize it had been nothing more than distilled thistle water. But then—then he still believed in fairy tales.

Mastering his fear of the dark and warming his heart with dreams of Boronan steel, the prince climbed down beneath the floor and froze. He sat in silence, motionless, scarcely daring to breathe. The noise and desperate screams above seemed part of a children's game—until his mother cried out and something heavy fell across the hatch.

For a long while afterward, something above clawed at the floorboards. Lafren even smiled, thinking his father was trying to frighten him into giving himself away with a scream. Then something began dripping from overhead, and the cramped cellar, crowded with barrels, filled with a hideous smell and the metallic taste of blood.

Still, the dream of possessing his own treasure kept his heart warm.

And darkness closed his eyes.

No one knew how long the boy remained in that cellar. There had been everything: animal terror, the thought that they had simply forgotten him, futile attempts to lift the hatch himself. Everything except noise and screams.

Because Lafren had promised.

He had nearly surrendered to despair and sat with his eyes shut when voices sounded outside again. He flinched, struck one of the clay pots, and sent it crashing onto the stone floor. A heartbeat later, brilliant sunlight blinded him. Strong hands lifted him from his prison—the hands of his future mentor, Grammaton cleric of the High Temple, master of sword and prayer, Sir Ulric.

The soft melody of a song broke through his memories.

The duke's footsteps became soundless. He raised his sword and moved toward the music. He could not make out the words, only a low, lilting tune. Ten paces farther on, candlelight flickered behind a cask and water splashed.

Lafren sprang into the light.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The girl spun around in fright. The mop fell from her hands, overturning the washbasin, and she herself dropped to her knees in the spreading puddle, pressing her forehead to the floor.

“M-my... m-my lord,” she forced out, barely audible. “I’m Katy, the laundress’s helper. Mercy!”

“Get up and answer me. What is a laundress’s helper doing in the wine cellar in the middle of the night?”

“I—I was only...”

“Enough stammering. What are you doing here?”

“I was the laundress’s helper until noon today, and then Mistress Tati was reprimanded by the princess because the linens smelled strange. Her Majesty flew into a rage over the smell. And Tati blamed me, but I... I swear, I washed them myself, and then I sprinkled the sheets with my ma’s herbal brew to keep vermin away. Lice or bedbugs, you know. My mother got the secret from my granny, back when the plague came and the dead rose out of their graves. Granny said the whole village died of the sickness, but everyone in her cottage lived.”

The girl rattled off the words as though terrified he might interrupt before she could defend herself. Her eyes, wide with fear and black as a summer night, followed his every movement, trying to guess whether he meant her harm and what would happen next. Her nervous hands clenched the hem of her skirt, released it, then seized it again a moment later.

“A brew, you say? And where is this grandmother now?”

Lafren breathed in. The girl’s scent was indeed delicate: a subtle, faintly sweet fragrance with notes of honey and the barest hint of bitter almond. There could be no mistake. It was the scent of Tears of the Thistle.

“They burned her. Accused her of witchcraft and burned her. But the recipe survived.”

Something in the laundress’s tale did not add up. Tears of the Thistle did more than repel small insects. It worked against all blood drinkers, ghouls included, and blocked a witch’s chakras, preventing her from replenishing her magical reserves. Acolytes did not simply memorize the protective potions; the knowledge was beaten into them with switches.

That was not something a man forgot.

“Tati,” Lafren said thoughtfully. “Remind me again what she did.”

“The head laundress ordered me to soak the ruined linens in wine vinegar to get rid of the smell. And while I was here, she told me to scrub the floors. I still have to haul enough water to fill the tubs before morning.” The girl’s voice trembled with injured resentment.

“Linens? Vinegar? Floors? You must take me for a fool! What spell were you whispering down here?”

“It was a lullaby, sir,” the girl replied. “My mother sang it to me when I was little. Now, when I’m frightened, I sing it to make myself brave.”

“Prove it.”

“I... I can’t...”

“You dare defy me? Do you know who I am?” the duke hissed, still seething from his quarrel with his wife.

“Forgive me.” The girl pressed her forehead to the floor again. “Please don’t kill me, sir. I’m new to the castle. I’ve never gone farther than the servants’ dining hall from the laundry yard. I’m not allowed. Mistress Tati said so.”

Lafren looked down at himself and nearly burst out laughing. Dressed in a nightshirt and sleeping cap, with a sword thrust before him, he hardly presented a figure of majesty or terror.

“Sing,” Lafren commanded.

At first the girl sang so softly and timidly that he could barely hear her.

Sleep, my own blood, do not fear,

Hush-a-bye, my baby dear.

Through the still and dark of night,

*I shall pray till morning light.
Neither plague nor cruel war
Ever shall come near your door.*

Let all sorrow pass you by;

Song shall guard you where you lie.

Her voice grew stronger. The song was filling her with courage and resolve.

Sleep, my own blood, do not fear,

Hush-a-bye, my baby dear...

Lafren caught himself silently forming the refrain along with her, as he once had beside his mother in a childhood now impossibly distant. He did not know the song's words, but "hush-a-bye" left his lips as if he were enchanted. The girl's voice stirred his frozen soul almost to tears. The duke swallowed the lump rising in his throat.

With my song I'll cover you,

Shield you from all harm that grew.

Morning sun will wake and rise,

Flood the room with golden light.

Evil fades and darkness goes;

Only love no weariness knows.

Hush-a-bye, my baby dear...

The duke found himself gazing at the singer, remembering his mother's melodies. In Katy's voice lived the same aching tenderness, the same resolve and strength with which any mother would do whatever she must for her child—shielding that child with her own body against every misfortune.

Only now did Lafren understand what his mother's calm and certainty had cost her. What courage it must have taken, especially with terror tearing her apart from within.

Katy was frightened too. Frightened—and still she sang. She sang in defiance of her fear.

The duke wiped a treacherous tear away with the sleeve of his nightshirt and, without embarrassment, began to sing along with the laundress.

Hush-a-bye, my baby dear,

All my love I give you here.

Sleep, my own blood, do not fear;

I shall always guard you, dear.

The girl fell silent.

"That song won't protect you from sickness, much less ghouls," Lafren muttered, looking into the maid's eyes, black as a warm July night. For some reason, their gleam reminded him of that very vial, shaped like a bunch of grapes—the emblem of the Bardanian family.

"I have no other weapon. I'm only a laundress's helper."

The girl's pale pink lips pressed into a firm line.

She isn't timid. Or is this the courage of one who has no choice?

The thought crossed the duke's mind, and once again he remembered himself as an apprentice. He too had sung back then—sung so he would not hear claws scraping on stone or the rustle of the chitinous, crawling creatures that inhabited the castle dungeons.

A girl like this would die before disobeying an order. Obedience worthy of the highest clerics.

"Hmm. Fortunately, I have one," Lafren added aloud.

Steel flashed in the candlelight.

"It isn't fitting for a lord to guard a pauper. Surely you have more important matters."

"I am a paladin of the White Rose. I have sworn to guard and protect all who are weak—and most certainly the duke's subjects. You are a subject of Lord Lafren of Katatida, aren't you? And are you planning to sit there all night? You said yourself you had floors to scrub, linens to soak, and water to haul."

The girl nodded. Plainly flustered, she adjusted her soaked skirt with a shy, girlish gesture. Her fingers, clenched around her apron, betrayed that she had no idea how she was supposed to behave.

“Sir... are there truly ghouls down here?”

The man remembered why he had come and smiled.

“No ghouls. But keeping watch is serious business. Tell you what,” Lafren offered, surprising even himself. “You finish washing, and I’ll stand guard. I have nowhere I need to be.”

“But your watch?”

“What about it? I’ll inspect the well afterward. Sometimes unclean things get into them—”

“How could an unclean thing get into spring water?” the girl asked with a smile. “And a noble paladin shouldn’t waste his time on a simple girl like me. Duke Lafren is harsh and quick to punish. If he learns you neglected your duty, he’ll punish you—and as for me... I can’t even imagine what he’ll do to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You aren’t from these parts, are you? Katatida’s laws are very harsh. The punishment is a fine in gold or death. People like me have no money. There’s only one place for me—to feed his hounds.”

Lafren nearly dropped his sword in astonishment.

“What are you talking about? What sort of tales have you been listening to?”

“They’re no tales, my lord. Only the other day the stableman was torn apart. He tightened the princess’s saddle girth too much. Mistress Tati said, ‘Thank the gods the princess decided his fate. It was a terrible death, of course, but a quick one. If the duke had judged him, the poor wretch would have spent days dying in agony.’”

“She said that? Those exact words?” Lafren asked, tightening his grip on the sword.

“Word for word,” Katy whispered.

“Hmm. Then I have all the more reason to help you. I can hardly allow them to feed you to the dogs on my account,” the duke muttered.

Gathering up the skirts of his nightshirt, he walked toward the tub of linens. But the moment he reached for the pitcher beside the sour-smelling wash, the laundress caught hold of him.

“You have a very kind heart, my lord. But I still can’t let you do my work. What if there really are ghouls here? They might attack while you’re tired or unprepared. Just stay with me. That’s help enough. I’m not frightened when you’re here, and the world seems brighter somehow. Besides, the linens must be handled carefully. Too much vinegar will ruin the cloth, and that they certainly won’t forgive.”

Is life in my own domain truly so terrifying? How did I allow this to happen?

The rustle of approaching footsteps interrupted Lafren’s thoughts.

The duke pressed a finger to his lips and slipped into a gap between the oak casks.

Katy clenched her teeth and began scrubbing the floor vigorously with the mop.

“Look at that, Stan. The laundress is ripe for the plucking. Fine little piece, isn’t she?”

A cheerful bass voice shattered the cellar’s silence, and a heavysset guard stepped into the candlelight, wearing a shirt of mail that did not fit him. Another man followed, older, in a studded leather vest with a long dagger at his hip.

“Always trying to find someplace to stick your cock,” growled the one called Stan. “If you’d kept it in your breeches, we wouldn’t be prowling around the cellar now.” Turning to the girl, he went on, “Don’t hold it against us. This isn’t our choice. We follow orders same as anyone.”

The dagger gleamed in the candlelight, but Katy seized the mop and plainly meant not to die without a fight.

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