

Matter of Kyrridea

Pact over Forsaken

To you, devoted into finding secrets of a mind,
I thank you for revealing my quill proficiency,

And you, who attired peasantry in bronzes,
Grateful I am for your approval on my first steps,

To the one, with gaze widely spreaded on what is upon him,
I value thine enthusiasm from the days when pages less steady were,

To three of you, from our metropolitan adventure,
for spent time and approbation,

To daughter of Perla de Oriente, have many thanks of mine,
Even though the ink ornated many pages, by the time we met,

To the foreigner, who call the distant duneland their home,
I owe you numerous words of appreciation,

And to all of you, who I meet rarely yet with enjoyment,
Presenting you my progress on occasion was a pleasure.

I.

It was dawn at the first days of Fvaernnas. The rising sun casted pale light, slowly revealing craggy shore. The shoreline was covered in melting snow, from which a bunch of yellowish year old grass peaked through. Amongst the blades of grass a few of rugged rocks were protruding.

Horison from direction opposite to seaside was covered by solitarly growing conifers with short crowns, which were waving slowly under force of wind carried from the sea. Along the coast a path was stretched on, leading to nearby thorp. Rannuldun – which was the name of place – was not so different from other villages in Jätynjodr. Rannuldun consisted of a few huts, with the wood sculpted shrine at the center that was portraying a figure with four rhombuses close to his chest.

Locals were living from what surrounding offered them – such as fishing, pasture sheeps or shipbuilding. A coin in such places was simply replaced with barter or service. Gold was only seen in pockets of outsiders, which in parts were a rare sight. So Rannuldun was a quiet place left from unwanted surprises, that eternal idyll was not disturbed even by arrival of mysterius man named Geonrod, middleaged loner living peacefully in Rannuldun from around a dozen years.

Geonrod didn't have a difficult live in Rannuldun the man was living solitarly in his hut built in slight distant from other houses. Geonrod was self-sufficient in matter of basic needs, and so he was rarely seen in village, only at early mornings, since he used to take walk around edges of thorp or near the shoreline, always heading back to his home without any worries or interesting assumptions.

However, at some day his attention from his daily walks brought a whine of newborn child. Alerted by the cries Geonrod realized that near the wooden totem laid mysterious wrapping. Inside of it he noticed a source of whines – an infant covered in white sheets. In the moment when Geonrod came closer, the child stopped its tearless cry and piercingly nailed his eyes on Geonrod. Not only his unnatural behaviour desoriented Geonrod but also his face – the child's skin despite despite

being exposed to chill was natively pale and though, the most of its head was covered by sheets something tells Geonrod that the infant will grow into someone past all belief comely. In child's profile was felt unexplainable nobility and seriousness, its pitch-black eyes were only tracking approaching Geonrod, not showing any sign of being afraid of the man.

Geonrod slowly bened down to a child and took it onto his arm, the material, in which the child was covered, was surprisingly soft. Geonrod also realised that he has a child in his arm for the first time in his life. The thought was swiftly brushed away by instincts telling him that someone watches him.

The sences of a man was not fooling him, indeed during his approach to a child he didn't noticed that almost the whole village was slowly coming closer to a wooden shrine.

– Geonrod? – one of villagers called him. – Wha's that bairn in dine arms?

– I just found him. I know as little about the child as you.

– A bunch of derns with du already is so better be clear about that one.
– villager glared sharply at Geonrod.

Geonrod gone silent, ignoring the uneasy stare from a villager.

– Oh, du doesn't get upset about dat dimwit, Geonrod. Glad I am dat du founded dat poor little one. – stated peasant woman, ending occured silence. – No doubt, da bairn on its own would freeze to a bone. Let me take it on hands, wills du?

Geonrod handed over the infant without a word.

– On my look the child is an out. But wha would abandon kid here, in such forsaken place? – commented the woman with child.

– By sweet face of its I bet dat's some noble's bastard bairn. – claimed village smith, taking a glance at the child through woman's shoulder. – Dat blanket which veils him seems to have quite a value. And yeah, why kid thrown got away here, in Rannuldun?

– Dat has some sence in it, Harivir. – one of villager nodded in approval. – Beardman of us said many times dat shameful bastards are silently thrown from keeps to, yous know, not bring a shame to family's name.

– Dat bruck worth is pesky south nobles, Ulryk! – smith scolded villager with anger. – Our dignitary would never do such thing!

– Du’s out of mind, Harivir! A bunch of our nobles put dey in such shame, mimicing the great south. – confident about his statement Ulryk continued: – How many crowns will convince dee? Earl Dileren when he hanged dat village elder because he didn’t welcome legionares? And what about dat blether of currently only in good memories Earl Terlog dat with some vasilean official our kin an pack of illiterate boors called in letters?

– Silent du be! Du and dy babbling about good auld authority. At the Forefather Land we would be having a better life, my arse. – Harivir shook his hand with anger. – Ye’ll be prattling again that..

– Shut your mutts! – a peasant woman with child hushed them. – You goin to wake the bairn up! Shoutings keep on shindies during mead!

– Wouldn’t be the best – Geonrod broke into conversation, receiving a stare from the villagers – if we head to the Herberman with the child? His knowledge could give a better picture about child’s origin. Hand me over the child, I’ll be heading to a wiseman.

Geonrod’s statement met with villagers’ noddles and mutters of approval. Before the man received the infant, gathered peasants quickly make space for upcoming to them elder.

Dead silence occured, intereferenced only by rhythmic clatter of staff on trodden soil. It was difficult to guess where arrived Herberman peeked his eyes on, since, like he used to, he kept his face hidden under cowl, under which only the long, silver beard was coming out.

– And so this is a reason for such perturbation. – Herberman’s words cutted through silence.

Voice of his was sounding rough, yet powerful. Herberman took few steps closer to a child, gesticullary instructing peasant woman to give him the infant. His analysis took few drops of sandglass, accompanied with few quiet fascinated mutters of Herberman.

– Now whit? Whit is with da bairn? From which parts is from? – village smith interrupted his analysys, with tone full of nosyness.

– Patience, Harivir. – voice of Herberman didn’t show any sign of resentment to smith’s behaviour. – I was able only take a proper look onto child’s eyes. Hm, seems they have foreshadowed the astonishing willpower of their possesor. The eyes of its reveals some unexplainable mightiness.

– Whit made du thinks dat way, elder? Was it thanks to dy magicka? – asked peasant woman, more respectfully than previous villager.

– Oh, not at all, my dear Briska. My „magicka” is nothing but a slight knowledge about herbs. This little one exposed his mental potential with mentioned earlier eyesight. I can feel his unbending attitude, which not many can claim to have. Hm, and especially just an infant. Gods surely know what secrets are hidden in this brittle newborn.

Briska nodded unsurely in thanks, then quickly turned to the rest of villagers. A bunch whispers flew amongst them, full of probyness and curiosity.

– For certain this cause is also fascinating to you, though I must beg for a bit of silence. I have not end my investigation yet. – loud statement of Herberman’s immediately ended whispers around peasants.

When silence took place, Herberman continued his analysis. Gently and with prudence, Herberman unfasted material covering child’s head revealing its long, close to scull ears. The look of them was bringing an image closer to insect antennae than human earlobe. The villagers gasped in shock.

– By best, dat’s a bloody clean Inkarn! – Harivir forgot quickly about the demand of remaining silent. – Just like in auld stories..

Another wave of whispers flowed through the crowd, ones at the back reached out to take a look on an infant. Herberman at this moment stopped caring to keep a composure around him.

Via gestic Herberman summoned Geonrod to order him keeping a child under its armpits, so he could uncover a part of sheet on child’s shoulder. This time he revealed two mysterious signatures on its neck – one resembling something close to drop of water, the second a whirl of wind.

– Good people of Rannuldun, we have a guest from Celestial world. The infant is marked with symbols of Yane and Tidvron. In old folk tales that sort of signatures was put at hybrides, a heir of two living, elemental representations. – announced Herberman, almost in whispers.

Gathered villagers started downing their heads, likely due to respectful voice of Herberman or dread of unknown. Though right after, they got quickly taken by their curiosity and started spreading amongst themselves bits of knowledge how rarely seen are hybrides. Noisy whisperings was cutted out by Briska,, when she took few steps closer to the Herberman.

– So if the kid is heir of twa heaveners then why it was abandonn here, not around the clouds? And why, with all of respects to our gods, the kid looks, well not very godly? – woman asked.

– The structure of Celestial society and so deite figures is unknown to us, Earthlings, particularly from common cause like ours. We can only suppose that their race is thriven by a long time conflict, which can be assumed from few stories about clashes between Celestial factions. And how many truth is in such tales we don't know. Perhaps we are not and won't be destined to know that, as just earth creatures.

Herbaman's oration left only a sign of unenlightment on face of Briska. Since she was closest one, Herbman handed her child asking her to announce a gender of child – turned out the infant was a girl. Oldman right after convene a quick voting to point a foster figure for a found child.

Twenty from two dozens of gathered voted for Geonrod, as he found the newborn. Rest of them were for Herbman, but due to opinion of majority they quickly went to their side. Geonrod agreed with decision of Rannuldun, though he clearly wasn't confident about given him role.

– I'd like to complete granted me task, yet for my whole life I was never taking care of a newborn, nor grown kid. I don't want to hurt the child, due to my lack of knowledge. – Geonrod stated.

– Don't keep such chagrin in thy mind, Geonrod. Certain I am, thou wilt not be left on deep waters by our villagers with parenting. – Herbman added quietly: – And thou knowest what lesson thou shouldst give the little girl. Teach her what you know the best. Practice her arms sword wielding, legs wandering and head recognising the wonders of our world. Certainly she will be grateful for thy teaching, when right time comes, the Tidvron's blood flowing through her veins will make her hungry on many roving at her youths.

– You know awfully a lot about so called mysterious race, „Herbman“. – Geonrod whispered back, giving him a amused look.

– Thou art certainly aware that we do not wish to cause any disturbance here. It is for their sake and safety, will be better, if village consider highborns as a regular folk.

– That sounds reasonable. But that always sounds from you in such manner, my old friend. Then may your and village's volition be fulfilled.

Herbman acquitted words of a man with serene smile.

Gathered started following Geonrod once the man without any more word headed to his hut. Only Herbman stayed in the center of village, his head faced the rhombuses at chest of shrine. With silent mutters in melodious language he nodded to totem, then slowly walked away to his house, in company of only sougning wind and patter of his staff.

II.

Eighteen years¹ passed from past event. The girl under guidance of Geonrod grown into wanderer figure, just like her foster father.

From little kid Geonrod was taking her to several day strays, teaching her how to recognise useful herbs and wild fruits, as a teenager she was accompanying the man in hunts for wildlife. Under experienced eye of her father she was acquiring proficiency in rope tying, move in wilderness, striking fire, reading from weather signs and many else skills necessary to live from what nature can offer. When she wasn't mastering her survival expertise, a girl was taught the way of a sword with her father. Geonrod, as an experienced fencer showed her many sword techniques, suggesting her to based on them a shape ofwee her own style.

– Your hands and body will tell you, in which moves you may send your blade. Listen to its pleads and you'll be able to feel your sword as your own limb. – Geonrod told her many time, through the years the girl understood his words deeper, and so she slowly started shaping her own fence style.

Both of them visited home rarely, many time greeting their homestead covered in dust and cobwebs. If they were arriving, it was taking place only at dawn, to avoid any unnecessary attention from villagers.

Although the villagers, like they used to, were respecting Geonrod's privacy that the girl not only once met with their sight revealing from fascination to disgust, which by the time it kept her from staying away from people in Rannuldun.

Her not seen everyday in Jätynjodr appearance also was bringing a bunch of attention – unchanged by years piercing ink black eyes, athletic physique standing six foot tall and jet black hair, dense enough to keep her long ears hidden, which minorly helped her to stick out less from locals.

Staying in Rannuldun often meant to have a visit from Herberman – despite his difficults with walking oldman happily was coming to a his

1 One year consists of 400 days

old friend, occasionally he was also giving little hybride practices of writing and reading.

Oldman called her many times „Heir of Stars” which leaded to giving her a name Iseren, meaning „star” in ancient language, a speech currently used only in prayers to gods.

What disturbed her caregivers was the fact that Iseren though she was surely interested in teachings of Geonrod and Herberman, she never from her own asked about anything not related with their lessons, even some simple and nourishing curiosity questions, just for instance her own origin.

Her way of behaving was samely distant and quiet from the day Geonrod founded her; the man never saw a tear or smile on Iseren’s face. However Geonrod nor Herberman couldn’t dive into reasons of her monotony, counting only on unknown day, when she will get better somehow. Old wiseman could only insure Geonrod that Iseren perhaps will gain some needs to at least get to known the matter of her origin.

Some day a man felt to face the girl to get answers to her way of being. Carried by his sudden thought he placed away a piece of wood, in which he had intentions to carve a figure, with fast glanced he took a look inside his hut to track a girl. It only required from him to peek above the table in front of which he while ago was sitting peacefully – he found Iseren near the threshold silently watching the sky. Thoughts veiled over her mind to the state that she didn’t notice creaks of the wooden floor, accompanying the steps of a man. Just like woken up from the spellbound she turned her head to greet the face of standing above her Geonrod.

– Oh, it is you, father. Apologies for not hearing you. – her voice was soothing, yet deep, almost as masculine one.

– On what were you looking in clouds, Iseren? – leaning on doorframe Geonrod also took a peek on sky. – Did you assumed something from them?

– I.. I feel like I was there. – sight of her didn’t turn away from clouds. – When I was little, Herberman was calling me Heir of Stars many times. Is that somehow related with my current thoughts?

Geonrod didn’t answer immidietally, still enjoying the look of the sky.

– Why now? – the man asked.

– I have no idea, father. I think my mind was focused on blade and wanders – Iseren replied, slightly frowning in thought. – Now however, when I finally found my peaks..

– Oh, Iseren, you nor myself didn't reach our peaks yet. – Geonrod corrected her. – Our livetime resembles a mount hike, ledge by ledge we take higher, yet our journey is veiled in clouds, it is unknown will be to reach the steps.

– If so, I feel I can taking a sit on of conquered steps, for a while. I want to get to know, what have I left behind. And then I will continue granted me hike.

Geonrod smiled faintly in response.

– Not to shabby with your rhetorics. If you're so confident about yours, give a visit to Herberman, perhaps he will help you with your farther hikes. Go to him and surely he will give you answers to anything you need to know. – after his word, Geonrod headed back to inside of the house.

Iseren knew the road to Herberman's hut very well, so she wasn't thinking too deeply before standing up from threshold and heading towards the center of Rannuldun. In company of whispering wind and creaks of wood birds, she took a slow pace to Herberman's hut. While passing the village, she was feeling at her neck many glances and heard a few whispers about her.

The girl didn't care to keep her ears open for their words, and so she ignored any passed peasant, until she reached the door of Herberman's house. Iseren knocked few times, from which the young female peeked through.

– Wha there? – her nonchalant voice quickly changed, when she noticed Iseren. – Ah! Forgive me, dear. Name's Grothe, I take care of Herberman, poor one pure boke got at his auldest. Any else stoter I would kick out like a hund, but for sire Geonrod and his daughter door's open aie, he welcomes yous anytime. So go on, what's his is dus.

Grothe opened the door wider, making enough space for Iseren so she could enter the hut.

Furnishment inside did not differ in any way from other huts in Rannuldun – hearthfire at the center, few crude wooden furniture around it, and floor covered with stiff mats or pelts. Any household item was

stored in baskets, pottery or sacks. What made house unlike like others in thorp were scattered around tables many alchemic instruments, notes about performed by Herberman researches, also shelves with books, amongst which were peeking clay bowls and jars stuffed with wide variety of alchemic reagents. Atmosphere inside was mysterious, saturated by scent of dried fungi and herbs.

Iseren found owner of the home hunched at the stool in corner, while after, when she get used to many devices firstly seen by her, since the Herberman used to take a role of visitor, not the host.

Despite the oldman was not wearing cowl, from his shock of hair and lush beard it was still difficult to even guess his facial expression. Cloth that was covering him partially showed emaciated hands covered sparsely in liver spots.

Due to noises near threshold Herberman raised head, revealing his sharp eyes in gray tone which contrasted with his pale and weakened body.

– Many snows melted since I saw you, Iseren. What bringed you here? – dry, yet still powerful voice of Herberman spreaded over the whole hut.

– I wished to find something about my origin, Herberman. – Iseren stepped closer to the oldman. – But you seem to have mor serious problem, a sort of illness. What is the matter with your state?

– I’m old, that is the matter. Even my knowledge cannot trick or overcome that destiny. Some day I and all of us will close eyes and never open them again.

– You sounds peaceful, talking about such thing. Are you not afraid?

– Only a man without a soul wouldn’t be afraid. I am scared and so I’m avoiding the death as it is carved into our heart. But the sowed seed has to be someday scythed as a mature ear. Before that inevitable doom will meet me, I shall give an answer to anything that came to your mind.

Via gest he showed Iseren the chair, also ordered Grothe to come back to her house. Woman wasn’t hiding her anticlimax, yet she listened to wish of Herberman and with linger left the house. Shortly after the slam of closed door, old wiseman reached for one of books on the shelf and grabbed well used piece of folded paper.

– Before I start anything Iseren. Do you remember foundations of our beliefs? – Herberman asked, leaving the book with paper at the table.

– Yes, I do. According to the tales five of gods was in possession of elementar crystals which they were sharing to each other to create clean form of element. One of gods named Nyren wanted to form a liveform from the created matter. And so he refused at some point giving away the crystals, when his turn to rule ended. Due to that, the rest of gods felt right to take justice in their hand and with force take the crystal back. Each god take the crystal and pull it to himself, which leaded to tear the Nyren apart into four pieces, turning his ripped body into source of life essence and turning gods away from themselves, from now on ruling only one, opposing to the rest element.

– „According to the tales”, hah, few here would be quite upset to hear that, to put it nicely. – Herberman laughed briefly. – But I can’t argue with that, Iseren. How close to the truth is that story even old Herberman does not know. Though that folktale give a slight picture on Celestial society. As we know from the tale’s content, gods took one of crystals breaking eternally the harmony once present between elements and themselves. gods afraid of each other, after finding out what properties had the remains of Nyren, started creating first Celestials.

Herberman grabbed a charcoal and started to draw something at the table.

– Iriam, god of warmth and chill, Yane rules over liquid, Tidvron vapour, and Gerana, any form of mass. – Herberman named each of drawn signature.

– So the Celestials are under subordination of particular element?

– Just like that, Iseren. Which leads to assumption they are mortal enemies to each other, and I have in mind your parents. However my knowledge too penurious is to tell something more, I can only point out a potential help, an university in Visildeia. I think the scholars through the years could achieve better assumptions about Celestial race.

– Visildeia, never heard of. Is it far to the place?

– Yes, it is very far from here. Take a look on your own, perhaps that will give you a better picture. – after his words, Herberman unfolded the piece of paper, revealing the scetch of land piece.

And just like Herberman stated, map covered pretty spacious terrain. She naturally started from searching for Jätynjodr. She didn't hide her surprise once they found that the land was merely a fraction of the Senvold which until then was whole world known for a girl. Region itself was just a bit of the whole landmass. Her attention was brought right after to the name of the land, written in the cover of map – Kyrri-dea.

„So this is what the land I live in is named.” – she realised.

After that reflection she felt sudden desire to see at least a fraction of places covered by the map. While taking a more proper look to the map details she noticed that a handful of provinces, which included partially the Senvold, was surrounded in burgundy border. A glance taken at the map's legend gave her an answer – it was marking for Visildean Empire borders. Even just a thought that one monarchy could rule under such spacious region made her impressed.

– That's stunning. – she whispered, realising after while she said that out loud.

– Indeed Iseren, the world is stunning. – Herberman supported her with a warm look seeing how fascinated about the map is Iseren.

Iseren didn't felt the passing of time while she was studying the map. During her visit the sun moved around two hand's lenght through the sky. After thanking for taken time, Iseren was about to move to the entrance, until oldman stopped her and handed her over his map and untouched during their conversation book, stating that Iseren will make a better use from them than himself.

The girl thanked him once again and headed back to her father's hut. She passed few gawkers that started pretending that her presence was not a reason to stop their daily labour. Iseren, like she used to, didn't care about their whispers thrown behind her back, she only replied with noddos to few more respectful villagers.

Once she went back to hut, Iseren found her father sculpting in wood, he clearly was giving the piece of material a shape of devine figure. The man raised his head from whittlework, when he noticed her presence.

– Hah, I see that Herberman still bounteous and willing is, to share the knowledge. – Geonrod commented facetiously the gifts holded by the girl. – How the oldman fares?

– Not so glad. As he stated, he feels as he is about to face his end.

Geonrod frowned sadly.

– By all banes.. The upcoming loss of Herberman is going to impact the Rannuldun for certain, folks around here will start thinking back about each non-Jätyn with hostility. Well, we can at least enjoy the remaing peace, since Herberman still keeps that thorp in some shape.

Iseren remained silent about impending situation, she only walked to the hut, full of entanglement in her mind.

– At the stir in mind a short walk will work like a charm. – Geonrod proposed, recognising her troubled look. – Get a cape, I'll grab some bows from outside.

Iseren nodded without a word. She placed book at the table, and took off a cape from entablature. She met her father near the household.

As he claimed he prepared two bows – one slunged over his shoulder, the second holded in his hands, together with a bunch of flinthead arrows.

– Only a short walk, but would be stupid to miss out a chance for a fine meal, eh? – The man alluded whither Iseren placed her eyes.

Iseren didn't reply.

– Besides some bow practice might come handy, with such opportunity to know a bit of world now. – added Geonrod, not upset about her silence.

– Is something on your mind about that father? – Iseren asked.

– Indeed. As you may remember folks in Rannuldun send once for while a caravan to Galundharr, that one stronghold quite a road from here. We pay with goods for pretection from our lord, some leftovers are then sold in city. I was hiring to caravan many times, for handful of silver or such I stood guard, looked for bandits or other foes. But now my sword is not that much stronger from a earl's conscript or broad shoulder from Rannuldun. However I see a potential guard in you. What about that Iseren?

– Sounds good, a bit of silver might come handy in the future.

– Speaking of the future, that's not an end about the offer. After you reach city's walls you're free to go, payment will be considered only for one escort.

– So this is how the matter goes.. – girl summarized with slow nods.
– I'll make a good use of that offer. And I am thankful for presenting it to me.

Geonrod had a impression that the sight of Iseren shifted to a little warmer one for a moment. The man replied to her only with slight smile, right after his attention moved back to the woods in distance.

Rest of trip was spent in silence, disturbed only by mews of seabirds passing by. Geonrod at some point stated that they are about to step into good hunting ground. Also with contentment he approved today's wind – its flow was turning to the thorp side, so wildlife could not be alerted with their scent.

Before starting the hunt, the man reminded Iseren how to draw the bow and hold the dart between fingers. With satisfaction he observed how effortlessly the girl was pulling a bow. Her problem was around the actual shooting part – despite her strong draw, she was lacking in the good aim. After taking few confident shots Geonrod decided she's ready for the hunt.

Their look for game took almost whole noon; Geonrod hunted down a young stag, Iseren in other hand took down a wild duck. With bows and hunted game at their shoulders they went back to thorp to cook a fine meal. Having in mind how much meat they collected, they spared the goods between people in village with a wish to prepare a food for Herberman. They headed back to the home after a while along with few gifts for their generosity. There Geonrod prepared a venison stew with few pieces of bread for addition. After the supper the girl started studying the book given her by Herberman, from its content she assumed she will expect from it a sort of a travel guide. Page after page she discovered new regions, though vastness of the new information she was trying to memorise made her quickly forgetful about the content. During the

read about the Jätynjodr she suddenly reminded herself about the escort offer.

– Father, i have a question regarding given me proposition. When the village will organise the caravan? – she asked Geonrod, carried away by sculpting in hunted animals' bones.

– Oh that one? Guess they should prepare cart tommorow, at least if the weather will allow. – the man replied. – During day we'll see, I guess we couldn't miss the sight of men loading a waggon. By the way, glad you mentioned the caravan job. We should make you prepared for the trip.

Geonrod started rummaging through fishnets at the ceiling. Not long after, the man freed from them a bundle made from stiff material which landed on a table. Unwrapped package revealed gleamy sword and matching shield.

– Won't lie, bunch of stars went out, when these ones saw a use, yet they should serve you well, Iseren. That's for sure a better protection than the blade you used to wield. – his hand pointed at rusty old sword lying in the corner of the hut.

Iseren, fascinated, tried new sword in wield, not so long after feeling how greatly she can rule over the blade. When Geonrod tried to give her a shield, she denied.

– Sword is good enough. – Iseren decided.

The man despite his first protests was able to trust girl's instincts.

– Suit yourself then. Quite odd tho, you never had problem to pick a shield before. – he noticed.

– In means of practice i have not indeed, however I never could found it fitting me. I block blows with blade much better. – her responce made the Geonrod more convinced on her decision, which was shown in nod of approval.

And really, as she stated, Geonrod didn't remember if Iseren used a shield from her own will.

– That's all what I can offer you Iseren. I know, it's not that much, but better than nothing. – Geonrod said after short pause.

– That's far more than „not that much”, father. – Iseren lowered her sight in thanks.

Not waiting for father's response Iseren started tying the sheet in form of a shoulder bag. She packed any necessities such as provision, knife, bunch of ropes and recent gifts from Herberman. Her new sword was placed neatly beside the bag. Once she was in bed, she kept her sight on the dying hearthfire, allowing numerous thoughts to fill her weary mind. The girl was asleep before the fire entirely went out, not even remembering entirely what kind of thought process she was going through. Not knowing also that the Geonrod observed her for the whole time, his mien was unknown due to poorly lighted interior. The man, seeing that Iseren was fully asleep, sent her a warm gaze before going to sleep himself.

On a next day Iseren woke up because of conversation having place outside. After putting on clothes she stood near Geonrod and villager from Rannuldun near the threshold, still remaining inside. Geonrod seeing his interlocutor was peeking over his shoulder made a space for Iseren to join the conversation.

– Baramir, here is Iseren. She's going to be the one standing guard during your journey – Geonrod placed hand on Iseren's shoulder, which made her sending a weirded out look. The man seeing her discomfort quickly kept hand to himself.

– Eh, I know kid by an eye, dat is all I need to ken. About du, Geonrod, I put trust in dat mind of dy didn't start to gaff at du on auld days. – Baramir started sceptically judging Iseren's look. – Quite desperate from me dat I rely on a lassy, especially Inkarn one.

– You were able trust me for years, I take guess you'll be able to do the same with her. – assured him Geonrod, noticing how icily Iseren was starting staring at Baramir.

Baramir was clearly wanting to say something about this until he sighed deeply from resignation.

– Fine, by goodness.. Any arm for standing guard is worth taking, even if serves for da one way of trip. – he shook hands with Geonrod, before facing at Iseren: – And du, lass, du's ready?

– Not yet, I will join your crew, when I grab everything I need. – she replied with a firmly peaceful tone.

Baramir pursed his lips, like he was about to say something once again, but he decided to simply walk back to Rannuldun. Iseren in other hand ate quickly a small meal, grabbed her belongings, and with hurry left the hut.

Geonrod still standing near the entrance stopped Iseren.

– Since you're likely not going back, I wish to give you something. – The man grabbed from his purse a quaint piece of jewelry.

It was necklace decorated with bone shards, its main part was two-headed figure. What was quaint in it that the character was having long-eared heads erecting from two opposite parts of torso instead of legs.

– As you might noticed, these two heads are representation of gods, the Tidvron and Yane – while naming the deities, Geonrod glided his finger over parts of figure showing the engraved elemental symbols. – I only wish from you to accept the gift. May it serve you as a reminder of me.

– My reminder of people lies in memories, not figures. But regardless, I have to thank you for the effort you put both to the carving and my education.

Geonrod sent her a warm smile.

– Now go before you make a old Jätyn sob like a baby. Goodluck. May the road be easy for you, Iseren.

The man took the Iseren into his arms, from which she firstly tried to escape, but after while she awkwardly returned the gesture.

– Farewell. – she whispered, letting herself from man's arms. The man wiped out a tear from an eye.

– Well, looks like I sobbed anyway. – he commented, trying to sound casual.

– It happens.

It didn't take long for a Iseren to find the caravan. When she arrived the cart wasn't loaded yet, thus she joined the carriers to help them out. Labourers there didn't bother her with conversations, they were only po-

inting her where the at that moment holded basket or sack shall be placed. Once the work had been done, Baramir proceeded to count goods on the waggon. Taken by the calculation he bumped to Iseren, muttering something. When the man raised his head, he angered even more, seeing on who did he stumbled upon.

– And where were du’s been, lass! – he grumped. – To take part we soon have too and yet du wander around! For sure while ago du arrived!

– Actually, I was at the cart. – Iseren claimed.

– At car? And what was du doing hither, except standing in someone’s way, like right noo?

– Helping to load the godds, that is what I was doing.

– Hah! How unusual! Such a occasion to see actually useful sell-sword! – Baramir cackled.

Iseren answered with only puzzled stare, which took down amused look from his face.

– Why du stand still like that? – he lost patience. – Hop on dat seat, for gods’ sake!

The man leaned to her hand with clear unpatience. Iseren was grabbed at her wrist, and landed on a creaky bench, hearing near her ear a quite surprised groan.

– Phew, not the light one, aren not ye? – Baramir breathed heavily.

Iseren didn’t react at stupid comment and sat steadier at the seat. Baramir, as he was carman, whipped lightly at harnessed cattle and with a slight shiver the waggon moved leaving behind the waving peasants behind and then slowly shrinking Rannuldun.

– Weel, lass – with truculent tone carman started. – Being honest, du’s fine with that blade?

– Enough to defend myself I think. – Iseren replied, trying to avoid eye contact.

– Dy job is to defend us, not dee. – he cackled. – Anyway, why du leaves the village? Something’s wrang here, eh?

Iseren turned silent.

– Baramir, let her bide in peace. Dat her first joab, gluff probably vores her down and du puts a sweet on top with dat frecking yarn about life. – guard wearing lush moustache disturbed their colloquy.

– Javnar’s right, I can already tell she’s not talkative one. – added second conscript, dressed in simple hauberk. – In that profession you’ll simple find out who’s capable or not, if she’s second pick then we atleast try to provide our old companion a body or something.

– Sweet talker from you like a fife from sheep’s arse. – replied with laughs Baramir. – Now our Inkarn lass looks more out of colors. Worry not, little girl. When some clash will take place we would not throw dee up to fight for dy certain dying.

Conversation quickly made them forget about Iseren, so she could spend the ride on observing the passing scenery. It was a memorable experience for her, not once she felt into silent delight from surrounding vegetation, especially, when the road leaded through meadows sheeted with pale flower fields slightly waving under winds from now distant shores. Her pleasure on the view of flowery plains lasted up to noon as the waggon passed few trees, a prelude of the soon entered forest.

After a bit of passing through woods, she felt the road started to get slightly slope. It got darker as the conifers blocked the almost entire daylight, leaving the woods half visible. Grass was slowly replaced by patches of moss with partially exposed dark soil, from which few rocks were erecting.

Focused on looking for any unexpectance from deeps of forest zagro- Iseren wasn’t ready for sudden stop of a waggon.

To avoid the unevetable fall, she painfully grabbed rough wood building the seat. While wiping her scraped hands she took a eager of explanation glance at caravan members, searching for a reason to take such rapid stop. Quickly she found answer in fallen tree above them, which was also commented by others at the carte.

– A bane on dat darn stump, eh.. A good hand of sun wasted for sure. But whit can we do, een of yous, grab longer rope, we’ll move that little bastard out of da road. – Baramir hurried everyone over to leave the waggon. – Du Iseren, stand guard.

When the rest started tieing the ropes to the log, Iseren laid her eyes on surronding forest, until she noticed something in the tree itself – a track leading from the forest.

“Fallen logs usually don’t drag themself on the roads.”

– Back off from the log, that’s a trap! – shouted to caravan guards. – Everyone on the waggon!

Surprised by her sudden voice, the waggon guard did not question the girl’s demands. In a hurry they jumped on the wagon, dropping the ropes behind. Iseren on the other hand remained on the ground, slowly drew her sword, and with careful steps leaned her back against a fallen trunk.

Announced by the rustling of the thickets, a band of Jätyns in irregular equipment revealed themselves from the woods, evidently no longer trying to maneuver discreetly.

“Bandits.. Quite desperate though, I would never count on someone passing here if I were them.” – Iseren suggested herself.

– Well well, how could you ruin whole gaff with backstabbing. – stranger at front of group spoken in a rough voice, blowing her thoughts out of head. – What’s your name?

– Iseren. – she replied with vigilant stare towards the group slowly surrounding her.

Peering behind their backs she noticed that the rest of the gang had surrounded the guards huddled in the wagon. From the distance that separated them, it was difficult for her to tell whether the bandits intended to respond to the desperate swings of the conscripts’ swords with anything more than mocking smiles.

„A ratio of two to one... They’re probably counting on our surrender.”

She swiftly focused her eyesight on semi-circle of thugs in front of her.

– What a gaff. – a bandit chuckled to the rest of his companions. – First time I’ve scoot at three Jätyn men hiding so pathetically behind lass’ back.

– And it was first time I’ve fallen tree trap done before someone actually is in the good spot. – Iseren bit back.

Bandits looked between each other with stirred up feelings.

– Well listen now, slut. – hissed the one in front. – I am going to tell you this once. I don’t like foul gobs. Matter fact, I break teeth inside of you as form of self-recompensation.

– Very fascinating. – Iseren replied without a blink.

– You kens, chief? Something tells me she’s not going to just give up. – one of thugs with fast and stertorous voice pointed out.

– Dat’s fine by me. We’re eight, against four pesky skulls that will greet a maul of mine, close and personal. – frontier bandit tapped his mace firmly. – Maybe dat will wake some sense into her.

– Such pity, it did not. – Iseren replied casually. – But I am very open for an another trial or two.

Rest of the bandits looked from her back to his chief, with interested glances for the responcees.

– No one never sarded dee up, eh? And I was so damn goodwilling to consider demanding from you pay, the uhh..

– A toll you probably mean. – she hinted him.

– I’m boke of listening to dat bitch. – one of the thugs claimed.

– Me too. – chief agreed. – Make her suffer. And silent at last.

Bandits slothfully drawn their weapons, taking steps closer to the Iseren. Three of thugs seeing the upcoming fight forgot to keep a look on hold on waggon ones. With the corner of an eye Iseren saw a Baramir winked to her.

– So, that’s all? – Iseren asked, raising her sword. – Very well then, we don’t need to speak any longer.

Without any hasitation, Iseren swooshed her blade on chief’s left side, from which he clumsily dodged, leading to ending sent swing in his companion’s abdomen. The hit one with shock painted on his face looked down on his reddening hip, right after he collapsed into pool of his own blood.

She never before had wonered how strong she was. Not once she hap-pened to put her father on ground during trainings, although, as he often mentioned after, his years of might were gone long time ago. And she herself was not even an Earthling.

Regardless to her reflections, Iseren lowered her blade as nothing place a while ago, she then softened her grip and encircled her enemies with a serene gaze. The three bandits, about to answer her attack, clearly hasitated.

– Wh.. Why she went all dat calm suddenly? – one of them panicked.

– Silence! Not calm she is! – girl remembered the chieftain’s voice lower for at least tonation. – Kill her! Rob her! Before she strikes once again!

Behind their backs another battle occurred, as the caravan guardmen jumped on distracted thugs. Iseren couldn't however get distracted with three remaining opponents.

– All at once! – the chief shouted.

With his comrades chief charged at Iseren, blindly sending blows, the Iseren however was able to perform a series of dodges and blocks. The continuity of the attacks weakened, Iseren managed to swing her sword at them a few times, which helped her to increase the distance between them. One of her opponents swung an axe at her, the girl in order to avoid it undertook a rather risky swivel at exact moment.

„Father would gut me for exposing like that.“

She ended her turn leaving the axeman behind, now curled up with opened abdominal cavity. Immediately she turned to remaining two opponents – the thug wearing a shield and chief. The one with the shield clearly was trying to stay out of her sword reach, while the head of the gang mocked her with the intention of attacking, breaking off in a leap before Iseren managed to reach him. The girl stepped towards the leader, instantly returning her blade to the shield-bearer, who was clearly waiting for Iseren to expose her back.

„Poor trick.“ – she criticized defeated thug.

With maddening growl the chieftain swung his mace with astonishing force. The girl without any chance to dodge had to take the blow with side of her sword, painfully transferring the powerful swing into her arms. With pain still spreading through her arms, she wielded the sword double handed and sent equally mighty swing, which missed ready to block weapon of her opponent. While her enemy had the guard broken, she swiftly swung her sword back, leaving a deep wound on bandit's forearm, on which he reacted with surprised and dreaded scream.

This deciding blow swayed the scales towards Iseren's side, as she continued to deal more cuts to her opponent. She wounded his chest and thigh already, until the bandit, drained from all energy and blood, dropped his mace at the ground. Iseren was ready to deal a final blow, though bandit raised his wound-free hand, like he was about to confess something.

– W-wait. – she barely heard his dim voice.

Iseren lowered her sword, the bandit continued:

– Let me fade away in the time the best want, for what I did through my life. – he took a peaceful gaze at the heavens. – No forgiveness or such, it is for weak ones.

– Fine. Farawell then. – Iseren replied, while sheathing her sword.

She only kicked the mace out of reach of dying bandit, before rushing to the rest of caravan guard. They luckily took down the rest of men already, only the Javnar lost his thumb and forefinger.

As she get closer, the guardsmen bowed politely to her surprise, even until now spectic Baramir showed his respects to her.

– My lass Iseren, we have to dee debt over any debts. – carman said quietly. – I can't show how grateful I am, for what du's done for us. And I am sorry for the way I was to you.

After him, then rest of guardmen wast shaking hands with Iseren and thank her.

– A cut of a frigid airt from the seas, one fell after another! – shouted Javnar in lively gestures, completely forgetting about his hand wounds.

The enthusiasm ended quickly, when they heard a deep and agonial cough, then blunt thump on the ground. With weapons ready they faced the chief lying on ground, now dead, face down. Iseren make her best to not react loudly, as she noticed the carcass emits gleamy mist, giving her an image of floating golden petals.

„Is this happening?“

Flabbergasted, she squatted near the fallen bandit, her hand reached to the mist. The petals gently shifted around her fingers, leaving the slight warmth on them.

– Du's gud, Iseren? – she heard Baramir's callings behind her.

– Don't you see that? The mist floating from the corpse? – Iseren seeing the caravan guard shaking heads, she turned from the body.

She felt uneasy with how concerned glances she was taking from guardsmen. She only wished from then to give fallen bandits a proper burial.

Guard as she wished grabbed few shovels from the waggon and started digging in softest ground a mass grave, still givivng her a few axious looks. The guardsmen moved the bodies to the digged pit with weapons close to them. Then they covered a grave with soil and counted a hundred heartbeats. After that, guardsmen formed symbolical pile from

surrounding stones. When they were done with last honors, they turned from cenotaph in dead silence.

Before they returned to the wagon, Baramir stopped Iseren, rummaging for something in the purse wrapped to his side. After a moment, he pulled out an amber in the size of an infant's fist..

– Take this, as for my and my men countless thanks. – Baramir reached the hand to Iseren. – In our sides stones like dat are called Globetropper's Encourage. Since the farder du travels, the more value the amber will get. I don't travel much though, so du'll put it in a better use than me.

Iseren accepted the gift, sliding the amber between the coins in her purse. It was difficult for her to say anything in return, though neither Baramir nor the caravan turned upset about that.

Despit the calm look, mind of a girl was still persistently dwelled on the fight, therefore she made her best to shift her thoughts to a appealing sight of colorful clouds on setting sky. With glances take on the rest of caravan members it was clear that they struggled as well with harrowing memories, which they tried to overcome with cheerful whistle songs or silent reflection. Different set of thoughts started teasing her, as she recalled in her mind a vision of a mysterious mist, that none except her could perceive.

“What was a symbol of it? Is it something related with my hybride origin? Is it visible Celestials too?” – she drown herself in questions lacking an answer.

Intuition hinted her that someone from the University of Visildeia could be able to help her find the answers. She also wondered what other gifts her Celestial origin might hold, which also considered as a question that one of the scholars might be able to answer. Still it was up to her to figure out how to get into the university, assuming that visitors or potential students would be screened, and that she might be eliminated. To calm her thoughts, Iseren decided that this would be her concern when she arrive under gates of university. But until that will happen, a long journey was ahead her.

III.

The rest of road to Galundharr was free of troubles; a good chunk of time passed from the bandit attack until the caravan members stopped worrying about a next wave of outlaws, willing to avenger their fallen companions. To their luck, no ruffian didn't show. A charm of nature helped them in placing minds on more peaceful direction as the fading to the red light of sunset casted rays through lower parts of conifer crowns, leaving a swirling mozaïque of shades on ground. Amongst soughing trees a group of birds were chirping in accompany of Baramir's whistles to a form of unkown for a Iseren melody.

Not only a weather and easy route was doing them a favour, but the time as well; despite an unwanted stop during travel, they were able to reach the view of city's palisade walls before the sun met the horison. As the path climbed the mountain, the forest gave its way to the rocky base of the hill on which the stronghold was situated. The town itself blended well with its surroundings - raw, but in this rusticity laid all its charm. From above the hewn logs, which were building the stockade, a few ornamented roofs of houses peeked through, some of them were covered by crude rectangular construction of watchtowers. In similar style the maingate was presenting too, above the gate wings a banner was hanged, depicting city heraldry: green coloured, with sword in middle of two quills placed on yellow rhombus. Near the entrance gate stood two guardmen wearing chainmail, who seeing the newcomers, motioned for the wagon to stop.

– New faces? Wha are yous, strangers? – one of townguards came closer. – We're about to keep the gate shut, so some explanation would be lovely.

– We're from Rannuldun, gud sir. On da back trade we have, to pay the tribute and peddle after. Name's Baramir, my mates are Iseren, Hvemir and Javnar. – each mentioned person respectively shook a hand with guard.

– Rannuldun.. – guardman muttered, while scratching his head under nasal helmet. – Oh yes, dat one bitty thorp near water.. Well, welcome in Galundharr then, as long you don't mean any problem here.

Guardman went back to his comrade and with a little of struggle together they opened gate, revealing the town's panorama in its full pride.

Inside the walls to Galundharr a view of loosely built streets greeted them – between houses and other building was so much space that city looked depopulated, which contrasted with hubbub and labour sounds. Slowly advancing to depths of city, manufactories and workshops were gradually giving up space for housing districts, at which the city noise was fairly noticeable. Baramir, likely knew the route, as he passed household, to arrive in another crowded area in stronghold – the marketplace. With slight twitch the waggon stopped and passengers jumped off it to block the wheels of a cart. When they were done, Baramir brought Iseren's attention to him.

– Well, Iseren, du's free noo. – carman gave a solid purse of coins. – But if du changed mind about the wander, we can take dee back with no problem. For now we're staying here to rest, if du needs anything.

– Nothing personal, but I prefer to stay on my own. – Iseren replied. – It was a pleasure. Farawell, a fine road to you.

Each caravan members shook her hand and wished her best in travels. With one last glance given on them, she headead towards the end of marketplace. Girl passed by few waggons similar to the one from Rannuldun, infront which a bunch of Jätyn people warmed themselves around campfires, variegating the evening with singing and performs on simply constructed instruments. Between guardsmen from different carts was plenty of place for drinking together or planning bargains. Willing to avoid such bustle, Iseren moved to city streets, looking for a place to rest. She ignored the bigger inn, instead she went to the smaller one near the city gate.

Inside greeted her with merely noises of laughing patrons or clanks of clay cups. She moved around tables from simply carved wood, leading to the countuar. From its other side she met with grim stare of innkeeper, who at the her coming stopped cleaning pottery with well used rag.

– Want a room? Something to drink? – inkeeper asked.

– Both. And about drinks, a milk if you have one. – after words of Iseren, the innkeeper frowned from amuse.

– A milk? Hah, fine. I'll take a look for it if du really wants drinking it, I may have some after baking, let me take a look. – innkeeper disappeared in the kitchen, after a while he came back with the jug. – For a bed and the, hehe, bewerage du'll pay ten saijvises. Or mayhaps some sence came back to dee, and du'll drink something more finer?

– I need to refuse, my stomach doesn't agree with Jätyn mead very well. – Iseren explained.

Pubkeeper only shrugged, while taking money from the girl. When she was about to leave, she heard resontant toots of the man:

– Room's at da erst floor, second one from da left! – he shouted. – And dat jug better stay in whole, when du gives it me back, or du's gonna be sorry!

Giving him sign she understood, she went to the rented room, ignoring any interesting gawk of inn's patrons. The price seemed fair for the room – metreage might not was the most spacious one, allthough it contained a solidly constructed bed, which was lined with worn furs. Near bed stood endtable, at which a jug was placed and on its legs leaned her baggage. She landed on a bed, taking a long stare at the room's ceiling. Iseren allowed her weary back to straighten up and rest a little from all day at the waggon. She could easily fall asleep at this moment, if not the stabbing feel of hunger. Without any rush, she sit back at the bed cross-legged, leaned towards her bag to took out from it a piece of bread, which she teared into two parts. She took that half and started nibbling it into smaller pieces, which she dipped in the milk. The rest of the milk she tossed off with one gulp, the now empty jug was placed once again at the endtable. Supper was far from the rich ones, yet it was surely satiating and warm, and in the aftermath it made her even more sleepy. In no time, her clothes and sword landed at the room's floor and Iseren herself in warm furs.

A dawnlight woke her up. Iseren after putting on clothes and equipment walked from the room to the ground floor.

She took a seat near counter, after greeting the innkeeper she ordered a warm meal. Focused on eating she didn't notice the young man sitting by. Her attention was brought to him right after he wished with languorous voice for something strong. After taking a good sip he placed loudly cup at the counter, and when he noticed Iseren, the youngling quickly sat more elegantly on the stool and swiped of the drops of liquor from his face.

– Ah, I see a fellow wanderer! – stranger greeted her with more cheerful tone. – Name's Orthnar, hired sword, always for a good price. And who are you, my lady?

– Iseren. Have you a story to tell? – her deep and monotonic voice made Orthnar gawking at her, like he become a spellbound victim.

– Y-yeah surely, Iseren. – his tone turned hasty, and sight of his ran off from Iseren's pitch black eyes. – I saw many in Svjarstein, was there and there.

– Svjarstein? Never heard of.

– Wha? But that's how our land is named. – Orthnar glanced at his cup content, as they were responsible for something.

– Not the Senvold?

– Nah, Senvold is us, in general people from the seas and the larger ground, those who speak and look alike. We call our part Svjarstein, that one at the coast of continent. You also have Loggjänd, such a dump. Oh, and Ancestor's Land, and I was there, ye know.

– And about..

– Aye, even at the Forefather Lands I was. – Orthnar didn't even notice girl wanted to say something. – A squarrel took place there, between a few old royal lines turned their back from our emperor. If you didn't hear, the Forefather Land is in some part ruled by free from vasi-lean crown monarchs, those lords act like a savior of our kind. Well their saving mission ends on destruction of plunder of what's or who's standing on vaisileian side. But recently my wish to take a step from our snows. Some distress took place at Fridveldoia province, in Öenrehn. Ye hear about that?

– Not quite. I will be pleased to hear it though.

Orthnar took another sip of dark coloured mead with squinted eyes. After opening them, he continued:

– Like quite a while ago at Calidor! Sea invasion I say, attackers took down the Ejdldhart castle as if it was empty! Visildea sent the aid from south rumours says that anyone carrying a sword can join. Want accompany me, mayhaps?

– Right now I have matters to attend to at south. Besides I don't feel my sword to be sold. But you mentioned Calidor. Is there anything you can tell me about it?

– Certainly ye're not from these parts, if ye didn't heard about that siege. That was about tens of star swirls ago, like now, same unknown forces. Heavy infantry with wide bladed spears, the stoutest warrior will be cut in half by the swing of them. Men from Calidor were lucky enough to have a legend amongst mercenaries on their side, no one but Macair himself. A sorcerer of sorts, one known from, I don't know, centuries. When more enemy vessels came closer, like anyone from Calidor back day claims, Macair did some wicked move with his hands that made a gap in sea, pushed the boats there and made water flat again. Then fellow got silent, I bet he just wanted to rest from constant adventures, doubtful is that he could be gone from sword crossing.

– So spell casting is nothing ordinary in Kyrridea?

Orthnar paused thinking, then shook his head as a response. Iseren after finishing her meal asked young wanderer about best roads to the Vasildel, the capital city of Visildeia. According to the Orthnar, best way would be travelling via boat to Kreovia, where highways were much more passable.

In order to Iseren was not only a listener, she told her story from yesterday fight with bandits. Orthnar to get a better hear leaned closer to her, in his slightly entranced eyes progressively were showing more significant signs of being impressed by her. She started feeling off withreckoned with how Orthnar started to behave.

– ..And that's all, Orthnar. It was pleasure to speak, but I need to get going. Safe travels. – Iseren said it quicker then she planned.

Willing to pay for the refection she reached to the counter with her palm, above which immidietally showed hand of the youngling with counted already sume that went to the innkeeper.

– Such astonishing dame shouldn't make her purse lighter. – Orthnar smiled playfully.

Iseren without any feeling to argument didn't disapprove his etiquette and simply went to the exit. She felt suddenly that Orthgrabbed her at forearm.

– My lady, careful ye must be in this grim world. And it was most pleasure to meet you. – youngling stood up, still holding her hand.

– Yes, for me too. – replied with hardly kept calm tone. – Now I really get going.

After releasing her forearm, she shook Orthnar's hand in farewell despite her unpleasant feelings, and then hurried out of the tavern.

– May we meet again, pretty one! – Orthnar called after her.

Outside, she took few deeper breaths with closed eyes.

„*I suppose I need to get used to situation like these.*” – she calmed herself. – „*Or I'll lose my mind here.*”

After while she stopped feeling her hands trembling and her heartbeat slowed down. With mind on proper settings again she stopped overthinking about the situation.

„*Where now to go?*”

Iseren from lack of ideas went back to market willing to work as caravan guard, however no waggon crew was interested in the offer, peculiarly when she mentioned she doesn't intend to stay in their thorp. Wandering around waggons she met once again Baramir's crew, who greeted her sonorously.

– Take a seat Iseren! – Javnar encouraged her. – We have a fine mead, want some?

– No, I'm not in mood for liquor. – Iseren said without any vigour in voice.

Caravan guards looked at each other.

– Du's well, Iseren? – Baramir made worried face. – best granted us such a wonderful day, and so we shall enjoy given favour, dame. Best smile upon the grateful ones in return, just look at us, we already got a damn well trades here, and we're guests here only for een day.

– It is hard to find a guidance. To anywhere. – Girl's voice was monotonous as usual, yet a faint sorrow was noticable in it. – I do not know how to travel, straying doesn't seem to be an answer.

– Ah, dat vast of choices. – carman looked at her understandable. – On my eye to the closest townlet is day or two of foot pace. From then

ye have a river which you can leave Jätynjodr, right to vasilean lands. If not with merchant, then some other chap might be interested with the guard. Du can always travel on your own though.

– Sounds reasonable. Especially if time's not my most important commodity..

– Indeed, lass. Slow down with da wander, da world won't run from dee.

„*The world won't run from me..*” – she recalled in thoughts.

Without any else word, she gave them last handshake in farrawell, then she left the market. While passing the townsmen she submerged in thoughts about her upcoming voyage, thanks to the help of Orthnar and Baramir she felt safe about what she can expect from the trails.

Outside the walls she took a deep breath of forest smelling air, she felt something more than freshening scent – it was a sensation of freedom and somewhat unbended will to overcome the wanders ahead her.

Iseren was traversing through deep coniferous forest, intersected with steep slopes. With sun hidden under horizon, she slowly was loosing the good sight, as to the moment the girl was unable to see for farther than her arm lenght. Taking a while to gather branches and kindling, she erected from them a modest pyre, with energetic friction of two sticks she started to smell burning wood. More taken time finally gave her a long awaited sight of smoke snails and then confidently blazing flames.

Despite the constant march, the girl couldn't complain on weariness, quite the opposite – she felt with each step a need to take two more. Pushed by that unexplainable urge she was able to notice a indistinct view of townlet before noon. Not so long after she was upfront the gate, greeting guardsmen. From their chat she got to known that she was in Svellingatha, minor town built at the inlet to one of the biggest rivers in region.

Guards didn't care that much about her presence, without a word they apathetically observe her as she was entering the city.

From the other side she was greeted by couple of huts made from unhewn wood and clay patches. Residents took often peeks at passing around them Iseren, to come back after to their daily labours. The girl didn't react to any of these gawks, she went to more crowded part of Svellingatha, which were the docks. Harbor district miasta was just a few platform, though the amount of shipped or unloaded goods, was spoiling that the townlet could or was very likely to keep its steady situation from even only the river transportation.

Whilst of going through the docks she passed a handful of small transportation boats, on which the goods were placed or taken from. At the edge of last bridge she spotted the taskmaster of the works, he was at that moment keeping watch over the destination for arrived barrels. With working dokers in mind, she carefully traversed around labourers, until he faced imperiously standing Jätyn. The man turned his hand to Iseren as he came closer.

– Need something? – stentorian voice of his spreaded around the docks.

– An offer of sorts matter bringed me. To be more particular, is there a chance to travel by one of your boats? For exchange of course.

Man scratched his beard in thinking. She took a judging look at Iseren, glanced at his workers, then at Iseren again.

– Hm, for a lass du has some might in arms for sure, for dat work you'd fit like a glove. Though, as du sees, I don't need any more workers anon. Ask again in Yaneas mayhaps, I may have a place for dee.

– What about one flow? I am not in need of silver. – Iseren kept on stubborn.

– Oh by best, fine, we'll do like dis. You're working here to the noon, then when we're going to about to launch a boat, tell my men dat taskmaster Laufmarr gave dee permission to sail with dey. Is lass fine with dat offer?

Iseren nodded and extended her arm to sign a agreement. The man in responce shook energetically her hand and got back to work in one of riverside storages. The girl in other hand was helping the docker in moving the wares. At the noon, as Laufmarr informed her, the crew pre-

pared a boat to launch. The ones working with Iseren in almost no time got aware of her strenght, so from the beginning she was treated like one of them.

When the boat finally met the water the girl told her about her arrangement with the Laufmarr. No one asked about that many questions, the men only told her to hop on board. Seated between the tightly closed barrels, she grabbed granted her oar and, under the skipper's orders, helped the rest of the boat keep the vessel on the right track. Now sailing straight, the boat's crew unfurled the sail, thanks to which they started sailing several times faster. On oar crutched like a spear she was enjoying the view of the riverside landscape.

The pale afternoon sun cast a golden shimmer on the surface of the stream, which also reflected reflections of small conifers and larger bushes. In some places, the river bank was formed into steep slopes with grass on it, tickling the water surface.

– Iseren, am I right? – one of crewmen disturbed her observation.

– Yhm? – she muttered back, her eyes stayed at the view of riverside.

– In which sides du goes, so du's fine working for free? Some good ones?

– To the Visildeia I go, I cannot tell you are these parts fine. I never was there.

– Lads, have yous heard that? – one of men shouted with amusement in his voice. – Igros hitted on our new one!

The boat filled with laughs and hand thumps at Igros' back.

– Boil yous heads! – Igros grunted, full of embarassment. – All of ye! And ye Jorn, du should most long!

– Easy on dat one Igros, we're with dee, brother! – when Jorn's went louder, the nostrills of Iseren got attacked by stench of liquor. – Da ancestor of us fell for those sweet southern faces! And us little lass..

– Whish yous gobs already! – skipper cutted of. – Eyes on da water!

Iseren stopped listen them a good while ago, she once again submerged into the sight of surrounding.

The landscape was leisurely changing from a coniferous forest to a mixed one - more and more often, Iseren noticed stubby trees, surrounded by densely growing shrubs with more vivid, sometimes even bright shades of green. Her admiration of the nature around her was interrupted

by the skipper's call, ordering her to help keeping the vessel on the right turn. With sail reefed, they began to enter the headwaters of the river they were about to cross. From clamours of the crew, she got known that the main river was called Lumvis and was serving a form of border between Jätynjodr and Lumvollr, the land known from the sea and river-wise trade there.

At dusk, a city, not much different in size from Svellngatha, began to appear on the horizon. Approaching the town of Iseren, she was once again aiding the crew with task of landing the boat in the dock. After mooring the boat, she helped the crew unload the vesse. After the work, labourers sat the the dock bridge.

– Nothing better than a well deserved rest, eh? – Jorn said merrily, the crew responed happily as him.

When it looked as labourers are going to keep themself busy, the Jorn suddenly faced to the Iseren:

– And du lass, du's tommorrow? – he asked.

– She's not going to be tommorrow. – the skipper answered for her.

– My deed with Lauffmar is done. – she added.

– Well, about that, something needs to be done. Follow me, lass. – the skipper stood up from the bridge.

When they left the happy group, the skipper looked somewhat relieved. The two after short walk went to one of warehouses. Inside, a pair of workers were supervising the transport, but the skipper ignored them. Instead he turned to the girl.

– So, it's like dat. – he scratched his head. – Have to admit, du's best arm we had at da docks. Du's capable, don't ask dumb questions, does what needed to be done. Du's interest at the next season to work perhaps? Dat time something more propoer, permanent?

– I think not. This is not my field of labour.

– Du's shuur? I can talk Laufmar doon, he could give dee a dose of silver. Better one than for those boozed rabble we usually hire.

– No. – girl cutted out.

Skipper's jaw moved few times as if he was chewing something thickset. Iseren slowly put fingers on her sword.

– I see. Such shame though, but I see no chance of convince dee. – as man gave up, Iseren stopped holding the weapon. – Strength of two men

du has, and reason of five of dey, ken? Weel, guv may not be chuffed about dat one, but for dy honest work I'll let some things dissapear from da storage.

The girl, as skipper promised, got a little provision and dried herbs. From the smell of it Iseren recognised as crownwort – wildy growing herb, commonly used in North for seasoning meats.

In the fading light of sun, the girl left the docks, searching for an inn or a any other place where she could rest. Fortunately for her, there was a modest bunkhouse near the docks, which Iseren spotted by the sign depicting a bed, barely able to see it in the semi-darkness while wandering the streets of the town.

Entering the inn, she found a friendly looking oldman who, seeing arrived patron, beamed from behind the counter.

– Most welcomes, my lady! – oldman greeted her cheerfully. – Looking for a room? Or a little chatter perhaps?

– Bed, any kind. – Iseren replied tonelessly.

– A fine bed for you, for only thirteen saijvises. How does that sounds for you, hm?

– Good, I guess. – another stroke from fatigue made her sound more reluctant.

– Very well, I'll show your room. – the oldman bowed gently after receiving a payment.

The oldman, despite his short stature and age, was surprisingly quickly climbing up the stairs, the girl was led to the first floor, which consisted three rooms. Oldman pointed at the middle room with a thick finger, telling Iseren something about the difficulty of opening the door, the girl no longer had the will or energy to focus on the conversation. After receiving from him wishes of a good night, the oldman returned to the ground floor, humming joyfully. Iseren in other hand entered the room, greeting a sight of meagre room, containing a bed and battered table. She threw her bag and sword on the ground, got herself comfortable in the bed and was able to take only her shirt off, before she fell asleep.

The next day the girl was woken up by clatters coming from the next room, but being relatively rested, she did not try to fall asleep again. She couldn't see the sun from the window above her bed, but, prompted by the bright light cast on the city's skyline, she concluded that it must have been a long time since dawn took place. Looking out for the sun, she absorbed herself for a long time in admiring the wooden buildings of the town. Its appearance reminded the girl of other cities she had encountered on the way - carvings at the edges of the roof, a neat but austere structure that blended perfectly with the surrounding landscape.

She got detached from the view by a chillier blow of wind at her exposed arms. A moment later she sat on the bed and quickly re-dressed. When was tying her shirt, the neighbor behind the wall, who was responsible for the noises that woke her up, started coming down the steps to the ground floor. She left her room moments after the stranger left the bunkhouse with the slam of a door. Hearing the owner's calls, she went down to the ground floor and found the oldman behind the counter.

– Slept well? – he greeted her with a smile.

– Well, indeed. May I heard any rumours or such here?

– Many happened actually! Our little Dahlgreth was visited by a pilgrim and his faithful ones. In my humble bunkhouse a few of them paid a vist, for a little gossip. I know a little about their journey, the leader pilgrim is willing to travel to the south, as they said.

– To south you say? Actually I am heading there as well. Do you know are they still there?

– Oh, no no. They left city at dawn yesterday. Poor ones, under roof for months, I'd say. Such vagabonds like you or them are best to boggle and respect at once, my lady. – the bunkhouse owner laughed, stopping quickly, when he noticed the cold stare from Iseren. – B-but that doesn't matter. Something else you would like to know, my lady?

– No. Good business for you.

The oldman patted Iseren lightly on the shoulder in response and offered her his hand with a kind smile in farewell. The girl with reserve returned the gesture and then walked out into the street, aiming towards the exit gate. The walk to the main gate took only a moment, it seemed that Dahlgreth was mostly built by the river, so the street leading to the exit from the city was only a few dozen steps long at most. After reac-

ging outside the walls, Iseren approached the shabby signpost, comparing it with the directions on her map. Putting together a travel plan in her head, she decided to head towards Tahlreg.

"If it's on the sign, then it has to be a more important city than townlets I've recently been." – she wondered in her mind. – *"Ugh, these petty strongholds are slowly stirring up in my mind."*

The thought of breaking away from the routine of her wanders immediately filled her with excitement. With it, she returned to her old walking pace, accompanied by the inexplicable amount of strength she had during for all her on foot voyage. There was still a long road ahead of her, yet Iseren was confident that she could overcome it.

IV.

Iseren has been wandering continuously for days; as she suspected, she was able to keep herself on the gifts of the forest, using the modest portions of the provisions she had. She hadn't seen a soul in a good week², which was fine by her.

In her long walks through the deep forests, she realized how much she missed the soothing space, which was soon offered to her by a two-day journey through lowland terrain, leading gently back to the increasingly dense deciduous forest. Halfway through the second week, the girl grasped that she had lost count of the days she had spent wandering alone. In the increasingly denser forest, she also had difficulty determining the current time of day, but she continued to push along the well-trodden road, hoping that she would eventually encounter a signpost that would reassure her that she was heading in the right direction. Despite her limited orientation in the field, she was not in a hurry when traveling and often stopped at places that caught her attention to admire nature. For many days of her journey, the girl did not encounter a living ones apart from a few animals, and as a person who likes solitude, that suited her perfectly.

However, one early evening, while listening to the chirping of birds unknown to Iseren, her attention was swiftly drawn to a golden light in the distance, most likely casted by a fire.

„Not good..” – she thought. – „It is not very likely to encounter some friendly settling in middle of woods. Perhaps I may have to deal with them, most probably the bandits.”

While being still a good chunk of steps from the spotted camp, she drew her sword and slowly approached the source of light.

Iseren counted at least eight people in the group, five of them warming themselves by the fire and engaging in conversation. To her misfortune, their carefree tone and spreading laughter slowly gave way to nervous calls and fingers directed around the place where the girl was hiding. A moment later, a pair of tall men with weapons drawn appro-

² Which consists of five days

ached her, warning her or them about something in a language she didn't know.

„What now? *I did not expect a different language in Lumvollr.*” – she asked herself with growing uneasiness.

In act of desperation she warily stood up and sheathe her sword. The men stepped closer and kept placing an eye on her.

– Forgive my sudden arrival, I do not have intentions to cause a trouble. I only wish to go around your camp, with no need to mean harm. – Iseren formed her sentence in vasileian, known for her majorly from literature.

The strangers, probably convinced by her calm tone and peaceful attitude, also sheathed their weapons and after a short conversation amongst themselves, invited her closer to them.

She followed them with hesitant steps until she reached the source of light, casted by bonfire. Spotting a mother with a child feeding her little one soup, she calmed down, knowing that no bandit clan would allow the mother of a small child to be in their gang.

„*Refuges perhaps? Victims of war in Öenrehn? I hope only that they're not afflicted with something.*”

The leading her men stopped at a slightly larger tent in the camp. Inside, she spotted a young man dressed in tawny robes, sitting on a folding stool by the candlelight. On the table, Iseren noticed a book he was reading intently. Hearing noises near the entrance, he looked away from his lecture and took a glance at Iseren, then and his companions entering behind her. After a short exchange of words between the men, they left the tent, leaving the youngling and girl alone. The youngling closed the book, stood up from the seat and stepped a little closer to Iseren, giving her a gentle peek.

– Greetings, stranger. What is your name? – to her relief, the youngling also knew vasileian.

– Iseren. And you, if I may? – asked Iseren.

The boy, seeing that Iseren was shifting from one foot to the other, politely pointed at camp bed, on which the girl sat down with her legs crossed. He sat at bed as well, though on the other side of it.

– Dankard, madame. – his voice was velvet smooth, on a deep tone. – Pardon me, but what is your reason to be here?

– I'm in middle of journey and I had to pass by your camp. Forgive me to bother you peace here.

– Ah, worry not, my company is open to greet a new face, even the foreign ones. – Dankard assured her, while striking of his chestnut lock from forehead. – We're not from here as well, Iseren. Most of my group is from Öenrehn, from Gaernbejrg in partical.

– Oh, I heard about your homeland being attacked by some mysterious sealanders. I'm sorry for you, it must be difficult to be left on roads like this.

To her surprise the Dankard faintly smiled.

– Oh, Iseren, you clearly traversed truly forsaken roads for a long time. Ejldhart was claimed back long time ago! The attackers retreated upon seeing numbers of the vasilean army. To the voyage not fear of war hardship motivates me. I have a mission to spread god's good word throughout the emperor's lands. And with me are the faithful from the city who have sworn to protect me, and sometimes also someone with a business like you, who wants to overcome the hardships of the journey under our protection.

– Which god you serve, Dankard?

– The creator of us all, the Nyrelion. May all hail his name and name of his legacy holders of his creation, the Possesors!

– Legacy holders? Sorry if I hurt you beliefs, but they were the ones responsible for killing Nyren, for breaking a covenant between them. Why you name them the legacy holders then?

– Possesors of the element, killed Nyrelion due to unknown about his good will, I assume. But the discord amongst them do keep our being alive and well. Iraneon's might warms a body of ours, Yaenalia's refreshes us and metal in liquid turns, Tidaron's clears our mind and stout upon our path into powder turns, and Geranna's allows us to tread on a steady ground. The powers that create our lives can also with same ease take them out. They have our lives at stake. And thus, we, as an earthling race, probably known to you as Earthlings, must gaze the sky with at least part of our hearts devoted. We grateful must be that the Possessors' destiny was set in the direction of other, smaller life forms flourishing. May their name be praised, now and forever!

– May it be that way. Forgive me, but my engagement in gods' matters is surficial to say at least.

– I accept your apology Iseren. It is about my mission, to place a seed of knowledge inside vasilean heads and grow a wonderful plant of worship in them. And from heads to temples, for sake of complete Lords' cult comeback.

– I see, I have to admit that your mission seems inspiring. I wish you to ask me something else. Did you visit Dahlgreth recently?

– Dahlgreth.. Ah, yes! A good two and half weeks ago, when we were guests in Lumvollr we had indeed been there, before travelling to Kreovia, in which we spent five days already. But why do you ask about it Iseren?

– Am I in Kreovia already? I can't believe it..

– Sometimes I surprise myself with how much road I already left behind too. And where are you going to, if I can get to know?

– To the Vasildel, I wish to reveal something about myself.

Iseren paused, willing to be more specific about the origin she was talking about, but she happened to feel unable to trust the boy that much.

Dankard, expecting the next part, continued to stare at her, waiting for something further, but after a while he gave up.

– Oh, understood. So I'm not dwelling on what past we're talking about. But the library in Vasildel will help you dispel these uncertainties. Would you like to discuss anything else?

– No, that is all. Thank you. For a taken time and welcoming attitude. Wish you best in your missions, Dankard.

Iseren was about to leave, until Dankard stopped her in a slight rush.

– You can stay, if you want to. – Dankard paused, on his face a sign of concern meddled in. – By the good name of gods, it looks as if you didn't eat a decent meal for weeks.. A little of rest would be necessary too. Come, we should have a little of supper left. I don't think someone would mind if you took a bit for yourself.

Not wanting to refuse a welcoming offer, Iseren went with the young man back to the bonfire. At their arrival, a mother and child who were providing soup started conversation with Dankard, on its end the woman handed one of the wooden bowls to Iseren. The girl sat on the ground by the fire, enjoying her soup in silence.

At some point she stopped the meal, feeling someone's intense gaze on her. She looked up to meet with the face of a child, clearly fascinated by her. From the long auburn hair, Iseren assumed it was a little girl, no more than a few years old. Iseren found difficult to bear this constant stare, and so she couldn't continue on her meal. Luckily for her, the child's mother called out to the kid, who with reluctance walked to her. Iseren didn't enjoy the peace for long, the little girl stubbornly returned to Iseren, this time settling down next to her.

Behind her, Iseren heard her mother's gentle laughter as she crouched down next to them, accepting the empty plate from Iseren. Up close, Iseren saw that the woman was young, emphasized by her slender and friendly features. In a foreign language, she asked the girl for something, who took the plate to the empty sagan. The woman locked eyes with Iseren, giving her a friendly smile. Iseren gently tilted her head in gratitude for the meal. With her eyes turned to the ground, she felt the gentle brush of her mother's finger on her cheek. Not wanting trouble, she allowed her to touch her face and fix hair. When she looked up, she noticed that the woman was inviting her to one of the tents. Iseren moved warily towards the tent, when inside, she was greeted by a simple interior, no more than two fathoms long. The woman made a field bed for her and covered it with worn-out furs. Iseren thanked for welcoming with a short bow, then she make herself comfortable in the bed. Lying on her back, she take a long stare at the skeleton of the tent. Her breath slowed and eyelids turned heavy, as she was submerging into to the cracks of the fire, upon time it felt like the sound was be coming increasingly farther distance.

Late in the morning she stepped out into the fresh air, feeling well rested. She found a few pilgrims at the campfire, including a young woman she met yesterday. From their conversation, she heard that the child's mother's name was Olfira, who, seeing Iseren, hurried to sit her down at a hearty breakfast of buttered vegetables and boiled eggs.

Pretty full after the meal, she thanked Olfira with a nod of her head, handing over the wooden cutlery. Feeling the need to take a break from

the hustle and bustle surrounding the fire, she decided to take a walk to enjoy the nature surrounding the camp. While traversing the safer-looking parts of the forest, she managed to encounter Dankard, who apparently also used to spend his mornings in the bosom of nature. He looked around the forest with a gaze worthy of an old thinker until he heard the girl approaching.

– It is good to see you, Iseren. Especially in the better state than yesterday. – Dankard gave her a friendly look.

– Good to see you too. And to you knowing, my state was fine. Though I am glad for your care. I wonder, you really don't mind my stay here?

– No worries. Many vagabonds we have as guests in our camp. And if you're concerned about our finances, our followers are providing us with basic commodity, when we happen to visit owns. Generous ones are always under good will of the fortune and so any good shall be spared amongst others.

– I see. And about visiting towns, where are you planning to go now?

– Might suit you that choice. To Gradlov we go, one of biggest cities here. A good company is always nicely considered, unless the time doesn't allow you to do so.

– If you don't mind, I can accompany in your travels, for a bit of time at least. When a foe strike, you can count on my blade.

– A will worth of sneovold warrior. Even them were a company in my pilgrimage. – Dankard sighed with a serene smile. – As we mention many corners of Kyrridea, I think you might be interested with learning öenwaldian speech, might come useful during you stay. Do you wish to practice it?

– Certainly i do, Dankard. Many thanks for proposition.

– We stay here in woods for a little while, shall we? We can attend your teachings when the sun meet its zenith.

– As you wish. I have no urge to make that quicker, Dankard.

The boy responded with a warm look, which turned gravitated again as he returned to the observing teeming with many lifes forest.

After returning Returning to the camp, Dankard invited the girl to his tent. Having a few manuscripts at his disposal, he taught Iseren some simpler phrases and pronunciation of the language. Much to the young man's satisfaction, Iseren had easily learned the basics of the language by the afternoon, although her pronunciation was still somewhat impaired.

When Dankard decided that this knowledge was good enough for now, she returned to the fire to help preparing dinner. She shared a few twigs of crownwort amongst gathered so they could season the food they were preparing. Iseren offered Olfira to watch the stew on the fire for her, which made the woman very delighted.

Once Iseren was done, she helped prepare the bowls and cut the bread, and soon sat down to dinner. The meal was eaten in a hurry since they had a long journey ahead of them. So not so long after, with their belongings on the backs of their horses, they set off on their travels again and, although the group consisted of eighteen people, they paced through the dense forest at an efficient pace, slowly getting closer to Gradłów.

During their voyage through Kreovia, they began to be pesked with strong blows of wind pasued by downpours; Even though they were protected by trees, everyone had soaked their clothes already, so as the rain grew stronger, they began to travel under sheets of material, often squeezed into small groups. Iseren, at Olfira's persuasion, allowed herself to be covered with one of these sheets before the girl managed to get completely soaked.

The rather gloomy mood amongst the travelers was dispelled by the encouraging news from Dankard - based on the map and signposts, he estimated that there was no more than a day's journey left to Gradłów. Carried by the vision of staying indoors, the old joy and singing in their native language returned to their conversations. Iseren, even though she already knew it partially, did not join in the song, because all her attention was focused on the surrounding landscapes, often seeing similarities with her native Senvold.

And finally, at one foggy morning they left the woodland they have been traveling for a long time. The pilgrimage felt rewarded and relieved to see a panorama of a large city spreading out on the plain, it seemed the town wasn't that far away from them.

It took them the rest of the morning to reach the city gates, where they stopped to greet the guards at the entrance. What was impressive in Iseren's opinion was that Dankard had taken a few conversations with the Gradlov guards in their native language, which sounded quite fluent by her ear. That meant that the young man knew at least three languages. After a short exchange of words between them, the group arrived outside the city walls, where, to the girl's delight, the young man had a certain host as a friend who allowed them to stay at his inn.

Once inside, they sat down on the floor by the fireplace, warming themselves by the fire. Only Dankard remained on his feet to present some news over the heads of the rest:

– Dear people! – he shouted, gathering attention of the pilgrims. – As we used to, our sermons we start when a finer weather occurs, I take a guess that might come tomorrow. If your abilities allow, let you become announcers to spread a word about our upcoming mission. Have to point out also that announcer has to know a kreovian tongue in a well-spoken manner.

A few people in the room raised their hands, which Dankard eagerly called them to step closer, wanting to teach them the announcements to the townspeople in Creovian.

After memorising the announcement with them, Dankard went to the owner of the inn, and during his absence, the people timidly began to disperse through interior.

Iseren had already noticed the interesting style of furniture inside the building - neatly carved in light-coloured wood, which felt as a contrast to the austere furnishings to which Iserren had become accustomed during her years in Jätynjodr. The girl maneuvered around dining tables to sit near one of the inn's shutters. Peering through it, she analysed the stocky structure of houses with a thick thatched roof. The houses were divided with flower gardens, enclosed from themselves with a fence or stone walls. The girl's dreamy gaze also wandered amongst the faces of

few donizens that had to take a walk during faint rain – most of men there were stalwart blondes with faces blushed by the chill.

Her observation got interrupted by the loud slam of the inn's door, the fresh breeze from outside that came with it encouraged her to leave the building, willing to take a better look around Gradlov. After informing Dankard of her departure, she left the patronage, to take a breath of wet soil smelling air. Without any rush, she walked through the city streets, stopping from time to time in front of some flowers to enjoy their scent.

While returning to the inn, she noticed a narrow path leading behind the building to a small yard with flower garden and empty clotheslines. After a quick measuring of the space, she was felt to remind herself a way of the sword. After a few awkward movements, she slowly immersed herself in the cuts and jumps she was sending. Her training stopped, when she heard footsteps behind her back. Thus she turned her gaze towards the three approaching her. She recognized the three from Dankards's pilgrimage

– Well well, kind of good thee are with the blade. – one of men greeted her. – Ye are Iseren, isn't it?

– That is right. – Iseren replied, placing her blade on a tigh. – And who are you?

– Name's Gjerryt. And my comrades Wigfried and Kaulus are. – introduced men shook her hand in greeting.

– Good to get to know. Did you want something from me?

– Indeed we do. – Kaulus said. – What would ye say for a little parry with us, away the walls of Gradlov?

– Nothing against to say. And I see you're lacking in fourth companion. Perhaps you know any good field for duels?

The man named Gjerryt nodded and gestured to the girl, insisting to follow them. Heading outside the city walls, they soon found a spacious meadow, a few hundred steps from Gradlov.

– For mushrooms I was looking for, when I found that place. – the man explained, while they were making their way through the grass. – Some grass we stomp on, and that plain will fit our needs like a mitt.

It didn't take long for them to prepare their place for duels. The four divided into pairs and started attacking each other, trying not to hurt their partner. However, after sending her disarmed opponent to the

ground, Iseren suggested that the three men fight against her. Realizing her abilities, they willingly agreed to her proposal, also feeling that it would be more fair.

– So to the first drop of blood. – she stated. – And show me what a real warrior from Öenrehn fights like.

– This time will not be that easy, lass. – Gjerryt said back with clear confidence.

"That might be interesting.."

Iseren slowly drew her sword and spreaded on bent legs. She placed her free hand on her hip, allowing the trio of men to position themselves in front of her. When they were ready, she gracefully twisted the sword in her wrist, then suddenly moved forward, cutting in a triangle with the blade.

Men surprised by instant attack, dodged the cut at the last moment and tried to slash the girl on the back, but she immidietally parried their swings, simultaneously hitting one of them in the head with the flat of her sword. Knocked down by the force of the impact, he could only now watch as Iseren disarms his companins, leaving them with minor cuts on their hands. Not more than a few heartbeats passed when her three opponents, breathing heavily, were clumsily picking up weapons from the trampled grass. Iseren stood over them, expressionless, with free from sword hand still on her hip.

– Dear gods, what a fight. Who was thy master? – until now silent Wigfried asked with slightly muttering voice.

– My foster father. – Iseren replied shortly, not raising an eye while cleaning her blade.

– Who would've seen that coming, got kicked in arse by a lass. You roughened our arses that much that we wouldn't lay that down in I guess next life. – Kaulus claimed with laughs, rubbing his slightly wounded knuckles.

– You fought well too. Glad for the duel. – with a slight bow in response, the girl sheathed her sword.

– By all wraiths! Piles of silver I'd give ye for a little training, Iseren. My comrades are on a same mindset very likely. – Gjerryt stepped closer to Iseren. – Will ye meet our needs as a teacher?

– I think so. We can master the sword each forenoon.

– So it's settled then. – Gjerryt thanked her with a hand shake. – Inkarnian from the face you seem, but to best three men at once like straw dummies.. I'm certain you'll reveal to us some tricky swings.

„*Inkarnian from the face?*” – Gjerryt's echoed in her mind for a good while

Preoccupied with these thoughts, she was about to return to Gradłov until she accidentally stepped in a water puddle. Once taking her wet shoe from the puddle in distaste, she looked at the waves spreading on the water surface. When the surface stopped creasing, she let her curiosity take side and took a gaze on her reflection in the water. All her worry faded away once she did so – even after taking off the cowl she was still not giving clear signs of being a highborn.

„*Good, I happen to look.. inconspicuous. Better be that way.*” – Iseren, without much concern for her appearance, only fixed hair to be sure her ears will remain hidden. She then set off to the inn, intending to warm herself by the fire.

A few runs of the sandglass later, she entered the building, three men from her duel her came inside. A few people near entranced got interested with the bruises and cuts on their hands, so they approached to ask what or who had injured them. Making no secret of their admiration for Iseren, the three men welcomed her with gestures to accolade her excellent fighting skills.

The girl, hiding her reluctance, allowed to be patted on the shoulders and listen to praises from the gathered people, but fortunately for her, the pilgrims' attention was quickly distracted by the dinner being prepared. However, as she sat down at the table, she still felt eyes on her, which forced her to focus on the table before the meal was served. At one point, feeling that someone was standing over her, she was forced to look up. To her relief, it was only Olfira serving her a hearty - as she usually gave her - meal.

– My mistress of sword must to get a good meal. – woman sent her a smile. – But please, you carefull must be, that path can be treacherous..

Her next words sounded deeply saddening, almost as if the woman was saying them in pain. Catching eye contact with Iseren, she quickly brightened again and hurried back to take care of her daughter.

The concerned look on the woman's face remained in Iseren's memory long after dinner, but she felt that she should not delve into the source of this concern for her or what Olfira's intentions were.

„*Maybe she's just used to being so protective of others...*” – she suggested to herself, feeling like I was lying to myself a bit.

Unanswered thoughts tormented the girl until late in the evening, preventing her from falling asleep peacefully.

She woke up to the golden glow of late morning; most of the pilgrims were already on their feet, preparing breakfast. When she finished washing her hair in a small tub, they were brought to the table, where Olfira was waiting for her with a baked fish fillet with groats prepared for her. Iseren, as usual, thanked her and started eating.

It wasn't long before Dankard called the pilgrims together and informed them of his upcoming noon sermon. The girl volunteered as a guard to guard the young man, along with the trio of Öenrehns she knew from yesterday's training. In the time before leaving, Iseren spent time outside Grادلów, lounging under a tree. Subconsciously, she was also planning the route to Vasildel in her mind. A moment later, she took a nap till the forenoon, lulled by the gentle whispers of the wind and a full stomach.

Woken up from her sleep, she stood up, brushed off from grass and straightened her linen shirt. After the swift procedure, she didn't stop anywhere on her way to Grادلów.

Upon entering to the inn, she found Dankard nervously wandering around near the entrance. Once he noticed her, Dankard ordered her to stay nearby. She obediently stopped next to the young man, who, after short preparations, took the congregation to the agreed place for the sermon.

Once there, they found a few locals and a platform prepared already for Dankard. When Dankard stood on the platform, he instructed Iseren and the rest of the guards where to take position before the rest of Gradlov's citizens arrives. Iseren, positioned next to Gjerryt at the back of the crowd, monitored the inhabitants, in the same time she tried to take listen on the Dankard's speech, although all of his oration was formed in a language foreign to her.

– Hope I don't bother you while listening to Dankard. – whispered Gjerryt.

– No, you don't. I don't know kreovian.

– So in that case we could talk. Where are you planning to go, Iseren?

– To Vasidel, I have, let's say, some business with sholars. And I can offer something in return. – the girl significantly patted the scabbard.

Gjerryt endorsed her words with a smile.

– Then may the word give you an answer, lass. So that means, we're going to separate at some point?

The girl thought about her answer for a moment, casting a pensive sight into the distance.

– Seems to be that way. – she stated after while. – I guess I miss the chance of getting promised piles of silver.

– Hah, I guess so. – he chuckled discretely, taking serious face while after. – Eh.. Wish I could help, lass, but I haven't seen a world by myself. Just a little under Dankard's company I saw some fractions of Kyrridea.

– Same situation in my case, I did not traverse much land yet. Only native souths of Senvold and parts of Kreovia.

– Native souths of Senvold? Wouldn't guess that, ye don't look like Northerner for me.. – Gjerryt gave her a uneasily piercing look.

– Fact is, I was only growing up there. – replied, avoiding his eyes.

– And where you family was from, if not from there?

– My parents.. Never had a chance to know them.

– So that's how things going.. Dankard might help, eh? He got some books, you should ask him.

– I'm not questioning Dankard's intellect, but I doubt even his knowledge could unwrap that veil.

„And I'm not feeling to expose who I am.” – dodała w myślach.

– Mhm. Then I can only wish you luck with that.

– Thank you, Gjerryt.

Mężczyzna replied only with gentle smile, then he turned his head back to the crowd of listeners.

The speech lasted for a few more runs of the sandglass until Dankard ended it with a louder calling, after which the audience began to cheer and place gifts under the dais. The crowd then slowly began to thin out, many of the departing faces were showing signs of inspiration, though some also revealed apathy or even disgust. Before leaving the platform, Dankard entered into a conversation with an old man dressed in an ornate long robe.

– Usually getting the attention of local priesthood means trouble. – Gjerryt commented. – But I see that time we got lucky.

– So do you had troubles with religious circles?

– Aye, we had. Ended up on disabling speeches or sometimes even banishments from city. Folks frown at the sound of old gods, bah, even the elemental belief cause a stir up in some places.

– And I thought the Visildea has unified belief. – Iseren made a surprised face. – In my thorp people worshipped Nyren, and elements treated with respect, yet with a dreaded distance.

– Almost like us. If I remember correctly, official religion of Visildeia is only around Nyrelion, but I heard about some older pantheons, not even the elemental one. – Gjerryt got Iseren's attention at the podium. – Finally, that clergy fellow went away. We better join Dankard.

Once they approached him, Dankard revealed to them that Gradlov was considering modernizing the city's religion, which kept the young man in an enthusiastic mood.

His guards helped him to get back to the rest of the faithful in the inn, intending to continue on his way. It didn't take long for the group to leave Gradlov. Dankard's explanation indicated that they would now be heading to Wistuja, the capital of the Principality of Jamryns - a small but wealthy state on Kreovia. Along the way, Iseren, as usual, became absorbed in admiring the nature and landscape around her. They crossed a well-trodden road, between which there were stretches of clearings and green fields, amongst which there were small villages, numbering no

more than a dozen houses. As Iseren noticed, the road was frequently traveled, mainly by peasants and merchants.

The pilgrims traveled constantly till late evening, when it became dark enough to make further travel close to impossible. Amongst the pilgrims a very joyful mood was present, so the dinner quickly turned into a drinking fuddle not cheap on singing and antics. Iseren, uncomfortable around that many noises, stepped away from the hustle and bustle, after brief walk she found a good place to sit on the edge of a hill. In silence at last, she took a serene gaze at the night firmament. The sky was clear, which allowed her to observe planets of various sizes amongst the stars. Observing the colorful sky, she didn't hear Dankard sitting next to her at first, very likely also done with bender by the fire.

– A great night. Each sphere is so bright today, almost like it can be placed on a palm. – Dankard whispered with slightly dreamy voice. – It seems you like to watch the sky as well, Iseren.

– I always liked to do it. My father used to tell me that the stars are inhabited by ancient race, from which any Earthling life is derived. – Iseren placed her hands on bended knees. – I wonder, is many truth lies in those tales?

– Very likely it does. *Leugele* were always close to Earthlings, curious perhaps, on how or are we grateful to Lords.

– By the way, why do you call your Deite Lords? Yane and Gerana are women after all.

– Ah, you see, Iseren, gods aren't in form of the same physique, like us or closer to Celestial realm ones. gods you could call Lords, but Ladies as well. Their existence is less physical, therefore, no gender applies to them. Although in elementary religion it is assumed that these more life-giving elements are feminine. Which is far from the truth, each elemental force shapes and maintains our existence in a relatively equal way.

Girl nodded in understanding, without taking her eyes off the sky, as she was arranging star constellations in various compositions.

– Glad for explanation. – added after while.

– No glad is needed. That is my mission after all.
The young man suddenly get up, with full excitement on his face.
– Do you see that? Those flashes on sky? – he asked with intentness.
– Yes, I see as well.. – Iseren with slightly opened lips watched as night sky was getting furrowed by gleaming trails in warm tones. – A bigger clash occurred, if we could see that.
– A clash? What is on your mind about that, Iseren?
– A wiseman from my village once said me, when celestial troops fight with themselves, such lights often glamour across the sky.
– It's breathtaking.. But sorrowing in the same time, if this telltale is true. So much beauty is initiated by bloody discord between once brothers...
Iseren fell silent, wondering if she would be able to find answers about this race close to her. Lost in thought, she didn't remember when her reverie became part of her dream.

Iseren rose early in the morning, awakened by the rising sun. She passed Dankard, who was sleeping nearby, to go to the camp with the intention of preparing a meal. She found vodka bottles scattered around, a few sleeping partygoers, and an unfinished dice game on a scattered shirt. She quickly realized that she would not prepare any dish so as not to wake up the Öenrehns scattered around. So she went deeper into the forest, which was located close to the camp. Walking through the forest there was a lake which, after examining the shore, turned out to be deep enough to allow her to properly cleanse herself.

Taking this opportunity, she cleaned her long-worn clothes in the water and hung them on a branch of a nearby tree. Stripped of her clothes, she slowly entered the water, gradually getting used to the chill water. Over time, coolness of the lake became relaxing for her, prompting her to stay in the water a little longer than she needed.

Once she was done with taking a bath, she lied down on the slope by the shore to dry herself, closing her eyes against the sun shining on her through the treetops.

While taking off the clothes hanging on a tree branch, she caught herself looking at her body reflection in the water. She looked at her reflection from a few sides, giving a vent to her curiosity, before the morning cold began to bother her. So she quickly put on dry, forest-smelling clothes to return to the camp.

Coming out from the woods, she brough the attention of few pilgrims who were just finishing preparing breakfast. The mess from last night had already been cleaned up, and the only thing that reminded me of the previous day were the slightly numb looks on some faces. As Iseren approached the fire, she could smell liquor from several of those present, some of whom were still sleeping off their drinks. Only Iseren, Dankard, and Olfira with her child were fully rested

While waiting for the meal, the girl watched the landscape from above the hill where the camp was set up. Her attention was distracted by a gentle pressure on her knee. Looking away, she saw Olfira's daughter, holding a wooden plate with spiced bread and a piece of fish.

– Here ye go. Momma wanted to give ye this. – little girl stuck again a bowl in Iseren's leg.

– Then thank her in my name. – Iseren tried her best for a soft tone.

The girl took the plate from the child's hands and placed it on her thighs. While eating her meal, she made eye contact with Olfira, who with of the corner of her eye observed them with a slight smile. Her eyes returned to her little girl, who ran childlike to grab tje hem of her mother's dress. Iseren after ending the meal, approached the woman with an empty plate. Olfira looked up from the kettle, giving her a warm look.

– Hope our kitchen serves you, Iseren.

– It does. Allow me to help you with rest.

– Oh, thank you! – the woman beamed. – It's so sweet from you..

Iseren did not answer and began to ration food for the remaining pilgrims. Then she washed the empty dishes with water and placed them in order. Having some time before continuing their journey, she decided to take a walk not that far away the bonfire.

By the dusk they had covered quite a distance; According to Dankard's assessment, Wistuja was three days away. They pitched their tents away from the road, on a wide plain. It was already dark enough that Iseren couldn't get a good look at what was surrounding her. When she felt that she had helped as much as she could in the camp, she went for a walk, as usual, to rest from the day spent in constant company.

Sitting on a boulder by the road, she watched the village looming on the horizon. In the distance, she could see the dim lights of the village, wondering what the villagers were doing now. Hearing footsteps behind her, she looked back to see Olfira walking nearby. The woman must have noticed her, since she clearly took few steps closer to her.

– Don't see that well in dark.. – the woman started cautiously. – With who am I pleasure to talk?

– With me.

– What a great coincidence! May I sit next to you?

– Mhm.

– You find yourself here?

– Have corner to sleep, you never let me be hungry. Fine by me.

– I'm so glad for that sunsh.. Iseren. Oh, and Junerika happened to like you a lot!

– Quite a name.

– Laurle chose it.

– Laurle?

Kobieta remained silent. In gloom it was difficult to Iseren to tell, what frown shown on Olfira's face.

– My daughter. – said in almost whisper. – She served in vasilean ranks.

– I understand. I can assume the rest.

– Not like me, I cannot rest reasy without the known the truth. Don't know what is up to her, she's just a mender, though if whole company was taken down, then no one cares who hold a sword and who doesn't.

– It would be best to stay on positive mindset.

– Glad you think that way, but I don't want to fool myself.

– I see. I can only wish you best.

– I thank you, Iseren. But not myself is is reason to worries. Junerika is. Poor one still thinks that Laurle will come back soon.

- Hm. Perhaps she should know the truth?
- V-very well, I think you're right. I tell her, but when she'll be older.
- Still who knows, maybe when you come back to Gaernbejrg you will stumble upon Laurle in your homestead?
- Sounds ludicrous, but I hope on that scenario.
- Hope never sounds ludicrous.

A silence took place between them, during it Olfira and Iseren were watching the evening skyline. After a while, the woman got up and left Iseren alone on the slope, stroking her head gently as she went away. Left alone, the girl spent some time watching the darkening sky before heading back to camp.

Not wanting to go to sleep yet, Iseren sat down by the fire. There she found Caulus trimming his hair in the reflection of the polished plate. Once he saw her, he gave her scissors and a makeshift mirror, thinking that the girl was waiting for them.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, she sat down on the ground and started trimming the longer strands of hair. In the reflection of the plate, she noticed that Olfira was approaching her in a better mood, offering to cut it herself. Iseren, not wanting to hurt the woman's feelings, agreed to her proposal.

– On how long you wish to have hair? – woman asked with warm tone.

– To chin. – Iseren replied, showing the length with edge of her hand.

Iseren relaxed, listening to the slow cuts of her hair. But suddenly she felt scissors grabbing her ear. Fortunately, Olfira didn't cut them, but she dropped the scissors in fear.

– Oh my bad deary, didn't know you have.. Good gods, you're..

– I know who I am. – Iseren interrupted her.

– Are you Inkarn?

– I could say so.

– I understand.. *Leugele*, that's who you are. – woman whispered back.

– I'm not a Celestial, but a mixbreed. – Iseren said coldly, taking her sight from woman. – A brood of two heaveners.

Eyes of Olfira started to glimmer from tears.

– Iseren.. Do not say that way. You are not a brood.

Iseren remained silent. She grabbed the scissor and continue to style her hair in silence, until Olfira took them from her hands.

– Let me end that haircut, alright?

– Fine.

The girl closed her eyes and slowly took in a breath.

„That's the last time I let someone cut my hair.” - she vowed to herself.

Iseren opened her eyes when she stopped hearing the metallic sound of the scissors. Olfira, trying to put on a cheerful expression, showed her new hairstyle in the reflection. The girl thanked the woman for trimming her hair, and then, avoiding any rapid movements, she walked away from the camp. There she took a deep sigh of relief and calmed down from the situation. Despite she felt more calm about the occurence, she started to look nervously at the nearby of bonfire, having weird sensation as if someone other than Olfira had found out who Iseren was. She instinctively knew that she should not reveal her heavenly origins to everyone she met.

Lying on her back, she listened to the slowly fading conversations from the camp. She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep, and she also knew she wouldn't be able to stay in this company anymore.

„I could barely stand the stupid praises in the inn for fencing. And this? I am a member of a pilgrimage that worships the Deity. What awaits me as their descendant? Lynching for leaving heaven? Or constant honour as the daughter of the great gods? I just... I can't stay here anymore.”

The girl slowly got up, realizing that everyone else had already gone to sleep.

„It's the middle of the night. There will be no better opportunity than this.”

Without thinking too deeply on the decision, she took the bag lying next to her and slung it at her shoulders. She only entered Dankard's tent - as the girl assumed, the young man was asleep. Taking careful steps, she unfastened the purse from her side and took out a handful of saijvis. She poured them onto the cover of the book on the table, careful to muffle the jingles of falling coins.

“I'm sorry.”

Once she left the tent, she headed towards the road to continue her journey from there.

V.

Path of her was lit only by one of the moons peeking out from behind the clouds; the girl has already come a long way since she left the camp. She made sure to head to the right direction via cheques on the signposts, despite difficults to read them the darkness she knew she was going to the right direction.

Iseren did not sleep, yet she did not lose strength as she traversed the lowlands of the principality. At dawn, she stopped for a moment to take a look at the sign to assess the distance remaining to Vasildel. With few additional glances at the a barely visible map, she decided to stop for a moment in Wistuja, hoping to find a faster way to the capital of the Visildea. So she quickly stopped and continued her journey.

She marched on until the afternoon, when she began to feel famished. So she sat down under a tree to eat some provisions. She also heated the water on the fire and made an infusion based on a few herbs that were partially known to her, so she was confident that they would not harm her.

She decided to drink plenty of tea to save herself food for the rest of the journey. The idea turned out to be a good one, although the warm infusion made her a bit drowsy. However, she knew she couldn't take a nap for now, so she gathered her belongings and extinguished the fire, returning to her journey.

Her journey continued until late at night, her path leaded through the sparsely growing forest, faintly visible in the moonlight. When she came from woods, she noticed a few light in the distance.

„It must be Wistuja.” - she thought. – „Which means I have a great overtake from the pilgrims, I don't they'll be a concern anymore.”

The thought of Dankard being abandoned without a word made her feel guilt once again. She was fully aware that the money left for him will not cover the costs, she burdened the group, and especially the

people gifting them necessities. She felt even worse thinking about how Olfira will handle the situation, even if Iseren did not share any bond to woman she didn't want to make Olfira feeling guilty for the girl's disappearance.

„It simply had to be done”

With thoughts still on during yesterday's escape, she started stroking a fire. Once the flame give her a stable source of warmth and light, the girl laid down on her back a few fathoms from the fire, placing her hands on chest.

„What use would I have from knowledge about Celestials?” – she asked herself.

She felt an unnatural sensation of weight, not related with her need of sleep. Fire of nearby fire seemed to not warm her at all.

„I stray without a purpose.”

Face of her flowed with chill, she felt as if something that does not exist started to hurt her.

„I cannot think that way.” – Iseren rebuked herself. – *„Nonsense it would be to ponder upon something that does not have a sense. Vasildel is the only place I can go. The only one in which I may find a sense.”*

The sensation of cold didn't fade away. Long and with difficult she was falling asleep, any attempts of reverie she stopped, wanting to finally drowse off.

It was early in the morning; Iseren didn't felt rested. She had no will to stand up, it appeared inert to her if she remained here travel further. She closed her eyes, counting on that she will get more refreshed.

Girl woke up in pain, her back stiffened from the long laying. Her head felt as if was more heavy than it was in reality.

„For too long I was sleeping.”

A desire to fall asleep once more apeared. She ignored the will and busted rapidly from ground. From sudden move she started to feel dizzy.

Iseren gave herself a moment to get better.

After extinguishing the dying embers, she drank the rest of yesterday's tea and continued on her way.

When the sun revealed itself completely from horizon, Iseren was able to spot the city walls. Wistuja made her already impressed – the fieldstone fortification was coating the lowland, embracing in its walls a grand and densely built city. Above the main gate of the city a banner depicting a sickle with star on white and red background was hanged.

The guards at the gate, seeing the girl approaching, gave her a piercing look, focused mainly on the sword tapping gently against her thigh. Iseren, avoiding sudden movements, passed the guards and entered the city.

The interior of the city was also dominated by stone choice in architecture, although the upper storeys of the houses were often made of wooden half-timbered buildings. The streets lined with cobblestones were full of townspeople who, in the hustle and bustle, paid no attention to Iseren walking amongst them. The girl didn't find Wistuja on her taste as a place full of confusion and various social classes mixed up together. Nevertheless, she did not hide the fact that she was dealing with a city where she could find work worth a saijvis.

Upon passing an tavern, an aromatic scent of prepared dishes wafted, giving her temptation to enter it and comfort herself with a fine food. She resisted, as she had provisions for a few days, which should have been enough for her to leave the principality of Jamryns, after which only the traversing through Visildeia remained.

While crossing the street, from a crowd of voices in a language that was foreign to her, she heard vasileian, which immediately caught her attention. Following the voice echoing through the streets, she reached the podium on which stood a herald dressed in robes matching the color of Wistuja's coat of arms.

– ..A pay for brave one or ones will be a thousand saijvises and uncountable gratitude from the court and family of Jamryn. Required it is to bring a proof of perishing the banite. Signed by his principal majesty,

Greziyja Jamryn. – with sonorous voice, the man was reading the content of scroll.

Iseren decided to wait until herald will start to read the proclamation once again. It took some time when he started to shout again:

– People of Wistuja! From order of mighty Jamryn's family, a handsome reward will be given for anyone brave enough to end the agenda of foul brigandery that dared to mean harm to good people of principality. The one responsible for such action is the Palegob considered and the flock of his comrades as well. Many accounts will claim that Palegob has almost dozen of men on his side, each of them well armed and ready to viciousness is. Bandits were seen at roads to Prilenyica, Tzudarai, and near old fort at Wrosiva hill, from which they supposedly plan their on-slaughts to good people of principality. Each valliant man well with any weapon is encouraged to gather the trustful party and challenge the outlawed Palegob. A pay for brave one..

From that moment on, Iseren stopped listening to public speech, as she knew the rest of it.

„Manhunter. Hm, I could test myself on that. And good sum of saijvisses is always nicely considered.”

Once she returned to her walk around the city, she noticed that on some walls of buildings there were wanted posters, calling for the capture of Palegob, whom the girl already knew. Therefore, she focused on the memory portrait.

Given the amount of effort, the charcoal sketch gave only a superficial image of the bandit - an unshaven, oblong face with an unfriendly facial expression, as well as long, dark hair. Two features of his appearance caught Iseren's eye, namely the jagged scar on his cheek and pair of bright eyes, which someone responsible for portrait clearly tried to capture in the appearance of a highwayman.

„Something tells me I very likely stumble upon him..”

Iseren stepped back from wanted poster, ready to leave Wistuja. She squeezed through the crowd of residents towards the main gate. The guard she passed called something in Creovian, from the context she understood that it was a warning about Palegob. The repeated mention of him convinced the girl more to try her luck with the prize for bandit's head. She dispelled these thoughts to follow the signpost at the road to

Mácirsarok, a city located several days' journey from here in the Vasila province. Iseren intended to just pass the city and then head to the capital of the empire, which would be a matter of a few days' journey from there.

In „Travels through Kyrridea” - the book that the Herberman gave her - it showed that the fastest route to Mácirsarok from Wistuja runs next to the vasilean fort on the hill.

„A fort on a hill, probably worn down by the passing of time? Sounds oddly familiar..”

Iseren wandered by the highway, which leaded through slightly getting higher hill, from its peak the girl noticed sparsely growing conifers with a low and widely spreaded crowns. The road seemed to be frequently traveled, so supposedly operating here bandits seemed to be a recent trouble. Once the Iseren got on the top of hill, she took a moment to enjoye perspicuous scenery of majorly lowland area, as well as faint view of Wistuja, partially swallowed in blues of horison.

From observation brought her a sight of men nearby, the group was gathered around the cart. It looked like that waggon lost its wheel.

„A robbery? But no one's dead here..”

Hidden in woods Iseren sneaked closer to the strangers. Upon hearing screams in vasilean she took a better listen:

– Sard this wheel! That Klemnic's shit of a work, oh, better that bastard be ready when I beat his sorry arse.. – male voice hissed from frustration. – Zidar, come here and be useful for once in your miserable life!

The girl looked out from behind tree to take a closer look on the scene. To the waggon stepped well-built man with a memorable dull stare.

– Yeah? – he asked with resounding voice.

– Take that waggon and lift it! – vociferous voice belonged to a short-statured brunette man that kneeled infront of a cart. – Need to place a wheel on axle.

– Where to grab?

– Arse of yers you grab, ye gull without a single thought in mind! Don't ye see where waggon needs to be lifted?

Bruiser named Zidar spitted in his hands and raised cart.

– More ye need to lift it, what, didn't ye eat the meal? Ryžko, Druvan, Casco, aid that bespawler!

„I see they would like a bit of help.”

The girl stepped out of her hiding spot directly to them. Her pace was serene enough that no one frome gathered grabbed his weapons, she was only greeted with cautious stares. Iseren stood above the uproarious man.

– And who in the fuck's name are ye? Blade wielding scoundrel? Sell-sword of sorts? – the man fighting with cart grumbled.

– Iseren. Any help is needed? – Iseren crouched near him.

– I donno how woman can hel..

The man didn't have time to finish, as Iseren lifted the cart high enough to place the wheel where it belongs. Shocked at first, he quickly shook himself from suddenly taken action and swiftly nailed the wheel to the axle of the cart.

– At last! Thank ye, stranger. And forgive me nerves of mine. Luthian is my name, from Skudfále I am. – the man reached hand for a greeting. – Enough problems with transport already, now that damn wheel. And those nitwits here, only good for comments and idle standing!

Bruisers looked at each other sending smirks, until Luthian didn't reflect them with a scream.

– No need to be sorry. I can get the idea how stressful can be the merchant work. – the girl assured Luthian.

–Bah, no merchant from me. – the man swunged hand. – Only a hired wagoner, apprentice I am. But no complains about that, lady, I have a good pay, to city traders many wares I ship. Now reijrmalian I have on wagon, but shush! Expensive it is, like a chasity.

– Reirmalian?

– Uh, ye know, wine, Reirmal brews. Or his sons, who knows now. More important though that damn savoury it is, for years now ye could see it on tables of continent's dignitary and other rich ones.

– Aristocracy and wine?

– Aye, they drink, but not just any one, from my cart they have it. – Luthian puffed out proudly. – Seasoned, with citruses, with a bit of mead. Like I sodding said, best on continent!

– Then it must have quite a price, even in ordinary looking barrel. Weren't you worried to drive there? You might heard about the Palegob character, he's by rumours operating here, and he and his men could kill you for your shipment.

– Well yes, of course I heard about him. But why worry about him! – he negated airily, to Iseren's surprise. – Dangerous he might be, but not stupid. He knows that me paying for passage is more profitable than me being stabbed and dead.

– You know him?

– If ye ask are we drinking guvs, then no. But if I allow to one or two kegs got missing from my cart, then he allows me to pass.

– So you know where he can be found?

– Ye could say that. Usually a bunch of his boys rushes from bushes and take something from the cart. And if the carriage is empty then purse of saijvises they demand. But those are so petty losses, so business is still going anyway. Well speaking of ongoing bussines, I have to get return to travels to make it that way. Wine to Wistuja I have to ship.

– Have you passed the Palegob already?

– Yeah, say a little while ago. Why about Palegob that much? Do you.. – Luthian turned frightened at that moment. – Ye're out of mind! That's suicide! Ten men against one lass!

– Not the gentles to ask about such thing, but I'd like something in return for my help. You will b..

– No way I am going onto this! – Luthian cut out. – Sooner I'll eat my boots than..

– I don't want any reinforcement. Look, I simply wish you will stay here for a while and wait for my return.

Serene tone of Iseren seemed to convince the man, as he nodded in affirmation.

– F-fine. Wish you luck, lady. – added after while. – May Nyreliion guide you. And once we hear a squarrel I'll send ya two of these churls, then a chance is you may be rescued in whole piece then.

– It will not take so long, it is them or me. And take a look on my baggage during my absence. It's yours, if I will not come back.

Iseren threw her bag between the kegs. Men around the cart followed the departing girl with a sight that was appropriate to the situation at hand – as if they were observing the youthful leap.

– If bright hair she had, I'd bet a hundred saijvises that Snevoldian she is, oh, they and their battlecry. – Luthian mumbled amongst brutes, which they replied with few nods and mutters.

Iseren stopped listening to what was happening behind her back. As she walked along the road, she began to be more nervous about any potential places for ambush or signs of the bandits' presence. She had been walking along the path for a good hundred fathoms when she started to draw with her eyes a looming outline of the ruined fort.

„And there is a fort at Wrosiva.”

From a distance, the girl noticed that the structure consisted of a time-worn tower and a ruined fortress adjacent to it, which, without a roof and part of the walls, resembled a more modest courtyard. The upper part of the tower was built of wood, which darkened over the years and slowly fell apart, as evidenced by the leaky roof of the tower.

Iseren slowed her pace when she noticed movement inside the fort. She slowly drew her weapon and hid in the bushes in a crouched position, slowly approaching the walls of the fort. Up close, Iseren heard drunken conversations punctuated by laughter. She hurriedly squeezed herself into the wall as four thugs emerged from inside the tower, descending the worn steps outside the fort walls.

The bandits were heading in the opposite direction - towards the road. Taking advantage of the opportunity, she waited until they moved away, and then she sneaked near the ruined fortress. Peering around from behind a low wall, she saw five bandits in the remains of the fortress - four playing dice on the beaten ground, and one, with a bow over his shoulder, walking on the wall, watching the surrounding from time to time. Iseren herself couldn't find Palegob though, yet she intended to use a surprise attack to overcome more numerous enemy. Without any qualms, she reached for a loose stone from the wall and threw it accurately at the head of the patrolling archer. It bounced off the thug's head with a dull thud, due to the impact he fell off from wall outside the fort.

The rest of thugs left the dices on the ground and rushed to check the wall, then climb it and pull their companion out.

Iseren's strong throw made him dead, the bandits present there ran to the tower, leaving the fortress not guarded. The girl took advantage of the confusion and jumped over the wall and remained calmly in front of the tower. A moment later, bandits were back near entrance, but when they saw Iseren emotionlessly staring at them, they stood terrified, completely unable to move or even look at each other. One of them pushed through them, his face was hidden in the darkness.

– And who am I pleasure with? – stranger asked, still standing in shadows.

– With Iseren. I see you know vasileian.

– Iseren.. Glad to get to known. About vasileian, around half of my men know it, but that doesn't matter. – the man stepped to the sun, revealing known to girl face from bounty posters. – For the award you came, I suppose.

– I am here for more personal reasons. – she replied with calmly, yet resolute tone.

– Well, well, how surprising. – he mocked her. – Another man of justice came here to clash with dreadful band of Palegob. Some were wise enough to bring some mates to help though.

– I want for testing myself, not for glory. – the girl took a step closer to him.

– That attitude is slightly less dissapointing. – Palegob got from tower's steps with unpleasant smile. – What about a conversation before your trial?

– Guv, whass that about? All at once we should! And smite her in half! – one of men shouted.

– You better stay where you are or you're going to be the one cut in half. – the calm warn of Palegob stopped the thug in place like an enchantment. – And back to our guest, will you come with me?

– I will. May I invoke the rule of hospitality?

– Hm. – he placed a piercing stare at her. – From odd corners you must came from if you ask about such right. Fine, the word has been said, so you are welcome as you wished.

Palegob was the only one who carelessly summoned Iseren inside the tower, pushing his men aside. The girl, had no choice, so responded to the gestures by entering the tower.

It took a while for Iseren's eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness after entering the tower. She looked discreetly around the interior - crudely carved furniture, a few floors, small space.

„So cramped here, the arm can barely straighten. Let's hope that won't be a place for fight."

The ground floor of the tower served as a living room, which was suggested by a table heavily covered with trinkets. Palegob showed her a seat at the table, and he sat down on the opposite side. The thugs poured into the tower, glancing nervously at the girl.

– Not how the guest should be treated – Palegob took a cold look at them. – Bring me a fine beverage.

– But why do you welcomed here? – one of them tried to inquire.

– Do you question my decision? – Palegob asked.

– N-no.

– Then go for what I asked to.

The sight of Palegob warmed up as he looked back at Iseren.

– You feel cosy here? – he smiled.

– Quite a nest you established.

A dusty bottle and two mugs appeared on the table. Palegob grabbed the serving one's wrist. The bandit looked at him horrified.

– Much appreciated. – he whispered with satisfied tone. – And now, out the door.

– But..

It only required to Palegob get up from chair, and bandits backed off.

– Was something unclear? – he asked.

– N-no. – the brave one replied.

The thugs went catiously outside, leaving the two alone.

– You won't take the cowl off, aren't you? – Palegob broke through silence.

– No.

– Such shame though. From with I see such pretty face. – he stated without any effort to sound subtle. – To the state it is hard to just watch.

Iseren sent him not impressed stare. The smile of Palegoba weakened.

– You got surrounded such easily. – he started again, with a rough look at the girl. – What do you plan to do?

– Get a good use of my right to residence.

– As you wish. – Face of a man twisted in fascination.

Palegob uncorked the bottle and poured its content to cups. Echoing the man, she drank the contents of the mug, letting the burning accent linger on her tongue.

– Weren't you afraid to simply take a sip? – curiosity was wringing from the words of a man.

– No at all.

– And what if I put poison on the mug?

– Then I will be poisoned.

Palegob pursed his lips.

– How many men you left dead? – he asked, noticeably delighted with the tense situation.

– Six. – replied with vigilant glance. – Your bowman included.

– Nice throw then. – he said back evasively. – And my men told me that Flinthead fell from the wall, not got stoned in a temple.

– Such shame, they weren't able to perform proper autopsy for you.

Palegob was able only to shook his head.

– I have to admit. You're damn good with nerves, Iseren. So now, tell me, what's about your trial?

– It's simple, I wish to test my sword. Curious I am, how many I can handle.

– Words worth a smith of commonness. – seeing puzzled sight of Iseren he added: – Let me explain.

– I am all ears then.

– You see, the people are divided into blacksmiths and metalwork. The metal bends upon the blacksmith and becomes a tool. And once the blacksmith creates, he's left only with good metals around him. The rest is thrown away.

– Mhm.

– But about your test, on who you wish to try yourself? On me?

– On you. Nothing personal.

He smiled.

– Left by anger, yet ready to take the life from people.. You're the interesting one, that's pity you have your own goals, I wished for at least one good arm in my ranks.

– I don't feel like meaning harm to weaker ones.

– What, honour or conscience can't allow?

– Lack of challenge, since with the effort comes the value.

– Oh, you'd be surprised, pretty one. Sometimes for robbing a caravan you need to put quite a effort.

– Don't call me pretty one.

– Under my roof I can call anyone like I want. – the man leaned to her from table. – And I won't let you die, my dear. Oh no, those rags of yours hold some pretty good treasures. And even if you ugly or flat were, then this hiding place would still need a woman's hand, even one in chains.

– Perhaps you overestimate yourself.

– Perhaps. We'll see, what fortune is about who is the one overestimating himself.

– Palegob? – Iseren felt an uneasy stare of man's light grey eyes. – It seems to me that we should not make the gods wait any longer for our fate.

– No worries, gods will not wait for long. – he said back, sending her unpleasant smile. – But let me try your capability first. Let's say on my tools. Now, we'll better go outside.

Iseren left first. She turned around in disgust when she felt Palegob's hand on her hip. There was no sign of shame on his face.

– I'll cut out that hand. – Iseren warned him.

– We shall see.

Iseren slid aptly from the stairs, standing infront of the band. Bandits took looks for each other, then glanced anxiously at his chief.

– And what are you waiting for? – Palegob asked them.

– Uhh.. We dunno. – one thug was able to answer.

– Then think. You have infront yourself an intruder and murderer, as she shamelessy professed.

– Who did she killed?

– Who! – repeated with frustration Palegob – Why is that not already clear for you! She killed Flinthead! Will you just let her go? You know how I feel about ignorance of vengeance, right?

– W-we know, guv. But we’re just to take her, chief, we swear! – the group promised.

Palegob swepted them with glance full of superiority.

– Kill her.

Four bandits came out of the tower, hesitantly pointing their weapons at the girl.

– That one here killed your good comrade! – he hollered, which gave them uplift. – With a little vigour, my men!

– Yea, let us show her how gallant Krövens fight like! – added one of thugs, wielding an axe.

– For Flinthead! – the rest were shouting.

Iseren let bandits to went from stairs and stood infront of her.

– Not that confident now, aren’t thou? – one of the band tried to provoke her.

The girl remained silent, as she remained her attention on still smiling Palegob.

„Now just not lose that much energy on them.”

Iseren pushed away her thoughts and began to spin her sword as she stepped closer to the bandits. Her oponents tried to approach her, yet her calm demeanor clearly confused them and kept in place. At one point, she grabbed the sword tightly and made a immediate attack at one of the thugs, who did not dodge the attack quickly enough.

The cut was smooth but shallow. It only left a slightly bleeding cut in the robber's neck.

– Gods damn, a child o’ a whore thou are! – he hissed from pain, right after tried to counter attack her.

The girl easily sent the bandit to the ground with a kick to the chest. That chest was soon stabbed with a tip of Iseren’s sword, ending ruf-fian’s life. The rest of them rushed at Iseren, launching clumsy attacks at her. She performed a series of dodges and parries in front of them, sending back more accurate cuts in return.

The aggressive attitude of her opponents quickly turned against them - the last one alive, in a moment of mindless fury, ran towards her with

an ax held above his head. From bented legs she jumped towards enemy, thrusting her sword right to thug's abdomen. With a broken cry of pain, the man was thrown from sword on the ground, where he remained motionless.

Iseren barely had time to catch her breath when she heard Biallic himself approaching her with his sword lowered.

– Well, that was kind of a fine show. – Palegob sent her languorous smile. – Too fine actually. To could be done by Earthian's hand.

Muscles on Iseren's arm tensed.

– What, don't you like when someone find a truth this way? – man triumphed. – Lacking in amusement up in clouds, so you had to get down amongst the lower cast?

Iseren remained silent.

– Let us forget about your.. non-earthiness. Because I have to admit, fine moves with a sword you have. – Palegob changed topic. – The bloodbath suits you I shall say.

– Let us get over it. – Iseren cutted out.

– As I promised. – his languorous smile got stronger. – I will get you the challenge you sought for that long. So perhaps I may get famous as a Skybane. But we shall see.

Palegob raised his sword and in no moment sent his first swing. Iseren deflected his blow with difficulty, as she had never encountered anyone who fought like Palegob. His attacks seemed blindly aimed and furious, but the effort she took to fend them off quickly convinced her that her opponent was in control of his slashes.

Between the swooshes and clangs of crossed blades, she heard Biallic sending attacks with maniacal laughter. She tried not to let it distract her, focusing only on the opponent's view, which was quite a challenge considering his chaotic movements.

After a serie of devoid of order attacks, the two stepped back, started to circle around each other on bent legs. The image of Palegob slowly was replaced with taken by instict animal, ready to sink its teeth in rival. Vision was hastily dispersed, focus of Iseren was brought back to the bare aspects of a fight.

Iseren onrushed first. He swunged at Palegob's shoulder, though he dodged the atak and sent a thrust in responce. The girl didn't make fully

in time, as the blade injured her forearm. The cut sensate in an odd manner, Iseren didn't remember when was her last time she got wounded.

She was shocked when same sensation spreaded in her leg, Palegob soon after was ready to leave an another cut. Before she pondered on whether it was matter of pain or shock, she once again wasn't able to dodge, shallow, yet still desorientating incision.

„*Stop this rumagging.*” – she upbraided herself.

The pain or whatever was distracting her faded to the back of her mind, Iseren, as if she awaken, jumped at Palegob, thrusting him with a sword. Not swift enough she was, though the tip of blade stabbed the man in torso.

Palegob screamed more in amusement than pain, with the opportunity after few bluff attacks she swunged brutally at the girl's face. Iseren was just waiting for stronger attack. In moment when swords were crossing, she swunged rapidly her sword in opposite dirrection, letting the weapon of her opponent move towards the ground. The man lost his tact, once the blade found in its way only the air. Without any consideration, she grabbed the sword in both hands and from half-turn she sent the sword at Palegob's exposed arm. The force of blow was potent enough to cut off his arm, which with the carried once sabre was thrown at the stones of ruined fort.

– Seems you carried your promise. – he commented, taking not so concerned peek at his cutted of arm.

It didn't surprise Iseren that Biallic's still smiling. As if nothing happened, he just drew the dagger from his strap and jumped towards the girl, trying to stab her with it. Weapon though was too short to reach Iseren. Without an arm Palegob was not a problem for Iseren to send him with a kick on the ground. Man upon falling threw his dagger, before he could reach it the girl stomped at his fingers. Second kick in the jaw threw him once again on the back. Palegob remained motionless on ground, with a blunt gaze he was awaiting his fate.

– I take that this is an end. – Iseren stood above the man. – An interesting battle we had

– Cannot argue with that. – Palegob smirked, showing dirty from blood teeth. – And so, the heavens subdued the earth. It was me that

turned out to be just metalwork of your creation. Now.. Finish your smi-thing.

– Very well. Your last will, almost-Skybane?

– Do it with my dagger. Can hurt. Or not. It is up to your fantasion.

– As you wish.

Iseren stepped away from Palegob, ready for a desperate trial for fight from his part. However he was patiently waiting for the girl, to get back with his dagger.

– Raise your chin. – Iseren crouched near Palegob, hand with the dagger turned white due to clench.

– Merciful from your part. Not many thugs could have such luxury upon their end.

Man exposed his neck with closed eyes. Breath of his was unpleasantly serene under current circumstances. He took a whistling breath once the dagger opened his throat horizontally. Wheezing puffs of a man weakend up over time, up to point when they had stopped completely. Girl kneeled near motionless Palegob without any thought, suddenly from his insides exploded a swarn of glamouring petals. Instinct made her jumping back from them, from her hand a dagger slipped.

„This light again? I assume it may have something to do with the mental strength of their owner. That's why I didn't see it so well when Palegob's comrades were dying.” – she leaned closer to the petals, letting them warm her blood-soaked hands. – *„Maybe this ability will serve me as a bargain for my enter to the university? After all, not everyone notices them.”*

She was interrupted from observation of luminous aura by the sounds of nearby singing, probably made by coming back remaining four bandits.

She looked up from beyond the fort walls to get a better look at them. It seemed that they apparently managed to rob someone's caravan, since they were carrying various types of valuables. Soon they reached the ruins of the fort, where they found the leader of their gang - dead in a pool of blood - as well as Iseren, at the sight of whom they dropped the looted goods out of fear.

Iseren quickly drew her sword, standing on slightly wobbly legs in front of them, relieved to see the caravan guards come to her rescue.

– Come at them, smite all! – the bruisers shouted, swinging angrily their weapons.

With a fine hit, one of bandits collapsed on the ground with crushed skull. Rest on them fell on their knees with weapons dropped.

– Mercy! – one of them howled, trembling. – Lady, oh good lady, spare all o’ we!

– If you prefer the shame, fine then. – Iseren gritted her teeth in pain, as she sheathed her sword. – Bury your friends at least.

– Many thanks, grateful will be to us ends! – thug lowered his head with humility. – We vow, an innocent will never scam with th’sword again! And vodka from what we will addle, only at Elftnis!

Iseren looked away from the bandits in disgust, she only took Biallic's sabre from the fort. As she greeted Luthian's guards, she asked them to take the keg from the thugs' hideout. A moment later they returned, but with a few other valuables.

– Zidar made us do this. – one of them justified himself when he saw the way Iseren looked at him.

Before she could answer, she felt a lancinating pain in her leg, from which she fell to her knees.

– Cuts you have many. – Zidar chuckled, placing her arm on his shoulder. – But so many men you bested..

– What a physician you are. – replied his companion with amusement.

Iseren, put her effortt to not scream in pain, so she said nothing in response. Three of them slowly returned to Luthian, who had already fallen asleep under the tree. He quickly jumped up when he saw Zidar putting the girl on the bench and then, accompanied by his mates, dumping the valuables into the cart.

– Chief, we’ll take this as payment. But ye’ll buy us a fine citrus vodka for a drink, alright?

Luthian he still couldn't utter more than a few curse words.

– H-how?! – he asked after a while, pointing with his open hands at the loot of the bandits in his cart.

– That does not matter. – with a faint voice Iseren cut into conversation. – But at the end you have your keg back.

– Yeah, my keg.. – Luthian clearly couldn't believe what he just saw. – F-fine, enough time I spent here, on a cart now!

Despite their massive stature, brutes jumped neatly onto the seats, putting special care to not step on Iseren's injured legs.

– All in one piece, the keg as well. You surely deserve that citrus one. – satisfaction crept onto the carriage driver's face. – Remind me about that in Wistuja, alright?.

– With pleasure, chief. – Zidar replied fancifully, as if he was already tasting the promised drink.

The cart moved with a jerk, slightly clattering on the beaten road. Iseren gripped the backrest tighter and as she did that, a growing pain in various places on her body got more severe. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at the Luthian who was focused on driving.

– Since we've got a little of road to Wistuja, ye could tell us what happened there at the fort, cause I heard quite a massacre from there.. – Luthian broke silence, remaining his gaze on the road. – And from those churls a shite I'll hear.

– I have nothing against. – the girl replied mumbly, as she was wiping the blood from corner of her lips.

"At least I'll stop thinking about all these wounds for a moment." – she added in thoughts.

The girl gave herself some time to arrange the past events into a coherent story and then present it to Luthian.

A while passed once they departed; during that Iseren managed to tell Luthian's company about interesting parts of her journey, and in return, they shared stories they happened to get to know upon their travels.

One of them interested Iseren in particular, as it was about a wandering cartographer wizard known as Macair. The girl, since she heard about him before, was eager to hear about his activities in Avsalim - a city in the vasilean province.

History was covering the story of him, traveling around the world in the company of other brave warriors, together constituting a highly respected group of mercenaries. Their purpose of going to the city was likely related with thriving force of deserters, who after abandoning their service chose the path of plunder and devastation. Even though Macair's

company consisted of only a few people and their opponents were numerous enough to be uncountable on fingers of two hands, yet they were met with the murderous might of legendary spellcaster's enchantment. Macair allegedly burst the ground beneath his opponents' feet, drowning them in an underground stream.

– ..And what was the oddest – Luthian cleared his throat, a bit hoarse from constant talking – that Macair wanted only a purse of coin and a book from the court library as payment for getting rid of these soldiers. Can ye imagine? Slaughter so many just for a handful of silver and a dusty book.

– Was known what book he had taken? – Iseren asked, not that ridiculed by spellcaster's choice.

– Uhh, don't remember from that telltale. Not sure even I am, was that Macair character not just figment of some storyteller.

– Mhm.. – As the silence took place, Iseren began to feel the pain spreading throughout her body again.

– Ye sure, we'll be able to reach Wistuja?

Iseren didn't answer. She closed her eyes slowly, calming her breathing. After a while she heard the clatter of horseshoes on the stone road.

"We're in Wistuja now.."

The girl felt someone lifted her from the cart. After a slight rocking, she realized she had to be carried somewhere. As if she was underwater, she heard concerned conversations in Creovian, amongst which she recognized Luthian's voice.

„Why can't I get up?"

Iseren was able to open her eyes at some point; luckily for her, in pair with sight, she regained sense of her body. After few blinks, she met with the sight of modestly furnished interior, in the corners of the room noticed a couple of beds, some of them occupied by other wounded. As she rose to a sitting position, she realized that her wounds were bandaged and covered by oily healing substance.

Before she could get well process such sudden change of scenery, a middle-aged woman dressed in loose robes entered the room.

– I see thou've recovered. – the stranger smiled, when she saw that the girl was sitting on the bed. – Have to admit, you have a surprisingly fast metabolism, if you could just that wake up. You were injured in many places and probably poisoned. And yet you're already on your feet.

– Was I sent to hospice? – Iseren tried to stand on feet, despite the dizziness. – And ugh, was I poisoned?

– It seems to be the case. – the woman folded her hands. – Lack of flexibility in limbs, drowsiness and no responses to basic stimuluses. It could have been a reaction to some poison, as I mentioned. Oh, and yes, thou ended up in a hospice under name of Lord himself, Nyrelion the Life-Giver.

– I suppose I owe you something in return. – Iseren looked around for her purse, before remembering that her clothes got changed. – Where are my belongings?

– In that chest near thy bed. And where are my manners? Jodliła, priestess I am.

– Name's Iseren. I feel good enough to manage on my own, I suppose. And I appreciate for taking care of my wounds.

– If thou sayest so, I wouldn't say myself, yet I can't tie thee to the bed. Come with me then, when thou changest to thy clothes.

The woman turned around, giving her time to put on her clothes. Iseren began to put on her tunic, which after the fight with Palegob contained few serious tears, so she tried to no deepen them further than they were already. She almost fell on the floor once she got off bed, which met with Jodliła's indiscreet cluck of discontent .

– If I were thee, I would stay to recover for a day or two. – woman persisted.

– Do not worry, I can take care of myself. – Iseren assured her. – Would you take me to the entrance?

– Well, whatever's upon thee, it must very important. – Jodliła shook her head. – But enough of my lectures, let us go.

The girl, led by the priestess, passed a short corridor full of similar looking rooms, in some of them she spotted a few sick and injured

people under the care of priests. The place looked too sterile and well-kept to be a public institution.

„Wistuja had to put lots of fund on this hospice. But why no one demanded even a coin from me?“

– Who left me here? – asked nearby Jodiliła.

– Visildeian fellow, didn't introduce himself. He know our.. my kinsmen's speech, though he explained me you're not from around here, and so thou very likely don't knowest kreovian. And also, allegedly thou'st done quite a favor for the region. – woman sent her curious look from her shoulder. – By that second sword thou hast I can make some assumptions about that..

Iseren fell silent, feeling that Jodilila continued to glance at girl with the same inquisitive look. Soon the corridor ended at the stairs leading to the ground floor and from there to the exit.

– Do I really owe nothing to hospice? – Iseren made sure, while standing in vestibule.

– Thou doest not. A mentioned stranger handed us over a grand purse to take a good care of thee.

– Very kind from him.

– Indeed, not common act of good will that was. And I suppose that is a farawell to us. May the Lord guides thee, Iseren. – Jodiliła pushed door at the street of Wistuja. – Come in need, all souls are most welcome here.

Iseren bowed in thanks and procceded to walk down the street, towards the castle towers that were protruding above the roofs of the city buildings. At some point she realized that it was mid-morning, which meant she was unconscious for at least a day.

„I would be inclined to believe that Palegob could have poisoned the blade of his weapon or contents of that mug. Not for advantage..“ – The girl stared uneasily at the blade wrapped to her side. – *„...But to saturate his fantasies.“*

Clouded by thoughts she happened to bump at the townguard, who warned her in kreovian in response.

– Ough, please, forgive me. – the girl passed irritated guard, not counting on his acquaintance with vasileian.

– Oh, have to plead you on something too. – the soldier mocked her, copying her toneless voice. – To take damn eyes of ye out from arse! Get out of here, ye and yer murrains ye carry, vagrant!

Having in mind the condition of her clothes, she didn't even try to blame the guard for mistaking her for a beggar.

She had a similar problem when she reached the gate to the prince's court. The guards standing at the entrance blocked her way.

– I need to see someone representing court. –Iseren was initially met with unfriendly eyes from the interns. – About Palegob.

The guards at the gate did not answer her, muttering amongst themselves for a moment in their native language. Finally, one of them walked slowly to the castle courtyard.

After a long absence, he reappeared at the open gate, accompanied by another guard.

– Yeah? – he asked roughly.

– About the bounty that was announced in Wistuja. I killed Palegob. – the girl untied the naked sword from her side. – Here's proof of my words.

The guard who knew vasileian stood like rooted to the ground.

– C-come with me. – he choked out, then hurried back to the courtyard.

Iseren followed him as he ordered, trying to keep up with his pace. The guard turned abruptly to one of the wings of the castle, where, after wandering through the corridors for a while, he reached a room that looked like someone's quarters.

The interior of the room was luxuriously furnished, full of bookcases, shelves for scrolls, and easels with sketches of the area. In the center of the room there was a heavily set table, under which a decorated red carpet was spread. A stout man dressed in elegant robes sat at the table. Seeing the two approaching, he stopped his feast and gave them a waiting for an explanation look.

– Sire – guard stood in more respectful way – That vagab.. that woman here stated she has important raport about Palegob.

– Is that so? – man's bushy eyebrow raised. – Let me hear it then. Go for now, soldier. Dismissed!

The guard bowed his head in respects and then left the quarters. The man showed Iseren the chair across from him.

– Now, I'm listening. – the stranger placed his fingers at table in the shape of a pyramid.

– As you wish, sire. – Iseren lowered her head.

During telling the story, she watched as the man's face slowly took on an expression of admiration and satisfaction.

– Well, well. In almost on your own taking such banditry down is quite a deed. – the man poured dark liquid to his chalet. – Almost unbelievable, isn't it?

– I have proof of my act, do you wish to see it, sire? – Iseren adjusted the sabre that was hastily tucked into her belt.

– That would be most convenient of you.

Iseren handed him the weapon.

– Well, that changes how I see thy report. – The man looked closely at the blade, after while he placed it above the fireside. – It really seems you tell me the truth..

– I wouldn't dare to lie to you, sire. – Iseren lowered her head.

– Good then. – the man smiled with satisfaction. – It's time to report to his majesty. Certainly not in the condition I happened to talk with thee.

– Frogive me my.. –

Iseren was unable to finish as the dignitary silenced her with a hand gesture.

– Come, before the audience will take place, you'll be properly dressed. – he stood from the table.

Iseren quickly did the same, allowing him to be led from the quarters to a chamber filled with various outfits and sewing equipment. Around them few women servants were sewing and mending various textiles.

– I leave her to your hands. This is a guest of our majesty's audience, so I expect from you to dress her with dignity.

– As you wish, sire. – one of the maids bowed with her hand on her chest.

Once the door closed, the castle's tailors surrounded Iseren, slowly measuring her body with their fingertips. Iseren closed her eyes, letting them touch her while trying to keep her breathing calm.

When she stopped feeling the pressure of the women's tiny fingers on her, she opened her eyes to see the maids working at the tables.

– Hey, chin up. – the younger servant whispered to her, suddenly placing the materials in Iseren's hand. – Your audience will surely be a success.

– I am not afraid of that. – Iseren whispered back. – If I may to know, why do you use the Visildean language at court?

– Oh, we usually use our speech, but we are ordered to communicate with guests in the language that was suggested by authority.

The girl nodded, letting the maid return to her work.

The maids looked through the prepared clothes, putting aside a pair of similar size.

– Is madame willing to keep your sword with an attire? – one of servants questioned her.

– If that's a possibility. – Iseren replied, unfastening her sword from side.

Servants left three pairs of garments on the table.

– If we may insist, we beg for a bit of madame's attention. We're about to present miss our attire proposition.

Three women stood in front Iseren, each of them was holding an outfit in her hands.

– First of them, the classic kirtle, with flowery decoration of an apron. – one of women started to explain. – Second, the toga, meets novelties of southern fashion. And third, thickly woven shirt.

– The shirt seems fine.

– A wise choice, madame. It will emphasize your femininity while retaining, if I may speak that way, your battle spirit.

– Thank you. Shall I wear it now?

– That would be most welcome, madame.

Iseren took off her tunic, feeling the chilling air on her skin as it was swirling around the stone castle. After receiving the outfit in her hands, she began to carefully tie it. She didn't tie one string properly before the tailors did the rest for her. Iseren reluctantly allowed them to get herself dressed, trying not to show her displeasure.

– Magnificently you present in your new clothes, madame. – one of the servants commented, when Iseren freed herself from their hands.

– Great. –she tried to show some enthusiasm. – Is that all?

– From our side, indeed it is. In matters of aesthetics, We think you already look presentable enough, miss. There is no need for skin and hair care. – servant pointed at younger maid. – Jolina, take madame to quarters of our majesty’s majordomo.

After leaving the chamber, Jolina’s official expression worn out.

– If I may, I would like to make the walk to sire Prysimił a little more enjoyable. – the maid proposed. – May I ask what thy name is?

– Of course you can, Iseren I am named. Glad to meet you.

– Me too. – Jolina replied her with a warm look. – Well made sword you carry, the blade is cidelite, made in Senvold, isn't it??

– You’re right, that’s jätynian sword to be more specific. You must have a knowledge on weaponry if you describe it that precisely.

– My father is court smith here, sometimes between horseshoes he takes a look on equipment of teammen. It happened few times that even mercenaries from many corners of the world came to him, we had then a good opportunity to get introduced with unusual weapon schematics.

– Maybe I'll visit him then, it would definitely be useful to see my equipment under expert supervision.

– His forge is not difficult to find, it is located in front of the more representative part of the castle. You can always seek advice from someone from the castle if you will happen to have trouble getting there.

– I should get there on my own.

– If I may to ask such thing, will you tell him I send my regards when you’ll meet him?

– Of course.

– That’s very kind from you. And speaking of meetings, here is majordomo’s cabinet. Best of luck on your audience, Iseren. – Jolina corrected Iseren’s sleeve, taking her forearm in hands. – You are trembling.. Are you feeling alright?

– I do, it is simply cold here. – Iseren replied evasively, she freed her arm from servant’s palms. – Have to go, I wouldn’t want majordomo witing for me too long.

– Reasonable that seems.. Farawell. – Jolina sent Iseren sad gaze, trying to smile. – I have orders to accomplish too.

– To the next time. – Iseren replied in a low voice, then knocked gently on the door.

Hearing the call, she opened the door, finding Prysimił immersed on the view from the window. His hands were clasped behind his back and he stood still.

– So, thou art back. – he moved from the window. – And thou lookst respectable, dignified enough to stand in the presence of his majesty. So let's not waste any more time on chatter. The audience will take place in the throne room, his majesty has already returned from the hunt and he would like to speak with you.

– Why does the resolution of an arrest warrant require the reaction of his highness himself? – Iseren wished to know, with hand leaned on the doorframe.

– That is his majesty's will. – Prysimił stepped closer to the fireside to grab a sabre from it. – In small reign we live and the matter was of high importance. Palegob and his men had evaded all our patrols on his supposed hideout, so we were helpless in this matter. It would be a pity to lose good people on an actual assault, even in times of peace.

– And someone unknown might reveal their name with a good act. – Iseren concluded, to which the majordomo responded with a smile of agreement.

– I still struggle to believe that you alone managed to defeat five men and Palegob himself. Will not hide that I don't support your mercy towards the rest of the marauders, but well, the order was only to kill the leader himself. But nevermind on my moral views, the audience awaits. Follow me.

Prysimił granted Iseren the sabre and then closed the office behind him. The two of them went out to the outskirts, where from there they went to the main part of the castle, leading to the throne room.

Walking along a long carpet, they reached the feet of a wooden throne with intricate decorations. Iseren saw someone's silhouette on his seat and knelt in front of it.

– Rise from your knees. – low voice spreaded through the throne hall.
– I was expecting both of you, apparently you bring good news.

– Indeed, your highness. – Prysimił replied with courteous tone. – Our connectivity to Mácirsarok has been cleansed thanks to..

– Iseren. – the girl completed. – I am glad, I could put your majesty in a well mood with my act .

– A second blade thou carriest. – the prince leaned over the throne, flooding his face with auburn curls. – Hmm, I recognize it. Every man in Wistuja could as well. That sword was truly, as you said, Palegob's weapon. Thou hast done the great thing, Iseren. A gratitude from myself and the whole city you have. Caspir!

A swarthy-skinned man named came out from the columns, bowing to Jamryn. He was holding a wooden pyxis in his hands.

– Put it in front of Iseren. – the prince turned his face towards the girl. – There, thy promised reward of thousand saivises.

– It is an honour. – Iseren replied in almost a whisper, tilting her head.

– You are free to go. – the ruler dismissed them with hand. – Iseren, thou art now always welcome in my castle, as a token of my gratitude I grant thee one of guest chambers and privilege to join court's feasts.

– I shall thank you hundreds of times, your majesty. – Iseren had the impression that the prince smiled slightly in response.

Iseren and Prisił bowed once again to the prince and then left the hall.

– Feast privilege.. Well, well, quite a status at the court. – Prisił were standing with Iseren at the courtyard. – I have to go back to complete principality matters, and thou doest whatever thy heart desires.

– It would be best if I took this box to a safe place.

– Great idea. If I remember correctly, the guest rooms are in the left wing, first floor. There is one more thing, not very important. – Prisił turned oddly shy, before speaking once more: – May I keep this sabre?

– I wouldn't dare refuse you, sire. By the way, the blade looked very worthily on sire's mantelpiece.

– With your contribution to the affairs of the principality, thou canst call me „majordomo”. Eh, and as usual, I am talking instead of doing what I have to do. Stay safe, Iseren. – Prisił tapped Iseren on the shoulder as a farewell, pinning her a little to the ground.

The girl was left alone in the castle, slowly assimilating all occurred events.

„I don't think it would be appropriate for me to leave the castle now. Besides, a few days of rest from journey wouldn't hurt me...”

VI.

The same day before dusk; During this time, Iseren wandered around the castle gardens until she began to feel hungry. As she was returning to the interior of the castle, she encountered Prysimił in the courtyard, who was observing the bird key.

– The castle didn't overcome thee, I hope? – majordomo greeted her warmly, turned his head away from the birds.

– I have to admit, I don't usually am a guest in such places, majordomo. – Iseren's voice was formal, devoid of warmth. – Have you managed to resolve your formal matters?

– Yes, I have. A pair of letters, conversations and I'm relatively free from principality affairs. Oh, by the way, the court organizes feast, once the sun sets. His highness expects from for to appear there. And also close to his principal majesty courtiers, so I suggest you to go.

– So I will go, majordomo. I'll wait here with you if I may.

– Nothing against that. – Prysimił stroked his balding head. – Kind of curious, what brings thee to Kreovia?

– I'm passing through. I was heading to Visildeia.

– Ah, the vasilean province, it is full of opportunities to show off. You come from there?

– No. I came from Jätynjodr, I don't my real parents though.

– I see, thou hast been burdened with an unpleasant fate, Iseren.

– Sun touched the horizon. – Iseren changed topic. – You think it's time for us?

– Seems it is. Let us go.

Iseren followed Prysimił into the main part of the castle, this time turning right. The majordomo pushed door for Iseren, leading her to the banquet hall.

The girl, accompanied by Prysimił, sat down at a lavishly set table, collecting a few curious glances from the aristocrats present there.

– My guests – she heard the voice of prince Jamryn, already familiar to Iseren – Due to the presence of our guest, I would like us to use the Empress's speech at the table!

Those gathered at the feast quickly noticed the new face, pressing Iseren into the chair with their eyes.

The prince rose from the end of the table and told the story of Iseren's deeds. The faces of those gathered revealed many feelings towards the heroine of the novel - from curiosity, respect to apathy or even hostility. After finishing his oration, the prince raised the cup in the name of Visildeia's well-being, to which those present in the room responded and lifted their goblets as well.

Taking a faint sip from the cup, Iseren started to feel in her mouth a burning taste of fruits and spices.

„*The famous Reirmal's, I think..*”

The atmosphere at the feast quickly relented to the rhythm of lively music on shawms and drums. Many laughter and clinking of goblets spreaded across the table. Throughout the feast, Iseren ate almost nothing, despite her hunger, as she tried to not to be noticed. That took place until a few dignitaries who seemed to be friendlier to her invited her with a gesture.

– Lady Iseren! A great act ye have done! – standing near the window nobleman shouted in a coarse tone.

– For Iseren! – his friends echoed him.

The girl waited until they drained the content of their cups, she only wetted her mouth.

– Well, what about his highness' hospitality? All right? – the nobleman asked again.

– Very well it is, I can take a rest from my travels for a while. – Iseren replied, clutching her cup in both hands.

– Ah, and where are my manners! Bukaš I am! From family of Gałskovi, a fief of Gałsk. – he shook her hand. – Give a visit to my manor someday, I'll treat ye like my own there!

– Oh, I'm honoured to hear this invitation. – Iseren bowed slightly.

– Honours, honours – Bukaš chuckled. – After your act of heroism, ye are like one of us!

Hearing Gałskovi's words, some of dignitary gave them looks of disgust or hostility, mostly older, more conservative-minded guests at the feast. Luckily for her, they weren't interested in Iseren for long, they

usually quickly turned back to talking about politics or scandals in noble families.

– Any stories you have to tell, Iseren? – Bukaš asked again, letting her to look away from the group of hostile dignitaries.

– I happen to have some, but those are local actions.

– Even the inside of a latrine can be a good setting of a story. – one of the people replied with a laugh. – Let us hear it, fine tales don't like to be hidden from the ear!

Iseren, as they wished, proceeded to share with them story of her battle at Galundharr.

– Well, thou hast shown them their place. – said the elderly party guest, smirking. – I have been on a way of sword too, many years ago. And I hope that thou wilt gain wealth and title with the sword as I did.

– I'd be pleased to hear something from your youth days.

– Many I could say, lady. But there's one very interesting tale in peculiar. Around thirty winters ago, Visildea set a military campaign in middle of nowhere. Closest town was Syelsovka, half a day from there it was.

– Where is Syelsovka? – inquired Iseren.

– In Rhigalskaia, a land in Usknavrailha province. Far away from there, good week or two of travel to get there. I was hired sword back then, captain of ours aided one of centarches, in charge of cataphracts.

– And against who you've fought?

– Locals from vasilean ranks told us many times their name, the Usaians. That sort who wander and put any good in rubbles. These said Usaians plundered few villages under vasilean protection not so long before the campaign, so our ruler naturally formed party to end Usaian's villainry and keep the flow from fiefs. Quite a number of clashes took place, either to defend the village or we stumbled upon them in the open field. There were usually more of us, but each of the Usaians was mounted. And armed a spear, a javelin or an axe. Even frost was no fright for them, we in other hand were exposing our camp positions with fire, several of them perished due to that.

– Who won?

– Our side, although it is due to fact that the tribal ones just vanished at one day and stopped their trials to ambush our lines or pillage rema-

ining thorps. Merely few survived, but the those who did so got richly rewarded.

– So, for your glorious accomplishments! – Bukaš shouted, taking a good sip from his goblet, making the rest of group doing the same.

– Ugh, I’m starting to feel sick from this wine.. – the girl winced.

– Hah, because ye have brittle head, like an Inkarn! – Gałskovi cackled. – Oh, I remember seeing Inkarn fellow here that first time, oh how much fun we had with him. One glass and he was already greeting his kind in heavens.

Hearing the comment, Iseren reached her hand towards her ears with concern. She was relieved to feel that they were still hidden in the bush of her hair

„Ough.. This comparison costed me more nerves than it should have..”

– ..I also remember our friend Olieser, it's a pity I haven't heard about him from Vasidel. – one of nobles immersed into retrospections.

– I must beg for my leave. – Iseren excused herself.

– Oh, our liquor really isn't agreeing with you very well! – Gałskovi’s laughter got more sonorous. – Well, but for the untrained it is like a death sentence. Sit down, Iseren, and feel free to come back anytime, when you get better.

Without any else word, Iseren moved away from the drinkers to sit at the table. Fortunately for her, Prysimił, who has long been in a convivial mood and was chatting cheerfully with the guests, was receiving all the attention there. The girl could therefore listen to the musicians' performance in peace, allowing the nausea to be replaced by a slowly growing weight of drowsiness.

Before midnight, the feast was coming to an end when those gathered began to get more and more drunk, and the musicians moved on to more subdued melodies. So Iseren left the hall to get some fresh air in the castle garden. Apart from a few patrolling guards, Iseren saw no one else, which gave the girl a break from the bustle of the feast.

As her thoughts settled into a more subdued direction, she had no desire to return to the party. So she went to her room and lay down comfortably in bed. The bed's mattress was relaxingly soft, and Iseren fell asleep

quickly and deeply, not remembering what she was thinking before going to sleep.

Iseren woke up late in the morning feeling famished. After putting on her clothes, she left the castle, taking her box of gold. As she walked down the busy Wistuja Street, she noticed that some of passing townspeople stared at her.

„Word must spread quickly here..”

She turned from the main street to the hospice, where the door was opened by a middle-aged priest with a tired look on his face.

– Huh? – worn from any enthusiasm eyes of his turned to Iseren standing in the doorway.

Without a word, the girl handed him a solid handful of silvery coins, arousing great astonishment on the priest's face.

– If I may, I would like to left a bit of coin for a coming traveller as well. – the girl announced.

– On a usual day we don't serve as a bank, but for generous and in good cause we can make an exception. And how is that wanderer named like?

– Dankard. Will be her in matter of days to preach. Simply tell him it's a gift from a friend. – the girl left the temple before the clergyman asked for more details.

Iseren returned to the prince's court with a slightly lighter box. After putting the remaining money aside, she went back to the courtyard, watching the guards patrolling it. Hearing an echoing conversation in Kreovian, she turned to the castle wing. There, she spotted the majordomo, accompanied by a middle-aged heavy armored man, who she recognized as a guest of yesterday's feast. Seeing Iseren, Prysimił stopped with his conversation partner.

– Didn't have an opportunity to speak yesterday. – rough accent of man's vasilean was a clear sign of his local origin. – Wituj is my name, I'm in charge of his principal majesty druzhina. Under banner of his majesty's Legion as an auxiliary force.

– Iseren. An honour to speak with you, sire. – girl slightly lowered her head in front of him.

– Burgundy Legion always find an asset in independent sword wielders. However, if you would like to contribute to good causes under our banner, we have a garrison in every allied city.

– With all due respect, sire tenman, yet I prefer to keep on path chosen from my free will.

– Thy choice it is then, Iseren. Although consider joining. His imperial majesty always rewards well his men.

– Yeah yeah, surely she will do that. – Prysimił interrupted their colloquy with unendurance. – No offence, dear Wituj, but dinner I have, and I don't like eating cold ones.

– Very well. Simple needs calls thee, yet for me many serious matters are still awaiting to be dealt with. Be seeing thee.

Tenman gave Prysimił an energetic handshake for goodbye and marched out to the courtyard. Once he left the castle walls, only what remained after him was the receding clatter of several pairs of hooves on the stony streets of Wistuja, slowly wearing out in distance.

– That Wituj, vasilean military made him stiff-necked like this. – majordomo's voice rang out through the empty wing of the castle. – And thee, Iseren, wouldst thou like to join the dinner?

– Wouldn't dare to say otherwise.

– Excellent. There will certainly be no opportunity to eat well on the roads, but till then enjoy Kreovian cuisine. It will certainly keepst thou on well being.

– I hope not too well.

Prysimił smiled amusedly, opening the door to his quarters for her. The servants were just finishing putting various dishes on the table as they passed the majordomo in bows.

– So, for who's good name shall we raise our chalets? – he asked, once he sitted at the table.

– Hm, for well being of his principal majesty. – Iseren raised her goblet. – And yours too, majordomo.

– For thy too, Iseren. – Prysimił replied, lowering the contents of the cup.

– An interesting aftertaste that liquor has. – Iseren swirled the goblet in reflection. – Is it due to leaf of snowy toyaka?

– Indeed it is. I see that herbal arts very well thou knowest.

– The elder of my village educated me in alchemy. He had a pair of volumes from which I have been taking lessons.

– So you happen to read books.. – the majordomo put down the cup to reach the bookshelves. – I think it might interest you as a future guest in the vasilean province.

– Oh, what a gift. Thank you. – Iseren gently took the book in her hands. – „A collection of legends about Visildeiê”.. Sounds like an old Kyrridean term.

– I see that you have also mastered linguistics. As it is in fact phrase from old kyrridean. A beautiful, yet forgotten language. Maybe it's right that it was forgotten. Visildeiê was once the capital of the incarn imperium before their dominion was abolished by us, Earthlings. Then, over the years, the city's name took on a more pronounceable form, Vasidel.

– Intriguing. I will definitely read this book.

– Consider it as a gift, Iseren. For this truly tasteful sabre.

Prysimił turned with a proud collector's smile towards the sabre hanging above the fireplace. The weapon was hung crosswise with a sword with a blade that widened towards the end.

– Xyphos, from Sottalnoia. – explained majordom, following her gaze. – The blade certainly saw the emerging the Visildea, perhaps even when Sottalnoia itself had already formed into more than a handful of cities.

– The sabre has deep roots as well?

– Indeed it has. Sabre of a nobleman, from the southern provinces of Usknavraiha, which also contributed to the founding of the Visildeia.

– I wonder how it got in hands of Palegob..

– It could have been granted to him in form of hereditary, but I am more inclined to believe that Palegob stole it or that someone unaware of its value sold it to him or gave it to him. – Prysimił knotted his hands behind his back as he looked at the weapons above the fireplace. – Usknavraiha, especially the regions free from the Visildea, are famous for their, so to speak, harsh temperament, often resembling it with raids on

compatriots loyal to the majesty. For them, such behaviour is perceived differently, as an element of everyday life.

– Brutal pride, just like amongst the independent magnatery in the north of Senvold.

– Last bastion of old virtue defenders, as they call themselves. In fact, they are driven by similar motives. – the majordomo sighed quietly, returning to the table. – Thou wishest to pour thee some wine?

– No thanks. I've had enough already. – Iseren leaned back in her chair, examining her empty plate. – sire Majordomo was right, your cuisine will put everyone on their feet.

– It is also said that afterwards it will knock from those feet with a good liquour. – Prysimił poured himself a glass of bewerage. – Although I used to drink only light drinks to keep my head clear, if you feel like drinking something stronger, thou canst always find something to drink in the local inns or from the castle basement I could provide you a bottle.

– I am not really fond of liquor.

– I would never refuse a good Reirmal's, but each person has different taste. Oh, time flows with you like a stream from peaks of mountains. It is time for me to go back to my duties. – Prysimił stopped Iseren at the door. – And if you want, you can always join me at evening.

– I will be happy to visit you, majordomo. And thus I won't disturb you with matters of state. See you soon.

– So it's settled. A fine stay in castle to you.

After farawell to the majordomo, Iseren left the courtyard, heading to the castle blacksmith. The rhythmic clanging of metal on the anvil led her there, and as she got closer, she noticed that the man working there was just finishing hammering out a horseshoe. In the silence that fell, he heard Iseren approaching him.

– Welcome. – the blacksmith went from forge for some fresh air. – Lady Iseren, am I right?

– Right you are.

– So, what brings miss here? – smith put hands on his hips.

– Sending regards. From Jolina.

– Oh, Jolina.. – man's face turned sentimental. – Is everything well with her?

– Yes, it is.

– Ah, such pity we are so occupied with chores here, can't even see each other in days.

– Sorry to hear that.

– Yeah.. – smith hanged his head. – Not as I have against the serving court, though little I have of free time.

– I am not sure is that applicable to ask at the moment, but may I expect your service?

– Yea, ye may. – the blacksmith wiped the dirt from his forehead. – Something needs to be done? Got back in the shape?

– I think my sword could use a specialist's eye. How much such a pleasure would cost?

– I need lady's sword to measure, and then, we'll see. – the blacksmith accepted the blade from Iseren and began to mutter a little to himself. – Mhm, mhm, two and half.

Without a word, Iseren let him examine the sword.

– Well, the razor is a bit worn out, I could oilify it to make it easier to clean. Ye know from what alloy this blade is made of?

– Not really. I heard only it is made from cydelite.

– That shouldn't be a problem. – smith smirked, making face of a specialist. – Well, in my opinion it is also cidelite. Good metal, reliable and inexpensive. But enough of my opinion, is there something else you need?

– I think that's all I need.

– The sword in good hand will, so worry not. So the total will be one hundred silver, is that the price right for ya, ma'am?

– Sounds reasonable, no haggle needed. – Iseren haned the smith the handful of coins.

Man only shrugged, theen proceeded again to smithingwork.

– Come back in a few days, should everything be ready and shiny then. – smith added, pausing on a moment sharpening the sword.

– Will do. Farawell.

The blacksmith raised his hand in responce, afterwards he went back to straightening the blade. Iseren left the workshop, heading back to the castle.

A few days passed, which Iseren spent without any worries at the prince's court. During these few days, she visited Prysimił in any fitting occasion, also under the pretext of tailor works, she visited Jolina as well, mostly only to greet her.

Time at the castle passed surprisingly swiftly, as she spent a lot of time in comfort, by resting in the guest room or taking walks around the area. Without her sword at her belt she didn't was cautious on where she spent her free time, and thus she end up staying close to the main streets of Wistuja or the castle gardens, which were well patrolled by guards.

And then, one day, she went to the blacksmith with question regarding to an order, which she was doing for days. This time, the satisfaction on the blacksmith's face revealed that the order has already been completed.

– Won't lie, It took a while, lady, but the sword is as good as new. I had an order from some folks to forge and shoe a hive of horses, so that's why it took so long.

– Hive a horses, you say? Quite odd that I didn't saw anyone mounted here for days.

– Ah, you know, common lout can't rush here on a horse. And those, as said, like an army of fellows! – the blacksmith spreaded his hands rapidly to show the size of group, almost knocking the spear at Iseren's head. – An I had to go to them, down there, at outerwards.

– Locals? – the girl got interested.

– Didn't look like those, but guts tell me they were related with us in sort of a way. That one who gave me the pay and order sounded, well, like on of us, nothing's standing against that he was from here.

– About my sword..

– Ah! Yeah of course, ready it is, on back room, come one in. – smith encouraged to go inside with gests. – But odd is you didn't look for any armour. How is that, thugs won't cut you on tits or what?

– They certainly cut, although there's no way I could proof that without making a scene.

– Nothing against such scene. – he shrugged.

– What a surprise.

The blacksmith only responded with a short cackle, right after went back to gesturing, insisting to follow him.

Iseren, behind the blacksmith, was passing the clutter covering the workshop, until she entered a slightly tidier warehouse. Iseren beheld her sword at the top shelf, before the owner of the forge himself could stepped fully to the room.

– And where's that blade.. – the smith muttered to himself.

Without a word, Iseren reached for the sword.

– Phew, quite an eye ye have. – he whistled, as he helped her to reach for the sword. – Well, about the sword, the blade's like freshly smithed, didn't require that much special treatment. Gifted ye are, when it comes to taking a good care of a sword.

– In any means I appreciate the good service of yours. I wish you successful business, blacksmith.

– And safe travels I wish ye, miss Iseren. Take a visit, if you'll be around someday.

Iseren was about to leave the forge, until the smith called behind her back:

– Hold on a moment, Iseren!

Once she turned to him, she faced the blacksmith searching through his purse, he counted an amount of coins from it.

– You deserve a discount. – he explained, extending his hand with sa-ijvises. – Because a good soul ye are, for that effort with regards from my daughter.

– I don't feel like it would be appropriate to take the coin. – Iseren hesitated. – After all, I didn't do that much.

– It'll be, take them. – he encouraged her to accept gift. – Now I can wish ye being good on health and coin.

– You too.

Iseren felt much more assured having back her sword on her hip. As she was now ready to move out, she went into the guest room and took her belongings. She had difficulty manging space in her bag, since her stay at the castle she was granted with several pairs of garments, in addition to already fairly stuffed bag she was promised to receive provisions on the day of her departure. Thus she went to the kitchen, where she was granted a suply for few days.

– ..And a bit of dried gnawer meat, if the good food would deplete during yer trails. – The stoutly built cook brought out various dishes one by one, allowing Iseren to pick the ones she found best for the journey.

– Thankful I am for the court's generosity. Take care. – Iseren lightly lowering head left the kitchen.

– Yeah, ye better take care, dear. A well meal ye better eat before heading out, cos frail ye look! – the kitchen maid shouted to Iseren, as she was heading up the stairs.

However, the girl did not want to abuse the court's generosity, so after saying goodbye to the majordomo and Jolina, she left the castle.

„*Perhaps I'll pay visit here, someday..*” – Iseren sent city's walls a last warm look.

A few dozen steps from Wistuja she passed the patrol of the Legion, before which she bowed her head. Soldiers however were too taken by the conversation between each other, and so they ignored her.

– Quiet on the road, isn't it, Veris? – Iseren caught vasilean from passing soldiers. – Few more days like these, and my sword will hitch to the scabbard from the rust.

– Wouldn't complain about that, Rihtan. – soldier named Veris replied. – Peaceful it is, the Burgundy Trail is crowding like it used to. Wistuja will only get richer from it though.

– The locals are already drowning in saijvises, considering the prices of housing here, it's no wonder. – a swarthy legionnaire interjected to their conversation. – Well, wealth means peace, as you kind of said.

– True, true. – soldier with handsome mustache approved his words. – Only I wish for not sending us to the steppes. Another campaign is formed there, these damn lands. Better to stay low here than be stabbed by some savages gods knows how far from home.

– Right ye are, why would we take risks anyway? The same soup in bowl we get as them. – Rihtan noticed Iseren walking away. – Huh, didn't we know that lass over there?

– As ya look you do wish to get to know her. – Veris started daydreaming. – Is not she sweet, just look at how she balance with her hips..

– That's unacceptable on duty, so better be silent! Eyes on the potential threat, not on some lady's bum! – growled the previously silent, harsh-voiced infantryman.

– And the tenman, as usual, two meters of spear sticking out of his arse... - the swarthy-skinned man grumbled.

– Dijocen, as said, ye better behave yerself! – the infantryman warned him. – Or else I'll file a complaint to the centarch and..

Iseren stopped listening to their conversation.

„I wonder what steppes they were mentioning? I know something about such ones, mentioned in the manuscript from Herberman. – the girl became lost in thought – “But probably as a brief mention, hence my limited knowledge about them.”

Due to the lack of an answer, she was forced to end her rumination, the best she could spend her time on, was observation of the landscape surrounding her, which let her to partially escape from the pressure of unanswered thoughts.

Even though she spent a few days in comfort of the good food and warm bed, she didn't lost any skill in navigating the roads in any slightest – till noon, Iseren managed already to lost sight of Wistuja.

Only at the afternoon she happened to stop at the crossroads, not because she was tired of the constant wandering, but the surrounding meadow put her in a soothing mood. She put the bag under her head, took off boots armor, and then layed down on the ground with her legs crossed over her. She closed her eyes, listening to the birds chirping and the sound of the wind blowing the soft grass.

Hearing the nearby footsteps she raised her head, she met with the gaze of a passing peasant with bullock.

– And what happened with ye? – he called from the highway. – Ye’re hurt or something?

– I am not injured. – the girl replied, closing her eyes back. – Just enjoying the fine weather.

– Cold it is ma’am, would be unwise to catch a cold here. In hut you better lay, ye know, it’ll be much snuglier.

The lack of reaction from Iseren’s part convinced the peasant to leave the girl alone.

– Eh, no use, something odd is with her. – he muttered to himself and then continued his travels.

The girl once again submerged herself in the symphony of sounds composed by surrounding nature. With eyes still closed, she listened to the birds singing, letting every thought leave her mind. Once she immersed fully with the surrounding, she started to have impression as her limbs melt oddly comfortably amongst blades of grass.

A lot of time passed when, much more relaxed, she stretched lazily and sat down in the grass. It was difficult to tell, did she happened to take a nap or just lay down, only via change of sun’s position she could evaluate that she spent a good part of the day on the rest. Despite the comfort and no need to rush, she took herself back to the highway.

She had a feeling that she would not encounter anything worrying during the several-day journey that was upon her, to such assumption convinced her sleepy, idyllic scenery.

Iseren was keeping guard at first, though by passage of time she slowly adapted to the serene atmosphere of meadow - instead of observing the area for a potential threats, she glided her sight dreamily through the plains, which gave her an impression of being endless. The lowland was sheeted with flowers that grew at the end of Atmas, amongst the flowers shrubs were growing in distance from each other, many of their branches were decorated with petty sized fruits. Some fruits Iseren was able to recognise, so a handful of them landed in her bag.

Further along the road, she passed wild sourbeads - the trees, even though they grew on a passable road, were untouched by people, which was not a rare sight. For many, the fruit was too small to be worth eating, especially in a region rich in food. However, the girl knew well that the fruit, although small, was quite shelf-stable and tasty, and thus she picked a few larger ones for the road.

Late in evening, before the sun hid behind the horizon, a heavy down-pour started.

„Under such weather no chance I have for striking a fire. I have to find a roof for night, perhaps some merciful villager will let me in?“ – Leaning on the sides, she bumped her finger into purse stuffed with coins. – *„A fool of me, why would I even worry about that.“*

After a meagre walk, she caught the outline of buildings nearby, for which she hoped they were inhabited. She left the highway, turning towards the village she had spotted. The thorp consisted of several huts built in a good distance from each other and an inn, slightly larger than the cottages.

The buildings revealed the humble life that prevailed here - simple wooden structures covered with thatched roofs, foundations of them were made of fieldstones. The paths around the town were left by any resident, they apparently spent their evenings at the inn, which was suggested by the distorted through wall hubbub and lights shining from the windows of the building.

As she entered the inn, she immediately received various looks from inn's patrons. A few nearby conversations fell silent, focusing on the arrival of Iseren, others fell into silent awe, gawking at her face, spotted from the hood. Iseren ignored them, heading towards her host.

She sat down at the stool in front of counter, collecting a cautious look from innkeeper.

– Something to drink? A room? – the man question from the other side of countertop.

– Both actually. What do you have behind counter?

– Ale, vodka, fruit juice so a head will not hurt tomorrow.

– Sap sounds good. How much for a bed in your inn?

– Room's upstairs, no soul was there for years. Give me a bit of time, have to tidy up the place. – the innkeeper scratched his chin. – Well, I'll give it to you for six silver. And a round of juice for two saijvis. Perhaps something to eat?

– Would be great, bread I'd like if you have.

– Have a small loaf, I'll give ye for four saijvises. How that sounds?

– Fine by me. – Iseren placed the sume of coins onto the counter.

– Better be careful here. – innkeeper lowered his voice. – Would be most wise, if ye stay near me, only Deite knows what the local fellow could think of about a stranger. And I wouldn't want a brawl here, these yokels are my only regulars.

– Very well then. – Iseren at first willing to walk take seat somewhere else, sat back near counter. – But why, they don't like newcomers?

– Like anywhere else. – inkeeper smirked in understanding. – And most they dislike those who live from a sword. First you do them a favour taking a bandit clan out, then you have hear how lowlife and greedy ye are.

– I am not mercenary. I sword is only for defence.

– Not likely it is that your blade didn't contribute to even a coin. – the man sent her gloom, yet non-hostile view.

– I can say that one. – Iseren admitted.

– Labour like any else. Sellsword will be pointed for being hired cuthroat, though without I'd sell here an ale for a local band. – innkeeper placed his hand on the counter, revealing few badly mended scars. – I see you gawk at these cuts.

– Forgive me.

– Well, don't see a reason to hide my past. – inn holder sighed. – Once I lived from the sword too, there were six of us. Me, from Euvrozia province, in Bavrekênr I grew up. The rest of the party included a soldier from Senvold, an archer from Fridveloia, two swordsmen from Kreovia and, let's say, our captain. Incarn he was.

– Euvrozia you say? You must have seen many lands then. How long you're off your mercenary life? – zainteresowała się Iseren.

– Two decades it'd be at the moment, I guess. I wonder what's with the rest of party, bowman's probably digged already, loggerhead always

put himself into some trouble. Sicgrav probably as well, that one even sober could cause a serious squabble. Eh, the spellcaster is probably gone as the rest, pretty old chap he was even on our days.

– Spellcaster?

– By wraiths, I said too much already. Although I hid nothing about who I am and was, yet with the boys we vowed to not tell any first fop about themself. I can tell ye only that name's Noiernin.

– I see, sorry for letting my curiosity win. Since you introduced yourself, I'll do the same. Iseren I am.

– For I don't know long didn't I hear a old kyrridean tongue, a especially put in name of someone. – Noiernin slightly smiled. – I know, doesn't the most gentle to ask, but since I, like an idiot, poured a bunch about myself, would ye do the same? I wonder what's the story behind your name.

– Noiernin, I think you, with the old speech acknowledged, can already assume why I have such name. – cutted out Iseren.

– Huh, matter's that simple then. Since you're very likely an Inkarn, I'd suggest you moving to south, quickest as possible. – inkeeper hinted.

– That's what I have in mind already. And also a will have to find out what means to be a highborn.

– Bah, not that much to say, I guess. It's just matter of ears. – Noiernin shrugged.

– In Vasidel I shall see, is it, as you said, just a matter of ears.

Their conversation quickly stopped, as to the counter waddled middle aged yokel with a few snots.

– Vodka's gone, pour some more, m'dear Noiernin. – he muttered, struggling to stand still.

– Will be, worry not. Sit down to your comrades, Witor. I'll be there in a moment.

– And thou, sweet lady, want join us company mayhaps? – Witor faced Iseren with flirtatious smile.

– Long road I had today, thus I'm in need of a good bedding. Maybe later I'll be in mood for company.

– Well, well . –inkeeper whispered with amusement, once villager joined his friends. – Only requires more booze than blood in their veins, and every stranger becomes closest chap for them.

– No offence, but I didn't lie about my need to sleep. So forgive me for having to end the conversation. A good night for you, Noiernin.

– Yes, to the tomorrow, Iseren. – Noiernin spoken, as he was showing her way to the room upstairs. – You know, your way of being reminds me of someone I used to know.

– Do I? – Iseren stopped in front of door to room.

– Indeed you do, one of my friends from company.. – the man sent a thoughtful gaze at the inn, as it wasn't immersed with drunken racket.

– And what was name of that friend?

– Don't know why I keep telling you about my past.. But that friend's called Geonrod.

VII.

A few weeks later; with a creak, the door to the crowded tavern opened, to interior sunlight poured into, only to be in moment after got covered by the entering the patronage figure. Few heads near the doorway turned to the person entering, after a while returning indifferently to conversations amongst themselves. Due to the hubbub at the back of the room, no one even noticed the cloaked figure sitting at the counter.

– Welcome in „Diogeone”, stranger. – merrily greeted them innkeeper.

– Man like ye need to gulp something after long pace, eh?

– Woman. – deep, feminine voice correcter him from depths of a cowl.

– Oh, forgive me, good madame. As, said earlier though, need something to drink? We have a damn fine date of Floriuteli, cheap but upright ale, warm food and free rooms.

– Food sounds like a good idea. But more I would enjoy a bit of word travelling here lately.

– Many I can say, just as innkeeper should to. However I prefer knowing who am I talking with. Justilio, from Vasildel.

– Iseren. – girl took off hood from her head. – Huge city like this has to be full of many rumours.

– Indeed it is. I see you're sorta a sellsword. I think this might interest you if you happened to struggle making a coin. – Justilio grabbed a piece of paper from back of counter. – Here, take that notice.

Iseren frowned, as she started to read the paper.

*Adventurers and and free from banner blades, heed my words!
For a fine handful of coin, I incite any daring denizen of capital to
swear me protection during my search for the unknown yet crucial for
our sake. With any question or volunteering to this matter I send you to
the university of Vasila.*

*Signed,
Adaiel Nyaranne.*

– What, neither you can't read? – leaned on the counter, the innkeeper smiled non-judgmentally. – Some madman from the university wished from me to give out these papersnips to anyone who looks like a mercenary. But since he didn't even pay for the trouble, I don't feel like giving it away that much.

– I can read, but that doesn't matter at the moment. What does is the university. – the girl looked down from the wad. – I'd be pleased to hear a few words about it, as I'm about to head over there.

– And what brings ye there, if I can get to know? – Justil inquired.

– I need an answer to.. Some specific matter. That's all.

– Fine, I won't ask for more then. But hey, ye could go to the consiliarius instead of a random scroll reader. All consiliari are from university either way, you know, knows the lettering and all of such trivial matter.

– Who are consiliari?

– A dignitary characters, from the Comitium they are.

– Uhh.. From where?

– Council of Visildea, these consiliari, questors, praetors and others who fancy robes in red wear attend a meeting, proclaim their point and count for the approval of the rest. But what do I know, behind the counter I stay, not rostrum.

– And where is that Comitium?

– The same place where you'll find a university. together they constitute an em.. Agglomerate, lady. – Justil took pride from word he used.

– I see. May I hear what's gossip here in Visildea?

– Certainly ye may. A lot happened, not many from them is a good bit of news though. – voice of tavern keeper shifted to serious tone. – The legion fought on the steppes, but what cost ye think after? Probably more fallen was amongst soldiers than victims in plundered villages. The situation in the east is equally bad, no war is needed, yet the Rakhsvadeuh raises the prices of their local products for their own profit, well at this point it's just greed. Every general good more expensive is getting, in my opinion saijvidite has lost its value comparing to the giledite, but once it had meant a lot. Table are not empty right now, but that's only a matter of time.

– Such pity. And Visildeia always seemed to me like a collosus of Kyrridea.

– Collosus it is, no doubt. – Justil nodded with a mopish mien. – But on brittle clay legs.

– Forgive me but I need to get going. Farawell, Justil. Good business I wish to you.

– Many thanks, Iseren. May the track outside the walls be easy on thee.

Iseren rose from the counter, folding a piece of parchment into her significantly thinned purse.

„I would never expect that I'll be able to enter university so easily... And when I get there, we'll see, maybe I'll come to an agreement with this scholar and he will provide me with lessons from a counsilar."

With instructions from the reluctant to do so guard, she learnt that the university building was located in the administrative district of Vasidel, which could be easily spotted by pointy roof of towers protruding above the roofs of the houses the girl passed.

The city during days of Inkarnian rule must have already been quite grand, or its new residents remained on the building style of ancient incarnas, as architecture of Vasidel was pleasing an eye with its intricate construction built from a brick and stone. It was glamourised with cloisters divided by arches and curved roofs, which spared no expense in means of decoration, such as gargoyles or domes coated with cloaquamarine metal.

City's cobblestone streets built from a puny sett were flooded with a wide cast of people, although most of the townspeople were Earthians, though amongst it was doable to spot an highborn representative. City's fashion was dominated by togas and loose, colorful caftans. In the incarnian caste, due to the their slightly built physique their garments also allowed for subtle exposure of body.

The bustle of the city quieted down, as Iseren reached the administrative district, where she could easily reach the university building. There were four entrances to the building from the street, each of them leading through arcades as lofty as six tall men. Behind them there was a garden with paths leading to different parts of the university. The main part of edifice, infront of her, was marked by an impressive dome, which Iseren

had already spotted from the residential part of the city. As she got closer, she noticed watch in burgundy tunics, guarding the entrance.

– Appointed? – threw guard in a military tone, barricading her way to the gate with a spear.

– I could say so. – Iseren handed him a piece of parchment from inn.

– Allow me to take a look. – The guard frowned as he read the contents of the scroll. – Well, there is no seal, though the signature of a member of the Comitium has legal mean, the counciliar sire mentioned in the text inadvertently gave permission to enter the Main Edifice with this announcement. Oh, these younglings...

– That scholar, or more correctly, consiliarius. Where I can find him?

– Hmm.. If memory serves me right, members of Comitium should have their residential quarters in higher condigantions.

– Appreciate the aid. May your watch be peaceful today.

Soldiers gave her a slightly friendlier look in response. In a steep, synchronized movement, they grabbed their spears vertically, letting Iseren to pass through the open gate to the edifice.

„Almost embarrassing it is to reminiscence my worries on how I enter the university.”

The interior of the building was made of interconnected arches, which neatly divided the building at the branches of the corridor. Iseren's stepping on the smooth stone parquetry sent unpleasant echo through the dead silent corridors.

A few spirals of stairs later, she reached the third floor of the building. Luckily for her, the councellors' quarters were signed, which allowed her to avoid disturbing their owners' work.

– Basil.. Eleziar.. Iveon.. – with a whisper she readed residents' names. – Johil.. and there he is.. Adaiel Niyaranne.

She remained motionless in front of the door and took a deep breath. Iseren realised that she may be one step to solve her life's mystery.

„But what will be after?” – she concerned.

Not wanting to hesitate too long, she finally knocked on door. Hearing the call from the other side, she pushed the heavy door open with a slightly trembling hand and went inside.

The main room consisted mainly of bookcases and cross-built scroll shelves. Space was comfortably bright thanks to spacious windows. Op-

posite to the door a desk was placed, its top covered numerous scrolls, partially readed books, writing instruments and many less important trinket that added to the clutter that was already too chaotic to properly perceive it.

An owner of quarters she found behind the desk. Even with his ears covered, he would quickly reveal his highborn origins with delicate appearance, raising the question of its owner's gender. Adaiel, like quite a major part of fellow Inkarns, wouldn't serve as a model representation of masculinity - the boy had surprisingly for male prominent and round lips, long eyelashes, and widely shaped, hazel eyes that were casting a faint gloss. Hair of an Inkarn was tied in a bun, from which few black strands made their way out. Adaiel's outfit reflected the fashion prevailing in Vasidel - a toga with a richly coloured robe underneath.

Lad sent Iseren, still standing in doorway, a curious, yet slightly anxious glance.

– How may I aid you? – voice of his was high toned, but not in shrill extent.

– I wished to be hired as a shieldmaiden to your expedition. – Iseren gave him piece of paper from inn. – Is this offer still available?

– Ah yes, many days I already spent to wait for any else brave soul. Your kind of adventurers must have gone quite absent in these harsh times. – Adaiel placed the parchment with prudence, like he was handling a very brittle pottery. – Or perhaps the five hundredes of saijvises as a reward is responsible for such reluctance?

– With all of my respects, but I would say maybe the fact that tenth citizen of Kyrridea is able to read is responsible. – note of Iseren, despite a serene tone, made the face of Adaiel white pale.

– T-that would explain it.. And I thought that the common analphabatism is simply obnoxious figment of Comitium's intelligence..

– Well, it's not. Either way, I'd like to rearrange the pay, if I may. – Iseren with hands of her chest peeked through crystal ball at Adaiel's desk. – To put it frankly, saijvises aren't that much in my interests, but knowledge, answers behind it. Only an access to your libraries is fine by me.

– In which domains art thou interested, if it's not a secret?

– I wanted to delve into the culture of the Celestial race, what drives them to conceive hybrids. And also what directs such highborns to abandon them.

– I-i see. – almost in whisper Adaiel replied. – I'll put my best efforts to help thee.

– And sorry for not introducing myself. My name is Iseren.

The girl bowed slightly in greetings. Adaiel, shocked, answered in the same gest.

– Oh do not trouble. – he added after a while. – And as the matter of introduction goes further, would thou wishest to greet the rest of company?

– As you say. Lead on.

– Very well, Iseren.

Adaiel slid the seat under the desk and invited Iseren to follow him. From the study they went into a small but well-furnished dining room. At the table, she spotted a powerfully built man eating a roast, and a young woman focused on grating herbs in a mortar.

Upon their arrival, the woman looked up from the mortar and approached them.

– Jantricius dried well, sire consiliarius. – woman reported to Adaiel. – And yer companion is?

– Iseren. Adaiel hired me to his protection. –Iseren replied, taking woman's hand in greeting.

Woman made an odd face once she heard his name.

– Name's Svjetane. Sire consiliarius hired me as well, but more of a healer from myself than a sword. – her frown quickly shifted into a warm smile.

Iseren caught herself gawk at the woman quite intently. For an earth-tian, she was exceptionally fine looking – she was stoutish, yet her weight contrasted aesthetically with her distinct facial features and vivid eyes in colour of green. Woman's ginger curls were unusually nurtured for commoners' standards, as a waterfall they flowed evenly from her head.

Heavy footsteps behind Svjetane led Iseren's gaze to the other mercenary, who paused his meal to greet her. Even without the pair of axes hanging from his belt, he could be effortlessly recognized him as a Se-

nvoldian by his hazel hair, bushy beard, and ice-blue eyes that like spears pierced Iseren.

– A new face, welcome! – he shouted playfully. – I am Halverd Harjstör, a pair of axes for hire, songster and any good mead fancier.

– Name is Iseren. Pleasure to meet you, Halverd.

– More pleasant it would be with something good to drink, eh? Adaiel, do ye have some fine liquor left in pantry?

– Oh? – he looked, as he got surprised surprised with question regarding him. – Yes, of course, I should still have ten ounces of a nut one.

– Alright, I'll take a little of it with Iseren, if I may.

– As thou wishest. – Adaiel mumbled awkwardly in response. – I beg for my leave then, since you seem content with each other. We will head out tommorrow, so Iseren can rest a bit before so.

– Harverd, shame on ye. – Svjetane hissed, once Adaiel left living room. – Damn well ye know that he will not stand out. And ye drain his goods like some vain lassy!

– Oh no no, I won't such atrocious statement very kindly. – Senvoldian got upset. – No vanity from my part, as I put the rule of hospitality in a fair use, as fathers and forefather before me did so.

– But with a reason gods damn it. Ye should be a little more humble about that Adaiel would not kick us out from door, cos we aren't from the capital.

– Fine, but just that one last time, alright? New face we shall be printed in a cup of a fine drink. And since Adaiel already left us with a bottle, we simply have to take a bitty sip from it. – Halverd pulled up a chair for Iseren. – Well then, lass. For who's sake we should raise our goblet?

Svjetane made a very dull face, though she went silent regarding the ongoing matter.

– For well being of householder. – girl, despite her distance to drinking, she downed the contents of the chalet.

– For well being of householder then. – Halverd repeated, proceeding to gladly drink up the liquor. – Mhmm, a delicate tone of jaradnut. Such shame no good mead in Visildea is brewed, that wood-like accent would fit like a mitten in it.

Halverd set the cup down with a bang, cringing Iseren from the sudden noise.

– So – he started, muffling the burp – where ye came from, Iseren?

– From Jätynjodr, in Senvold.

– Hah! Wouldn't believe that at the first, but now I see from the blade that you posses you really could came from there. I was also born in Senvold, but in Solgjord, on the Forefather's Land. And where that Jätynjodr lies, since name by itself doesn't bring any chime to it?

– In Svjarstein.

– Ah, the younger land. Once or twice I've been there. – he commented. – But that's the story on other time. What bringed you to Visildea?

– University.

– Wisdom, huh. Looks can be deceiving, no offence of course.

– Said the non-deceiving one. – Svjetane cut into conversation with amusement.

– I'll take that as compliment. – lowered brows of the man contradicted to his response.

– But regarding Visildea. – Iseren went back to the topic. – I do not know if it's gentle to ask such question, but isn't your family concerned about your stay here?

– Not at all. My house recognizes that glory can be gained under any banner. We were never into political matter, so no man from my family cares what the heir of family what path they chose. Me and my brother, may he rest easy, were on side of Visildea, as the Kyrridea will be best as a united force. Well, at least I am set this thought for some time.

– I see. And you Svjetane – Iseren turned her head towards the woman, at that moment cleaning the table – where are you from?

– I'm one of Chašenes. – Svjetane explained. – From Jūrm I am, a humble thorp close to the shore.

– Chašenes were a proper local nuisance once. – Halverd added. – Centuries ago, got seriously enraged by northern sea raids and wiped out few seaside villages of ours as a form of vendetta. Just like Forefather Land itself used to do. After some time it went quiet though, likely Visildea convinced chieftains to stay low and peaceful.

– Yeah, definitely something to be proud of. – woman sighted, taking a seat to the table.

– By the way, what research Adaiel will perform in the fields? – Iseren questioned.

Once again, Svjetane's face frowned as she heard his name.

– Tribune is supposed to investigate an unknown overseas civilization, the consiliarius also mentioned a bit about inkarnian imperium that once ruled these lands. – Svjetane explained. – We don't know that much about details though. This is a business of the consiliarius and Comitium itself

– As far as we can take guesses, the Comitium has influence on the decision of his majesty. – Halverd added. – And intelligentia for certain divided is in numerous fronts and has to prove their point in any slightest.

– Speaking of overseas civilizations. Does all of this have anything to do with the raid in Ejldhart?

– Guess so. – Sight of Halverd shifted into distance. – Maybe they're related, as ye assumed. They surely wouldn't be pleased to see that the Earthlings broke the shackles of the Incarnian oppression and formed their own kingdoms from their lands.

– Bah, you're full of it. – Svjetane flounced. – North with South just took opportunity of sorts to take over more fertile lands, that's all.

– Don't know about that, I always been told about the version of mine. But perhaps the journey ahead of us will solve our lack of answer.. – taken by thoughts Halverd continued. – And you, Iseren. What do you think?

– Upon unknown it is difficult to set a mind.

– Well said. – man smiled in response.

Adaiel slipped through the dining room. Seeing as gathered glanced at him, he quickened his pace and hid in the further parts of the quarters.

Mercenaries went awkwardly quiet.

– He went to sleep. – Halverd ended occurred silence.

– We better go too. – Svjetane proposed. – We have guest chambers just for ourselves, Iseren. Ye should fit with us there.

– Not that much of space I require. – the girl assured her.

– Heh, not like us. – Svjetane smirked.

– Enough. – Svjetane stabbed him warningly with a finger. – Say the rest and ye'll be very sorry.

Halverd lowered his sight with child-like feeling of guilt.

– Well alright, I'll stop making scene instead of a kip. – tone of woman softened. – I see by Iseren, she would enjoy a fine bedding.

– Can't say the otherwise. – the girl approved.

– So as ye say will be done. – Svjetane replied her with a friendly tone.

Hired help took Iseren to the guest bedroom, where they easily fit into a spacious bed with an exceptionally comfortable mattress.

Iseren, despite many happening from the passing now day and Halverd snoring on the other side of the bed, managed to fell asleep relatively quickly and well, without having time to start cogitating about what awaits her tomorrow.

Preparations for the road didn't take that much of a time; early at the morning – ready for quite long to journey – the group was traversing cobble streets of Vasildel.

– We will head to the stables, for our voyage the Comitium granted us with four mountain horses. – Adaiel clarified, take the lead through the streets. – Our destination is Maiorone.

– I never rode a horse. – Iseren avowed.

– A fortune in misfortune I would say, as we will make an use for the one mount serving as a pack one. And two on saddle the horse shall handle, I suppose.

– Bah, with a longer back they'd keep three of men. – Halverd chuckled. – If ye said that's a mountain breed, then we probably have an honour to mount thaelrikhian longhairs.

– Pardon me, I do not possess any further knowledge regarding horses. – Adaiel replied with quieter tone.

– Thaelrikha? – Iseren immersed into topic. – We're talking about far east steppe, the one not so long ago at war with Visildea?

– Aye, that's them. Heard that few centarchs got pretty roughed up by local horsemen, and believe me, taking down a line of vasilean cataphracts is quite a stunt. Raw and mighty, that's what are thaelirkhian hordes. They always impress me with their riding skills. Ye know, we

Solgjordians had in some parties a line of mounted scouts, but never were able to form a such strong cavalry as steppe people did.

– Nation's quite interesting, seemingly teared up by petty conflicts, although when the greater threat comes, all men unify under one strong banner

– Mhm.. – Halverd's face shifted to clouded one, giving an impression of venerable thinker.

– As we look through our inns we can pretty much see the same. – Svjetane smirked vexatiously.

Halverd could only gasp from indignation, saying nothing else. Group spent the rest of the way to the stables in silence. Saddled and rested horses were waiting for them outside the stable, guarded by aged stable master.

– Mounts are yours, sire consiliarius. – oldman bowed with a struggle.
– Comitium covered the expenses of them, they are ready for the road, sire.

– Grateful I am for taking good care of them. We will do our best to keep the animals in the best shape.

Stable master smiled in return.

– May trails for protection of consiliarius sire and him himself be troubleless as fortune allows to. – oldman's face once more shifted to obsequious mien.

– Many thanks. – Adaiel turned to the rest of group: – Are you ready to move out?

– Indeed we are, sire consiliarius. – assured him Halverd.

– So be it. On the horses, if I may request. – the boy insisted, as he was taking the mount himself.

Halverd and Svjetane followed the Adaiel, once they were finished managing their belongings on the backs of horses. Iseren remained awkwardly on the ground.

– Adaiel? – voice of Iseren slightly shuddered the Inkarn. – With who you wish I travel with?

– Hm. I suppose that decision will not have any significant impact on our journey.

– Actually, It will have when I think about it. – Halverd broke into conversation. – By the look of Iseren I'll take guess she's not the

lightweight type. And if we encumber one horse more than other then over time we loose the formation.

– Continue, if I may insist. – asked him Adaiel.

– As ye wish, sire. I weigh quite a bit as well, so I'd suggest putting Iseren in accompany of Svjetane.

– I don't know about that. – woman withheld. – Not that much of a feather from me it is either.

Iseren sighed.

– If so much trouble is because of me, then I'll just transfer between three mounts a bit of equipment and I'll ride on fourth one. During travels I should be able to practice riding.

– Iseren, if I may. – instited Adaiel. – Thou canst travel with me, I'll take a presumption that we are the lightest in the group. And thus, is any aid from my part needed to help thee mounting the steed?

– Shouldn't be that hard. – Iseren tactlessly reached to the saddle. – Such fortune it is that these saddles are fairly spacious.

– Is it doable from thee to grab something? – he assured. – Travel by horse is not short in means of sudden moves.

– Anything that comes in my mind is, well, you.

Boy's lips tightened.

– If it's truly the only solution..

Iseren cautiously grabbed the boy's shoulders, trying to hold only to his robe.

– Is the road long to Maiorone from here? – Iseren threw question through the boy's shoulder.

– I can present thee the map, once we take a bit of stay.

– About the Maiorone itself, I take guess from its name that city is not vasilean.

– Senses of thee hinted you pretty well. As Maiorone lies far west-south of here, in the land of Mängvechals.

Iseren fell silent for a moment as, with a movement of the reins, the horses moved onto the road. Grasping Adaiel's toga tighter, Iseren tried to get used to the constant movement in the saddle.

„Ugh... I will never from my free will ride a horse again.”

– A little sick thou seemst to look. Is everything fine? – the boy turned over to her.

– Yeah. – she lied, raising eyes on him.

Both of them glared at each other, without any further word.

Iseren's stare must have unsettled Adaiel, as he swiftly turned eyes away from her, focusing back on the road ahead.

The journey was spent in awkward silence, sometimes, between blows of wind, Iseren could catch a sound of Halverd's whistles, composed in a melody that fit well with the melancholy lowland landscape around them. Once late evening came, the horizon could redraw into landscape presenting in front of them a strip of hills, covered sparsely with trees. From a distance the woods seemed to be dwarf and leafy ones.

When the evening went darker, party set up camp on one of hills, to their convenience, the upcoming night appeared to be windless and dry one, and so stroking a fire was not that much of a problem. The three mercenaries started preparing dinner over the fire, Adaiel in other hand, once his tent was erected, hid inside it.

Hirelings sat down by the fire, to eat the prepared grits, from time to time one of them threw a twig to flames.

– Oi, Iseren. – Halverd caught her attention. – What ye think about sire Adaiel?

– Hm – she paused, taking time to think about it – it is difficult to say, based on just a day.

– Ye know, a bit odd he is. – the man continued. – For a consiliarius he is a bit.. Servile.

– Put boorly, but ye're right about that. – Svjetane took his side. – Tribunes are people of the court, am I right?

– Mhm. – Harjstör stopped eating groats. – I was working once with some other fellow from Comitium.

– And how was it?

– Nose he has higher than his arse, also the lad was obsessed with his status. Really was fuming when someone called him „consiliarius sire” and not „praetor sire”. Once someone from band called him by mistake „Abilen”, by his name, and fellow just slapped him in the face.

– But to Adaiel you turn with his name. – Svjetane noticed. – Though you reminded me before taking step to Comitium edifice: „By any means do not spell his name, or ye’ll earn a punch to the face ”

– Cos I thought he’ll be ready to do so. – Halverd gainsaid. – But now I see he’s made from different cloth than the rest of Comitium.

– Well, nevermind on that. – woman stopped the topic. – Grit will get cold, and not warm one is not that good. A tasty meal I wish ye.

The next day's stop took place in similar time; the evening scenery remained similar to yesterday's, except that the hilly horizon now surrounded them on both sides. And like last time, Adaiel shunned their company, preferring the privacy of his tent.

After finishing preparing the stew, the trio formed a circle around each other, eating their meal.

– Any of ye knows how much roads remained to Maiorone? – Svjetane asked.

– Except the Inkarn, probably no one. – muttered lasily Halverd, picking in his tooth.

– Whoa, don’t be such a charger now. – woman warned him. – Sure, he might not whip our arses for not using his official title, but that doesn’t mean tha we can carelessly call the fellow in any way we want.

– But he’s an Inkarn, am I right Iseren?

Iseren raised her brow in silence.

– So brave ye are that you find a cover behind’s girl back. – mocked him Svjetane

– Hmpf, a cover! – Halverd huffed. – It’s just you you carping me for no reason, so I only ask a reasonable mind what so offensive I said.

The girl clenched the bowl harder in hands.

– Oh, said the one reasonable minded! – woman raised hand as if she was presenting Halverd. – And when the stream we were passing what did ye said? A garter lost by a lady giantess that was?

– Not true that is! – Halverd’s face turned red. – Don’t listen to her, Iseren! And ye, you ginger hag, you will face the end of yer villainry.

– Yeah?

Two looked at each other with stormed stare, until they bursted out in uncontrollable laugh.

Sudden noise pinched at Iseren's ears, she bited her lower lip. The girl left the bowl on ground and departed from them.

– Where are ye going? – she heard surprised voice of Svjetane.

– To Adaiel. – Iseren made up an excuse.

– Reasonable from yer part, would be good to pay him a visit. If ye can, take a little of stew, and make sure he's going to eat it, aye?

– Aye.

At the woman's request, Iseren took the remaining stew from the small pot and poured it into a dish for Adaiel, until then hidden in clean sheets, amongst the rest of ceramic china. The girl, once she grabbed the utensil from the bottom rotated it few times, to let the flowery design reflect dancing flames of campfire.

When she was done pleasing her eye with embellishment of an utensil she grabbed decorated spoon and headed towards the tent.

The boy didn't hear her enter the room, as he was deeply submerged onto comparing maps of the area and taking glances amongst pages of thick volume in the meantime.

– Want to eat mayhaps? – Iseren's question rouse him from seat.

– Yes, that seems to be wonderful idea. – Adaiel made his best to not look as he got scared by girl.

Iseren placed the bowl on the petty-sized table. Spoon she gave directly to Adaiel. Sitting on folded chair consiliarius give the meal an interested glance.

– A fine smell that course has. – he commented, lowering his head to the dish. – I have never eaten anything from northern kitchen, it seems that the journey will be for both of us an interesting sensation.

– In means of northern custom, that will be a new experience only for you. I am also not from here, I grew up in Senvold.

– Is that really so? – Adaiel paused his meal. – I wouldn't mean to be unamiable, but thou doest not look like someone from North.

– Well, I lived there sure, but to be honest I don't know what's my true origin. – Iseren sighed.

– I shouldn't ask about such matter, although.. – the boy hesitated to say the rest.

– Yes?

– Art thou an Inkarn?

Silence took place.

– You could say that. – Iseren was able to respond after a while, almost in whisper.

– I see. My apologies, for being such curious.

– Everyone is. And when it comes to you, it's just matter of proffession, to be more incline to find an answer.

– And what is your thought about my ears? Shall I hade them as well? Since I have to admit, I am lacking in concept regarding how Inkarns are treated outside the Vasildel.

– Don't know, in group the matter looks different. Maybe it's the me who should stop hiding with who I am?

– Oh, I didn't think I could suggest anything with my words. – Adaiel lost countenance. – Excuse me for such..

– That is enough. – Iseren stared him straight in the eye. – You didn't suggest me anything.

Adaiel pursed his lips in shock. Girl stepped back from him and leaned her head back. Once she lowered her hood, the girl grabbed her hair and moved them behind the ears.

– Isn't most appropriate to comment about such manner, although quite pristine genotype you seem to have. – with slightly calmer tone Adaiel stated.

– By what you assumed this?

– Via ears, shape of facial cranium, f-figure of thy. – Adaiel slightly went shy upon telling the last one. – On my days at university, at the lecture about difference between spherical race and Earthians one was the topic deeply mentioned.

– I never rumaged onto what differs me.. I mean us from Earthians. Except ears of course.

– Those are indeed not revelant distinctions, although I would like to avoid causing a boredom with explaining.

– I can asurre you, I like to be bored with conversation. For instance, I could be about the research of yours.

– I cannot say more than necessary, Visildea's secrecy it is. – Adaiel lowered his sight in apology. – Although a meagre in words unravel

would be following our set of rules. Maiorone, like Vasildel was one days of its foundation an Inkarn city. About the destination of our journey, It was conditioned by my foundings in old manuscript, as Maiorone once figured once as crucial for Kyrridean Empire cause city, namely the city was center of any seaside trade. And thus I intend to unearth any piece of oldest archives to elaborate what transaction was taking place in by the time Inkarnian Maie'Orrône.

– If it's a serious matter, why Visildea didn't grant you an asset from the Legion?

– Even though I serve vasilean authoritet as a Comitium member, his majesty and Legion don't interfere in doings of Comitium to avoid favourisation of one particular curia.

– I see. Sound reasonable to do so, although it is difficult to me to imagine such divided advisory of just one country.

– Complex of countries, as we think about it. To his majesty numerous kings and under their subordination dukes bowed their knee. And thus it would be plainly impossible to maintain the Visildea on only but meagre unit of court advisors.

– Maybe as you say, it's better if extensively considered inteligentsia aided his majesty in decision of most profitable choice.

–I am glad you see this that way. Any serious matter regarding Visildea is mentioned and settled on councils, sometimes to do so more costly resources are required from the formed curiae to prove their point.

– Adaiel suddenly gone silent. – I should not said that much, that was knowledge meant only for the circle of Comitium.

– What falls to my ear doesn't come out, once I am insisted to do so.

Lips of Adaiel formed into a slight smile.

– I thank thee then. And if thou wilt excuse me, I have to return to measuring the maps, I need to be assured that we will not get lost at the highways.

– That's not necessary. – Iseren took through his shoulder at the map.

– We have signposts, you can also entrust the map to me or Halverd, we will intuitively readjust any disproportions from the scale of the map or the layout of the trails. Based on these drawings, I can now try to deduce what would be best for us.

She traced a few points on the map with her finger, arranging them in a certain order.

– A cartographer on the trails tends to lose scale at hills, such as here.
– Iseren instructed, marking a section of the map in a circle with her finger. – The three of us will overcome any potential cartographical error.

– V-very well. But please, don't get us lost in wilderness.

– I will take my responsibility on this. And now thou couldst use some rest before the journey.

– You could as well, Iseren. And if I may to ask, tell the rest I wish to resume our journey at the earliest dawn.

– As you wish.

The girl took the now empty utensil from the table and left the tent. When she returned, without looking for the mercenaries, she put the bowl into the empty pot by the fire.

– It will shatter if put that way. – Halverd's voice from behind lectured her.

Without a word Iseren placed the bowl at the top of their belongings.

– Hm, let it be there, I'll wash it later. And is our Inkarn even alive there? – questioned her Halverd.

– He is. I turned his mind into some rest.

– Good then. Hey, what's sticking out of yer head? – the man fell silent for a moment. – Good heavens! Yer ears, ye're also an Inkarn!

– You could say so. – Iseren avoided getting deeper onto topic. – Adaiel wants us awaken and ready at the dawn.

– Hah! As long he himself will do so. – Halverd cackled. – But since sort of a captain he is let it be as he wished to.

– And what about Svjetane? – Iseren glanced with puzzled look at her left belongings.

– For some herbs she searches, she told me already many times what a fine pelander she found.

– Pelander? Never heard of, is this some local herb?

– Indeed it is, a local one. – Svjetane cutted into conversation, revealing herself from the gloomy woods. – Perfect for makeshift bandages, ye dip a bunch of them in boiling water, wait until it cools down a bit and simply wrap it around the wound.

– Sounds like a monkish linn from the way of use. – Iseren noticed.

– Yeah, linn can be used as a bandage too. But the pelander is a completely different herb, with just similar way of use. Anyway, since you know a bit about herbalism, I'd suggest taking a look.

From her laced belt, the woman took out a bunch of a stiff branches, from which few crimson flowers had grown, truly unlike to soft, whitely coated monkish linn

– Some of households of Mängvechals plant a pelander or two. – Svjetane continued. – But nothing is odd in it, quite a useful herb is pelander. It can hasten body's vital processes, cleanse wounds and mend even the worst of wounds. Such a shame though that with such potential it is usually used as a remedy for a hangover or a stomachache from shrooms.

– Sounds like only what makes pelander similar to monkish linn is its usage as a field bandage. – Iseren recaped. – Aside keeping the wound fairly clean the linn will not do much more about it.

– Ye know, it's a pleasure to sometimes get to know someone who's not looking through woods only for a good shrub to take a shite. – woman smirked in return.

– More pleasure would be to take a nap right now. – Halverd interfered.

– Right, talking about sleep made me already wanting it. – Svjetane rubbed his eyes.

– Till the dawn then. – Iseren said, taking a place on ground.

She closed her eyes, adjusting hear ears only to the cracks from nearby fire, she allowed her thought to start cruising uneasily around her mind.

„I wonder, does archive of Maiorone contain some hidden knowledge about Celestials. Perhaps even ones as me?“ – she pondered.

Iseren before reaching to some sort of conclusian was already asleep.

A few days have passed since the last events; from Halverd's estimates it was very likely that to Maiorone remained one more day of travels. At late evening, as they used to already, they camped at the hill, near

lazily flowing river. Maps revealed that river had its source not so far away from their position, so that gave expedition a chance to resupply in fresh water for further journey.

Taking advantage of the easily accessible water, Iseren decided to take a bath after supper. A few dozen steps from the camp, after examining a nearby stream, she submerged to the neck in refreshing water. Relaxed, she closed her eyes, letting the river's flow gently massage her weary body.

Hearing footsteps approaching her, she turned her head to the source of noise, after a moment she spotted Svjetane in the darkness.

– I see that not only for me that river was great opportunity to take a wash. – woman said in greetings, croaching at the edge of river's slope. – Won't I be a bother for you here?

– Not at all. Have in mind though that the water is pretty chill.

– Not a problem, for me at least. – Svjetane slid with surprising agility down the slope into the river. – In my parts, we had a long history of taking chill baths in ice holes, so I have barely no chance of getting cold.

– Sounds like activity from the northern nations.

– It is, they were first with that custom. As both Kreovia and Usknavrailha frightened the southern chroniclers with their pumpkins and their love of bathing in frost. But enough about the world, am I right?

– Very well.

Silence took place.

– So, what can ye tell me about yerself? – Svjetane tried to keep the conversation.

– No that much. I strayed a bit around the world, that is all.

– Did ye left something behind?

– A road? – Iseren looked crestfallen.

– No, sorry, not what I meant. – woman smiled from girl's misunderstanding – I have in mind home. Close relatives.

– Well. It seems, that still only the road I left behind.

– Oh. – smile disappeared from Svjetane's face. – I see. Shall I said something about meself?

– If you want to. Were you always a herbalist?

– Yes, and no at the same. When I was a youngling, I served as a field healer, had some basics from alchemy, though in majority my knowledge was around medicine mostly. Till I grow up a bit, I joined a mercenary band of free swords, then on trails I got better with herbs and all that.

– So you met Halverd in that band?

– With that noddle a different story is. – in dim light Iseren barely noticed troubled smirk of Svjetane. – After the band met its end, I started wandering around, offering myself as a healer again. I always had my hands full, vagabonds are usually treated with distaste, but those who can set bones or cauterize festering wounds were always welcomed more favourably. And I met our charming Solgjord fellow almost on his deathbed. The idiot and seemingly idiotic companions of his got into a brawl with the bear! Only he survived, as you know well, but the animal teared almost every part of his body before it got slaughtered. Had many weeks to get to know him then, I listened to every battle he was part in probably three times, and over time I started to like these silly stories. The first thing he did when he was able to move was pulling me into his arms. Of course, I was stupid enough to let his charm bond me with this dimwit for a good time already, so he didn't said farawell to his teeth for that.

– A strong bond likes the coincidence, as you think about this.

– Ye natter just like him. – Svjetane burst out laughing. – You grew in Senvold too, am I right?

– Right you are, though I cannot call this place my true home.

– No? So from from what parts are ye „truly” from?

– No idea, I am not an expert in the topic.

– But we happen to travel with the one. And by the way. – Svjetane leaned to her with splash of water. – Ye and Adaiel is like what?

Iseren raised her brow, she remained silent.

– Why do ye look with such no picture in mind, ye're the only one from group who can talk to him. And you often spend a free time with him..

– Of course I spend, as I rearanged my pay for travels to aiding me with the studies.

– Is that really all? – Svjetane kept on her curious tone.

– No.

Svjetane didn't look convinced.

– Worry not, ye can trust me. – woman whispered to Iseren gently. – I will not tell anyone. So, can I say ask what do ye think about him?

– Hm.. If you really care so much about it. – Iseren took a moment to find proper words in her mind. – I could stay by his side, as a student or friend. Adaiel has impressive knowledge, though he doesn't try to impress me with something.

– Straight from a heart. Didn't think you could such deeply introduce me to yer thoughts. That's very kind from ye.

Iseren did not return the warm expression the woman sent her.

– It's just better to not have anything to hide from each other.

– Oh.. Yeah sounds reasonable, can't argue with that. – woman turned her eyes from Iseren for a moment. – Ye know.. We should dress up and go back.

– Yes, let us go. We're absent for too long anyway.

The two helped each other to get dressed, then right after they headed towards the light of camp. During their way, Svjetane crouched infront a group of considerable sized flowers.

– Stand still for a while, will ye? – Svjetane asked.

Iseren did as she wished to. Woman got closer to her.

– And what are you about to do? – girl stepped back.

– Braid a flower in yer hair, that's what. – Svjetane looked hurt by her backing off. – My folk used to braid a flower to hairs of others.

– Fine. Do what do you want. – Iseren allowed Svjetane to braid a flower amongst strands of her hair. – Does that flower has some peculiarity?

– That's a pale circlet. Its feature is just looking pretty. – answered Svjetane with a smirk. – Despite telltales of elder hermits not every flora has an use in herbalism.

Before Iseren said anything in return, the two bumped into grumpy looking Halverd.

– Where were ye? – he growled. – I'd took at least three baths during yer absence!

– My apologies, love. We had a girly chin-wag.

– Huh, explains a lot. Women. – Halverd sent them an amused look. – Yer luck that I didn't take you for a unwanted stranger.

Solgjordian tapped at the axes on his belt with heavy sigh.

– Knowing ye, I bet you wanted to smack some skulls with these hatchets. – Svjetane commented.

– Won't lie, I wanted. Eh, damn boring it is getting at this journey. – Halverd lowered his sight on the ground. – I do only hope I'll not loose might of mine because of that idleness.

– A friendly duel mayhaps? – Iseren offered.

– Maybe, maybe. – man brightened once hearing the offer. – But I could go nuts on actual weapons, how about fist fight?

– Why not. – Iseren shrugged.

– Well then! – Halverd rejoiced. – Rules are simple, first one kissing ground with his gob loses.

– Indeed, simple rules. But aren't Svjetane have anything against the duel? – the girl made sure

– Not at all, feel free to beat the shite out of each other. – replied Svjetane. – ye'll for certain smack his gob if he will grab where he shouldn't. Besides, he had quite a story with yer kin.

– What happened? – Iseren asked Halverd.

– Well, uh.. – man's voice turned shy. – Ye know what? I'll tell ye, if you'll be able to put me down.

– And what if I lose?

– Hm.. I know, you'll be my vocal in songs.

– Very well then. – Iseren sent him a sharp glance. – But I don't know do I feel like singing anytime.

– Well said, miss Inkarn. – once throwing the axes on ground, the man stood in position ready to attack. – But enough of these gallant boasts and stares, brace yeself!

Before he could reach Iseren, the girl managed to jump on him first. Halverd took her sudden attack on his shoulders and started wrestling. The two pushed from one side to the other, hoping that their opponent would lose his balance.

Iseren broke the tight wrestle by throwing a few punches at the man. He dodged them surprisingly deftly despite his grant stature, and even managed to respond with a few solid swings.

They were sent with incredible force, although Iseren had no issue with dodging them.

With came opportunity she was able to sickle punch him in the face.

– Not bad. – he gasped, snotting out a trickle of blood.

Iseren lowered her guard due to that, which resulted with a solid blow to her temple. She blinked a few tears to clear the sparks from her eyes and, as soon as she could, she sent Halverd with a straight punch into the young tree.

The sapling broke under his weight, covering his head with fallen branches. The blow made him more enraged than stunned, and so he was quickly on his feet, returning to the fight.

Panting furiously, he pounced onto the girl, who lost her balance under such sudden push and, dragging Harjstör with her, rolled down the hill. While falling, numerous stones and protruding roots many times pressed into their backs, leaving painful contusions.

Once at the foot of the slope, the two, after several attempts to continue the fight, fell almost senseless to the ground.

– In odd way ye fight. – Halverd muttered.

– What do mean by that?

– Like ye're not willing to fight, but clearly ye kicked my arse. As said, pretty odd way to fight.

Both of them went silent for a moment.

– Who by your rules won this duel? – with a feeble tone Iseren was able to ask.

– Since both of us got down, seems you and me as well won that one.

– he chuckled. – Hah! Quite a fun that was.

– But since both of end up victorious, you know what that means.

– Yeah, I do know. – joy quickly left him. – Maybe better if I tell ye this here, as Svjetane always make fun of me once she hears that story. Well, as ye know, yer kind, especially young ones are astonishingly seemly. Heh, regardless of gender.

– I can guess already what happened.

– I thought such a lucky chap I was to find a charming lassy in Zandyl. And ye know what? Turned out to nor be charming or lassy either. We had a betting in dices, who wins gets on top and the other was..

– Enough, details are not necessary. – stopped him Iseren. – So, what is your secret then? A romance with Inkarn or the other man?

– And I thought the incident itself will shock ye that I.. unusual am in bed. Since I don't look as someone like this, isn't it?

– I cannot say, does the look of someone hint such thing. – shrugged Iseren.

– Right, not many it will. I didn't think that way. – Halverd smirked, embarrassed. – Eh.. No need to talk about this. Ye able to get up?

– I don't know will I be able on my own. I feel my leg got dislocated.

– Yeah, looks not most fancy. – noticed Halverd. – Allow me to take a better look.

Iserel let Halverd lean over her wounded leg. Instead of inspection, the man unprecedentedly grabbed it in two places of dislocation and with questionable subtlety put them in their place. Iseren cursed in se-nvoldian from pain.

– I'll take that as a thanks. – Halverd commented with witty tone.

– Yeah. Grace on you for the help. – she panted. – You could have warned me.

– A doctor acts, not warns. – edified the man. – But alright, we got to go. Or else Svjetane will skin us alive.

– Then let us go.

The two got back on their feet with a clear struggle, with even more they climbed back to the top of the hill, where, barely crawling, they went to the camp. Two sat down by the fire, trying not to complain too loudly about the numerous bruises.

– By the look of ye both I take guess none of you won that fight. – Svjetane sent him amused look. – Will two of ye will be alright?

– Can walk that off. – Halverd dismissed her word with a hand.

– Either way, I will cover bruises of yers with a bit of pelander. I was just cooking a batch of them already, I know too well how yer „friendly duel” usually ends.

– Iseren, go first. I'll handle these wounds for longer, worse I survived.

– Mhm, for ye, contusions under eye are like tickles. – Svjetane cackled.

Iseren allowed her to be wrap the bruises in warm sheets and then, as Svjetane had instructed, the girl laid down motionless as possible on her back.

– To tommorrow most of them will dissappear. – ensured her Svjetane. – Now it's yer turn, Halverd, don't worry, yer memories of challenging wolves won't go away.

– Oh, don't be ridiculous. – Halverd was outraged. – Do ye have me for some crude madman?

Svjetane simply smirked. Halverd huffed, closed mouth and put an offended stare at woman. Under the woman's amused gaze, he finally contaged her smile and let her wash the bruises and cover them with a pelander.

Svjetane covered the two with a piece of tanned fur.

– A good night for ye fierceful warrios. – said with a smile Svjetane, extinguishing the fire with leftover water in pot.

– For you too. – the girl whispered back.

Iseren was too exhausted to protest against woman caressing her for good night, though Svjetane upon hearing semiconscious disgruntles took hand away from girl's hair. During occured warmth and serenity, the girl could peacefully fall asleep.

The next day, as they assumed, they arrived to Maiorone already at the noon. The road leading to the city was serving as a last bastion of warm and sparsely growing woods, as the highways connected infront of city gates, the landscape yielded to seaaside maquis.

Once the group crossed gates to Maiorone, to their eyes revelead masterful example of Inkarnian architecture, cherished with countless arches, ornamenture in stones and steep toofs sheeted with tiles or tarnished by the passage of time metal.

Streets of Maiorone were mostly habitated by Earthians – lofty, faintly tanned, most often having light-brown hair. The significant minority of city was the highborn race, which gave an impression of pushed away from city's society.

The team did not stay to rest in any of the passing inns, Adaiel, apparently well versed in the city's pattern similar to Vasidel, relatively efficiently leaded the party to university. The mercenaries halted their horses, awaiting orders from the consiliarius.

– I will go to the edifice alone, afraid I am that the lecturers there might not approbate to presence of you. – said Adaiel, once he slipped out of saddle. – It is a matter of tennats that are ruling over the institute.

– Nothing against that. – ensured him Svjetane. – Some of us should have left guard to keep an eye on horses anyway.

– Fair that sounds. – the boy admitted.

– And about what tennats were you talking about? – Iseren joined the conversation.

– Inside walls of university a set of secular rules is reigning, as the edifice and buildings related authorized is only for ones who can well scribe and read, finely educated individuals particularly.

– I'm out. – Svjetane pursed lips. – Ye, Halverd? Good ye read?

– Ye know, I utter a bit. – his cheeks reddened. – Iseren surely can, looks like good reader. We for sure are boors in eyes of erudites and other intelligentia of the edifice.

– Will you handle horses on yourself? – she asked mercenaries.

– Yeah, will do. – Svjetane avouched her with a suggestive smirk.

– Aye, Svjetane's right about that. – added Halverd. – Will be most wise anyway, if we don't head over there, like the two complete boors.

– And what thought flourished inside thy mind, Iseren? – Adaiel got intrigued.

– Quite obvious one. – the replied shortly. – I'll keep you company, as long I can.

– Yhm.. – Adaiel looked as if he was waiting for an further explanation. – Oh, yes, yes, I allow thee to do so. And to the two of you, please do not contribute to any form of trouble. We will return as soon as possible.

– We and troubles like enemies are. We meet each other as rare as possible. – assured him Halverd.

– I.. I'll take that as a promise. – boy replied as a farawell.

Adaiel, accompanied by Iseren, approached the guards at the entrance to the university.

– What sort of matter brings you here? – threw guard in an official tone.

– National one, sire knight. – Adaiel handed the guard a scroll, which until then was hidden under folds of his robe.

Soldier did his best to remain straight face once he heard the way Adaiel named him. The content of readed scroll quickly helped him in doing so.

– A member of Comitium? Matters takes different direction then. – guard lowered his head, clinking worn by him chainmail. – This way, sire consiliarius.

In an agile turn, guardsmen made a way for the two. Once they entered the building, the door behind them closed.

– Iseren? – Adaiel asked in half-whisper, once they were heading through corridors.

– Yes?

– Why didst thou choose company of mine? And I mean by that entering the institute with me.

– I chose to, so you don't not deal with this only on your own. – she replied.

– Oh. – cheeks of boy turned pink. – Such gently act from thy part.

They fell silent when Adaiel reached the building's library. The boy knocked on the door, from the other side they were greeted by look of aged Inkarn.

– Travelels, I suposse? – elder asked from doorway.

– And what made you think that way? – Iseren bursted question, before Adaiel was able to reply.

– Any man from university knows very well that the library is not my worklab, and thus no one shall disrupt my work by knocking on the door.

– I see. Forgive me for my act of impropriety, dear custodian, if I may to please to. – Adaiel lowered head in apology.

– Oh, don't act such jesterish now. – elder shook his head. – And thou still didst not explain what brings you here.

– O-of course. – Adaiel gave him the tube with the scroll.

– Allow me to take a look. – elder immersed into the text, after a while he grumped. – Huh, just a verse of the text, and thou gavest me this scroll to me as if I had to read it for half a day.

Adaiel silently stabbed the floor with his sight.

– Eh, instancy don't want to leave their comforts to attend anything serious anymore. – custodian sighed. – And your messengers from capitol nothing but only less well-spoken they become year by year. But about that „research“, what is required?

– Any scribework regarding Khyie'de Imperium. – Adaiel muttered, avoiding eye contact with custodian.

– And even I have those documents, do thou really expectst from to simply hand over to some errands a hundreds year old archive piece, worth millions more than you both? – elder bursted. – That's not going to happen, a pure madness that is!

– So you prefer telling the Comitium that the university in Maiorone had refused aid in high priority research, for his majesty himself? – Iseren stepped closer to the custodian.

– No need to threats like these! – old Inkarn backed of frightened. – I'll give you the archives, for the love of Nyrelion! But if something happened with them, then I'll be the one informing the Comitium about incompetence of yours!

– I'd suggest going for the archives. – Iseren didn't look impressed with the threats.

– Fiend of a woman. – elder snarled. – I'll go for them, fine, for your fortune we had not so long a ago a rearrangement in archive wing.

– Glad to hear. – suddenly serene tone of girl made the custodian lost on track.

He was able to form a few incomprehensible mumbles in response, then headed over to depths of library.

Custodian returned after a while with a stack of scrolls, variating in various sizes and types of paper, some of the oldest ones were framed in wood to prevent them from falling apart.

– Do you have a way to cover these documents? – custodian questioned them bitingly.

– Worry not, they will be safe under our possession. – replied with calming tone Iseren. – We have a trusty casket on hand, all of paperwork will be secured.

– Eh, forgive me my fury about the two of you. – oldman gave up, taking an apologizing tone. – We are talking here about priceless collection, even a slightest damage done to any of those papers will be taken as my fault.

– I accept the apology. And I think the consiliarius on my side does that as well.

– T-consiliarius? – face of custodian lost all of colour. – You are that Adaiel, and not his errand boy?

– Yes. – Adaiel lipped silently in response.

– Most of apologies! – elder fell on his knees. – Why thou didst not mention that, sire consiliarius? Documents thou canst study in my humble library, bah, thou hast access to any chamber in university! At most urgent, I simply have to provide sire and thy companion a most luxurious quarters.

– Companions actually. – Iseren mentioned. – They are outside. Can they enter the institute as a Earthlings from simple cause?

– Of course they can! As they authority of Comitium is far above the university's set of rules.

– And what about our horses? – asked cautiously Adaiel.

– They will be taken under care of our stable keeper. A verily reliable fellow in his profession he is.

– Many thanks, dear custodian. – Adaiel bowed to the oldman, to his shock.

– I will inform the edifice about thine arrival, sire consiliarius. – with a again awkward kneeling the custodian announced. – If I may to ask, I wish if consiliarius sire and his companion remained in my humble library.

– Of course. – they boy gently nodded.

Custodian swiftly flew from the room, leaving the two on their own. In silence, both of them were cruising their sight on the various parts of archive. The chamber in which they were asked to stay was giving an impression of a vestibule, almost any part of it was shadeless, thanks to sunlight poured from the spacious windows and circle shape of the inte-

rior. The main part of library was hidden in by corridors of bookshelves, as it was labyrinth built from books. Around visible shelves, it was possible to notice modestly dressed personed, perhaps taken by the labour that much they are not even aware of the guest. Iseren, once she got bored observing the workers, went her sight back at the Adaiel.

– The Comitium must mean a lot in Visildea if the university is open to such amount of aid. – she ended silence at some point.

– Yes, it is very meaningful. – Adaiel frowned, as if he was embarrassed with the status he's carrying. – Comitium member can from his own will dismiss anyone lower in university, that's why so welcoming is given to us.

– Either way, I'll try to not interrupt your businesses no more.

– Actually, I should be thankful the help thou gavest me on this day. – sight of Adaiel escaped from the face of Iseren.

– Very well then. – she replied. – And so not only with sword I am sworn to protect you.

– No, don't get me wrong, that is not thy new order. – Adaiel lost countenance.

– So it is not.

The old man returned to the library, accompanied by Inkarnian with significantly proud facial features. Once he entering the room, eyes of his swept around the room room, until his watchful, rust-coloured eyes found Adaiel and Iseren.

– So those our newcomers. – voice of Inkarn carried a sensation of pride and serenity. – Iheode is my name, praefekt of this institute. It is an honour to have a memeber of vasilean Comitium as a guest.

– Name of mine is Adaiel, and I thank you sire for welcoming. – boy lowered his head.

– Hm, Zaehil warned me already about you not caring the weight to your title. – praefekt commented with superior smile. – Raise thyhead, sire consiliarius. Thou art high above me.

Adaiel did as he was asked to.

– And so the Comitium is on trial to find an aprobation from his highness himself, in verily serious matter I suppose. – Iheode had spoken once again. – Is some aid from our side required to carry your task, sire

consiliarius? We are in disposition of numerous lecturers, on your wish I will order my subjects to find you most skilled ones from our cadre.

– I thank you for the offer, although I think I prefer working alone.

– As thou wishest then, sire. – Iheode replied haughtily. – Thou knowest where to find me, sire consiliarius.

Iheode left the library, setting worn by him colorful robe into flutterous move, giving an impression of festival banner.

– I hope sire wouldn't mind if I will return to my duties. – Zaehil bowed in front of him. – And if sire needs instruction regarding the layout of the library, I'll be most pleased to aid thee, sire.

– Thank you. If you excuse me now, I have to start studying the writingworks.

– Absolutely. – humbly replied custodian. – Do sire prefers to stay in library or wishes to lead thee to thy quarters?

– I would prefer to avoid interrupting thy chore here. Where may I find such quarter?

– Oh, no no. I naturally will show thee the way, sire. – smiled ingratiatingly Zaehil. – Please, follow me, sire.

– In that case, I'll grab the scrolls. – proposed Iseren.

– Your will that is, madame. – agreed the old man in a bow. – And if it's possible, I would plead to remain cautious while carrying the paper as possible.

– Don't worry.

Zaehil pursed his lips obsequious mien as he handed her the documents. As he left the library, he gestured for the pair to follow him.

Led by the custodian, they entered a spacious cabinet which, like the library, was illuminated by sunlight let in through a spacious windows. Iseren couldn't explain why the place had this feeling, but the interior seemed familiar to her.

„*Probably saw that schemate in a dream.*” – she cleared her mind from thoughts.

–..And sire consiliarius, no reason for concerns. Our servants got informed to about sire's and your company's presence. – continued with highly servile tone Zaehil. – And about the kitchen planned for thee sire, is there any wish sire would likes to fulfill by our servicemen?

– That isn't really necessary. – boy's hands started shaking.

– As sire consiliarius wishes. – custodian bowed in front Adaiel. – And as the quarter matter goes, does sire wishes to have a bit privacy from his company mayhaps?

– N-no, please, keep any else matter in the current state.

– Absolutely will be done that way! – Zaehil became plasticly enthusiastic, as Adaiel presented him a verily genius idea. – In that case, I'd like to beg for my leave. Is there something against my wish, sire consiliarius?

Custodian placed his eyes on boy expectingly, unless Adaiel, visibly feared at that moment, shook his head energetically. Oldman seeing that, nodded politely and left the room.

Once the door shutted down, the boy fell on the seat in front of the desk, on top of which he placed his head. Stool, despite the fairly light weight of its current user creaked in not the most convincing to remain intact way.

– Are you ill? – Iseren asked Adaiel.

– It is just the weariness from the trails, taking upon me. – boy had spoken after a while, with sight still at the tabletop of desk. – If it is not an issue for you, please, inform Svjetane and Halverd that during the stay in Maiorone your function as a protection is temporarily repealed.

– I'll inform them. Take care now.

As she was leaving, she checked Adaiel once more, the boy remained motionless in front of desk. She decided to leave him be.

A pair of mercenaries turned their heads once they heard characteristic only for Iseren pace – a heavy, yet with some form of deftness stepping.

– There ye are. – threw Halverd, getting up from stairs – Horses they took away, something wrong happened?

Iseren proceeded to present them a shortened version of story, on how the conversation went between them and university's instance.

– Well, to give us, I mean the common rabble, an privilege to enter. – he commented impressed. – Ye talked these scholars down pretty well, if you were able to even grant us a acomodation in theirs.

– And Adail? What about him? – Svjetane asked.

– It seems he wished to be left alone for a bit. And also wanted from me to inform you that we're free from mercenary work during our stay.

– Great! That needs to be celebrated! – Halverd rejoiced. – Does on of ye feeling like a drink or two?

– Sounds like a good idea to pay a visit to an inn, not necessarily to drink there though. – Iseren took his side. – And your thought, Svjetane?

– Yeah, maybe as a two we will keep an a good eye on this muggard. – woman flicked Halverd in his nose. – Let us go then.

The three of them went on a stony roads of Maiorone, looking for a promising tavern to stay. Finally, in most populated part of a town, they found an exuberantly looking establishment. Amongst its patron some of them were looking as interesting fellows, perhaps with worth listening stories, matching a mysterious aura they were building around themselves. Without any word between each other, mercaneries decided, that the establishment infront of them will be the one they will enter.

– And Iseren, remember, ye owe me a vocal in my song. – Halverd mentioned in the entrance. – Ye think the keeper of the place will give us a mulled wine for free if we perform a song?

– Sooner kick on the paving. – Svjetane chuckled. – But go on, I want to see such scene.

– Need to convince that doubtass, eh? – Halverd puffed up from hurt pride. – We'll sing *Itsetnöga*, it is in senvoldian so shoes they'll run from their feet once they hear that song.

– Let us get going then. – Iseren pushed the door to the inn, taking a step first to the interior.

VIII.

To the edifice they returned at the late evening. Once they entered the Adaiel's study room, they were greeted by prepared feast, waiting in the living part of quarters.

Supper consisted baked fish, citrus fruits and crunchy breads. Since, they were eating last time at the noon, they sitted down with readiness to the table.

– Hah! A performance that the Maiorone will not forget soon! – Halverd shouted, taking a huge bite of fish. – Iseren, do ye often sing?

– Frankly, that was my first time of singing.

– By the gods! Good gods! – A piece of food fell from Halverd's mouth. – First time and you perfectly fitted into the tone! And voice of yer's like of a goddess! Not surprise it is that innkeeper gave us a bit of wine for free.

– Have to admit, you gave quite a show there. – admitted Svjetane.

– But if not the singing in duet, nothing would come out of it. – replied humbly Iseren. – I did not know a lyrics in a slightest.

– Ye must have a pretty darn good reflex then. Not many ones can sing flawlessly at their first stumble with the text.

– Hm, I don't know really how swift my reaction can be.

– And what was the most of a challenge for you at this point?

– Once I fought with a fencer, his name was Palegob. With sabre he fought, aside mastered technique he had challenged me with a ruse. With a premeditation he tried to cut me lightly as much as possible, so the toxin he put into his blade could spread effectively through my body.

– Like death sentence that sounds. How did ye handled this?

– I have different methabolism. If not, I would be a toy of bandit clan or fertilizer for nearby forest.

– Ye know, in my case a trial of my might I had, with the king of northern woods itself.

– I heard about your challenge, Svjetane told me about this once. – stopped him Iseren. – I admit, facing a bear is truly a sign of strenght and courage

– Stupidity more likely. – Svjetane chuckled.
– And from my view it was a trial of my fate. – Halverd had spoken.
– And both of ye are right about that, the crossing between courage and stupidity pretty frail it is. Yet paying with a wound a blood, I bound with that beatiful soul here.

Halverd crowned his oration by pointing at Svjetane. Her in other hand pretended she's not listening to them, in which her turning rose cheeks were not most helpful.

– Gods of ours used to smile upon the ones ready to throw their lives away in sake of something greater. – continued Halverd. – It is divided by saying that some of the souls are meant to lead to greater or that the greater done is what makes the souls this way.

Iseren felt sudden chill, as if she was caught during serious crime.

„So I assumed well, some men's soull is simply more valuable.”

– And why ye Iseren suddenly turned so pale? – Svjetane noticed.

– Probably because of the wine. – Halverd replied for a girl. – Have anything for stomach?

– I'm fine. – stopped them Iseren.

– Late it is anyway, so maybe go to bed. – proposed Svjetane. – We're going too in no time.

– I don't have to.

– Eh, fine.. If you really fine, then maybe remind Adaiel that he needs a rest as well?

– I will see what can I do.

– Wonderful, thank ye. – Svjetane whispered with a smile.

Iseren went to study room, noticing Adaiel leaned towards a candle to take a good look on readed paperwork.

– Adaiel? – she asked, taking him away from the lecture.

– Oh, Iseren. – he gasped, trying to hide that he got scared by her. – Did something happened that disturbed thee?

– No, I came because quite late it got, certainly you will have difficult to read through such darkness. Personally I had quite a struggle to even notice, that you read about goods imported from Ghaiedôre.

– So thou knowest old kyrridean tongue? An astonishing proficiencie.. – he whispered with excitement.

– Partially. I knew a priest, that used daily few phrases from it. – thought about Dankard raised an unpleasant sensation in herself. – Matters aside, reading will be much easier and reasonable at the day.

– Indeed, perhaps as thou hast spoken, such action as more prudent will be considered. – the boy curved his lips in thinking. – From me it is only required now to secure a scribework, then I can take a rest.

– Very well. Sleep well, Adaiel.

Inkarn sent her a warm look in response.

The girl went to the guest's bedroom, furnished in similar manner as the rest of the quarters. Someone for their need put additonal beds, which was evident by a slightly chaotic placement of other furniture. Since the Iseren's was far from interior decorator, an disorganisation wasn't a bother for her. She was too weary at that moment to put her mind on such trivial matter.

Next days were passing sluggishly; in their free time a three of mercaneries spent a lot of time together through straying around the city or taking a rest on the nearby shore.

And such rest they were taking on that peculiar evening, after spending afternoon on acknowledging the surrounding they headed to their favourite slope above the beach.

– So – Halverd raised his voice, to be catchable through seawaves whipping the sands of shore – ye think that out Inkarn something with their research assumed?

– He could share a progress with Iseren. – woman faced Iseren: – Wouldn't that be a problem for ye?

– Not at all.

– Good. – she replied with a smile.

– Well, once we'll be back, y'll pay the lad a visit. – Halverd picked a flute, sculpted in bone. – I'd suggest play a song to warm a mood. What ye tell about *Falblondäns*? On vasilean, A Dance of Fallen Petals.

– Sounds interesting. – admitted Iseren. – Any vocal from song is needed?

– Eh, even if, then who will perform it? Ye don't know a text and from my part a sorcery to sing and play flute is unknown to me.

– Right. Let us hear the song then.

Halverd spun the instrument between his fingers before starting a play. Once he blew into mouthpiece, a clear tune came from the flute, forming the charming melody.

First impression that came to Iseren's mind was indeed petals fallen from flower heads, she closed her eyes to immerse in further parts of performance. She opened them again, once the music stopped spreading through the shore

– Well well, didn't know yer songs can tell about something else than a pillage, drunkrage or combination of both. – put off Svjetane.

– *Iteliäde* is a song dedicated to goddess of eternally frozen lake, many of us consider place as sacred. – explained Halverd, ignoring comment of Svjetane.

– Goddess of a lake? I thought deities are only elemental. – pointed out Iseren.

– Oh right, ye could not hear about our gods as a Svjarsteinan. They are the ones who rule and not are the meaningless energy. And ye can guess, burgundy fellows aren't happy about that, and so they sent their clergymen to convince us to believe in liveless element.

– I take guess that in Visildea some form of religious enlightenment took a place? – assumed Iseren.

– Phew, enlightenment. – Halverd winced in disgust.

– A bit that enlightenment costs, having in mind that the free from the Visildea northern parts are closely bound to their belief, and both of them are equally strong I'd say. – stated Svjetane. – But I don't like type of blether like this. Musician of mine, would you liberate us from the current topic?

– Alright, will be done. – Halverd grabbed his well used lyre, strapped to his back before. – Usually this song is played on lute, but I guess ye wouldn't complain. Something kreovian this time, some street entertainer taught me this song in Lvycca. *Ed'uthi Gvabe* it was named, as long I spelled that right.

– Well listen it with pleasure. – ensured him Iseren.

– Want a duet mayhaps? – he proposed.

– Why not, though with foreign tongue my singing might get a bit flawed.

– Bah, not a problem. – Halverd dismissed that with hand. – Just I need to prepare the chords, gods only know what in the world is happening with them during my travels.

After a while of tuning and test playing he announced the lyre is ready to play. Iseren nodded in response, being ready as well.

The lyre start playing harrowing theme, to which the two started singing in low tonation:

*D'gvabe, d'gvabe,
Utha da n'prasuge de, utha da n'sadri mnabe.
D'endra dvo de nadvrlece,
Lrji vosna da dene nevmce
Druze ze dvoba nec sadre,
Verm nec snive da injgha, vpechtni z'move iebenasni udre
D'gvabe, d'gvabe,
Zemne tmarni d'vite ó prnavi hrene?
Mlijc ine dye zede csersnite crva, vne manspre zede azdra gresne dene.
Druze ze dvoba nec zdraci hvle za,
Druze ze dvoba nec dothi zemna za,
Amnugri zemna za, ze ztani gvabe,
Vechsni Domnze prda ze gvabe int pvre z'nevmca zrabe,
Vosna da, de tnute vne raspe,
Dene prde vne tzene rude,
D'dnaita dothe n'vrek, vita da brsudi!
Vointa da zdrace de nicn pnriva da zede vnale,
Vointa da zdrace de ien zrice dvoba, vointa da frapa vode o'pratd tzene
gatl!*
*Dnaita da zrice, crdini nec da zdrace,
Pvreme vre frapa da rude tzene dvi pnuge snrabe
Dothi nec, uthi vita da, rusni gvabe!
Inblica da vreke, preti vestni craze kvese!*

When they stopped singing, in corners of Svjetane's eyes a drop of tears appeared.

– I.. I truly impressed am. – she whispered. – It reminded by about a good friend of fine, from my old company.

– Ye mean Besvir? – Halverd tried to find out. – My precursor of sorts in songs and bedding?

– Y-yes. – woman laughed through tears. – Clearly I have a weakness for those who talk more their accomplishment than they actually had done.

Svjetane paused, she blinked a few times.

– He really like performing that song, always by it he reminds us during mercenary works to care about more than just pay. Such shame he himself forgot about those words one day.

Woman went silent, rubbing her eyes.

– And what are lyrics of this song? – Iseren asked, once Svjetane calmed down.

– Let me form a translation.. On vasielan it would be something like this. – Halverd proceeded to recite in a dramatic tone:

*Ah warrior, warrior,
You've forgotten about your threshold, about the warmth of by you loved.
Come back to your homestead,
take a tearful look on your grown children
The roads will not give you the love,
don't let your heart freeze like a iebenasian water.
Ah warrior, warrior,
How long have you been on a dry loaf?
During the nighs whipped by winters, during the day choked by Sun's
heat.
The roads will not give you the true glory,
The roads will not give you anything.
But it's too late, oh you stubborn warrior,
The Old Wraith got the warrior in their grips until the new dawn greets
us
Look at you, at the scars brushed on your face!
At your hands, painted in others' blood!
You brought doom on yourself, you are the guilty one!*

*May your soul never greet the Celestials,
May you carry only the fear, that will wretch the voice from throats of
mortals!*

*Carry the fear, you faithless soul,
Just like you've carried others' blood for sack of silver.
Be gone, be forgotten, wretched warrior!
Smile upon a doom worth taken by withering grain ear!*

– Verily poematic, yet full of pain that song is. – Iseren sent a clouded gaze at the setting sun above the sealine. – No offence Halverd, but I don't feel like more singing right now.

– No grudge holded about that, I know, in too gloomy tones I went into. – the man replied, hanging his head down. – Will be dusk soon anyway.. Well then, are we heading back to the edifice?

– Good idea. Will find out how Adaiels progressed with researches of his. – Svjetane approved the idea.

– How about a poem to warm our way to the city? – proposed Halverd.

– Why not, I never heard any of your works before. – Iseren agreed.

– And thus.. – Halverd cleared his throat with more serious face. – Oh you, sheeted in gilded tulles, an anchor once of astral children..

The same day, at the late evening; avoiding to disrupt Adaiel's work, mercenaries sat down around living part of quarters. Iseren and Halverd were taken by a board game, which allowed Svjetane to prepare gathered recently reagents for upcoming travels.

– A candle will lit off soon. – the woman noticed, pausing grating the citrus' peel. – I do hope for yer souls ye didn't bet on, since we got to sleep soon.

– This are no dices or such, we play just for the giggles now. – Halverd didn't even raise his sight from ongoing game. – And it happens, that our match will probably end in one or two tours.

In the exact moment Iseren lifted one of her pawns and jumped over Halverd's minion, taking the fallen pawn out of board.

– Well, now nothing I can't do, I'll give ye this round. – Halverd gave her hand, initiating the game's end. – But quite surprised I am, that someone fatigued to such sweet toy from Hakh'Illim import here.

– I give you that, quite interesting is that game. – Iseren helped the man with placing pawns inside the folded board.

– Huh, who wouldn't find. They say that in east folk play that game, mostly aspiring strategues to grind their soon in use skill. But enough of my talking, we really should go to beds.

Halverd stood from the table and with company of Iseren went closer to the Svjetane. Woman clucked in irritation, when the two stood in the light of candle.

– Oh, ye really ready? – she didn't hide her astonishment. – And I was ready for you two delaying the end of game till the midnight. Well then, we can go to take a good kip. And, Iseren?

– Yes, I know. I will go to Adaiel first, and additionally I get a bit of word regarding his project.

– Seems we can now comunicate without a word. There's second thing though. – woman lowered her voice with a silly smirk: – Don't rush if ye can, we would put yer absence in a very good use.

Iseren glanced at the Halverd, who suddenly got deeply interested with the wall on the deeper parts of quarters.

– No problem. I will try to take as much time as possible. And if not, I'll do my best and loudest to announce my comeback.

– Glad for the efforts, Iseren. – replied Svjetane with a laughter. – Be seeing ye, till the morning.

After saying goodbye to the two, the girl went to the study room. Adaiel, sitting over the manuscript, looked fully focused, his eyes were placed solely on the text he was reading, he was unconsciously playing with his lower lip. Iseren made no effort to keep her footsteps silent to distract him from his reading.

– Yes, Iseren? – the boy asked, once he noticed her.

– We were curious on how your progress goes around the research. – Iseren got closer to his desk. – Are you able to tell about the progress, or at least have some clues?

– By both I could gift you, as you look at the matter. Although a misfortune thrives, as part of scribework was bought to private collection of someone, the statement of custodian, once I noticed a gap in archives. A memory of his was capable to reveal, that contract was related to high ranked stranger from Wistuja.

– Prysimił.

– What?

– Majordomo of Jamryns' court, a principality in Kreovia. That's only person, that comes to mind of mine. He's known for his passion to ancient matter, about the rise of Visildea in particular.

– It would explain why from archive only raports from to the attacks were bought, scribework written until attackers breached through Maiorone's defences.

– Earthlings you mean?

– Frankly, I do not know. – admitted consiliarius. – Many oral stories claims that Visildea was found by earthian incursion, yet no convincing material can prove this. Evidence from Maiorone might be revolutionary though. Perhaps majordomo studying the writings got to know the answer already.

– Hm.. And no one paid attention to these documents before?

– Well.. – Adaiel reddened. – Right, for certain such crucial fact would be not ignored. Poorly executed my theory was, my mistake.

– It is my mistake, as I changed topic. Nevertheless, our next destination is court of Jamryn's family?

– If that said majordomo can be encountered there, it certainly will be. Tomorrow, our voyage shall begin once more.

– I'll tell the others. – Iseren raised her sight, to take a look at night-sky from the spacious window. – But for now, would be wisest to take a rest.

– A wonderful idea. A good rest is most advisable before long journey.

– Adaiel hasitateted to enter the residential part of quarters. – Might sound shallow, a bit farcical even, as I feel too excited to repose.

– Nothing farcical is in excitement. All you need is a good distraction.

– Iseren got closer to the exit from the quarters. – A starry sky will help you mayhaps?

– Wouldn't be unwise to leave the university under such late hour?

– You don't need to worry about that. – the girl tapped her sword with a finger.

– In that case, I will try to not.

Adaiel remained silent for the rest of walk, trying to keep a swift pace of Iseren.

With her steeping they walked through long corridors of institute in no moment, not so long after the two left the walls of Maiorone. They were taking much longer distance from the cite for a bit longer, until Iseren stopped by the hill, few steps from the highway.

– From the bottom of hill we will have the best view on the firmament. – she suggested.

Iseren laid down with hands above her head, with reluctance Adaiel got down as well.

– Don't we need an optic instrument to take the astral element on proper observation? – Adaiel asked after while. – With the telescope for instance.

– For simply taking a look on stars that is not necessary. Trust your eyes.

– Hm, very well.. – in eyes of Adaial a glamour of night sky was reflecting. – As I look at the firmament I wish to bring a bit of reflection from my part.

– Let us hear it then.

– As thou wishest. This might sound unbelievable at the first words, but.. Without any intention never I was taking a look on the night sky. Of course I had astronomy lessons, although too taken with forming constellation I was to even send a glance for just pleasure of an eye.

– Is that so? Weren't you interested with something such simple?

– I didn't have time for simple interests.

– I see.

A silence took place amongst the two, during it they were only busy with stars and formations of them.

– You know, it is said that my.. family consider stars as their dwelling. How much of truth lies in such statement? – Iseren renewed the conversation long while after.

– Allow me to mention that we are talking about my family as well. And thus we are pondering upon the genealogy of both of us.

– My mistake, years made me used to be the one with celestial roots.
– she apologized. – And about my question, how high is a chance for truth being this way?

– Not likely it is true, close to simply impossible. – the boy kept his sight on the night sky. – Stars, or named with more proper terminology, ablaze spheres are penurious in means of any matter else than the light.

– And what about the moons?

– Dimming spheres not so rich in resource are as well. But faded spheres in other hand, just as the one we are denizens of, doable are to ingest and emit the elemental energy, both the primalform and the multi-form.

– Interesting, so this means, that Celestial could not live in any else type of sphere than the one we live on?

– With scientific approach to the question, it seems to be this and not any else way.

– I like listening to your explanation. – admitted Iseren. – Do you know you have an aptitude to become a lecturer?

– Oh, I am glad to hear that. – Adaiel tried to not look flattered by her words. – And as I think about this, if not the heirloom after my father, I could indeed share my knowledge amongst the students

– One doesn't exclude the another. After all you give me the lessons, as a form of payment.

– Didst thou really consider my harangues as something educational?
– the sight of Iseren nodding turned his lips into a shy smile. – Once I complete forming rapport for elder circles of Comitium I will find thee more proper specialist at once.

– Though I don't really need a teaching from specialist. But from the passionate, someone talented with solving problems. Yours teching, to be more specific.

Adaiel opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but he couldn't form any words.

– Then I will fulfill thy wish. – he uttered at last.

– And I think I should explain to you where my need to find out about the highborn race came from.

– Certain are you to reveal such matter?

– Yes, I am. You see, I am not an Inkarn. But.. a Hybride, I am daughter of two opposite Celestial. – Iseren exposed her marking on the neck.
– Take a look, if you like to.

Adaiel reached his hand with fascination on his face, yet he got reluctant to get his hand closer to the girl.

– You can touch it. – she assured him.

Barely noticably the boy moved his finger through the symbols on Iseren's skin.

– And so true it is. – he said almost in whisper, after taking his hand to himself. – Hybrides are indeed marked for the earth race, although no man knows what intention is behind those markings.

– I was quite of a curiosity for my village's elder. He himself didn't know either or didn't want to share what's behind those marking thing.

– I doubt he knows anything, with all respects to him. Only veiled in close to mythical aura Eukrat from Mondra was able to establish a convincing theory. According to it, hybrides figure as Celestials, although due to formation of two conflicting elemental powers they had lost their celestial form of being, thus making them on the equal with the Earthling and Inkarn as well.

– That is why I was left on earth, amongst you. As I weaker from other Celestials am.

– That would make sense. – admitted Adaiel. – But those are only guessings, uncertain we are with how really this matter looks like.

– Maybe I'll be able to find an answer...

– We will be, as I will help you, according to our agreement. But one is not clear for me.

– What is unclear?

– Why didst thou tell me this? It wasn't necessary from me to be aware of thine origin.

– No idea. I just can trust you. Simply feeling that way.

– Oh.. It is truly warm to hear such thing, that no word come on my tongue to thank thee.

– No need to say anything, silence suits me as a response. – she ensured. – Let us just watch the stars, as we intended to. How about that?

– Watching sky it is then. I should ask about something before so.
When thou wouldst like to go back to edifice of university?

– When you would like. I could sleep over night here if that was up to me.

– A night under naked firmament? Like in adventurous novels..

– I take that as an agreement.

– Yes yes, I agree. – Adaiel shook his daydream off. – I have nothing against thy proposition.

The two looked at the night sky for a long time, once a warm wind rose from the mainland. Combined with the soft, dry grass, they obtained a convincing imitation of a comfortable bed, of which neither Iseren nor Adaiel could resist.

IX.

– Iseren, I'm sorry for such brusqueness from my part, but I simply had to wake thee up. – half awoken girl heard Adaiel's calling. – It is most wise to take our part on the current day, we must pack our belongings, take an inspection of the steeds. Thus best it would be if we were ready before the zenith, better even if before it.

– W-what? – she asked with sleepy tone, rubbing her eyes.

– Come, if I may to ask, I-i can help thee stand up. – Adaiel offered.

– Oh come on, I am not crippled. – she sat down, blinked few times to faster rallying. – It's barely dawning.. Fine though, if it is rush as you say then let us go.

Iseren, not wanting Adaiel having to wait for her, stood up quickest as it was at that point possible. After briefly fixing hair and attire, she gave Adaiel insight that she's ready to go.

Their comeback to university didn't took specially long, road felt much less long during daytime, and so merely a prayer to Nyrelion could pass until they stepped into Adaiel's quarters.

– Wilt thou allow me to split from thee for a while? – the boy stopped in the doorway. – As a idea born in mind of mine, that thou wilt call our company and me in the meantime will have time to catalogue inscriptions in a proper order and hand them over to custodian.

– As you wish. – girl agreed.

– Grateful I am for thine approval. And if I may to ask, please remain inside the quarters.

Girl nodded in understanding.

Adaiel, with a slight help from Iseren's part, took documents from his desk and take them out from the quarters. Once the girl was left alone, she went to the sleeping chambers, she found the mercaneries already awoken.

– Will be heading out soon, be ready. – she informed them.

– Ready we are, as ye see. So no worries. – responded Halverd, stepping closer to her.

– No need to stand like that until the Adaiel come back though. So maybe we'll go to the dining room? – Svjetane suggested.

The two approved the idea of her. After making sure their belongings are in one place, mercenaries took seats in front of prepared breakfast. The meal consisted mostly fruits, that were eaten with little breads sprinkled with a bit of olive.

– Well then, Iseren. So how our travel will look like, huh? – Halverd asked during the eating. – Did something our captain mentioned?

– Not much he mentioned, I know only that we are going to Jamryns' principality. There a negotiation with his majesty's ambassador will be taking place. – she informed him, bending her hand with a piece of bread. – Fortunately, that majordomo seemed to like me during my stay.

– Court likes ye there, huh? I guess that has something to do with how we earn for living. – Halverd commented. – Me on my very youth lived from such jobs as well, but in our parts, from laird that just sat at the throne. Sometimes my work was questionable enough that if we are judged in our end for our action then I'm already doomed.

– Nearly any hireling shall in gaol end, so ye don't worry about yer wrong done. – comforted him Svjetane. – From a person it depends, not his line of work

– Like in any else profession.

– Like in any else. Gods have theirs bad deeds behind ears as well, that's why so long they grown. – woman reddened upon seeing stare from Iseren. – Well then, n-nevermind. By the by, Iseren, what happened between ye and Adaiel yesterday, huh?

– Oh yeah, that is worth listening topic. – Halverd leaned towards Iseren with an amused smirk.

– Nothing out of ordinary took place. – the girl felt a painful clench in her stomach from intense stare from the two. – We just went on a while, to take a gaze on the night sky

– To take a gaze on a night sky, hm. Maybe good ye did, it seems lad needs a bit of fresh air. – from the sight of woman it was clear, that she wanted to add something more to her statement.

Iseren kept her sight on the food, as she felt Svjetane tries to see through her.

„On what she is counting on anyway?“

– Go on, eat until it is from our purse. – encouraged them Halverd, taking a deep gulp from the goblet. – Heh but the drink is fine too. Mead it is not, true, but that inkarn wine whirls head in a funny way too.

– It better not whirl yer head, later from horse ye drunkily fall on head and only worse will get inside of it. – Svjetane chuckled.

– Nah, I will not fall! – Halverd miffed back, almost spilling contents of the chalice on himself. – Not once I hav..

– Calm down. – sudden voice of Iseren made the two silent. – I hear steps from corridors.

– Then what? These book munchers know already we reside here! – Halverd boomed. – And if we silent be, then of them will pay a visit here and what, a sight of yokels like us will surely shock him!

Svjetane didn't share his vision as she took the goblet from hand of Halverd, when he tried to fill it once again.

– I see that no fall from horse is needed from ye to lose yer mind. – Svjetane hit the Halverd in the head with chalet, once he tried to argue back. – Sit down already. One more wit ye say and yer forehead kiss that cup in no moment.

With a persuasion from Svjetane's part, Halverd managed to end the meal without a word. That silence had been present until Adaiel went back to his study room. Via gesture from Iseren, the three came to cabinet and gathered infront of his desk.

– We are ready, as you instisted. – the girl stated.

– And what about salute.. – Halverd started, quickly stopping, as Svjetane stabbed him into chest with fingers. – Fine, fine. No wits.

– Wonderful, Iseren. – Adaiel replied with a slight smile. – Let us go to the stables then, as a word was sent to me, that the stable keeper prepared steeds for our upcoming voyage.

– We only need to grab our belongings. Where shall we wait for you?

– Near the bottom steps to the university. – Adaiel moved to the exit of quarters. – But should not I aid you with carrying our equipment?

– Nah, you don't need to worry about that, sire captain. – Halverd joined the chat. – We'll be fine with that clutter on our own. Besides, the sight of consiliarius struggling with some bags along his crew will be controversial, isn't it?

– Oh, indeed it will be.. – Adaiel lowered his head.

The boy left the room without any further word.

– Did I offend lad or something? – Halverd raised his brow.

– Not really, but he seems to have problems with his title. – Svjetane turned to Iseren: – Did he said anything about that?

– No, he didn't. Although your guessing fits here.

– Aye.. Better leave Iseren to talking with Adaiel. Good she is with that. – Svjetane proposed. – No need to make the lad upset.

– Iseren as a subcommodore will fit right in. I take a guess no voting is needed for so, as I am the only one caring for such title giving. – consent Halverd.

– I have nothing against either. – Iseren assured them. – Let us take our equipment, Adaiel expect from as a swift leaving.

– Just at that, barely nominated and she throws at us orders already. – Halverd cackled.

Smirk of his weakened as he realised the girl did not reply.

– Quite a talent ye have to upset Inkarns. – pinchily sumed up Svjetane. – Move and take these bags already, or ye are about to recreate yer Zandyl incident mayhaps?

Halverd after grumbling incomprehensible and also likely impolite reply, went back to help the rest with preparations to depart.

At some point he discreetly attracted attention of Iseren.

– Is something concerning you? – the girl asked, once she stepped closer.

– Not at all, lady subcommodore. – he brushed that off with significant unconcern in voice.

Man after that glanced nervously at the Svjetane, at that moment occupied with putting pots into more handeable stack.

Iseren sent him a puzzled look.

– Alright, fine.. Svjetane would not approve the idea, but I have a thing for taking that exotic board game with us. – Halverd admitted. – Will subcommodore turn blind for a bit on that perhaps?

– We should not exploit the status of Adaiel, especially in non-urgent matters. – Iseren took him away from the game. – It is time to leave.

– Eh, fine. – he sighed.

After making sure everything got taken, the three packed a bit of left over breakfast to serve them as provision in upcoming travel.

The three found Adaiel in front of university, the boy was in the middle of conversation with praefekt of the university. Not wanting to interrupt its course, mercenaries stood in distance, until Iheode paid attention to their presence

– ..I see that thy protection ready is, thus I will not keep sire consiliarius from awaiting travel. – Iheode lowered his head in farewell. – An auspicious journey may I wish to company of thee, sire.

– It was a pleasure to be guest of thine university. I thank in the name of mine and my companions. – gently replied Adaiel.

– Same pleasure I feel upon thy statement on how university came to sire's taste. – despite smiling, Iheode's words sounded chill. – And consider what I said regarding known by us praetor Saethrin, consiliarius sire. Especially, as sire mentioned, the university under my management suits sire.

Iheode measured the boy with prideful gaze, right after he went back inside to institute. Adaiel remained motionless, still rumaging on what Iheode told him.

– We have belongings. – Iseren broke the occurred silence. – To the stables it is then?

– Oh? Yes yes. Indeed. – the boy answered, snapping out of his dilemma. – Praefekt ensured us that the steeds are under care of specialist, devoted to their profession expert. Curious I am about how that expert presents themselves. And thus, let us go.

The four entered the stables. The interior was casted in dim light, air inside carried an scent of straw and horse hair. Except the horses and them it seemed no one was present there.

– Ye think stable master went out? – Svjetane pondered.

– Despite this, we should be able to rub along with horses on our own. – Halverd replied – Take a look for our ones, will ye?
After finding their horses, the group started tying saddlebags on their backs.

– Is my aid required? – sudden voice came from darker corner of stable.

– Not necessary that is. – said back Adaiel. – A likely to be difficult work you have already.

– Cannot argue with that. – voice replied in bitter tone.

To the bit of light inside a stranger man walked into. Once under it, the light revealed his somewhat noble yet outlandish face. Narrow eyes of his hid brown pupils inside, cautiously following the four. With every step of a man a slight cling of chains was being made.

– Are you kept here as prisoner? – Iseren asked.

– I am. – a man tried for serene expression.

From his physique it seemed that he is kept prisoner for not so long, which was evident by his still muscular body and healthy skin. Iseren stopped observing him, when the man stared back at her.

– Why is that a case?

– I am not permitted to explain this.

– Will you allow me to have a use of your authority? – Iseren whispered to Adaiel.

The boy nodded shakingly in response, his face was covered in mixation of sorrow and compassion.

– Tribune gave you permission to speak. – Iseren informed the stable master.

– I am not aware of such law.

– Any order by Comitium member is above any else vasilean entity's law, except his majesty himself of course. – Adaiel explained.

– I see. I am.. Was warrior from Lyankhu clan. I fought. With other clans, with the red soldiers. Until the recent, my clan was destroyed by red army and sold to them Toghaya clan. No one let me die as I was meant for. Instead of it, pair shackled hold my ankles and as if I was cattle I got sold .

– And university of Maiorone bought you, I see. – Iseren said the rest.

– Maiorone.. It is worth knowing where I am. – stable master tilted his head in thanks.

– And what name you carry?

– Hodhoke, in tongue out of my people. Though my people granted me second name, *Gji'isa-Mzengara*. In your speaking, Crimson Hilt it will be.

Iseren got closer to the Hodhoke. He didn't backed off. A sudden, almost foreign thought came to her mind.

– What do you think about slavery, Adaiel? – Iseren due to impulse asked the boy.

– Iseren? – he got concerned.

– Just what do you think. – she asked once more.

– Hm.. – boy swallowed loudly saliva. – I am not in part of it. And thou wishest to..

– Yes, to get him free. He is a warrior, the university especially shall not kill his potential by keeping him closed in stables.

– Aren't ye just sad with his horrible fate? – Svjetane broke into conversation.

– I am only sad upon seeing talent about to being wasted.

– Yeah, the talent. – woman looked as she was upset with her response.

– Tell me, Adaiel – Iseren faced the boy – does the title of consiliarius is able to liberate the slave from their servitude?

– Under such condition it is duable to break a shackle of his enslavement status. – response of Adaiel was barely noticable. – A verily noble act from thy part that is.

– A practical one more likely.

– Said in humble word an act still noble remains. – Adaiel stayed on his opinion. – And that act inspired me, Iseren. I shall be going to praefekt now, an answer to how close to possible it is to peacefully convince Iheode to free Hodhoke, may I leave for fortune. A you, you stay here please.

More time passed than they assumed it will take on negotiation. During Adaiel's absence, mercenaries sat down around the stable on hay bundles or on ground. Only the Iseren stayed near Hodhoke. No word came from him, same as from Iseren.

All of them got up, when light coming from entrance got covered by two entering figures. After passing the doorway one of figures turned out to be Adaiel. The second was accompanying him university guard.

Watchman, after few sniffs, came closer to Hodhoke, after moving finger through the keys he found the one that opened shackles from Thaelrikian's ankles.

– That is all from my part. – the guard bowed to consiliarius and left the stables.

Mercenaries and Adaiel gathered around Hodhoke as if he was wounded.

– Thou art free now. – Adaiel announced in soft tone. – Up to thee it is, is thy will to stay in our company. Regardless of thy choice, all of thy belongings will be granted to thee.

– An honour of mine precepted me to stay. – replied Hodhoke, lifting his head proudly. – I am in your debt, stranger.

– Adaiel is my name. – boy placed hand on his chest while introducing himself. – And the one in favour of thy shall be the lady on my left, Iseren.

– I see. Yet you were the one who has spoken in my name. And thus I shall serve you to pay my debt. – Hodhoke bended his knee in front Adaiel. – At your service, Adaiel.

– As said, it is up to thy decision. – ensured him Adaiel. – In the name of Comitium, as consiliarius, may thy name be censed from all crime and may I grant thee a liberate will of vasilean citizen.

– From my own will then, may I vow my loyalty. – Hodhoke's voice sounded almost obstinately.

– Heh, what a ceremony. – smirked Halverd. – And what about our travel? Late it is slowly getting.

– The bright-haired man is in right, we are wasting time because of me. – lowered head Hodhoke. – Shall we get going, sire?

– Indeed, we will soon. – replied Adaiel. – And call me Adaiel, please.

– As you wish, Adaiel.

With a help from Thaelrikian, they moved their horses from stables. And as they quickly found out, Hodhoke had a marvelous gift to horses, giving an impression of communicating with them. Mercenaries let bridles go from their hand, allowing the Hodhoke releasing animals on the fresh air from boxes. And although the man was wearing just ragged robe, with his way of being a mysterious form of majesty was present, saturated only more by his cultural dissimilarity.

Not soon after, guard came back with a package under his armpit.

– I see you got to know about his talent. – the guard commented.

– Would not be a way to miss such gift. – Adaiel affirmed. – Oh, and almost I forgot. A belonging of Hodhoke, may I ask you, dear guardian.

– Aye, right ye are, sire consiliarius. That is all he had on himself. – watchman threw the package on the ground.

Iseren, insisted by Adaiel, proceeded to take off its contents. Attention of a girl was brought by a peculiar appearance of Hodhoke's equipment. It was heavy wide-bladed sabre, ornamented in flowery motive. In similar setting was made shortbow with unusually bented limbs.

An armour of his consisted sturdy sewed caftan reaching knees and leather cap with few feather pinned in it.

Hodhoke once his belongings were given to him, observed them with a expression, as he they were granted to him for the first time in his life. Turned aside from the gathered, he put his garment on, then fastened sabre, in pair with the shortbow. On the opposite hip he placed quiver with a hunting knife.

– A considerable delay we have. – worried Adaiel. – And long road is ahead us.

– We will find a way to overcome it. – Iseren promised.

– Simply put, it will take a day long than I assumed.

– Will be some or another. – comforted him Halverd. – Well then, we're ready, consiliarius sire?

– Indeed, mount on, please.

Mercenaries take on saddles as he wished to. Iseren, despite having now Hodhoke to choose, decided to take a ride with Adaiel once again.

– Everyone's ready. – Iseren reported. – Are we going off?

– Indeed. – Adaiel turned over his shoulder. – And thus, to the Wistuja we go.

On the late evening; the party stopped by nearby road debris to take a rest. After setting up the camp, the three sat down by the fire to warm their hands.

– What ye think about that Hodhoke character? – inquired Halverd to end the silence.

– Honourous he is. I take a guess, travel with him will be captiviting. – stated Svjetane. – And your thoughts, Iseren?

– Indeed he is the loyal one.

The group glanced at Hodhoke, the man was standing still, guarding the entrance to Adaiel's tent.

– Hey, Hodhoke! – Halverd shouted. – Come to us, we have a good eye on the tent already!

He didn't answer, only turned his puzzled sight on them.

– His vasilean is limited i guess. – speculated discretely Svjetane. – After all he's.. Well ye know.

– An enemy of Ceasord, as we look at that. – whispered in response Halverd. – I do hope no trouble will come out from this.

– Iseren, maybe you'll be able to talk with him. – encouraged her Svjetane. – Ask if he want to sit down by the fire. We'll make some dish soon. He is not about to stand like that for the all night, right?

– I will see what I can do.

– And if able ye'll be.. Convince Adaiel mayhaps?

– I doubt about this.

– Yeah.. – Svjetane sighed. – At least we'll give him some warm food. But maybe Hodhoke can be convinced?

– We shall see.

Iseren stood up, and faced Hodhoke.

– A bit of rest perhaps? – Iseren proposed. – You stand like this about a half of the evening.

– Then may I stand the whole of it. The starts will not replace my guard. – replied, not even raising an eye on her. – They are not on our side.

– And on which they are?

– Their own.

– I see. – nodded Iseren. – And may I see Adaiel?

– I will leave that to your own will.

She passed cautiously Hodhoke, the man didn't even cringed a finger while she was walking near. In the tent she found Adaiel immersed on

the manuscript, taking a moment for a while to scribe new findings. Once he noticed footsteps he turned away from his work.

– Oh, it is you Iseren. – Adaiel greeted her. – I suppose and hope no accident took place.

– No at all, everything is in its order. But maybe you want to rest for a while by the fire?

– With you? – he shocked. – I am deeply sorry for denying such offer, as I have to file a official scripture regarding ancient culture of Inkarns.

– Can that official note wait?

– Legs it does not have. I think it can wait. – on his face a shy smirk formed.

– Good then. Svjetane is worried about Hodhoke. He stands guard on your tent, completely restless.

– Is that so? – Adaiel turned serious in a moment. – With me maybe he will go?

– Maybe.

Adaiel once he put down flames of candles, leaded the girl to the tent exit. From the exterior they met imidietally with the sight of Hodhoke

– Orders? – inquired Thaelrikhian, taking a look on the consiliarius.

– I take guess you need a rest. – announced Adaiel. – And as far my guessing goes, I can assume that passed day was for you fairly profound.

– But is that your will, Adaiel?

– Yes? – guessed the boy.

– Then may your will be done. – Hodhoke moved his stiff limbs, taking a stand nearby Adaiel after a while

Iseren took the two to the fire. Svjetane, in middle of chat with Halverd, stopped suddenly conversation upon seeing who Iseren brought to them.

– Adaiel! – she rejoiced. – What a wonderful surprise. Water's almost ready, will be cooking soon.

– Do you need help with such task? – scholar asked.

– Yeah, if ye want to. You can cut scarlfang, that one red stoutish root over there. Here's a knife ye'll need. – she pointed at the blade stuck in the stump.

– Are you not concerned about the filth? – winced Adaiel, taking the knife to hand.

– All will boil down, don't ye worry. – woman cleared his concern. – Iseren, come, ye will help me with the citruses.

Iseren came to the Svjetane, which gave her dried fruits.

– Impressed I am. – she whispered. – Good, the lad will get along with us much better this way.

– No need to thank me. – brushed off Iseren.

– Don't be like that. You truly did good, Iseren. – woman sent her intense stare. – Maybe if someone such Adaiel will get along with us, then the rest in Comitium will take a warmer look on the common rabble, stop thinking we were tainted in some way.

– Maybe that will be the case.

– Why do ye deny well done? – frustrated Svjetane. – No need to pretend it is not that way.

Iseren had not idea on how to respond. Problem solved, when Adaiel came with the cutted vegetable.

– Yeah, now slide them down to the pot. – instructed him Svjetane. – And they have to get introduced with the rest of pot's contents. About a sandglass it will take to be softer. And once the ember red will get, the whole pot contents will get fully chewed through with each other.

– My apologies, I don't know alchemical terms. – Adaiel lowered his head.

– Nah, no alchemic they are. An old hag by the stove will tell ye the same mutter. – she replied with a laughter. – Take a seat now, I'll serve the stew in no moment.

Iseren sat down opposite Halverd, to her right joined Adaiel. Halverd glued his eyes on Hodhoke, standing in distance from the flames.

– And he is what doing? – Halverd turned silently to the two.

– No idea – gaze of Iseren went somewhere on the ground.

– Perhaps he is unaware that he can join us? – Adaiel theorized.

– And why would he think that way? – Halverd nibbled his beard. – Would that have anything with custom of his?

– You know, Halvwerd. – Adaiel lowered voice, as if he was mentioning top secrecy. – I rather suppose that it is related with his former servitude. It would be better if I check on him.

Adaiel left the circle and came closer to Hodhoke. The two after brief colloquy went back. Light of the fire revealed serene face of the Hodhoke, he did not seem to be forced to be their company.

– So, what kept ye away from us? – Hodhoke threw to Thaelrikhan. – On watch ye were standing?

– That is true.

– Bah, no need to worry about guarding! – the man grinned care-freely. – With me nothing is a threat to ye. Axes of mine not one sword from palm knocked, not one spear cutted in two.

– And tongue not one to death bored. – ended Svjetane. – If ye have any more boasts, spare them for a supper.

Standing by fire Svjetane took of the pot from stand and started pouring its contents to wooden bowls. Once everyone got their portion, the woman fit under Halverd's arm.

– So, sire captain. – started Halverd during the meal. – How much of yer progress is worth our ears?

– That is more a matter of keeping vasilean official businesses in secret. I simply am obliged to not share such wisdom outside the circles related with current researches.

– If ye say so. – the man sighed. – Ah, ye know, Adaiel. To some sea voyage I would attend to. Something like this during service under yer command?

Adaiel responded with a mysterious smile.

– I'll take that as a yes. Well then, will ye share a bit with us? – Svjetane got interested.

– If Comitium accept the outcome of research of mine, they could entrust us to the next moves. Perhaps with the sea related.

– Regarding what ye already research?

– As thou saidst. In Jamryns' principality a bit of a task I have for you.

– What is needed?

– Can you gather current rumours from the locals?

– Hah, an errand to chatter in tavern. – rejoiced Halverd. – With pleasure I will accomplish such mission.

– I don't know kreovian in any slightest. – Iseren admitted.

– That is not an issue. Will you be able to talk with majordomo?

– I will. And I happen to know majordomo.

– If you know him, it is better than I expected.

– What about our steppe warrior? – Halverd glanced at Hodhoke.

– Hodhoke, is any of kreovian languages known to you? – Adaiel asked Thaelrikhian.

– And what is *kreovan*? – barely spelled Hodhoke.

– It is used to communicate through northern center of Kyrrideia. – explained Svjetane.

– *Krydeia*? Such word is unknown to me.

– This is how we through centuries call our homeland, Hodhoke. Steppes in which you lived are part of it – pomogła Iseren.

– Mhm. *Krydeia*, *kreovan*. – recalled to himself – A foreign land, with foreign tongue.

– You will handle this. – comforted him Halverd. – Barely got to known vasilean speech myself too.

Hodhoke put his gaze in distance, closing his eyes after while.

– Is something wrong? – Svjetane made sure to his feelings.

– Weakness got me. And.. Longing. – Hodhoke struggled to say, this time not due to the spelling.

Halverd stood up to Hodhoke and placed hand on his shoulder.

– I missed many too. The home, the snow. – crouch near him.

– My home sheeted in snow sometimes too. – muttered back Thaelrikhian.

– Cold steppes, huh. Not so different than snowy woodlands as I think about this. – Halverd sighed. – Want to drown this sorrow?

– Drown?

– Drown yerself, booze up with something strong. So the weakness and longing will not take over ye.

– Mhm. Let us drown themselves then.

– As ye wish. – Halverd nodded with a smile.

Senvoldian reached for a few dusty bottles and with company of Hodhoke under should went on their way.

– I think they will get along. – whispered Svjetane to Iseren. – Despite the tongue barrier.

– Mhm.

– The two of ye want to have some privacy too mayhaps? – Svjetane took a look on Iseren and Adaiel.

– Afraid I am that the official scripture for Comitium cannot longer wait to be written. – apologized Adaiael. – Thus I need to go now.

– That lecturing and writing will fatigue him to the corpse state. – Svjetane escorted the boy with an eye of concern – Do ye know what paper he writes, Iseren?

– I know he was forming a note regarding research results . – replied Iseren.

– Then why do ye sit that way? Why not going with him and with quill help him?

– He mentioned that he is writing an official note. – the girl opposed. Svjetane placed at her a stormy stare for a moment.

– Yeah, right ye are. – the woman gave up. – Eh.. I shall take a nap.

– Very well. I'll remain awoken for a while, until hearth will weaken to embers. – submitted Iseren.

– Glad I am for the offer. To the morning then.

The longer she was sitting in front of fireplace, the sleepier she was gazing upon burning out firewood. She did not remember when exactly she laid down on ground, and in corollary of this she fell asleep, taken by a hissing sound of dying flames.

X.

Through the external gate to Wistuja five horsemen came by, with whizzes trying to clear out the way for themselves. Right in front of city's entrance the group almost trampled stationing there guard. The near death experience from some reason did not met with his approbation.

– Woah, you there! – watchman shouted, stopping them with hand gesture. – From which parts are ye, and why such rumpus ye cause?

– Verily important matter brought us here. – apologized the horseman in front. – High priority. We have a speech with a man named Prysimił.

– That is our principal majesty's majordomo. A bit respect you better show.

– Forgive me my brusque behaviour, soldier. In a bit rush we are right now and we must pay him a vist as soon as possible.

– Hey! Not so fast! – guard blocked him the way. – What are ye thinking, that are ye someone more special, huh? Say your name, give a reason of such visit!

– Adaiel Niyaranne, consiliarius. – few passing by looked at him with fright. – It is a vasilean matter, including all of majesty's fiefs.

– T-consiliarius? The one from Comitium? – watchman stammered, in a moment coming back to his soldierly tone: – Prove it, that is a serious title!

The boy with a deep sigh grabbed decorated scroll tube and proceeded to read its content:

– Adaiel Niyaranne, descendant of Niyaranne Saethrina from sixteenth day of Irmnas, nominated is..

– Enough. With some stample are bitten those papers? – paused guard, scratching his head under helmet.

– This is the closest I can show. – Adaiel put his finger at broken sigil on the scroll's edges . – Is it enough to verify me?

– Well.. Eh, no chance from me to verify it. But if I may to ask, ride with a bit more reason, sire consiliarius.

– Absolutely, and forgive me my haste.

– Tribunes.. First the Legion, now them.. – muttered watchman, once heading back to his position. – Puke I only want when seeing the burgundy, bane them all..

The group took a slower pace on city's roads, though this time the clatter on stony roads favoured them to clear the way in the crowd. Their ride lasted until they reached castle gate.

– I ask for a passage! In the name of Comitium! – called Adaiel as a greeting.

Standing guards on patrol did not have feelings to question consiliarius, and so they allowed the five to enter.

On the courtyard, Adaiel with Iseren got from horse, getting a few glances from courtians there.

– Iseren, is the place of majordomo's quarters known to you? – the consiliarius asked her.

– It is. – nodded Iseren. – And what about the rest of our group?

– As I some time ago mentioned, a bit of a gossip they shall gather from local taverns' patronage, regarding any important ongoing that took place in Visildea. And horses they'll take to good innkeeper.

– Will be done. – replied playfully Halverd. – So will gather in biggest tavern here at the end, and ye find us, right?

– Well try to do so. Take care, we will try to join you as soon as possible.

– No one's rushing captain. Only we can wish a good luck with the mission.

Three mercenaries turned their horses and left the courtyard. Adaiel with Iseren in the meantime navigated through one of castle wings.

– And what if majordomo will not be present at the court? – concerned Adaiel, while traversing corridor.

– Worry not, we can always wait for him and taking a day of rest to do so will not be a crime. – Iseren calmed him down. – Also it is a small domaine, so I highly doubt Prisimił went on diplomatic mission.

– Though knowest a lot about this castle.

– I was once a guest here, as a reward for a bounty completion. Perhaps I could still have a permission to access guest chambers.

– As mentioned by thee repose matter goes further.. Do you think we could allow as to spend a night in castle? For certain a fine bedding they have here. And it is said that not a crime is to sleep in well sheeted.

– Adaiel.. – Iseren glanced at him surprised. – I see that still waters likes to run deep nowadays

– It seems to be this way. – he replied innocently.

The girl was well aware of the castle schematics, thus going from the remaining corridors to fronts of majordomo's quarters did not take more time than is needed to boil a water.

Iseren knocked on the door. From the other side a familiar voice replied

– What did he said? – whispered Iseren.

– Not absolutely sure I am, I think that was „go on in, please”. – Adaiel muttered back.

– Did you not have a linguistic lessons?

– I had, I happened to have a bit worse grades on them. – cheeks of boys turned pink. – Although.. Nevermind, just let us go. Thee first.

– As you say.

The girl pushed the door to Prysimił's cabinet.

From her last visit nothing had changed – from the furnishing to the cabinet owner itself. And as she expected, majordomo was savouring the contents of his goblet, of which he almost spat out once he saw his guest.

– Iseren! – the man clapped hands. – For so long I did not saw thee!

– Greetings, majordomo. – Iseren lowered her head slightly. – It is good to see you too.

Prysimił when he stepped closer to Iseren, put fists on sides.

– Huh, such a curio. – muttered with fascination after while. – You, an Inkarn thou art! And many I pondered from where I know faces like these..

– My friend is an Inkarn as well. – added Iseren, showing Adaiel with an open hand. – A sort of a matter we have to you.

Adaiel reached hand in greetings. From the mien of a boy it was possible to assume, thjat Prisiimił sent him a robust handshake.

– On my guess, it is not apposite to stand still like this. Come, take a seat, a good roast I have, willing to take a bit perhaps?

– Sounds great. – nodded Iseren.
The three sat by the table, tasting the dishes.
– And so. – revived Prysimił during the dinner. – What brings the two of you here?
– Visildea’s matter, majordomo sire. – took voice Adaiel. – I am a part of Comitium, an access to thy purchase from Maiorone I would need to have.
– I will remain easy on the questions regarding where did you find about the purchase. – Prysimił gravitated. – Only I need to know though. Do you want this archive permanently?
– No at all. Only I need to write the copy of it. – ensured him Adaiel.
– Can we count on thy cooperation, sire?
– I would not try to recalcitrate on this, without a reason no Comitium member would be sent around the word. – Prysimił stood from the table.
– Shall be back in a moment, I have to find these documents.
– I did not expect such swift turn onto matter. – commented silently Adaiel.
– He’s a typical man of action. – girl explained. – I do believe he will even do more than promised.
Prysimił came back with a few scrolls hold in hands.
– I’ll give you my writing of them, to vasilean I translated them. – majordomo handed them over the table. – Original pieces truly brittle are, would be a shame to damage them, even for sake of something important.
– I will be spared from few days of scribing with your gift. – smiled Adaiel.
– Glad to hear. If you will be in need of history connoisseur, you know where to find me. – majordomo fixed collar with a prideful face.
– About that – questioned Adaiel. – Did majordomo know well the content of these writings?
– Excellent, I could say. How I could form a copy if not?
– Oh, simply I need to ask. Did Maiorone.. got conquered by Earthlings?
– What kind of question that is? – Prysimił’s mien turned cold. – They conquered it. What is more to say?
– But was it written that Earthlings did that? – pushed consiliarius.

– I simply don't understand these queries. Does the consiliarius hide a resentment to someone?

– Absolutely not. – Adaiel's pace of spelling fastened. – I ask, as definitive answer was seen in reliable source. And thus, was in these documents any clear description of invaders?

– By all bane.. – majordomo put a fist near his mouth, he spoke in almost whisper. – I wish to cry, that a vile confabulation that is, yet.. There is no fact indeed for earthian invasion.

– I of course do not disapprove their potential appearance. I would not want to to give away any.. Credit from earthian race to the matter.

– Tribune – Prysimił's tone took an intent manner – On a vasidean throne seats who?

– Emperor Gotela Laseprin, sire majordomo.

– I know the name of his imperial majesty. But information I have about regarding race

– I.. I do not know.. I do not know either anyone who saw emperor on his very own eyes. And name Gotela..

– Is a deformation from old speech, Gueth'dele, the Good Speaker. – completed majordomo. – Listen, sire consiliarius. I can offer aid in the search, not for my own pride, but from a pure interest, I am passionate about the history of our land, deeply I am. Profit from it I do not need, I can ask for prince's forbearance, which in this matter may be crucial.

– I am afraid that principality's interference in research might not be approved by Comitium. Too discrete data I was entrusted with to could hire any organised research party. I am sorry.

– I absolutely understand, consiliarius sire. Comitium needs to keep intellectual creation under strict protection. Concept „for authorized eyes only” is well known for me.

– Would not dare to doubt. Forgive me that such decrees are weighted upon me.

– No grudge will I hold to thee, worry not. An equitable lad from thee is already for a Comitium member. – Prisiimił laid his eyes on Iseren. – And thee, I see you did not loaf around once you departed from Wistuja. Thou fittest just right in amongst official matters, aren't you?

– I could say so. – girl admitted.

The two left the table, ready to exit the cabinet.

– Do you not want to stay? – startled Prisimił.
– We cannot, my deepest apologies. – Adaiel lowered his head. – In a bit of rush we are, also the rest of our company awaits for our return.
– I see. – majordomo, disappointed, spreaded on his chair, putting the seat on unbearable creak. – I will not take more time of yours then, may safe you be.
– Thee too, majordomo sire. – nodded Adaiel. – We may be able to meet once again, after all mission of mine. And we could speak about thy history passion perhaps?
– Maybe.. – majordomo smirked to them upon their leave. – But no word shall be thrown onto winds, consiliarius. We'll see what the time bring us.
– Reasonable that sounds. – admitted Adaiel. – Then may my plans meet with the mercy of the time.
The two left the room, heading back to the courtyard.
– Truthful thou wast, majordomo sire granted us with more then we expected. – boy's voice echoed through the corridor.
– And will you keep your promise to him?
– I will. And what about thee?
– Me? And what is my part in this?
– Oh, maybe right you are. After all, our parts will get separated once the deed between us will be settled, isn't it?
– No. – Iseren death stared him. – I simply did not know I am invited too.

The boy needed a while to think through her words.
– Oh, absolutely. Of course thou art, Prisimił have a good friend in thee. – Adaiel take the puzzled gaze out from her.
The face of his though suggested, that despite the abashment he wished to say something more.

The two traversed in a slow pace the streets of Wistuja, wondering, which tavern mercenaries consider as the biggest one. The answer they received fairly quickly, as they heard the sing of Halverd from on the passed inns, likely wanting to get a drink for free.

And thus the two went inside, Halverd was just ending his perfomance to the rejoice of patronage and innkeeper himself. People in the

patronage shouted many in kreovian, some threw coins to him, which Halverd agily were collecting in air.

The remaining mercenaries they found in corners of the establishment, Svjetane sat down amongst the wanderers, sipping an ale with them, Hodhoke in other hand found a company in grim just like him stranger. For about once a sandglass drop they share a word, on which the conversation partner was responding with nod or brief answer.

Iseren with Adaiel took a seat around the free table, where in a moment they got attacked by a serving drinks wench. Leaned towards the two, the woman awaited for their order with the lettered yet convincing smile.

– Something light, if you serve such drinks. – inquired Iseren.

The wench's smiled turned to a shock, with a short shook of head she went swiftly to the counter. From behind it a man lazily went from, by the badly mended scars and posture he was giving an impression of war veteran.

– Yeah? – his voice was harsh and rough. – What to serve?

– And what do you have? – Iseren asked.

– Simple in any means booze, grain or citrus vodka, and a bit of brandy.

– Anything lighter? – Adaiel joined to the conversation.

– Heh, don't hear such question often. We have a fruit wine, with reluctance it is getting sold, so ye'll get the whole bottle for sixteen silver.

The boy sent the inquiring sight on Iseren, on which she responded with a bit of saijvises taken from purse. Adaiel stopped her with a hand gesture and pulled bigger sack of coin out.

– So be it. – the boy placed coins at the table. – We will get the wine.

– Some food? A bread maybe? Have one, for four. – innkeeper made sure.

– We can take the one loaf then. – Adaiel added the same.

– Will be back in no moment. – innkeeper headed to kitchen.

During his absence, Iseren looked for the mercenaries once again. Svjetane's company changed to more local looking one, Hodhoke was continuously during his slow paced conversation, it was unclear who his interlocutor was, as they was fully hidden under deep cowl, from which

only few eyelets of the chainmail glamouring dimly. To her concern, Halverd was out of reach of her sight.

„*Maybe he went somewhere else.*”

– *Dene mrasne, chvli revste va. Mazni nsete m'vointa.* – the voice of wench turned Iseren away from her observation.

– *Precumi d'veli, vosinta ma ete sadne de.* – courteously replied Adaiel.

Serving girl bursted out laughing.

– *Gasni vode da meca.* – wench winked an eye to him. – *Vointa da ogli teg.*

Adaiel was sitting in the same manner as before, which met with a frown of a wench, as if she was getting impatient. And so she left the boy, choosing more easier to charm patrons of the inn.

– And what that tavern girl said to you? – Iseren got curious.

– Nothing grand really, only good appetite she wished us. And she found my kreovian different, jesterish I could even say. – the boy started swirling his cup in hand. – You know already, the linguistic is far from mastered from my part. And I was taught only the one dialect of Kreovian tongue anyway. Such fortune it is, that we ended up in the region, where the speech is similar to the one from lectures I had in the past, so we could understand each other at least.

– Quite vast this land is, not surprised I am, that over time languages shifted from their progenitor. But enough of the language matter, want to gather our men, so they will share a word they gathered?

– That would be wonderful if you could do that. Once together we will be, I will tell what is our next desination after the Comitium convocation.

– I take a guess you will report in the capital.

– Indeed. Comitium will form an action regarding what I have gathered so far. That as long, well.. Nevermind on that part.

– No pressure from my part, Adaiel.

– Glad I am then.

Iseren, with intention to stood up, sat down almost immidietally after, when their table faced Hodhoke, sending an inquiring gaze on the sitting two.

– Go on, take a seat, please. – Adaiel showed him the bench.

– Your will that is, Adaiel. – Thaelrikhian with obediency sat down. – Do you wish to hear a rumour I have got from the traveling ones?

– Absolutely.

– Will be as you wish. – the man nodded. – The way of vasilean speech only the two knew. A preacher, did not introduced themselves. And the man named Ulrij, the hired sword from the Usknavrailha.

– What did they told you? – Adaiel got interested.

– I shall skip the reason of their journey. – he paused, putting an awaiting stare at Adaiel.

– Oh? Yes yes, no reason for such thing.

– Thus. – continued Hodhoke. – The priest mentioned about recruiting to the ranks, vasilean one I take a guess. Told me that some campaign they are about to establish.

– Does not sound good.. – frowned Adaiel. – Continue, if I may to ask. I'm sorry for interrupting thee.

– I shall continue then. The one named Ulrij shared a new happenings from first hand as he claimed, about the clashes in the North. It would be difficult to call this war, as two side motionless are. The one does not know the terrain. The second lacks in manpower. In the veil of shadow warriors ambush the enemy patrol. The other patrol in rage falls to, and with anger it carries a hurt to the innocent ones from thors.

– I see. Aggression on the borders, to the more reminiscent battles it doesn't lead to as it used to. – Adaiel gloomily glanced at the contents of his cup. – And the wandering priest did not share a putting in hope rumour as well. Afraid I am, that our operation took too much time, perhaps the curia with the fight in mind was able to vote their view down, since we were not able to present ours in sedate manner yet.

– It doesn't doom us to failure. – solaced him Iseren. – The army is gathering, but it does not mean a straight up conflict. And did you found out who are seaside invaders?

– No reason remained to keep you uninformed. We are speaking about the Inkarnian imperium, responsible for the trouble on the kyrridean west shores. You heard about Ejldhart and Calidor, did you not?

– A bit of skimpy words only. Allegedly, the raports were regarding the same people behind these attacks.

– Indeed they were related, yet from current point no chance we have to prove this, disgraceful would be to put the bodies of fallen under section. Although due to descriptions of boats, armoury and facial structure we are suggested to relate these raiders with one centuries-long ally of ancient Khyire'de.

– What else suggests this?

– Hm, aside what I mentioned already, only my observation remained. Attackers never were seen at southern-west part of continent, where, according to many quills, a part of Maie'Orrône influence was settled. And the city was vassal or part of Khyire'de.

Iseren nodded as a sigh of understanding. She was about to say something, though the attention of Adaiel shifted to the Svjetane that approached their table.

– I see we're about to leave. To the exit I guess? – Svjetane sat down amongst them.

– Truth that is that we are going back soon on the roads. – Adaiel approved. – But before so, I would like to know, did you gather some useful gossip?

– Something I heard, I don't will ye like to hear them though, consiliarius.

– The matter that seems unimportant might happened to be an opposite one. I can hear you, if you wish to tell me.

– As you wish. But what about Halverd? I lost track of him after his singing. – changed topic Svjetane. – I thought he's sitting with you. Adaiel faced Iseren with questioning look.

– Perhaps thou knowest his whereabouts, Iseren?

– I do not. But I can find him. – the girl left the table. – I shall return as swift as possible.

– I thank thee. – Adaiel lowered his head. – Come back safe and in whole piece.

Iseren after wandering through tavern for quite a time gave up. She checked every table, counter and entrance as well.

„Where he might be? He was supposed to remain inside.”

Upon hearing significantly profanous curse in senvoldian she turned head towards it, naively counting for presence of Halverd.

The slur came from the corner of the tavern, clearly avoided by the wenches. With a reason, as the sitting there company was heavily drinking, every man was heavily armoured. They were giving more of a impression of wandering marauders than mercenaries, the light-haired faces were covered in dirt, few of the men were missing pair of teeth, and glances by them were clearly looking for a affray.

Under regular circumstances Iseren would turn her sight already, if not Halverd sitting amongst them.

„*Just great..*”

Iseren cautiously approached the group, wanting to take a better listen to their conversation, at that moment focused on a Halverd's story:

– ..Yeah as said! Two fathoms in size that beast was, teeth like spear heads.. – Halverd stopped, as he realised, that his companions are looking behind him. – What, something's wrong?

– Look dat way, some Inkarn bitch loiters near us. – one of Snevoldians raised his head provocatively. – Whit du's doin here?

– I'm here to Halverd, quit drinking. Captain has a wish to speak with you.

– Dat's pure gaff. – chuckled the stranger Snevoldians. – Wha would hire an Inkarn in Kreovia?

– None of your sarding business, as I could kindly say. – replied casually Iseren.

Amongst the gathered a few whistles and shouts of amusement spreaded.

– Weel, weel. Don't be such audacious, lassy. Let be dat way, and someone let be on dem way too, say, by cutting dat pointy ears of dine. Da fact dine dignity let dee show dem in public!

– I wonder, whi ones as yous did to disgust *Vingadi* enough so dem strike yous all from skies. – added his companion.

Lips of Iseren pursed, she measured the two with sharp sight.

– Fellow mates, no nerve is needed. – Halverd tried to calm them down. – To the squarrel it does not need to escalate, I know the girl well and I assure ye that she's a fine soul. Represent our home with a mind.

– Representation, pshaw! My bollocks! – one of them boomed. – Gone du better be, if du takes the side of dem barrators!

– Afer all, why not? – on Halverd's face a jacose smirk appeared. – If you really wish my leave before the cheque regulations..

Senvolds looked at each other with sudden regret of banishing Halverd.

– Foolish from yer part, with a telltale judge the whole race. – Halverd shook his head. – It is a shame that I had an ale with ye.

– Enough. Come on. – urged him in whisper Iseren.

The stools rasped violently, as Snevoldians stood up. The one on the lead started to deathstare with the Halverd, both the Harjstörm and the other one were claspig hardly their fists.

– Give up on dat one, Jarheld. Not worth dey are. – one of the men muttered to his comrade. – Dat lovely twa is about to take dey leave, are dey not?

– Absolutely. We're leaving. – the Iseren nodded to his word.

Girl nudged Halverd to calm down and go with her. The man with struggle lowered his furious stare from the group of Senvoldians and shambled after Iseren.

In the middle of their walk Halverd stopped Iseren obtused his mouth, about to say something.

– I.. – he paused, turning gloomy once again. – Eh, nevermind.

– You stood by my side, that is good enough. – despite crossed arms on chest Iseren didn't sound irritated. – I do not see a point to effort with explanation.

– Ye know.. I acted stupid, what else can I say. – man dropped out. – At least ye have a bit of reason and..

– And nothing about that. It is done and cannot be undone. – shrugged Iseren. – Come, after the reporting we have to go.

The girl went again, before Halverd had a chance to respond. He could only cut the distance and keep on most casual face he was able to make up at that moment.

Upon their return to the table of Adaiel, consiliarius leaned towards the gathered ones. He offered a cup of remaining wine, which Svjetane accepted cleary from affability. Halverd in other hand gladly grabbed the drink.

– And thus, all of us are present. Halverd, wouldst thou like to give an brief report? – Adaiel began on the report.

The man stopped him with a move of hand, so he could dry the cup to the bottom. Tribune didn't mind to wait.

– Will be done, sire consiliarius. – Halverd cleared his throat, before speaking again: – It is said that Visildea have plans to nod tighter the belief in Nyr amongst their fiefs. So gossip is about the Senvold also, that they have alliance with Usknavräiha, allegedly they are about to share their influences on north between petty reigns of theirs and free their kinsmen from the freshly established oppression.

– And that is the ember that made the North in shreds torn.. – Adaiel clouded for a brief moment. – Anything else thou gatheredst?

– That's all worth consiliarius's ears. – replied Halverd. – Well, I hope it is enough for ye. We know something anyway, right Adaiel?

Man patted him on back, to which Adaiel smiled awkwardly.

– Yes.. We know something. Many thanks for the help.

– Not a problem. – Halverd smirked complacently. – Any more orders as such, captain?

– I cannot promise anything. We shall see what Baiòna will bring us.

– And where Baiòna lies? – Iseren inquired.

– In province of Sottalnoia, I do not remember who was ruling over it.

– Those, uhh.. – cutted into Halverd. – Potròmes they were called.

– Indeed, Halverd, I appreciate thy hint. – thanked him Adaiel. – Regarding the earlier topic, Baiòna a harbour city is, it lies at the Zakhvada sea. It is well supplied in means of sea units, also not difficult it is there hire a pair of additional swords, if we happened to need such ones.

– Harbour city you say.. That means that sea voyage is just ahead us? – Iseren didn't hide her curiosity.

Adaiel smiled mysteriously as a form of answer.

XI.

On the edge of veiled in the morning mist horizon, a long-awaited sketch of the city loomed up. Upon getting closer to the town, its dense building placement was noticable, which gave a suggestion that the city grew in space in acute passing of time. The reason of such rapid expansion quickly appeared – port facilities, on which Visildea invested, noticably improved the region's economy.

Docks were buzzing, it wasn't difficult to stumble upon porter, ship's crewmate or legionist. Far away from the platforms, four mercenaries sat down, weary from their multi-day long journey.

– I do hope that Adaiel will come back soon. – muttered Svjetaned, fanning herself with hand.

– No worries. – assured her Iseren. – He told me that he shouldn't take long to look for a crew. Will go to the seaside control and pick a vessel. For certain he will be back soon.

– He spoke with ye? Well, at least to you he doesn't hold a grudge or worse. – Halverd didn't hide the mistrust in his voice.

– He doesn't hold a grudge to you. – cutted out Iseren. – I simply think his visit in Comitium didn't do well for him, I can assume, that the council didn't turn as he wished for.

– Doesn't make sense. – Halverd grumped. – If research of his did not met with approval of these consiliarius guvs then he wouldn't continue the mission, right?

– Right.. Perhaps the Comitium in general makes him upset?

– By all banes, who wouldn't be upset! Obvious is that place downs him, not much to think about. They throw the lad to deep water, hoping that he will give up on his.

– That's not that much simple as you think. Curiae of consiliari are divided by different views. And so why would the curiae he's part of send him to certain failure, yet at once willing to carry out their mindset?

– Maybe he's the one that came up with the peaceful solution? – speculated Svjetane. – That is why he was left with something above his competencies, so after giving up he could just blend with the thought of the rest.

– Maybe.. – Halverd frowned in thinking. – And what ye think about that, Hodhoke?

Silence took place.

– Something's wrong, Hodhoke? – worried Svjetane.

– I was quiet with a reason. – the man finally replied. – We shall not send our gaze far to the ripped from vision distance. We shall focus on what is on our horizon instead.

– Uhh.. whatever you said. – woman looked crestfallen to his response.

– I think Hodhoke's right. – Iseren cutted into conversation. – Adaiel will tell us what he finds suitable for us.

– Yeah, he said wise words. – nodded Halverd.

– Bah, whatever you all say. – gave up Svjetane. – Men of wisdom, pfft..

Halverd opened his mouth, about to let her know what he thought about her comment, until his attention was brought to approaching the docks Adaiel. Even from the distance he was looking downturned. Once he noticed mercenaries, he walked to them in a sluggish pace.

– Any luck finding a vessel? – Iseren inquired.

– Due to some official order any unit cannot leave the harbour.

– And what with your authority?

Adaiel sighed.

– Well, it was praetor, higher rank comitium member, that gave such instructions.

– I see. What we wi..

He stopped, as Adaiel without a word went on one of platforms. Mercenaries, surprised, followed him in a rush.

They almost bumped on him, once he suddenly stopped, as if he was petrified. Few steps ahead of him stranger Inkarn was standing imperiously, he stopped his conversation with an aged sailor. The Inkarn likely noticed the Adaiel too, as he approached them with company of two grim looking brutes.

– Huh, and who do I see.. – his voice was protracted, bored. – Young Niyaranne. Find the way to Baiòna in one piece.

– Iveon.. – managed to say Adaiel. – That was you..

– Yes, the one who gave an order to Visildean Dockyard Control. – stopped him with resignation. – Since I have to leave Comitium due to that silly wish of thine to play a savior of Visildea, why wouldn't I minimise the damage you will cause?

Foreahed of Iveon creased in distate which didn't fit the comely face of his.

– Oh, that didn't collide with you plan to comofortably swim through the waters with a vasilean unit, isn't it? – he added with artificial intentness. – But don't worry. Some outsider will be open to travel to some forsaken land for certain. Surely for almost free, right?

Iveon swept through Adaiel's men with a reluctance.

– Quite „adventurers” thou foundst for thy adventure.. – he continued unbothered, allowing for a disdainful tone. – And by so, these moving notices in the tavern were not as terrible as you thought? Also taking inspiration from famous talewriters paid of finally. That's adorable.

– How..

– Nyrelion save me.. Amongst the cards of bibliotheca I had found. And custodian himself mentioned that in a quasi-wit. In a peculiar manner thou preparedest to the travel, borrowing adventurous novels. But since, as we very well know, they are accurate guides through lands of majesty, isn't it? So, does thy companions close eyes for thee when you were passing a village going up in smoke? When on the crossroad the gander were beating to the crippled his once fellow and then hang his mangled body on the highway? Or maybe thou managedst to accept how dire the reality is?

– I managed to do so. – Adaiel struggled to reply.

– Is that so? So we still believe that a tavern in crowded city is a wonderful place to form a meeting regarding a verily serious matter? Don't fool a mind neither of mine or thy. Back away, before thou hast not many accomplished and by such actions cause a trouble for more reasonable curiae.

– Enough, sire praetor. - stopped him Halverd - Persecution will not change anything.

– I think thou mistakenst me with someone else. – eyes of Iveon squinted. – This a trial to reach this boy's last fibers of reasoning, not some clashes for material matter. Such shallow competition is absent in inkarnian mind, only in the intellectual field with duel, but here such need would never be nourished.

– Yer kind's set of manners explains a lot. For the Khyire'de ye fought with flowery words as well?

Iveon pursed his lips.

– Thou knowest a lot. And I cannot hide, well spoken thou art. – the way he was looking at the man hinted that he found Halverd's response on his taste. – People of the North excellent sailors are. For how many Adaiel hired thee?

– Twenty-five saijvises per week. And five hundred as a entry payment.

Adaiel moved nervously.

– Cannot argue with that. What would you say for the twice he gave you?

– For the double-crossing sellsword ye have me? I cannot change the side during my service. I have my rules.

– Huh, man of finance and honour at once. I could stand by side of thy people on the North.

Halverd almost got silent.

– No. I will not change my word.

– Thy choice. – bitter look went back on his face. – And I almost happened to like thee.

– And yer liking I have deep into the arse of mine.

– Watch for thy words, close-ground. – Iveon hissed. – Not like Adaiel, I respect my title, thus I will not let some boor insult me such deeply. But this time you are lucky enough to be spared from the trouble.

Svjetane in time calmed Halverd down before he could reply.

– Oh, and what do I see here.. – golden eyes of Iveon turned on Iseren's face. – Inkarn, how interesting. Such shame that for the handful of a coin is ready to abase themself as a mediocre blusterer.

– Poorly you eavesdropped us in those inns if you don't know why I am working for Adaiel. – pinched Iseren.

– I don't know because I don't care to do so. Unwise from my part to even respond to this. – Iveon sounded as the response costed him a lot of exertion.

„Is he holding rancour to us? Or was advised to do such thing?“ – sudden thought stabbed Iseren's mind.

She didn't finish her pondering due to noticing intensive stare between the Hodhoke and Iveon's men.

– Opressed ones. – Hodhoke threw to them with bitterness.

The two didn't respond, their grim, almost dull gaze remained the same.

Iseren upon paying attention to them found out that Iveon's protection was giving an impression of Hodhoke's appearance. Swarthy complexion, black hair and hooded eyes made them look almost as distant family.

„They appear to be kinsmen. Maybe they're from the same tribe that fell apart?“ – she theorized.

Mien of hers during her speculations must had brought attention of Iveon since his warped from reluctance frown weakened.

– These men are Thaelrikans, many of their kind are Inkarns. – Iveon explained, seeing that Iseren's eyes turned on him. – Good muscle is from them, they wouldn't dare to disobey their master. And even Adaiel knows that, as I see. Allegedly against slavery by the way..

Mention of Adaiel's name made the boy wincing, but he remained silent.

– Well.. Our time has come. – Iveon touched their guard on shoulders which as disenchanted turned to his direction. – We may see each other once again. But I do hope that will not take place, that you will give up at last.

Iveon went on board of one of vessels nearby to resume the conversation with present there sailors. Mercenaries of Adaiel awaited any reaction from boy's side, until finally Adaiel managed to walk away from the dock bridge, not sending even a glance to their direction.

The four mercenaries didn't remember how much time they spent sitting down with legs hanging from the dock ramp, naively counting for Adaiel's return. For a while they were able to see him talking with captains of various ships, but as hasty he appeared boy soon vanished from their sight. It was evident that he was not in mood for any company. Aside of few ideas on whither he might went, the four didn't speak with each other.

– Have to admit, lad has the dedication. – stopped the silence Halverd at some point. – From zenite he searches through these shell of a boats for anyone at least willing to depart from Baiòna.

No one else said anything.

– What is up with ye?

– Ye behave as if not witness was of what happened, that is what is up with us. – Svjetane grumped. – Bah, a part of it you were!

– Eh, happened to be that way.

– No „happened that way” I want to hear, ye simply haggled with that praetor fellow! And what Adaiel has to think about this? Not surprised I am that he does not want stay near us now!

– It's because..

– Because of what! – stopped him Svjetane with irritation.

Halverd busted from ground, he gave Iseren a sharp look as if he planned to blame her too. After a moment the man lowered his head with resignation.

– I don't know.. Forgive me my way of action. Boldness, stupidity, many word can describe it. But the shame will remain the same.

– Weak and wrong can be drowned. – hinted Hodhoke.

– About that – man looked at Thalerikhan with sympathy – tempting, but I have to get through this sober. For.. For him. Because the wrong I did and it is required from me now to well present myself.

– I will never get it why you hide with yer noble outbursts and instead of them a quarrel you have to cause first. – Svjetane shook her head.

– I think it's just how I am..

Without a vigour the four raised their heads from the waterline, taking a look on the crowded dockyard. Through the swarn of various vasilean

voices Iseren caught complains in senvoldian tongue. She tapped

Halverd on shoulder and together they took a listen to ongoing argument.

– By all bane, let us leave that fuck of a place at last! – a scream spread across the haven. – City-harbour, my arse! Just you get here then the dockyard chaps reckon for the own vessel, for the dock place, haulage. Ridiculous that is!

– What’s so ridiculous about that? They build a ramp and so they can rule over it. And don’t grump about this, Alfryg. Everywhere is the same as here. – a second voice rumbled, by its sound it gave an image of aged war veteran. – Go back to the market, maybe some soul we will find and have chance to redeem from zero.

– To the market! Three weeks we rot already there and a not even a scent of saijvis we earn from it. And I said, we should have join to the Legion, open for any free blade they are.

– About no damn Legion I want to hear! Just think for a mere moment, where will be sent first? Of course to our motherland, because locals we are and we will lead army through the ices. And until alive I am for treason of our people I will not allow.

– Voggtam, give Alfryg a break, he just wanted to share his silly wisdom. – interjected the third, factual sounding, voice, which Iseren caught better, once she stepped closer to arguing ones. – And will ye say about someone off the market? One was just passing by, some grain field overseer, he wanted to..

– Any more mention of the grains will make me puke, what our forefathers would say? Boat of theirs, from the terror of the seas on the raft repurposed!

– Times are different, Alfryg. – sighed second talker. – Take that and not complain. More important is to have a honest labour. And gods the honest ones are gifting handsomely.

– I guess that whole vasilean treasure will be grant to us for our tugging for any last coin. – Alfryg puffed. – End that mockery of a service for some petty vendors.

– No end will be announce until I say so. The rule of the oldest. – claimed the second voice.

– By all cuts on Yllir's body, may that grumpy backside of yers moulder amongst the sacks of flour. – grumbled Alfryg in response.

Iseren looked at Halverd.

– Sounds promising.. – summed up halverd with a smirk, as if he heard something familiar. – That boat of theirs, quite solid discovering unit. Had sail on those once or two. They can bite through the most inclement waters on the North without a scratch.

– I trust your sailing knowledge. I will look for Adaiel, and you talk down the crew. – instructed him Iseren.

– Will be done, subcommander. – Harjstör stood up proudly.

Iseren found consiliarius sitting motionless on the edge of ramp, cross-legged. On thighs he placed hands, which were buttressing his chin. The boy threw a long stare at the distant parts of docks, it was to difficult what emotions were tearing him at that moment.

– Adaiel. – muttered Iseren, crouching near him. – We found you a crew.

He raised not convinced sight on Iseren.

– Halverd will negotiate with them. – she continued. – They're speaking in his mother tongue, maybe they know vasilean too.

Silence from his part got uncomfortable. Iseren sat down next to him, looking for the spot which Adaiel was observing. It turned out to be a bunch of dockers maintaining transports from moored vessel. Not far from them she noticed exoticly dressed merchant, which with energetic gesticulation was explaining something to middle-aged Inkarn.

The two was sitting like this for a long while, long enough to make Iseren lost the feeling of time passing. Observed by them ship had departed a long time ago already.

Adaiel at some point moved, he took a less hampered position.

– Wilt thou take me to mentioned by you boat? – he asked.

– I will. Let us go.

Once they returned to Halverd, they found him in the middle of cheerful conversation with Senvoldians, as if they knew each other for forever. Few raised heads of crew made Halverd stopping the chat with them.

– And here they are! – Halverd, once the two got closer

Halverd then nudged on of men, the aged one, whispering something to him in Senvoldian. Old Senvoldian nodded upon some of his words, with the glare on Adaiel's face. The boy started to look as if he was about to flee from the boat.

– So, ye're that consiliarius? – aged sailor turned out to be the one with voice of old veteran. – Gillruj Voggtam I am called. Ye knew vasi-lean only, right?

– That is correct. – approved Adaiel, doing his best keep on clam tone.

– I said them what was required. – Halverd insured the boy. – About the rest of company, Comitium rules, equipment and keeping all of this in secret.

– Oh, I thank thee.

– Well, let us go back to business. – interjected Voggtam with tone as gentle as his raw throat allowed to. – Since the oldest from that boat I am I serve as a skipper. Aware I am that you can order us simply to sail as a consiliarius, but yer companion Halverd assured us that ye good person are and ye gift yer followers handsomely. Not most kind to ask but can we count on yer generosity?

– Of course you can. Do you need anything particular?

– Same as anyone else. Silver, valuables.

– I see. I suppose that will serve well as an advance. – Adaiel took off a ring from his finger. – May that convince you that I will not leave you with empty purses.

Voggtam accepted the ring, with gaping mouth he gave a close look upon the jewelry in sunlight.

– Giledite, casted with a bit of something else. – he mumbled, with ring between teeth. – Worth a lot, sire consiliarius.

– Will be enough?

– Hah, for certain! When ye need to take part?

– Today would be wonderful, if that is doable.
– Can be done.
– And can we ask for the help with moving all of our belongings?
– Yeah, ye can. Just tell me where these belongins are, sire consiliarus.

– In stables, kept on horses. – Adaiel turned to Iseren: – May I count on thee with moving horses to the ramps?

– Yes, you can count on me. – Iseren nodded. – I'll take the rest of our company. Hodhoke has a charm to animals.

– Thank you. – he added in semi-whisper upon her leave.

Iseren replied mu with an another nod. She then jumped on dockbridge with grace. After that she called Svjetane and Hodhoke, which in company of her and few Senvoldians went to the stables.

When to the boat the last saddlebag from horse was moved, the crew proceeded to remove nods holding the boat with dockbridge. Once done they unfurled the sail, and not so long after the vessel started to budge slowly on the water.

In the same time, the party sat down under the rooflet to take a look on bunch of sketches depicting their route.

– By all banes, each differs from another.. – muttered Voggtam, moving his finger on the maps. – My guts tell me that the travel will take about a few weeks, if not months. We have supplies for two months, as long sire's counts. And wasn't pity to leave horses.

– They were property of Visildea. – Adaiel explained.

– Ah. I see. – Gillru's eye came back to maps. – Anyway, if the storm will not take us, we should not have any problems. And what do ye plan do to attend there, sire?

– I cannot say. But I am allowed to mention that private matter take its part there too.

Hand of Adaiel shook on the tabletop.

– Will not dig deep into that then. – Voggtam replied. – If ye have a bussines, to me with it. No one else from crew know vasilean.

– I see. Thou art free to go. I will not disrupt thy management over the vessel.

– I value that, sire.

Voggtam walked from the table and came back to hoot at sailor to perform their task better. Adaiel hid the maps under worn furs, afraid that wind could blow them away. Once he was done, he went to the side of boat and leaned towards broadside, his head remained on the view of shrinking Baiòna.

– How about keeping him company? – suggested in whisper Svjetane, seeing that Iseren was observing Adaiel. – He looks sobby if I ye ask me.

– You think he is?

– Yeah, he looks. What, out of sight ye suddenly are? – woman treated question as a joke.

– I don't know. Maybe I am blind, despite having a good eyesight.

– Worth Halverd that speech of yers. – Svjetane smirked.

– What about me again? – huffed Halverd, hearing that he got mentioned.

– Oh, what about you? – mocked him Svjetane, forgetting about Iseren. – Nothing unusual, just for an example of tighthead that with elated mien natter some sonsense.

– Nonsense! – he got offended even deeper. – Such dim-minded ye are, for ye bright is only the one that shines, hah! And ye even will not get that insult!

Svjetane bursted out of laughing.

– Exactly as said! Just what are ye talking about!

Iseren did not feel like to listening to their banter. The silence around Adaiel leaning on the broadside appeared to be more attractive now.

„Actually.. Wouldn't hurt to be his company.”

The girl left Halverd and Svjetane to their company upon leaving the rooflet. Long ear of Adaiel trembled as he heard close stepping on the wooden deck.

– Do you need something? – he inquired, his sight remained on the view of the city.

– Peace I need. A deadly one.

– A peace.. Why? Did something happened so thou needest such feeling?

– It is just.. No, nothing actually.

Tribune nodded as a form of response. Iseren stood near him, with an eye she tracked glamouring ribbons of light reflections on water surface.

– Quite an unusal vessel you have found. – commented Adaiel after a while of silence. – I do not recognize its build, is it familiar to thee perhaps?

– It is. That's senvoldian boat, purposed for discovery.

– What a lucky coincidence. – smile appeared on his face. – Iseren.. I did not have a chance to properly thank the four of you.

– For something specific?

– For that boat. And.. For staying on my side. After what happened.

– Do you mean Iveon?

He nodded speechlessly with an unpleasant frown, as if he had eaten something bitter.

– In the end we happened to depart first. Despite that he had a whole baiònan fleet on his disposal. – Iseren spoke.

– I don't know.. I never find better position from the other side as something convincing.

– Maybe in the right manner you act. Those as Iveon live from that competition and keep on mindset expected by majority, does not really matter what he said about himself. He lives in the way the surrounding wants. He lives that surrounding.

– But he succeeds in the end regardless. – sighed Adaiel.

– Success but without an intention behind it.

Adaiel tilted his head slightly, in sign that he gets the idea.

– Let us remain of fact that I simply had to present pact of truce on the court of oversea imperium. – he said after a while. – And also try to look better while doing so than Iveon.

– About that, why did he departed too?

– Comitium verdict. And his majesty himself at the same. Two curiae got permitted to present their opinion on court of the mentioned inkarnian imperium. I have a plan to file a non-agression pact, Iveon wants only ultimatum. And based on oversea court's decision one of curiae will

be left as the one meant for matters regarding decision with the Imperium.

– Did many backed you up?

– More than the last time, although far from equally divided. If not my father's good name, no one would even think about giving me a chance to speak.

– I think that is something more than good name of your father.

– Oh. It is so warm to hear such thing, Iseren.

The girl had an strong sensation that Adaiel looks intensively at her. Iseren stepped back reflexively.

– Did I made thee scared? I apologize for doing so. – Adaiel turned abashed.

– Not by any mean. – she lied.

– Very well then. We better go back to the rest of crew, so they would not think what the two of young aged.. Well, nevermind.

Since their depart the surrounding appeared as if it remained the same. From the horison any sketch of a land vanished, water was turning to more serene, and as crewmen claimed, turquoise-coloured one. During her stay on the board for few days already Iseren got used to noise contrasting with monotone scenery, which was consisting of flapping sail on the wind, roars of the water hitting the ship's hull and clamour of the sea birds.

Iseren, with dull gaze on the rooflet's ceiling, she let her the thoughts take over her.

„I wonder what will be on the other side..” – she asked herself.

The girl raised head to take a look on napping nearby Adaiel. Tribune fell asleep with a book on his crossed legs, from one of pages a illustration of heavy-armoured Inkarn appeared as if it was reflecting the sight of Iseren.

„I also wonder does Adaiel himself knows.”

Few days earlier on the late morning; Iseren due to the lack of any activity, happened to take a listen to skipper, at that point man was occupied with navigating the vessel.

– ..thirty-fifth of Irmnas.. – Voggtam was monitoring the water. – Sun in second third of the palm.. Turn about a half of ell in the left!

Upon seeing her interest with navigation, skipper stepped closer to the pile of furs that served Adaiel's party as a bedding.

– By the look of yer face, I take a guess you know senvoldian. – commented Voggtam.

– Indeed, I know it. Why did we made a turn, if I may to know?

– Ah, ye know, according to the sire consiliarius's sketch schemates we are about to pass pettier islands, and there likes to be shallow water.

– So how we are to the bigger lands now?

– Well, that's also the problem. We can kind of estimate the remaining distance by those small islands. We're on the sea since the Irinas, quite a lot that is on waters. Given the best winds, it will almost be the end of sailing.

– I don't want to give away hope from us, though by the name „Archipelago of thousands isles" there's quite obvious explanation.

– Yeah, alas it is likely that way. – frowned Voggtam. – Well, at least we will have a land at disposal. And if land, there's also food and water on it.

– Could not say the otherwise, skipper.

Voggtam at some point sent few swift glances around the deck, after which she leaned towards the girl and asked:

– And ye know what you guvner is planning? – threw a question in semi-whisper.

– I do not nor do I delve upon this.

– Mhm. – he unbended. – Anyway, we chitter-chatter here, and I have a ship to supervise. Apologies to cut conversation that way.

– Would not dare to be upset. I like being on the ocean, but not certainly at its bottom.

Skipper upon his leave squinted eyes in witty smirk.

At some day a greeting between sailors and Halverd brought up Iseren from from the monotony on the vessel. Since from the time of departing, the girl had impression that Halverd and ship's crew know each other for the longer time, thus Iseren wondered if she can assume anything from their conversation. Trying to look indifferent by their presence, she leaned an ear towards the ongoing chat:

– Halverd! Ship may be small and its crew the same, but it is good to see ye! – one of men called.

– Ederyk! Mug of yers I see everyday, yet it still didn't bore me! – Halverd shouted back in amusement.

Sailors cuckolded.

– And how's the ship, suits ye? – one of them asked.

– Fine it is, how couldn't it be! I don't have to put each evening tent up, and worse that one curule chair from it. And with my kinsmen I travel. What else do I need?

– Curule chair? And what is such invention?

– The one that folds and unfolds. A headache if ye ask me, I swear, all of my finger at least got stuck in it. Well, enough about myself. Any news from the thorp of yers?

Sailor's miens turned grave, they hasitated with the answer.

– One day the stream got turgid and.. It tok with its flow most of a thorp.

– By the plague.. Who survived?

– Just the ones at the vessel.

Silence took place between the men.

– It is such pity for Flædvith.. – Halverd sighed.

– Halverd.. – one of Senvoldians mentioned. – That consiliarius, how he is? Shall we be afraid of him?

– Be afraid of Adaiel? Not by any means. – Halverd brightened up as the topic changed. – For a consiliarius, completely harmless he is.

– Harmless consiliarius. – flounced sailor.

– My word ye have, worthy the lad is. – Halverd assured the company. – Pays well, does not expect the impossible. Hah, once he gave me a share of jaradnut tipple.

– Indeed, a worth lad. – mentioned liquor convinced the sailor. – Jaradnut tipple.. Eh.. I’d love to have one right now.

– Yeah.. – other sailor approved. – Let us ask the skipper, in good mood he is so he will give as a keg to dry. Maybe not filled with something fanciful as the one from that your Adaiel but will abide with it as well.

Gathered nodded energetically their heads and headed towards the Voggtam. Iseren discharged them with a disappointed stare.

„*Difficult to say are they long-time fellows.*” – she thought. – „*Maybe at some day I’ll find out*”

Iseren in company of consiliarius was studying sketches of the land, until her analysis was interrupted with shouting about the upcoming supper. Sailors left their chores and gathered on the deck.

The crew was more eager to the idea rest than the meal itself, as they were eating the same provision daily – dried meat, pickled vegetables and bread soaked in the weak ale. The eating since it was meagre didn’t take long.

Just few moments later sailors, as in every evening, formed the circle to kill the spare time on heavy drinking. Iseren was about to return amongst the warm furs, when one of Senvoldians invited her to them.

– Sit down, lass. – encouraged factual sounding sailor. – Want some drink?

– Pour her a cup, Ilfrosd. – Halverd replied for her. – Iseren has probably head strong as her arms.

– And how do ye know that, huh? – Ilfrost congealed in front of the keg.

– Well, had a chance to found that on my cost. – admitted Halverd. Senvoldians leaned towards the Halverd, awaiting the explanation with smirks. Harstörm sighed and with reluctance summarized his brawl with Iseren. Once he was done, Halverd let the crewmates laugh from him at pat the girl on her back.

– Hah, that’s quite a story. – cackled Voggtam. – Lassie inostensible seems, and I see she has a way to surprise people.

Iseren clenched the cup with untouched liquor, she remained silent.

– Oi, Voggam, let us know how much road remained. – threw Aflryg to skipper. – Since I'd like to stretch legs on land soon.

– So, that is complicated. – Voggam scratched his head. – Maps are what they are, more a drawing made by stick on sand than actually something worth taking a glance. Frankly we don't know the scale of them, bah, even what may be upon us.

– Pretty optimistic. – pinched Alfryg.

– But one is remedy for sorrow. – mentioned Halverd to company's cheers.

Svjetane rolled her eyes.

– But with reason, lads. – woman opposed to their plans. – Remember, we are in middle of unpredictable ocean. We have to be always ready for anything.

– Our forefathers drank that from always. And what? – one of sailors stood up, he patted himself as if he was checking is his tangible. – We're living!

– Yeah, ye live. – woman huffed. – Because you're raised by grandmothers and more well-thought, that didn't break the ship on rocks in the sake of ale barrel.

– Ah, silence, you shrew without a hint of a humour. – one of sailors swing his hand. – Pour the drinks lads! Tomorrow the storm may take us and fishes shall not swim drunk. Dry the barrels!

– To the death we drink! – another man shouted.

Gathered drank the one cup. Iseren expected the foul bitter that usually drinks on board has. She was almost shocked to feel an exotic tone of fruits on her tongue.

– Tasty it is, isn't it? – Halverd smiled, monitoring her reaction.

– And what is that? – Iseren inquired.

Halverd nodded one of sailors, bringing his attention to a girl.

– She asks what we are drinking. – Halverd explained.

– Ah, I shall swiftly answer. That was for trade meant at first. We had sheets of fur some while ago from thorp, and when we greeted in uh..

– Irvnanto. – hinted one of sailors, that was taking a listen to their conversation.

– Exactly, many thanks, Idyr. Merchant said Voggtam that a local special it is, *Vythasvrég* it was named. Drowner as the trader was kind enough to translate.

– What is behind such peculiar name?

– We don't know. But tasty it is, so why should we bother!

– Well then. – Halverd leaned towards her empty cup. – Pour some?

– No. I'm fine.

– Hah, already? – Idyr cackled. – So these tales about Inkarns' brittle heads not so fairy are after all.

– Ones drinking avoid end unarmed in void, there ye go! That how in our sides is being said.

– Everyone here is from the same parts, so don't lecture us, ye idiot. – other sailor reproved him. – Iseren's too, Hajrstör told me.

– She's as well? – man disbelieved. – So she is from somewhere? I thought Inkarns don't have their home.

– Whoa, Ovlan! – the crew shouted at him. – Why with such insults to a lassy?

– Insults! – he repeated in frustration. – A normal statement and you all in frenzy, as if I placed hands on her mother or something. Like a damn party of errand knights.

– What, to the whore ye will tell that a whore she is?

– I'll say. Cause just a statement that is, what, it is not?

– It is. But, by the bane, no sane man will spit out this. – Halverd laughed upon sailor's response. – So old ye are and still need a lesson of manners.

– Oh better not I give ye a manner lesson, ye horse-sarder. – Ovlan bit back, to the amusement of company.

Iseren left discreetly men upon seeing that their quarrel started to escalate.

„Better they don't find out that weapons they have on hips.”

She went on a part of ship covered in evening semi-gloom to observe vast-coloured sky. Its colours reminded her about gemstone that once girl's father showed her.

„Whither that thought about Rannuldun came from?” – she tried to question herself. – *„It is left behind. And will be that way.”*

At some point she noticed a movement nearby, her instinct made her grab the hilt of a sword. In the figure she recognized Hodhoke, fingers of her rested from a weapon.

– You did not expect me here. – Thaelrikhan spoken. – And so do I.

– I wanted to take breath in peace.

– I suppose I shall leave.

– No. You can stay.

Hodhoke nodded, after which remained motionless. The two were sitting down in silence, which Iseren didn't want to interrupt. Once it became darker, she went back to the furs, enjoying its warmth more in incoming frigid winds.

Under the rooflet she met Adaiel, which automatically gave her a wing of readed book. Despite not wanting to read, she forced herself to read few verses:

Maldhi Bagh'aie, and with his steadfast brothers of shamshir Fijdhie, Zifhre, Kalaieb i Beyliah and many that names of theirs were difficult to reveal on the notorious day fourthy-six of Iebenas threw the mitten infront of a sandstorm, an element enhanced with blasphemous enchantment that numerous distress caused for Shach Eryd and his Shiigan, Alnamshdue, Qhuirdqille, Ghu'urduil and other fiefs of his that under his rule were. Company of Maldhi Bagh'aie by Shach was hired to slay the monstrosity on the sands and tame with spells the storm. The whirl of a sand swift as the blink of an eye was, good herd it tormentented and the farmhands, the well, huts' roofs and any thing that under Shach's watch was. Baile-Ghesiyai, because that supposedly was the name of monstrosity that the terror made from sand summoned, before the warrior escapade of Maldhi Bagh'aie to dust it grinded Shach's party already, fearless masters of the spell from Vsyindhαι, unlucky twenty men under command of Sashijir and many more that the quills missed, yet they were brave enough to pass the circles of Baile-Ghesiyai's powerful sorcery.

The spirit maybe an unmatched power of magical rule has, although sorcery of his was merely nothing compared to blessing of Lifegiver Himself that unshackled us from infamy and misfortune. Maldhi without any doubt amongst the rakhsvadhian beliefs was raised and devoted to

them was for the whole life of his, yet he valued the miracles and anti-spells from Visildean circle..

Iseren stopped reading, some thought hit her mind.

„Magic. Once more I happened to hear about it..” – she pondered. – „Maybe that.. That story is oversaturated, but author had to reference from somewhere the casting. Right?”

– Something bothers you? – Adaiel stopped reading as well.

– No, I only needed to think through on fragment.

– I see. Would you like to read back?

– No. Too dim it is anyway.

Iseren got tired of boy's presence, she fell down into futro nearby, listening to turning pages. At one point she stop hearing the rustle of paper.

– Art thou feeling well for certain? –Adaiel made sure.

– Yes.

– If you sayest so.

Iseren closed her eyes. She tried for so long to fall asleep, though sailors' feast made that impossible. She cringed on each louder laughter, cry or thump on the deck. She didn't have will to get up, so she remained lying.

She felt relieved, when she heard a dozen of steps on the deck, men finally were going to sleep. She hugged the furs, immersing in the impression of her melting down with them into the one. Imagined liquid was mixing for a while that felt as eternity, up to point where it dwindled into the night dream.

On the next day, at the dawn; Iseren's sleep got disturbed by a clamour from the ship's deck. In further part of the conversation she heard orders of the skipper threw in senvoldian:

– ..Change the route! Three ells in the north! – Voggtam was superintending the crew. – Grab the sculls, we have to take the land with a prow!

– Aye, skipper! – one of the men shouted back, in the rush through the deck.

Iseren woke up the sleeping ones, in the moment she put the party on the legs. In the company of Adaiel and Halverd they approached Voggtam.

– I see our cries woke ye up. – greeted them skipper. – Forgive us the hubbub.

– Oh, no. We don't hold any grudge to skipper. – avouched him Adaiel. – We heard about that a land you saw. How much time do you need for the resupply?

– Resupply? – skipper got confused. – What, don't we land here for good?

– No. We are heading to the capitol.

Voggtam pursed his lips.

– We'll try to head out the same day, depends only on what we find on the island. Or what finds us.

– Thus I suggest not to scout more than it is required. No intention of exploration we have.

– So we don't have it too then.

– Thank you for understanding.

– No problem, sire consiliarius.

Upon returning under the rooflet, Adaiel stood in front the map with an assistance of Iseren. It didn't seem to be that the sketches of the shores would hint anything.

– Maps will not tell us much. – muttered consiliarius with discontent.

– A matter of potential occupation of these islands worries me.

– Do you think some unpleasant surprise may await us from the locals? – inquired Iseren.

– Afraid I am it might be that way, highly likely it is that they are expecting our act of vendeta for their pillages. – replied Adaiel. – I have only hope that Iveon will declare aggression in less straight-forward way.

– So in that case he would never step on the deck of his fleet.

– Probably. Either way, forgive me that speculations, Iseren. – quitted the topic Adaiel.

– No reason to be sorry. It is worth taking a moment to think what is ahead us.

„And many things will likely be awaiting.“

XII.

First step on the land didn't gladden Iseren as she assumed – since she had to flounder a good several dozens steps in knee-deep water. It was only available option to get the vessel on the land, as assured everyone Voggam. Sailors, same as the mercenaries, did not smile upon that choice. Once on land, the crew with aid from the four of mercenaries proceeded to pull the ship on ropes, so they could locate it cautiously on the warmed sand shore.

Only when the boat stayed motionless and gathered men took a breath from the struggle with the ropes, Iseren managed to take a better look on surrounding.

Uwittingly she was attempting to find a significance in it to Kyrridean landscape – closest image brought her vision of souther seashores, only due to its vivid, thermophilic vegetation.

Her sight was cruising around sandy coast, rapidly cutted into slope, on which was growing richly flora. Amongst ordinary presenting plants she found some oddly looking, often with grand, thickset leaves.

– Does thou seest something worth mentioning? – intrigued Adaiel, taking Iseren away from her observation.

– It appears that island from this side is uninhabited. Or as a whole it might be.

– What suggests that?

– Density of the weeds. Such bush would not grow uniformly if someone step on it regularly. So I doubt will we find any bigger animal here.

Adaiel nodded slowly, he tightened lips in mien of appreciation.

– I think we should reconnaissance the terrain to prove is it just that one part vacant of any man. – he suggested after while. – Would you like to gather volunteers and designate sectors?

– As you wish. But that means you remain on the vessel?

– I must to research on where we landed, I could reveal with that distance between Kyrridea and archipelago for instance. And aside that, we all well certain that no good wanderer is from me.

– It seems to me that for such analysis would be better to take the part in field, after all by what you want to prove your identification process?

– That sounds as if thou wantest to take a walk with me. – cautiously suggested Adaiel.

– Don't be farcical. – huffed Iseren. – That way would be more practical. With a personal approach you will be able to precisely identify the island than via our raports.

– Reasonable that sounds. Even though I would take a half-dozen of sailors to help. And our company, since it happened a six of us is as well.

– And we will spread to different direction? – ended for him Iseren.

– Indeed.

The plan quickly was brought to life; volunteers for the scouting were many, so Adaiel decided that the Voggtam would choose which men from his crew will be most competent. Skipper himself remained near the vessel, which during the scouting was subjected to brief conservation.

Explorers were also expected to find a way to resupply if it's possible. Mercenaries and six chosen sailors waved to the rest of crew in farewell, then headed towards the unknown land.

Party of Adaiel since they left the ship surrounding only hum of the seawaves accompanied, focused on observation they were not talking with each other. That long period of silence was at some interrupted by a gasp from Halverd's part:

– Good gods! What a beast! – man pointed finger after disappearing reptile amongst the shrubs. – One and half of ell it was at least!

– Fauna as I see has many curiosity to offer. – commented Adaiel, captivated as well.

– I wonder what about herbs. – wondered Svjetane. – With such rich green they for sure invented the remedy for whatever gods knows.

– Huh, maybe we will have luck find some goodies on these islands. – added Halverd. – Some rumour gathering mission is needed, sire consiliarius?

Adaiel only replied to him with amused glance, yet it swiftly worn out upon looking at the sketches of shorelands. Their pace take a bit more, until Adaiel stopped in front of forming in the distance gulf, comparing the view with the map.

– Something wrong? – asked Iseren.

– Quite the opposite actually. – he responded, clearly rejoiced with something. – Look, the river’s mouth, the gulf. Just like on the map, it seems clear that someone took an effort to picture this. We are on the Bantaihan, seemingly important for us land.

– And why is so important? – Iseren inquired.

– We are aware of our location right now, thus I can say that to Tanung, the main island, only pair of days of travel remained. Only worse matter is still ahead is?

– What matter?

– Closest route will take us out from the wilds, we will be straight forward passing cities. No chance we have to not confront the local folk.

– We will handle that somehow, sire. – Halverd didn’t concern. – Voggtam knows how to sail, he can plan that.

– Wonderful to know that. Yet some else problems haunt us, less impactful it is though. Maps are verily outdated with size and placement of cities, some of them could fall upon the centuries if not hundreds of years. Frankly, I do not know on what year I can date the original map.

– Bah, with our maps no good use it is too. – brushed off Halverd. – There was, uh, Macair. Then few hired cartographers from east and that was it. Not many has a nerve for such escapades.

– Wasn’t Macair a sorcerer? – mentioned Iseren.

– He was, allegedly. But renown he got many in Comitium with his sketches of kyrridean land.

– I see. Such pity we have to end that topic, but we have important matters right now. – Iseren turned to Adaiel: – What’s the plan, Adaiel?

– We resupply first, as Voggtam wished. Once we return, we wait for the second scouting party. I take a guess we can rest here before taking the voyage once again. Bantaihan is seemingly safe place, vacant of any being, placed on the edge of archipelago. Thus no man would have a reason to swim here.

– And then we’ll see what’s next. – finished Halverd.

– Exactly. – consiliarius nodded to his word with sympathy.

Adaiel after making few changes in his version of the map, sent mercenaries to the deeper thicket, insisting to find food there. Relying on Svjetane's intuition the group gathered most familiar to the woman fruits. To her decisions Hodhoke interjected few times, some of their findings he suggested to leave. On askings of Halverd and Svjetane regarding how he knew these fruits Hodhoke remained silent.

To the camp they came back after noon; during their absence ship's crew drew out fully from the vessel, a makeshift tent was arranged from spare sail, it was giving more impression of a bazaar stall. Under its cover they were brought barrels and sacks, meant soon for the gathered fruits. Once filled they were taken back to the deck.

Voggtam in assist of Adaiel monitored the taken supply. Working nearby, Iseren unwittingly took a listen to their conversation:

– A few hundreds paces away river flows, skipper. – explained Adaiel.

– Thus I suggest sending few stronger crewmates, they shall fill our water supply to barrels.

– Good idea, sire consiliarius. Allow me to borrow Harjstör and Iseren. Stalwart lass is from her.

– Very well. Hodhoke could be helpful too. – seeing the mien of skipper he added: – a Thaelrikhan.

– Aye, looks robust as well. I'll bring them back before dusk.

– I have nothing against that, skipper.

– So ye later explain me what and how, regarding our route.

– We can discuss that matter right now.

– Lead the way. – Voggtam showed him with a hand the entrance to the ship's deck.

The two, once left the tent, stopped being audible for the Iseren. Girl therefore proceeded back to sealing the barrel.

To the early evening ship was resupplied, as skipper promised to Adaiel. The crew, exhausted with carrying barrels, sat down tightly by the fire, quickly finding out how warm days on archipelago conflicts with chilly nights, shrilling especially on exposed to the wind shore.

Fresh food improved the spirit amongst the expedition – for supper a fruit stew was made, the meal was at some point interrupted by splurges and practically endless singing, some improvised, to praise the still unknown for them lands.

Away from the clamour sat down Iseren, not soon after Hodhoke with Adaiel joined her. Tribune seemed to be captivated by their songs.

– I wonder what their music is about. – commented after a while of silent observation.

– If you knew, you would not be so interested with these. – girl replied.

– Why so certain about that?

– Because they're regarding simple man's escapes. Drink well, intercourse, get famous.

– I would oppose on the idea of escape. More of a path it is, the one we don't see as the correct one.

Iseren couldn't hide the surprise from his response.

– That was really.. Tolerant. I am not sure may I mention such thing – she started cautiously – but since the depart you seem, hm, more sedate.

– Oh, is that really so? I did not notice that's evident – admitted, yet a smirk of pride appeared on his face. – Although I do not feel any drastic change in my persona. Since I happen speak with Hodhoke I seem to have more clear thoughts. I have a feeling that I was meant that way all along.

– Interesting. Difficult task would be to keep a conversation with him. Hodhoke. – Iseren lowered her voice – With no offence to him, has his vasilean quite limited.

– No, all thanks to you it is not an issue. You helped me to see a complex in a simple word. This, in turn, opened the gate to the Hodhoke teachings for the mind of mine.

– And what Hodhoke taught you?

– If you insist, I would like to keep it between me and him.
Iseren nodded in agreement. She glanced at Thaelrikhan, he didn't listen to them. Man appeared to be taken by the view of stars, appearing slowly upon darkening of the sky.

– Hodhoke awaits the sign of Prophet. – Adaiel explained, seeing where Iseren turned her sight on.

– Oh. Did you adopted his beliefs?

– No. Prophet was not a god, but a voice, as Hodhoke himself revealed this to me.

– Do you believe in stars as him?

Adaiel smiled with pity.

– We don't believe in stars. Nor do I know or share his beliefs.

– So only mindset you share?

Adaiel nodded.

– Maybe that much instead of only. – he concluded in reverie.

– A face of thinker suits you. – Iseren commented, disturbing his veiled profile.

– Might be that way. But certain I am it suits to my soul. – Adaiel inhaled calmly air.

– I see that new teaching engaged you deeply. – acquitted Iseren. – That firelight impedes my night sky observation. Want to take a walk around the coast?

– With pleasure, Iseren. – he replied serenely. – Hodhoke right is praying, better we leave him be to his thoughts.

Once standing up, the two had to be careful to not nudge or throw sand at the taken by prayers Thaelrikhan. With firmament at its full glory Iseren managed to get fully taken by the view, same as Adaiel on her side.

Stay at Bantaihan lasted to the early morning, so all crewmates could sleep of the night watch. This time no heavy drinking was commonly present, so Voggam could count on finger of one hand all hangover sailors, until with that same hand slapped them for a wake up.

Moving supply to the vessel turned out fairly swiftly, before noon ship was back again on the water, and on her deck crew was bustling, so with a constant shouting of skipper it was remaining on desired route.

Under temporary Halverd's seeing over the crew, Voggtam stood, as many times before, in front the unfolded maps of coastlines.

– So, the plan the same as ye suggested, consiliarius?

– Unchanged it is, skipper. I cannot hide that many with it we risk. – replied Adaiel.

– Good thing ye are aware of that at least, sire.

Adaiel ignored Voggtam's comment.

– Thus, as I said. With more dense buildin we will turn a boat to its direction.

– For sure they will not smile upon our arrival. – man frowned. – But my lads no stranger to weapons are.

– Use them only if needed. It is required to turn ourself in to whoever will confront us. We need to enter the court of Tanungawa.

– Fine, will not ask why you what to keep it that way so much. – Voggtam swung hand. – I will do as ye want. And try to get yer point.

– I thank thee, skipper.

Voggtam only nodded head upon leaving, coming back amongst the sailors.

First buildings on islands were noticed two days later. They started to emerge in a shape of meagre reed-built huts, soon however from the vessel larger houses erected from a clay were seen. Agitation grew upon passing more significant townlets, Adaiel despite this ordered to remain sailing forward. In the meantime, backup up on a own copy of his map consiliarius were sketching schemate of passed localities which, to their unfortune, were varying seamingly from centuries-old version of land-sketches.

Iseren paid attention to Adaiel bared all these difficulties – with almost unnatural serenity, as if the surrounding him reality lost its weight on his soul. Even though he handling the matters well on himself, Iseren put an effort to give him hints to plan the sea route, which the boy

and Voggtam valued quite a lot. With some time skipper started calling Iseren by himself to take a look on the maps, which by her was much more suitable than regular ship labours.

At some day the three gathered as usual, to discuss the taken route.

– To Tanung it is about a day or two, am I right? – threw Voggtam, leaned towards the table top.

– Not so essential that is, as I see this.

Palms of Voggtam clenched on the table.

– But I maybe can know that, isn't it? – skipper's voice whizzed upon the change to more lighter tone. – From only curiosity.

– Thou can know that, right. According to the map scale it is the case.

– agreed Adaiel. – Yet I would like from skipper take a look at this.

Tribune got out from belongings his own version of the map, on which the islands layout was much sparser. With a difficult to explain smirk the boy stared at the two.

– Does skipper see that as well? – consiliarius engaged Voggtam to give an answer.

– Aye, I see that. If I am not wrong about that it seems that archipela-go came from cartographer's hand as more dense.

– Indeed. As long we are sailing relatively the same speed. Scale I based on the distance we take once a day.

– We should have swummed that way. – admitted Iseren. – Winds were close to invariable since Irmnas.

Voggtam approved with a nod.

– Either way not good that is.

– Not absolutely it is. – consiliarius unfolded his map close to the original one. – Disproportion is seemingly..

They didn't got to know that was the disproportion, as their conversation was interrupted by cry of Halverd from the prow:

– Skipper! Tribune! – from an elation the man was shouting in senvoldian. – Look, come!

– I do not know what words his clamour moment ago contained, but I suppose it was related with the town on the horizon. – Adaiel stated. – Skipper, would thou likest to calibrate the ship on city's direction?

– Will be done, sire. – man tried to keep his wise tone. – B-but the plan will succeed, right?

– That can only leave for local's desire. – consiliarius smiled mysteriously in return.

– I see, sire consiliarius. – Voggtam tried to mask his dull mien. – We will proceed to the landing as ye wish.

The city, on which they directed the vessel pleased an eye with imposing architecture built from a brick and chiseled stone, with the design bringing the image of inkarnian architecture from the continent. Near harbour a handful of humble rowboats were cruising around and more occasionally units of a bigger size, its look suggested that they were having a military purposes.

By a hint of luck or with protocols present in the city their ship was not greeted with a rain of arrows, although once arriving in the docks they realized, that the hubbub at the harbour was too faint for such populated place.

„Probably so silent it is because of our arrival.”

Voggtam were sending orders with the same confident tone, though nervous glances at the Adaiel didn't quite testified.

– Alright lads! Almost here! Take the rope! – cry of Voggtam shook off reverie from Iseren's mind.

Senvoldians proceeded to skipper's orders. The crew once was done stood up in group, awaiting Adaiels commands.

– What next, consiliarius? – inquired Voggtam.

– Quite obvious that seems. – Adaiel smiled. – We will enter the docks.

„From where such carefree came from?”

Tribune with Hodhoke walked on a dockway, not waiting for the rest, hesitating to follow him. To the two Iseren joined.

– Are you feeling well? – worried Iseren.

Adaiel turned to her, sending her a serene gaze.

– Wonderful I feel. Is there a reason behind thy query?

– Your decision seems, uh.. Unusual.

– Oh, is that so? – the question was sent in a ethereal tone. – The meeker approach we take the better. Lenience never leads towards to the path of failure.

– As you say. So what is the plan?

– We will wait for the attention.

Iseren didn't question openly what consiliarius said, she glanced only at the sailors, which were more against the taken strategy.

„Hold on.. In that moment we are clearly showing our intentions.” – girl realised. – *„Perhaps he just did not put that in proper words? Or a matter of coincidence that is?”*

She looked on the unknown city with much calmer sight.

„Nevertheless, we shall wait for city's response. It should came out without any issue.”

They did not have to wait for long, not so noisy harbour after a while almost went completely quiet, to their direction a dozen of soldier came. Men were lightly armoured, with a sword on hip and long polearm hold in two arms. Those weapons were similar to a spear, yet their heads were much flatter, giving an impression more of an blade than the skewer. Soldier measured the crewmates with an watchful gaze. As Iseren noticed, many of them had significantly hooded, similar to cat-like ones, eyes.

„Inkarns. Of a foreign root, yet still Inkarns.”

– Put arms on the deck. – Adaiel suggested in a whisper. – Iseren, if thou wilt be so kind, inform the rest.

Iseren quietly spread consiliarius's order, after few unpleasant comments regarding him, sailors with mercenaries did, as Adaiel wished to.

Soldier were standing still, observing their actions. One of them, with more ornated breastplate from lamellae, stepped forward, his polearm stood on ground.

– Good intentions we have, good soldiers. – announced Adaiel in an old kyrridean. – Allow me to explain what brought as here.

– We are listening you. – replied the one seeming to be a commander.
– Come closer, stranger

Tribune did as he was ordered, Iseren barely heard his sign of agreement. Further conversation stopped being in any way audible by her.

– Iseren, you know these dusty tongues, right? – Voggtam whispered over her shoulder. – Ye think they will cut our heads with these spears?

– I think not. – Iseren calmed him down.

– Pft, we shall see. That Thaelrkihan made a thunder in his youthful mind. – continued angered skipper. – Someone more reasonable should talk these fellows down..

– Do not dare to speak about him in such manner. – stopped him Iseren in a frigid tone. – He knows what he is doing.

– Mhm. – man squinted his eyes. – Something else dims mind in yer case. More simpler.

Iseren shook her head.

– You knew on what were you signing for. – she replied, unwilling to speak further with the man.

– Stop that quarrel, for gods' sake! – hissed Halverd. – Some of them just looked at us already.

– Would be difficult to not quarrel here. Yer captain simply lost his mind. So better think with who ye side, Harjstörm.

– Ye already took the silver and the ring from him. And what now, something's wrong? Because an Inkarn he is? Ye think he plans an intrigue with them?

– Don't fury me with that sard of a theory of yers. That has nothing with whatever he has on side of his skull, such things don't bother me in bargain. – cutted out Voggtam. – But a problems lies in reality, in which that youngster lacks any knowledge. And stop looking at me that way Harjstör, ye by yerself questioned his decision while ago.

Halverd went silent.

– Ye see now, eh? – resumed in semi-whisper Voggtam. – If you care about good turn of this matter, make a decision. Stand up to his lunacy, or, as I allow to say, turn yer arses on that mission of his. We'll see for a moment how close a eternal peace is to taking place.

Skipper as a proof of his words turned his head with grim satisfaction on Adaiel who was now taken by two soldiers.

– And I could brush off that idea of peaceful approach.. – Voggtam sighed heavily. – Alright, lads! Other than with force will not be the case! But consiliarius has to get out alive from this, ye hear me?

– Hold! – cried Iseren, for nothing.

Senvoldians rushed for their weapons, leaping at the unprepared soldiers.

– Treason! – girl heard a shout in old kyrridean from one of men. Soldiers backed off, lining up with glaives lowered, on which sailors almost got impaled. Few out of the line kept Adaiel on the dockway. Crew attempted to break through the line, their desperate attacks were cutted out by premonitory thrusts of glaives. Iseren pushed through the Senvoldians.

– Step aside, that is a misinput! – called to the armsmen Iseren.

– You better step aside. – warned her commander. – We do not know who you are, from where you acknowledged the old tongue, but one more move and we push a glaive into that one chest.

With a spar of his weapon, commander pointed at the Adaiel on ground. Iseren as a form of agreement stepped back, still receiving piercing stare from commander.

– And now, throw your weapons. This time far away from the hands' reach. – resumed the soldier. – You will explain that matter under arrest. That way will be much safer.

Commander frowned upon looking at the sailors.

– Let it be that way. – Iseren approved, calling over her shoulder: – Throw your arms!

Upon hearing the clunk of metal on the wood surface, Iseren turned away, meeting with an enraged gaze from Voggtam and disapointed one from Halverd. The rest faded away from Iseren's mind.

Soldiers, on an order from commander, broke their line, on a wordless warn of weapons use they captured the crew, taking them through depths of a city.

XIII.

As commander revealed, they were thrown to the gaol. With unset feelings towards to Adaiel and Iseren the soldier was open to mention as well about upcoming arrival of a viceroy, who will listen to intruders' explanations. That was the last time they had a contact with soldiers.

Captives were splited in half a dozen groups to cells made from oddly glabrous wood. They were in a military outpost, which was suggest by a barracks room away. Open space between cell bars allowed imprisoned to keep a contact between each other, which kept fairly silent wasn't interrupted by warns from guard.

For the local arches they were quite an attraction, until they found out that either no one was interested with them nor knew their language at least.

Adaiel by some method persuaded from a guard to share their cell with mercenaries, although it turned out that Halverd sat down in a distance from them, to whisper something with the Voggtam's men. Iseren due to an impulse take a listen to their secretive conversations, she felt an relief upon realising that Senvoldians were just trying to keep themselves on a well spirit. Nevertheless, she kept an eye on them, worrying that they might attempt to another daring act. Wcich kept her agitated to the rest of the day.

– Is everything going according to the plan? – she was able to finally ask Adaiel, somewhere between dawn and morning.

– I see a hope in this. – assured her consiliarius. – It only remains to await for viceroy's arrival.

– What then? – she asked without any second thoughts.

– I shall speak with him, as such intention I had.

Iseren was more concerned about the serenity that was over Adaiel's demeanour.

„Better he was aware about his actions.” – girl didn’t hide her worry in thoughts. – „I don’t even want to think, what if he indeed lost his mind? And the only solution is..”

– Thou art worried? – Adaiel asked.

– No. – she lied. – Maybe only about what is ahead us.

Boy nodded, closing his eyes. Silence took place once more between the two.

Iseren lost reckoning on how many days had passed; she was only able to assume current time of day, based on the meagre meal consisting of bowl of soft seeds and cup of water on the morning and smoked wish at the noon.

At one day Iseren sat down leaned on a bars, letting herself to immerse into her thoughts.

„An afternoon.” – she glanced at the unfinished fish. – „But which one it is? Why this started to interest me right when I can’t find a date for this?”

Before she formed a conclusion, her muse was disrupted by calling in old kyrridean:

– Stand up, captives from continent! – proclaimed entering the gaol commander – A guest came to you, he is stating that he knows your native tongue!

Adaiel raised his head.

– None from locals that is. – assumed in whisper Adaiel. – No man behind the sea could learn the vasilean.

– Why? – inquired silently Iseren.

– Connections between reigns ceased in times in which both sides used inkarnian tongue, known now as the old one.

– And so the visit to us is paying..

– Iveon.

As a proof of his words, to gaol enter mentioned praetor, leading his amused sight across captives’ faces, as if he predicted that whole conclusion. Behind his back, four grim-looking Thaelrikhans were standing.

– How surprising. – theatric voice of Iveon spreaded towards the room. – I see that Tanungawa did not approve the idea of truce.

– Without viceroy would be difficult to present any idea. – Adaiel replied.

– A lot of time you spend here, I am afraid. – man smirked meanly. – Authority on Tanung is right now. His majesty imperator vanquished got by inevitable, good week shall take the burial, and even more coronation of the new ruler.

– And how didst thou get here?

– None of thy concern.

Adail shrugged.

– Thy mystery that is.

– Almost bearable thou art being able to utter something, instead of sending tearful gaze on ground, thou knowest that?

– As a compliment I shall take that. – Adaiel smiled.

Iveon took a deep breath without a word.

– Allegedly thou hast come here for a visit – continued Adaiel. – And I highly doubt thou wouldst sail here only to take a look on us.

– Thou doubtst on that with a reason. As I have a proposition to thy men.

Iveon turned away from Adaiel before he could respond. After taking few steps deeper to the gaol, praetor proceeded to luster the sailors kept captive.

– Your captain? – Iveon sent a question in senvoldian.

– I am. – Voggtam replied. – By a rule of the oldest.

– Intuition guided me well, indeed I have a pleasure with the folk of the north. Thou seemst to be a good-hearted man. – praetor looked at him with a warm gaze. – And would be pity if such good-hearted man remained in cage as a common rogue, is it not?

– Cannot argue with that. – admitted Voggtam.

– So I think we could come to an agreement. – lips of Iveon formed to lenient smile. – Art thou fine with the ship, captain..

– Gillruj Voggtam. – he completed. – On a deck I am from the youth days, many I saw on the seas.

– Any catch?

– Fuck of a hogwash about nothing, surmises and backing on a fortune will make my fist clench, even on a gob of my current guvner. Especially if it brings trouble to me or my mates.

– Inquiring.. And the fact you mentioned that in gaol.

Voggtam smirked repugantly.

– Let me tell thee something. From a simple man I am not far away, despite what my robes are suggesting. – Iveon lowered slightly his voice. – Take a look on the palms of mine, hardened, worn out. I am not afraid of a simple mind or labour. Many reason lies behind it, sometimes more than in matters that as complicated are passed.

– Some of my lads could be ashamed of such callusses. – commented Voggtam. – An Inkarn, yet saw a fine labour. Rare sight amongst men of the Comitium.

– Glad I am to hear thy approval. But let us get to the point, as simple men. – praetor's smile disappeared. – You help me, I help you.

– I am all ears.

Iseren expected anything, reaction someone from cells, attempts to oppose. Yet sailors either agreed with Voggtam or did not have a choice nor will to make a choice. Only Halverd measured Iveon with a death stare, though he remained silent.

– I will pay a bail for you, from your part I expect you join my commandment.

– Hm. – Voggtam put fingers on lips in reverie. – And Skaggra, our vessel?

– Will pay for it as well, worry not. And a handful of silver for a good start.

– Always open for saividite. I take a guess alone ye were not sailing.

– Indeed, captain. They are seaside families with me, who from hands of these warmongers lost husbands, sons. Hungry for revenge they are.

– Here right now?

– Oh not at all. Right now we are looking for any weaknesses in fortifications. Under good pretext. And praetor's immunity. Voggtam looked at his men. Most shrugged in response, a pair of them openly approved the proposition.

– Wait, sire praetor. – Voggtam got closer amongst bars of Halverd's cell: – Hajrstör.. My good old chap, let us go together.

„So I don't have paranoia. They knew each other.”

Halverd put his gaze on the floor.

– Ye know my ethics. – Halverd replied roughly after while. – I am not open for business during work already.

– That is what I was afraid. Think about it, after so many years, we're together on deck, with us. Ship maybe different, but us same as always. Like in old days.

– In oldays we were chopping through Legion's fleetmen, and go under their banner. And I.. I do not sell during work. No. I have my ethics.

– Ethics that allow you set coin higher than old friendships? Through so many we were been, arguments, rescues, carousals. Hajrstör, a good sard on my ass.. I just don't want to have ye as an enemy.

– I don't know, by the gods. What I am doing?

Halverd stood up rapidly.

– I go. With ye I go. I don't want to cross a sword with ye too, Voggtam.

Man turned to mercenaries, without being able to meet with their sight.

– I am sorry, lads. – uttered almost in whisper. – Svjetane?

– Go ye better. I am not yer prop. And don't count on me selling out so measly.

– Listen. It is not..

– I will not listen. Just go. And with ye these boasts of how loyal and noble ye are will go too.

Halverd sighed deeply.

Iveon checked on the captives once more, then he came back to guards' quarters. Man came back after few drops of a sandglass in company of an aged soldier.

Elder after few sonorous sniffs proceed to open cells, from which sailors poured out with celerity. Once he was turning the lock of a mercenaries' cell door, Iveon holded his attempt to open the door.

– Only light-haired one goes out. – Iveon instructed in old speech, to which elder soldier replied with a nod.

To the cell came the second armsman, with his glaive lowered. It was not necessary, none of the kept captive had a plan to escape through opened door.

– And this better give thee something to think about, Adaiel. – Iveon leaned towards the cell. – Let that matter go.

Lack of any reaction from his part convinced Iveon to leave gaol. Under occurred silence, Iseren crouched near Adaiel. Boy raised his head, he didn't look as concerned.

– He bought them, is it not? – inquired Adaiel in surprisingly calm manner.

„Oh right, he could not understand the conversation conducted in se-nvoldian.“

Iseren summarized the whole encounter, face of consiliarius during her explanation didn't show any set of emotions.

– Better he know, by buying the traitor he himself is prone to face the betrayal.

– Adaiel, this sounds truly inspiring, but we would make more of a use from more earthbound comment regarding the matter.

– An idea I have! – the boy busted from the floor, ignoring expecting any explanation Iseren.

– Is that it? – huffed Svjetane from irritation. – Iseren, talk to sense of the lad, better he explain himself.

– I doubt he would like to do so. We better wait, he doesn't seem to plot a violent or vicious intrigue.

The two started to observe Adaiel. Tribune with a hand gesture summoned the elder prison guard, asking him about something in old speech. Man shook his head in response and went to quarters, leaving gaol without any watch.

– Looks like he is about to escape. – Iseren turned discretely towards Svjetane.

– Hmpf, don't like what I see right now. – woman whispered back. – Does Hodhoke know something mayhaps?

Iseren looked at the Thaelrikhan, at that moment focused on the prayer.

– I think not.

– Look. – Svjetane pointed at the gaol entrance. – Some soldiers came.

– That is a commander and the keykeeper, both know old kyrridean.

– Good, it seems Adaiel only wants to talk with them. But there is something else that worries me.

– What is it?

– Adaiel, is he.. Is his mind present?

– I don't know, Svjetane. I wonder too.

Woman nodded with tightened lips.

– But keep an eye on his, alright? – insisted in whisper.

– Very well.

The two returned her sight on Adaiel. Boy currently expounded something the commander, who was listening to his words with focus. He replied at some point, sending him a smile.

„I wonder with what Adaiel came up..”

Commander gave keykeeper an order to open cell. With difficult to believe, mercenaries were reales from the outpost. They were left on the fortification's yard. Led by Adaiel, they passed practicing soldiers, registration of the brought goods them patrol dragging an urchin in chains. Such hubbub was surrounding them, up to the point they finally reached the gates. Guard let them out, to which Adaiel replied with a nod. He stopped after a good throw from outpost, to please his eyes on city's panorama seen from the hill. Tribune sat down cross-legged, to his right joined Hodhoke.

Svjetane hasitated.

– Ye think he's kind enough to let us know what is going on? – she asked. – Since recently he's not so open to present us his plans.

– It is difficult to say. But better we join them. No need to separate already humble in men group.

„Svjetane's right. His intentions are getting unclear.”

Iseren dispeled concern from her mind, trying to keep most unbothered mien once she sat down amongst the consiliarius and Hodhoke. Adaiel had closed his eyes in the sun, on his face a soothed smile was present.

– Adaiel.. – she proceeded.

– Forgive me. I need a moment.

– As you wish.

Girl glimpsed at Hodhoke. He caught her attention, his sight didn't reveal any concern.

„Perhaps he is hiding such feeling?“

Girl took a deeper breath, gave a look at the stretched in front of them, at the wilderness around. Her sight raised to the lavender-coloured sky, it was coated with skeins of clouds. She relaxed, focused better on the view. Clouds appeared as if they were spinning and epicentre of the whirl were four mercenaries.

„I wonder, will Adaiel keep his promise to me in his condition?“ – girl expected to be more concerned about this. – *„If that was my reason to leave home, I need..“*

– Is that enough? – grumped suddenly Svjetane.

That unexpected call pierced Iseren's chest.

– Very well. I am listening. – sight of consiliarius returned at the mercenaries.

– Better ye explain Iseren, cause no nerve I have for it. – insisted Svjetane.

– Will do. And thus, by what method we are free men once again?

– Hm. – Adaiel paused. – I convinced the commander that as a four no much of a threat can we cause, comparing to our former comrades.

– So we are indeed free?

– Not fully. With a reason I chose to sit down in the line of watchmen's sight. We are still under their control, though we are not treated as criminals. In my opinion it is better that way.

– What do ye mean with „better“, huh? – Svjetane interrupted.

– Under guard of the watchmen we have temporary dwelling, food, view on a present here custom. Let us treat that as a form of protection, not custody.

– We will try to think this way. – replied Iseren.

– Very well then. Do you wish to return to outpost?

Iseren raised an eye on him. Adaiel seemed to be calm, yet by this foreign to her. His sight was confident, put directly on her.

„It is difficult to believe that in front of me is the same boy I joined back in Vasildel.“

Few days spent in company of armsmen quickly convinced Iseren to the local custom. Commander and keykeeper surprised Iseren with their courteous manners, treating the four more as guests than intruders. They allowed them to sleep in quarters, invited them to meals, at some point party was spending time together on conversations or local activities. Adaiel often was playing complicated tabletop game, to which Iseren did not have focus, as she was still concerned about the further turns of their journey. Girl wasn't sure if consiliarius was aware of the burden he is currently on his back. Her thought she shared with Svjetane, who was significantly worried about the Adaiel's state.

– We need to talk with Hodhoke. – one noon Svjetane could not stand it anymore. – After all, he is allegedly responsible for putting Adaiel out of his clear mind.

– I do not know is that good idea. He is loyal, but to Adaiel.

– We have nothing to worry about, we don't plan a plot against the lad.

– Maybe we..

– No „maybe we”, Iseren. We are just concerned. I am. Please.

Iseren stood up from table.

– I'll see what can I do. – added upon leaving.

Girl felt improper when looking for Adaiel, as if she truly was plotting something against him. It turned out that consiliarius was not present in outpost, she then tried to move quicker, whatever where Adaiel was currently.

Finding Hodhoke wasn't difficult, his profile was doable to spot in outskirts of a outpost, due to distance between them, it was difficult for Iseren to say what he was currently doing there.

Once stepping closer, Iseren noticed that man raised his head on the sky, he measured the view with a grim sight. He lowered his eyes on Iseren when he heard her pacing.

– Hodhoke. Allow me to speak with for a while. – she greeted him.

Man remained silent, he watched her expectantly.

– About Adaiel. – she proceeded to continue. – Since the last month's half he is. Different. I know that you pray together.

– We clear our mind. Adaiel does not want to listen stars/

– Oh, right. He doesn't share your beliefs.

Iseren stopped for a while, when Hodhoke hid his necklace under clothes. She didn't have courage to ask about the jewelry.

– Let me skip the belief matters. – she resumed. – You don't have anything against to talk to me?

– I do not.

– Good then. – Iseren sat down near Thaelrikhan. – Have you seen a change in him?

– I did.

– Was it by your opinion a good or bad change?

– A bad one.

Girl's brews raised.

– You.. Know? Didn't you try to cease it? Or take a different approach to teaching?

– I did not. That is turn of the matter, that is the intention of this teaching.

– So it was intended?

– It was inevitable. Yet the end took the form I did not wish to.

Hodhoke moved uneasily.

– Why did not you correct him, if he made a mistake?

– It was not a mistake. But path he chose.

– And what could be a mistake?

– Upon this path no failure lies. Only unexpected turn is present.

– Listen, your lessons served him well for while. What hap..

– They did not serve him well. – man stopped her.

– F-from what you assumed that? – Iseren hastened with question.

He didn't respond.

– Hard to tell?

Hodhoke replied with a nod.

– But why didn't you correct him? That is a role of a teacher, which distinguishes him from a book, that the Adaiel could choose.

– As mentioned, no mistake he has done.

- Was it teaching after all? Maybe a curation you meant?
- Maybe. Your tongue is limited to me.
- Does that curation have a name?
- Act of Sedation.
- I take a guess you practice it.
- Yes. It ease well the pain, that no herb nor oil could mend it.
- What hurts you?
- Days of my trial.

„He speaks oddly casual about something that supposedly hurts him. Perhaps he’s under Act’s influence?“

- What happened then? – he asked cautiously.
- My tribal name was granted to me.

Iseren decided it is not appropriate to ask by what action he proven himself to carry a name of Crimson Hilt.

- I see. What are stages of Sedation Act?
- You repent yourself to stars for earthian weakness. For taking astute mirium. If you remain alive, you thank stars for mercy.
- Astute mirium? What is it?
- It makes the mind curbing on what is meant to do. To think.
- Do you often take the astute mir?
- Once, in pursuance to he Act. To give a picture of truly clear mind. And this picture remember and remind. Deceiver will take it more, a lie whispers to him to perform an ritual once more. Act in that case is nothing more than dependence of mind on the mirium.

- That’s an intoxicant.
- Yes.
- Adaiel took it?
- Once, in pursuance to the Act.
- What then?
- He repeated the vision, he said he improved. Yet it was not the case. He stayed in one place.

- I understand. He expected that Act will solve all of his issues.
- Yes.
- Can we help him?
- No.
- Somone can?

– He himself.

Iseren at first was about to leave but he put hands back on her thighs.

– Adaiel turned towards the worse path, but he is still a good leader. – she said without thought behind. – Maybe unexperienced he is, yet he has good will.

Profile of Hodhoke seemed to warm a bit.

– Good chief he is. Avoids the red, as I do.

– So you prefer the peace.

– I will cease such one if I am ordered to. Though I prefer the gleam of spirit inside.

– Me too.

„So he sees souls too.. Perhaps as any else highborn?“

Iseren remained silent as she poured her gaze onto nearby landscape. Hodhoke followed her moves, he seemed to be indifferent about Iseren's presence.

At some point their sight met, in lacking of any deeper emotions understanding. After a while, they returned to observing the scenery around them.

Girl didn't have difficulties to picture why Adaiel became fond of Hodhoke's company.

XIV.

Adaiel didn't show up at the evening, which made Svjetane more agitated. Guard seem to not care about this, which in woman's notion made the matter more complicated. Iseren herself pondered upon his disappearing, though she remained somewhere about listless regarding the situation. Svjetane above her ear worried from their stay at the outpost to the fate of their journey. Iseren didn't have an idea how to reply, for some time she only nodded to her word and tried to keep a sight on her.

– Maybe he went to viceroy on a talk? – speculated at some point Svjetane, ending the monotony manner of her complains.

– He would say me. Always I took part in such matters.

– Right now lad could decide that no longer necessary ye are. Iseren, don't make a face like that. I know by myself, being thrown away like that is a damn pity.

– I am not upset. It is just that scenario, it does not fit here.

– Oh, ye should be upset.. – smacked woman.

Iseren's gaze sharpened.

– N-nevermind. – Svjetane lost countenance. – And what about Hodhoke? He knows something?

– He does not.

–And how he is able to take this so calmly..

– Via Act. If he can bear severely hideous memories, I suppose keeping and temper is not an issue as well.

– Yeah, right ye are. Sorry, Iseren, I am barely able to connect one with another.

– One thing is certain though.

– Yeah, Adaiel doesn't perform Act properly, and in ritual mend of a soul he finds an escape instead a motivation to action. After so many times I can say that by myself. But what's the use in this, if, as ye said, only he can help himself?

Iseren was about to say something, but to the quarters entered Adaiel as if nothing happened.

– Where have ye been? – Svjetane attacked him from doorway.

– At viceroy's place of residence.
 Boy didn't backed off from pushing towards him Svjetane.
 – Do you need something from me? – he asked without a hint of a fear.
 – Yes, by all banes. – woman growled. – Next time ye better explain yerself, if you have more vanishing in mind!
 – My mistake. But that matter was a high priority one.
 – From our part only remained to forget what happened. Did you achieve something by the meeting? – Iseren interjected, once stepping closer to them.
 Svjetane looked at her with disbelief, she remained silent.
 – Indeed, viceroy proclaimed that up to three days we will head out to capitol.
 – During these days Iveon have a chance to reach Tanung. Couldn't you speed up the depart?
 – Maybe I can. But who knows?
 – I don't think it is a proper time for philosophical questions.
 – Probably you are right, Iseren. Right now I have a will to take a walk. Do you wish to join me?
 – I do.
 – Very well then. Let us go.
 The two left the outpost without sharing a word. Iseren expected to hear some curio regarding the surrounding or interesting observation, but Adaiel didn't even looked to her direction.
 Girl remembered their first talks in distance from camp. Even though they rarely did so, Adaiel always pleased her with stories of distant, almost mythical lands.
 „*No use from such memories.*” – she discarded her thoughts.
 Vision of the past persisted in her mind. She remembered the day during which she was teaching Adaiel senvoldian, the awkward smile of his when he misspelled the words.
 „*I cannot hide. A lot of time I spend with him*” – she gave up.
 – I take guess thou worried art. – Adaiel assumed with a serious mien, finally taking her away from memories. – I know a remedy for such state.
 – I don't need it, nothing worries me.

– Ah, unnecessary from my part to ask. Shameful it would be to thoughts with grim veils cover upon the craft of a palm in front of us. Even though no matter apply to such hands..

„*And when he got fond of poetry?*”

– So difficult is to believe, that with such beauty we are pleased on a common day. How to not feel a bliss.. – Adaiel continued.

– I see you rested now. Are we getting back to viceroy, so he could speed up the ship preparations?

Adaiel's face winced, almost as if he was upset, when Iseren stopped his monologue.

– He gave his word. Depart during three days. – he mentioned in an intense tone.

– Yes, he gave. But word he also gave, that he is open to faster turn of events.

– Thou must care a lot about this matter, if thou insists so much. I shall talk with him tomorrow, alright?

„*I care? Was I the founder of that journey?*”

– Alright then. My time has come, too cold it is getting. – she confabulated excuse.

– Very well, Iseren. If you will need again where I am, I can promise you that I shall remain here.

Iseren returned to the army quarters, trying to keep a leisured pace. She discretely turned away, glimpsing at Adaiel, who kneeled on ground, focused likely on the Act.

Once inside, Iseren sat down by Svjetane, woman had her head on hand, lying at the table. Upon hearing scraping of a stool, she raised her head, first frown of anger was replaced by a shock.

– Iseren.. – her eyes gleamed. – Forgive me, I really thought you just sold me out in some odd way.

– No need to mention that.

– Did get something useful?

– Yes, either he is out of mind or don't want to push on the local authority. He behaves as if that voyage is not important to him.

– Probably just not pushing, a zeal would not simply left him like that. Atleast I hope. About something else I want to ask ye.

– What is it?

– Do ye.. – Svjetane hasitated. – Do you feel well lately?

– Yes? – Iseren raised brew.

– Glad to hear that. – woman tried to keep on casual tone. – But if ye need, we can always talk.

– Of course. I got to go now.

When Iseren stood up, she realised that Svjetane was still keeping an eye on her. Girl pretended that she is not noticing her stare, keeping a natural stepping, she got away from her line of sight to walk towards the sleeping part of the quarters.

Iseren opened eyes on casted in gloom chamber. She was laying on the flooring, despite it was built from stone it didn't appeared as cold. She didn't remember how he got here, yet the room seemed to be familiar to a girl.

„I saw it.. In a dream I did so.” – she realised. – *„I remember, a quarter in Maiorone reminded me about this muse. But why I am here once again?”*

Girl sent a gaze around the room. In the middle of it she noticed long trivet made from wood and stool infront of it. Close to the walls bookshelves were standing with neuter clutter on them. She didn't saw well, a dim light limited her. It was actually difficult to point whither the light came from, each time she tried to look through windows the view from it disappeared from sight, a foreign thought in her mind were suggesting her that things outside are irrevelant.

„Whose that thought is?” – thought jabbed her.

She didn't receive an answer.

„Perhaps it belongs to the owner of this chamber?” – she attempted to solve. – *„Did he invited me here? Or maybe..”*

– ..I will be going to viceroy. Wouldst thou assist me? – slowly clearer Adaiel's voice brought Iseren from sleep.

– Yes.. I go with you. – she forced herself to swift response.

Girl was able to fully woke up along the way, in which a chilly breeze helped, such one often whipped local shores on the morning. They were taking a route through city's edging, under guard of two soldiers.

– Is not too early for such visits? – Iseren ascertained.

– Viceroy did not expect me at a certain day period. We will find out once we arrive. – boy replied, without looking at her.

„*Not so reasonable from him.*”

The four after traversing through line of narrow streets arrived at district clearly habitated by more prosperous citizens – terrain was better guarded, households consisted much more free space, often divided by the paries, providing its owners privacy and isolation from city's hubbub.

Soldiers stopped infront one of the grandest residences. Iseren had to raise head to take a better look on higher storeys of a house – it appeared as light, due to subtle style of decoration, yet they likely were built from sturdy material.

– *Aawadan ton tiin.* – one of armsmen announced. – *Tawuapanilin uawi na esuatwa tuob gaan i otiil dihi utro.*

– *Mahiyowuna anakot waingakun waya.* – replied gently Adaiel.

The girl didn't had a lust to inquire on what the two said.

From the inside, a gate was opened, soldiers remained outside. From behind the gate's wing a heavy-armoured man came out, with a gesture he welcomed the two to enter. As Adaiel passed by, he bowed his head to the soldier, to which soldier responded in the same way. Iseren repeated the greeting, which resulted with the same reaction.

„*Seems they greet here with a head bow.*”

They take a path through the colourful garden, up to the portico. Near entrance they encountered the guard, men, upon seeing the consiliarius, cleared from the entrance with corteus bows.

Once inside, Iseren made her best to not look around or atleast not do it overtly. Furnishing was well made, interior did not lack in space. Guard took them on stairs to the higher storey, walk through wide corridor to its end. Doorway infront of them was hidden by curtain, Iseren caught by an ear few footsteps from other side.

– *Wagltko-Anunsangangn, Aawaditswa ta tiin.* – one of the armsmen had spoken. – *Wagtma bwi wipakadto ha?*

– *Uyon wa.* – replied dry sounding voice behind curtain. – *Hiwaotunta waan tiin widhi.*

As on order, soldier drew the curtains. Room behind it appeared to be cabinet, inside of it resided old Inkarn on ankle-height seat lined with pillows. They seemed to serve only decorative purpose, as elder was sitting down cross-legged with only bare wood under his legs. At their arrival, he doused his smoking pipe, taking more haughty posture.

– *Myiakaw iauaw i launwa uluwa haan.* – oldman showed seats vis-a-vis to him.

– *Wishi haimo agiin tiwuo.* – bowed Adaiel.

Boy took a seat on the pillows, Iseren followed what he did. Adaiel proceeded to explain something to the old Inkarn, likely viceroy, who listened with captivity his words. Their conversation appeared as tame, it was difficult for Iseren to estimate to who's favour are set conditions, or if consiliarius even proposed ones.

Two talking didn't paid attention at the girl, she herself wore a serious mien and with hands on chest she observed the ongoing dialogue. After a longer while, the two bowed their heads, after which Adaiel got up. Iseren did the same, elder on her bow replied as well.

– *Wagkta uroana atowa akta.* – said Adaiel on farawell

– *Usanga wasarabu unawa wikang aha konaahin.* – agreed Inkarn.

The boy remained silent during the travel, Iseren didn't pressure. Only once reaching outpost, the boy turned to her stating:

– They let us known when the ship will be ready.

Iseren nodded as sign of understanding.

– Notificate the rest?

– Yes. And now, allow me to gather thoughts at the fresh air.

The two spreaded, without looking at each other. Upon entering outpost Iseren walked to the barracks, looking after Svjetane. Near entrance she found Hodhoke and young soldier, they had an dialogue at the table.

– *Wi'ichipva van khokipova. Hunha kikasa eya huh ha'anhekpi.* – said Hodhoke to his interlocutor.

– *Volomiasye.* – replied soldier. – *Tokhe okinunya ono ovoto si'insoya va'utuva si'icune. Va'afile.*

„That did not sound as tanungawan. Perhaps Thaelrikhan tongue is known here?“

She walked away, not wanting to interrupt them. She chose Svjetane, sitting in solitude. Face of woman warmed up upon seeing Iseren/

– Like in tavern it is here. – Svjetane shared her observation as a form of greeting. – Everyona sit with who he likes and take a drink, a food.

– As if in inn rather. – corrected her Iseren. – Since a bed we have here.

– Right. But nevermind. How was the meeting with the viceroy? Iseren proceeded to summarized how it went, despite not being specially eager to do so.

– Positive is in it, at least lad handles himself fine enough. – sumed up Svjetane. – Shame though not many will get his intentions.

– Right now Tanungawan seems to get them.

– Maybe.. But at the same he could just sounds interesting for them. Right now fortune smiles upon us, if no one his way of action didn't criticise.

– Except Voggtam

– Bah, fool of a man he is. – brushed off Svjetane. – We better hope the authority in Tanung will be not so bright be or get fascinated by our guvner's oddity. In other way I don't see that.

The two tooook a sip from cups.

– Quite good they drink here. – Svjetane changed once more topic, swirling the utensil in hand. – How it was named, *Saawa giin*?

– Something in similar manner.

– Well, Hodhoke once told me that *Saawa giin* like wine is made, but from grain.

„He told her about something present in Tanungawa? Had received such curio from his new friend or Hodhoke himself was once here? Regarding that friend, one of them had to know the other's language But how they did it?“

– Ye think about something, right? – guessed woman.

– Yes. Wonderful was until it lasted. – muttered back Iseren.

Few days later; mercenaries sat down together for the breakfast, today to eat a fish with thin legume was prepared.

– Pretty good. – commented the meal Svjetane. – Is it not?

– Mhm. – Iseren replied, not raising an eye on her.

– And tell me, Hodhoke. – woman turned to the Thaelrikhan: – With who ye recently talk?

– Zheydar is his name.

– Wither he know thaelrikhan? – Iseren couldn't apprehend from the question.

– He introduced himself in the communal language, the one you named *thalrykhan*.

– Just like that? How he could get to know it? Few months of sea travel away we are.

– Maybe a second path exists? – suggested Svjetane.

– Perhaps. Hodhoke, how did you came to the Maiorone?

– Hm. – he thought it through. – In one long chain we were taken, up to the harbour. Then I was bought at the other side.

– So Thaelrikha is on different land. – assumed the woman.

– Not necessarily. – Iseren withholder her verdict. – Sea travel could be a better solution, not the only option. How long were you sailing?

– Nearly fifty days. I did not count them.

– My asking was needless, in no way it will answer the question. You could either take a straight route or circumnavigate the landmass.

– Don't ye have a map? – mentioned Svjetane.

– This map only covers a western part of the land. Mention of Thaelrkiha I gathered from adventurers' remarks.

Svjetane opened mouth, about to say something, before so a group of soldiers entered the barracks. Amongst them Iseren recognized Zheydar and from regularly stationing soldiers.

– I wish from you to take your belongings. – voice of Zheydar was clear, worth a vocalist. – A sampan's crew awaits.

– Sampan?

– Minor sea unit. Bankeidan one.

„*Bankeidan? Doesn't tell me anything.*”

- Oh, I see. We'll need a sandglass of time for preparation, if we may.
- Very well. – nodded Zheydar.

Iseren after explaining the two what news Zheydar brought, went in a haste for their belongings, which fortunately were kept in one place since the few days. Some of their equipment was missing, mostly Adaiel's. In the ongoing rush both her and Svjetane counted on that consiliarius took earlier what belonged to him.

- So? – huffed Svjetane. – Are we ready?
- Ready. – agreed Iseren. – Let us go report to the armsmen then.

The escort, as the same before, took them on edging of a city.
„Probably to minimise the unnecessary attention from citizens.” – theorized Iseren.

Based on the direction it seemed that they are heading towards the city docks, the same on which they were arrested about a dozen days ago.

At one of the gangplanks they noticed Adaiel, sitting cross-legged, in solitude. Not far away a sampan was moored. Attention of a girl in it was brought by a sail, giving an impression of a hand fan, which opened appeared almost as a flat scallop.

When soldiers arrived, they went in a conversation with Adaiel. In the meantime the three sat down, they remained silent.

At some point one of the soldiers gave an order to sampan's crew, Adaiel valedicted them, then went on a boat.

- Let us go. – urged the rest Iseren.

Mercenaries got on board, Iseren greeted the sailors with a head bow. Adaiel, who was sitting under rooflet, was observing them in muteness.

– Any wisdom for a road, Adaiel? – asked the girl, wanting to end the uneasy silence.

Tribune's brows knitted slightly in reverie.

- A long sail awaits us. – he announced succinctly.

XV.

Adaiel didn't lied; since the departure, many hours passed and it didn't appeared they will reach Tanung soon. Boat was surprisingly swift though, and its crew proficient, therefore even long journey should not be an issue. At least in means of time meant for arrival. As concerns of Iseren and Svjetane became more severe, they wonodered how Adaiel will present his truce proposition with Visildea. The two sat down near edge of the boat, sharing their worries in whisper.

– ..I know ye may struggle now, but ye need to force from the authority old speech. – Svjetane since long time didn't sound so graveous. – And have a chat with Adaiel, please.

– I don't know, Svjetane. – Iseren hanged her head. – Maybe he doesn't wish to share his intentions as he used to, but no madman from him is. And he is the one that has causative power

– Keep an eye on him, better he not say something stupid. And remember, not alone we are. Iveon will surely make an use from Adaiel's oddity, caused by sard knows what.

– Due to the obligations upon him?

– Eh, nevermind on the reason. – brushed off Svjetane. – Not so thinker from me. Anyway, once we will be first on Tanung..

– If we will be first. – mentioned Iseren.

– If not ye, no chance even would be for that.

– Adaiel would likely..

– Oh, for the fuck sake! – Svjetane couldn't stand. – Stop already with this discrediting yerself! We can't count on lad anymore.

– And what now, on me we only can?

– I said already, he went mad.

– I don't know. – Iseren sighed. – I observe him, he acts.. Peculiar. Yet he gets to his right. An end to this will not be a tragedy probably.

– If really mean it.. I believey ye.

Despite this, Svjetane wasn't looking as convinced.

Day later, since leaving the city they didn't saw any sign of civilization. Between them a line of hills covered in a lush forest was erecting, without a doubt untouched by a human hand.

Mercenaries were spending time on forming puzzles for themselves, in which Hodhoke turned out to be extraordinarily proficient.

– Fins it does not have yet it swims, body it has not, but amongst glass can be trapped, weapon it does not carry, can win any clash regardless.

– Goodness.. – Svjetane rubbed forehead with knuckles. – Now ye got me. Ah, I don't know.

– Hm. – Iseren did not gave up so easily. – What swims, in glass is trapped and wins over anyone.

Hodhoke listened to her in silence.

– In glass trapped, tamed. And swims, anything's fall under it. A water mayhaps?

– Water does not win always.

– Right.. Does the matter of puzzle literally wins over anything?

– Anything. From thought to any object.

– Anything, you say. And it swims. In glass. The answer is time. Can be tamed in glass, in form of sandglass.

– It is time indeed. Who's puzzle is now?

– I am done. – resigned Svjetane. – Too bright ye are for me, damn. Can't play with ye. Dices I'd play.

– Dices it is then. – agreed Iseren. – But don't stake on anything.

– Don't have anything to stake anyway. – shrugged woman. – Heh, first timme it will be played actually only for fun.

To the dusk all from the three was done with the dices. Svjetane after game got into a word with Hodhoke, likely counting on getting to know anything regarding Adaiel's mental state. Iseren used the chance to take a time for herself only, which wasm't happening often on meager-sized vessel.

With arms leaning against the boat side she was tracing a water surface with her finger. She wasn't able to direct her thoughts towards specific topic, remaining in idle reverie. She stayed in such state long enough it darkened. Girl realised by that point that the rest of mercenaries went to sleep. She started to feel odd sensation of fatigue, not related with her need of rest. Iseren fell on the deck, falling into uneasy sleep.

Once awoken she grasped she is not in reality yet. She was facing a view immersed in mirage, familiar atelier in which she never really has been.

This time its owner was present. She didn't saw him well, as he was focused on work in front the tripod, on it a wood upholstered in fabric was hanged. Iseren had no clue what the man was even doing, she only noticed that man behind the rack was swishing the cloth with brush.

„I never saw anything as such.“

Stranger leaned from behind the tripod.

– I see you arrived. – greeted her in old speech.

Voice of his was preternaturally clear, kept in audible, yet foreign accent.

„I arrived? Was I expected hither?“

Iseren didn't respond, she was too intrigued with the face of the painter. He had phenomenally long ears, tips of them arched towards the top of his head. His eyes were shapped unnaturally, giving an impression of curved drops of water.

„An Inkarns? Someone more perhaps?“

– What are you doing? – she managed to utter.

– I paint the upcoming.

Stranger dipped brush in paint, Iseren realised by that point, that only colour he was using was red.

– Future of what?

– Of what I see right now.

– I see. You mentioned I arrived. Am I your guest?

– Thou hast asked to be the one.

– How? I don't remember doing so.

– Thou hast been here, is it not?

Painter stared directly at her. Iseren felt an clench in intensines due to that.

– Yes, unwittingly. In a dream.

– Thou hast wished to know, to who that chambers belongs for, to which you received answer. And what view can be seen out windows.

– So? What is there?

– I do not remember. – despite saying that in whisper, Iseren heard him excellent.

„I can't understand.“

– Would not blame. – painter didn't left the whisper. – Though someone can help thee do such. No more I am able to say. Thou art about to wake up.

Whisper of painter echoed through the space of her mind, as if it was still coming from lips. Reverberation persisted until she busted from the deck, as though it was burning her. She fought for few quick breaths, getting deeper and more regular, which calmed her down. She swiftly found out that Hodhoke kept puzzled gaze on her. Eyes of his slightly glimmered in the light of stars. She must have wake him, yet he didn't show that by himself.

– A bad dream? Or bad vision? – he asked silently.

– Vision, I think. I am not sure.

– Mhm. – sight of his weakened, stopped focusing on Iseren's face, casted in gloom. – It is difficult sometimes to clarify.

– I suppose you wish to hear.

– I wish. Tell me then.

Iseren did so.

– ..And that person who can help is you? – she added at the end.

– I can. If he will come back.

– I see. I will ask for you advice once I dream about him.

– His presence is not a dream. – Hodhoke reflected girl. – But revelation.

„As if a god he was.“

Iseren spent the rest of night wakefully, unable to fall asleep. At morning they passed the city, intuitively she know that is not capitol city. The crew of sampan didn't even turn their heads in that direction, which gave the girl troth that they're well acquainted with archipelago schemate.

It was late night, Iseren couldn't fall asleep. Each time a image so drastic appeared, that made her sleep disturbed. Any attempt of revie-ving the vision was ineffective.

After one more try she gave up. She struggled to breathe, as if her clothes were wefted from metal, like a chainmail. She never wore such armour, but she heard in Rannuldun complains from guard how it put weight on shoulders.

„What am I even thinking about?“

She got up. Hodhoke wasn't sleeping once more, head he had turned at the sky. Iseren sat down by him, she noticed that Thaelrikhan had closed eyes.

– You do not sleep, Iseren. – greeted her, before she said anything.

– I do not.

Hodhoke remained silent.

– Visions haunt me since evening. – Iseren spoke. – I saw them five times already.

– Quantity does not matter. Elieor likes the image, not the number.

– Elieor? Is he a god?

– He lives in stars. The one I show is his.

Hodhoke's finger pointed at point of the barely seen firmament. He had still closed eyes. Iseren didn't found the star he directed at.

– I understand. What do you know about Elieor?

– He creates. Only ones above the will can interprete them. Are you one of those?

– Alas, no, but.. You knew him? Why didn't you mention yesterday?

– By that time you wished to be heard.

– True. I could mention that.

Hodhoke didn't respond.

– I want to speak with him.

– Do so.

– In dreams?

– In these he shall answer.

– But I cannot fall asleep.

– You will.

– What makes you certain about this?

Hodhoke stood up. For first she thought her doubt offended him, although Thaelrikhan simply opened his eyes. His sight casted an unusual serenity, close to indifference.

– Lay down. – he spoke. – And close eyes.

Iseren obeyed. She strained her hearing, Hodhoke began to recite verses in foreign tongue, it sounded similar to the one he spoke with Zheydar:

– *Tsu'uba arunatha ne. Gathei akujo ono ha'ani khamnekiire hanasai, ata'ani ha oyamenasa, khesute nhod okhroi ma'athi.* – she perceived the formula. – *Ono Shon toha'ash hkaye, khesute nhod okhroi ma'athi.*

Iseren felt moisture on her face, left by the strokes of Hodhoke's fingers. Feel of them was unusually delicate, it did not give her cringes, which she usually felt upon someone's touch.

– *Ono Shon toha'ash hkaye, khesute nhod okhroi ma'athi.* – repeated Hodhoke.

Iseren's shirt tugged, Hodhoke unfastened it. She remained motionless, Thaelrikhan freed only one knot, at the clavicle height. Hodhoke rubbed the exposed body, oil under Iseren's nose started to braise her with heavy, herbal scent.

Breathing turned out to be difficult, yet she didn't fight for it. Hodhoke fixed her arms, removed strand from her forehead. Procedure seemed to be continuing, though girl's memory struggled to keep up. The smell of oils was too potent to pay attention to something else.

Iseren was not at the sampan anymore. Hum of water was gone, with it repeated formulas by Hodhoke. She felt an acute burst of force, its potency made her queasy.

Blood, entrails, pain. Something that once was human spilled through the water now, forming ruby snakes. Grotesque shifted slowly to abstraction. Iseren stopped feeling supper elevating to her throat.

„*Is it art or prophecy?*” – she asked herself

– Well, Iseren. – she heard sudden voice of Elieor. – in both cases thou wouldst answer correct.

– Whither you got to know my name? – Iseren had difficulties to remain on only one question. – Do you read my thoughts?

– So – he took a breath – If I have access to thy thoughts, why would I not be able to browse through them? That would give thee an answer whither I found thy name.

– Oh, you are right. I am sorry, it is simply.. Difficult to comprehend.

– Difficult? – Elieor’s haughty tone disappeared. – Hm, maybe.. Thou art used to only material reality. Allow me to adjust.

Iseren started to feel her body, soft grass tickled her feet. Upon raising her sight she spotted mysthically presenting grove and Elieor, sitting elegantly on a stone bench. Light robes he wore were ideally attired to his physique, letting for slight exposure of the owner’s body. Iseren tried to not put an eye of his svelte body, especially not think about it. She focused then on Elieor’s face, seemingly comely even for canon of high-borns. Due to the distance, Iseren approached him cautiously. Bench on which he was sitting was too short for another person.

– It will stretch for thee. – explained Elieor.

Iseren wasn’t able to sit down in air, despite the assurance she wasn’t feeling that bench could simply grow to let her fit.

– We can stay. – Elieor stated. – No difference that is.

In moment Elieor stood up, the seat evaporated, as rapidly boiled water. Iseren put a heavy amount of strain to not comment that.

„*I am not in dream. But also not in reality*”

– Thou right art. – Celestial agreed. – We are in.. Corridor, between rooms. Or alternatively, out of any building. In sort of a creation.

– I have to ask. You disturbed my sleep, why for?

– Oh? – Elieor looked as astir. – Disturb? I was only curious, what do thou art thinking about my artistry. As I mentioned some time ago, I paint the upcoming. Strictly to facts, but with an artistic spirit.

– Why you ask me? Am I meant to know something? Or deliver?

– Oh, your conception about our race is at least adorable. – Elieor squinted eyes, amused. – Without a gift, those are only pictures. Though I value that interpretation. It reminds me trails of a blinded one to comprehend what are colours.

– So.. You like to observe struggle of earthian race, as though it was well known to you protrusion?

– Said in very stereotypical manner. I am not omniscient, even us, Celestials have our limits. But glad I am to remark some of yours, you are verily interesting. Such pity, only at observation it remains.

– What makes us so interesting to observe?

– You are distant from us, yet in some way close. You see, with the passing of time a flawless ideal starts to bore you, planned to the last bit. And you start to esteem the beauty of fortuity.

„*I wonder how long was he stalking me.*” – Iseren forgot that her interlocutor hears all of it for sure.

– I am not obsessed, worry not. And I have respect towards thy privacy. – he responded in a courteous tone.

– I take your word for it. Do you know why I saw your atelier in dreams?

– I like the change. From „why” to „do you know why”. Regarding thy question, I do not know. I thought thou hast wanted to be a guest there. Allow me to ask you something. As I mentioned, I am eager to hear thy opinion about my painting.

– Hm. – she bethinked her choice of words. – I wasn’t able to perceive them, except the last one. Although the way of capturing the grotesque was oddly calm, almost nonchalant.

– I needed an opinion of someone different from my kind, I thank thee. Certainly with your sensitivity such stimulus is less interesting, maybe even loathing. Despite this I value thine open mind. Regarding the mind, I have to mention that I am aware what you desire to know. If you need to, thou canst receive the truth from first hand, as I can colloquially put.

– A kind offer. Yet I'd like to cognize the essence of myself in my way. By knowing answer in unprecedented way I will not feel it in a proper way.

– Feeling the answer.. I understand.

– I hope I didn't offend you by refusal.

– No at all. That is thy decision, I have to respect that. And I am glad I can finally talk with thee, despite all of this. – he put an grim gaze at her.
– And the future I painted will happen.

– Undoubtely. What will happen to me?

– A fight, over thy capability.

– I don't know how it is, fall under someone's might.

– So thou wilt know by then. I am sorry if that sounded as a intimidation or malediction.

– It sounded that way. But I take that as a warning. Which will not change anything.

– No question when and where?

– No.

– You simply obey the will of fortune?

– I have no choice. That is only luxury of a Celestial, to play along or against the destiny. I can only as a puppet, play my role.

Elieor smiled faintly in response.

Grove transformed to delicately humming stream, by which sat down Celestial. Via hand gesture she invited her near his side. Iseren, once sat down, tried to wade with feet in water. Upon submerging them, she felt blows of wind instead of move of water.

„An interesting sensation. Is that matter formed only from vapour element?“

– It is, I, simply put, rule over vapour.

Iseren let her curiosity to touch the Celestial. She was shocked when her hand went through his body.

– Oh, forgive me. I limited sensory experience in my creation. – he apologized. – I could improve this little world, although I have worries about how thine *yahnaeil-aytham* would bare the change.

– Explain, if you please.

– *Aytham* is catalysis in celestial body, it allows for control over particular element. Except *nirilkash*, naturally.

- *Nirilkash* is related with Nyr or known by name Nyreliion?
- With who? I don't understand.
- Too much time it would cost to explain. I thought with an access to my memory you will know who he is.
- It is difficult to explicate. Thoughts, if compared to book pages, written are in bigger letter if often reviewed. And in opposition to books, it is the unopened page that fade.
- I see. Thank you for elucidation.

Elieor nodded, turned quiet. Under occurring silence, Iseren listened the flow of stream, its unnatural sound brought her attention. It was lacking squelches as though it was dry.

„It is, in some odd way. Water without liquid is not water.”

– Can I control elements? – Iseren spoke. – I am daughter of two Celestials.

– I know thou art *Khallan-Caern*, the One with Stigmates. – Elieor raised head. – Despite this, no rule over matter is meant for thee. Forces clashes upon your birth. I will sound cruel, but that fusion in many ways degraded thee. Following the topic, is there something else thou wantest to know about us, Celestials?

- No. I know too much.
- I don't understand thee. Thou hast already put so much effort to speak with me.
- Not enough to know everything.
- I think thou doest not care about the knowledge. – Celestial's gaze wast too piercing to ignore.

Something stabbed her abdomen as if she was caught with serious crime. She remained silent.

- I think that is difficult topic for thee. – Elieor stated.
- It is. – she admitted with effort. – Don't read my mind in this direction. Please.
- I swear. And apologize. Let us forget about this.

Scenerys shifted, this time the two was floating in middle of starlit sky. Iseren never felt so light, she could not lose impression of being not so different than wind swirling around them.

– This is how body feels without weight, when we become the one with the primalform. – he explained. – This is how we travel.

– Always?

– No, not always, other means of communications. Now allow me to ask about something. How a person not experiencing such practice from a child conceives this?

– It is difficult for a word that will describe this.

– I see.. Perhaps some day thou wilt be able to answer precisely.

Silence occurred.

– Soon thou wilt wake up. – Elieor announced.

– How it is to see forward?

– A great gift it is, but an awe as well. Apparently more eerie sensation than seeing an end of oneself does not exist. I am not reaching there with my sight, but yet, I fear that void, noir amongst the colour.. No word can grasp it.

– I take a guess it is better to not know.

– It is, by heavens better. Truly, a luxury it is to not know. About the end, I am sorry but thou hast to go. A mind doesn't take well sudden departure from created world.

– I understand. To the next time.

– It is up to you when that time will take place. You know the way now.

– I do. I shall come back.

Iseren started to feel the weight of body again. Upon distancing from Elieor, vision around her started to appear under mirage, at some point it darkened. Iseren woke up at ease, feeling light on spirit. First time in her life, Iseren wanted to fall asleep, despite being well-rested.

XVI.

Since her dialogue with Elieor day cycle of Iseren seemed to shift dramatically; she was reticent, apathic towards surrounding, everything from the past day left her mind as though she was part of meaningless dream. At night though her mind awaken, ready for another conversation with Celestial.

She prepared for sleep, closed eyes. In meantime girl browsed her memories, like volume pages.

Iseren watched her injured forearm. Above the girl leaned Geonrod. Man was younger, also much higher, even though Iseren remembered she overgrew him by head as a sixteen year old.

– Does it hurts badly? – he asked.

She didn't respond, without any emotion she peered the laceration. She grasped and interpreted the new feeling – pain. She felt its presence as fair, almost pleasing. Although she was certain that not always pain will enjoy her.

– Too rapid my lunge was for a novice. – Geonrod reprimanded himself. – Come, enough duels for today. We will take care of your wound, should do without any gash.

– Without gash I will forget about the wound. – Iseren spoken. – My first one.

– You will not forget, even if it will mend, as your first it is. You will always remember the first one. And last, may I wish you could remember long about that one.

– You sure I will not forget? – Iseren questioned childishly.

– Trust me. And come with me. Back to hut.

Iseren nodded, obeyed his word.

„He was right. I did not forget.“

Iseren opened eyes, she wasn't greeted with a sight of ship. She looked at empty chamber, only person in room was her.

„I shall try tomorrow.“

Next night; Iseren was falling asleep slowly, as she was too focused on desire of sleep to actually do so. At some point she was able to perish these thoughts, submerge into dream.

In chamber Elieor was present, though something in the room itself was less believable. In some spots space bended, escaped from her sight.

„*What happened?*”

– I slowly forget how that chamber used to look. – explained Elieor.
– I was not hither for long time. A very long time.

– Don’t you want to speculate with its look?

– I don’t, I would not feel it authentic.

– Hold on. Do you see only forward?

– Yes, only. I am not master chronomant, but a meager seer. Past I only perceive with memory.

– I dispose the memory of this place. You can take it from my mind. – Iseren proposed.

– Kind from thee. But let this chamber fade away, degrade. I will not come back here anymore, perhaps better will be if I cease to visit it.

– Why won’t you return?

– I am at war, it is more of a senseless show of might than actual conflict.

– As any else.

– No, not any is. You, on Si’irsghaloh have a reason to fight, for resource, for terrain. And Celestials? For us it is entertainment.

– You separate from common idea.

– Not just me. Many is against. But not my parents. They sent at war, for glory. – eyes of Elieor shimmered. – I hate solutionism.

– What?

– An outlook to life matter. In its mean for life is and must be some sick explanation. For instance my family life means giving away for worthless eulogy, spill of blood. To not live too cosily.

– I wonder in what teaching you believe.

– I do not believe in any. Life is definition by itself.

– How it is related with your contemplation over fortuity?

– Glad I am for change of topic. Thou seest, in comfort of my home I spent hours pondering on ideal, could say boring paintings. And I realize them. Perfection closed me at dream of schemates, refined, established. And fortuity? As though a edifice it is, leading for compositions I would never happen to imagine.

– How it is to paint with sight forward?

– Too ideal, I knew where to place a brush to encounter artistry too faultless, shallow because of it. And now, I close this proverbial third eye during painting. I commit mistakes, spontaneously I correct them. This a beauty I never knew before.

– Curious I am whither that decision came.

– From observation, I had and have for them plenty of time. – voice of Elieor shifted slightly. – A thought once struck, what if not to know the faith of wanderer in forest? Instead of haughtily watch his fate, I awaited, in anxiety. From such feeling solicitude flourished, I trembled upon thought what is after. I realized by that point. Without certain prediction of fortune I noticed more with seeing less.

Celestial made a long pause, observing the distance.

– And now, allow me to ask something. – he spoke in almost whisper.

– I am listening.

– Would thou allowst me to picture thyself?

– I will. As long the painting will be chaste.

– So negligence is not the case. – seeing Iseren in denial, Celestial frowned in consideration. – Right, such painting would not reflect thyself. I have to think it through.

– Shall I pose?

– No, I will not paint this vision on easel. I only use it symbolically. It does not exist anyway.

„Easel is that tripod, I take a guess.“

– Vision, you mean. – Iseren spoke, before Celestial could answer to her thoughts. – Would you like to send it later?

– With pleasure. – Elieor smiled calmly.

– One thing remained.

– What is it?

– Try to use less amount of energy in your visions. Last time I almost threw up because of it.

Since Iseren had contact with Celestial she didn't feel as she was sleeping through the night. Days appeared incomplete, she lost the count of them. She lied under the baldachin, trying to rally.

– Better ye feel? – checked her Svjetane.

– Better? Did I mention something about this?

– Well, yes. – woman was shocked by her question. – Ye told me that unwell ye feel, that head burns ye

– I don't remember.

– Cause ye couldn't sleep. Take a kip, if ye fare better now. We can reach Tanung anyday now.

– And is now?

– What ye mean?

– Time of day.

– Aha. Dawn, close to it. Go sleep.

– And why are you awake?

– Well – Svjetane blushed. – I know ye don't like asking of yer being. But I wanted to check, sorry.

– I am fine as you can see. You better go sleep too.

– But hollow, if ye need something.

– As you say.

Closing eyes was enough for Iseren to fall asleep.

Iseren woke due to sound of fast footsteps on ship's deck. She raised head, faced the panorama of the impressive city. With the view no conclusion was born, she watched the capitol of imperium indifferently. Girl was still not rested, she had a will to lay down and return to sleeping.

„*Shake it off..*”

She didn't remember how he got on feet. The crew escorted them through less crowded streets, up to the beginning of stony stairs, leading to the palace located at the hill. Men did not step at stairs, they only shared a word with Adaiel.

In that time Iseren sent her gaze on nearby architecture. She was watching it listlessly, unable to form any verdict.

Once nodded she proceeded to climb stairs, this time under safeguard of heavy-armoured soldiers. Soon they reached end of them, escorting them soldiers take a moment for mercenaries. A rest was mandatory only for Svjetane and Adaiel, though consiliarius tried to not show signs of exhaustion. Adaiel threw conniving glance at one of soldiers, they returned to traversing the palace fields.

Complex consisted of numerous structures varying in size and function. At the two sides of it grand buildings were piled up, one of them was right next to the entrance steps, Adaiel headed towards it.

Once passing by peristasis, they ended up in spacious vestibule, company of soldiers appeared to take more stark posture. Despite the palace guard, place seemed to be defunct, as if present aura of over respect and fear killed all courtians. The group sent echo through stony flooring, until they slowed their pace near entrance to throne hall. Leader wasn't at the seat. Adaiel stopped, reaching the scroll in tube. Iseren felt the anxiety of other, it helped her rouse her mind.

– What now? – inquired Iseren, voice of her was hoarse due to lack of use.

Eyes of Adaiel gleamed, like of child that heard insult about themselves.

– What may be? – he huffed. – Let us go look for leader.

„I do not know is it good idea.”

Adaiel rushed through sides of chamber, after him went one of soldiers and Iseren. Armsman didn't look as though he plans to sto him, the same did girl. Suggested by soldier's mien she adjudged that atleast he surmises what consiliarius is about to do.

– Adaiel. – she sent an sharp gaze. – Where are you going?

The boy didn't respond. She stopped rapidly, looking for something in throne hall.

– *Iwoga aw urtahan aha wagtutug karuyag inawang.* – soldier instructed him.

– Walnghan awonga wiyo, Hcetsa-Wya. – responded Adaiel, slightly lowering his head.

„Many I would give to understand what are they talking about.”

Regardless of what soldier said, it gave consiliarius an answer whither he needs to go. Warrior blinked shocked upon seeing consiliarius suddenly moving.

– *Awigtwa!* – uttered soldier, running to him. – *Awigtwa Kaunghce-Wya! Sagdon manwasanamg awa kangiwang Kaunghar-Pahgah!*

– *Wugak ha iwpuolongwe!* – Adaiel's voice turned shrill, he looked as offended. – *An awontil wakadto bisanpa ana iw kaburutwa.*

„*I take a guess he does not want to fulfill Adaiel's will, I can be wrong though. I shall risk, trust my senses. At worst soldier will reprimand me.*”

Iseren caught to Adaiel, almost near exit.

– Wait! – she grabbed his robe. – Where do you need rush so badly?

– To imperial majesty, where else could I? – Adaiel tried to control his voice tone. – Could at least thee not sabotage my attempts?

– Calm down. If the majesty is not at throne then he is likely busy.

– He is, currently he has council, which our comrade revealed. And our coming is great addition to the moot.

– It is not. – her grip on robes strengthened. – Stay here.

Adaiel turned to her acutely. By her mind a thought came that consiliarius will hit her.

– Thou hast ordered me? – asked her in unpleasantly. – Really?

– No, I advised. As you are about to act stupid.

Adaiel exhaled loudly.

– Yes, I act stupid, as always! – boy bursted in trembling tone. – And I thought, you at least respect me!

– But..

– And thou knowest what? If so stupid I am, I end my agreement, thou wilt only as for reward get. And with it hire a mentor.

Iseren let Adaiel's robe free, she wasn't willing to even look at the boy. Accompanying them soldier looked at her surprised, seeing her sudden remittance.

– A vain hope that consiliarius will give up. – she explained, not counting for soldier's knowledge of old speech.

He didn't respond, but suggested by not optimistic tone his mien saddened. They could only follow Adaiel by now.

Tribune chose one of the doorways, entering to the spacious courtyard. Its size emphasized the depopulation – only palace guard was

present there. Under dead silence Iseren heard tinkle of soldier's lames, both from the pace and cringes from the growing fear.

„*Whatever the punishment for interruption of imperator's moot is, it must be horrid.*” – presumed Iseren, discretely glancing at pale from awe soldier.

Palace's schemate slowly deteriorated upon traversing though various parts of complex; it was difficult to profess are they not circling around. Adaiel himself had to rely on the soldier, who still fruitlessly tried to dissuade interruption of moot. They passed the wing for nobility, gardens, armouries, until they reached high-guarded edifice, to which headed consiliarius. Escorting them armsman muttered something, by the tone of it it sounded as foul vulgarism.

„*Not surprised I am.*”

Guard blocked way for coming Adaiel, informing him about something in official tone. Adaiel due to that reached for the scroll, recited few verses from it. Watchmen with pursed lips lettem him go, put an mistrustful gaze on following the boy Iseren. Warning which guard told them upon leave made the soldier cringe.

„*I do not want to know what they said.*”

Inside, Adaiel walked down the short corridor to sliding doors made from glossing wood. Full of gaps construction of them allowed the three to take a brief glance at ongoing council. In that room voice took variety of Inkarns – from proud soldiers to shrinked from age wisemen. Leader itself was unable to be found by Iseren.

She stopped peeking through doors, focusing on Adaiel. Boy at that moment revealed something to one of guards, by his mien it seemed, that consiliarius asks for something absurd. Man at some point gave up and entered the chamber, in which council was. With discretive gest he hurried the rest to follow him.

They stood behind the guardian, following after him the bow.

– Thy reverence, – proclaimed watchman in old tongue – raport from Khyire'de arrived.

– Very well then. – replied aged Inkarn. – In name of revered emperor I aver that he will listen to what continent has to say. And may they have a reason for interruption of our council.

– If his imperial majesty wishes, I can use tanungawan. – Adaiel stepped deeper to chamber.

– In the name of his reverence I declare, that it is up to thy will. – elder said. – And this two?

– Escort, sire.. – Adaiel started.

Awkward silence took place.

– I presume thou art expecting my name. – old Inkarn spoke in frigid tone. – I only serve as translator, I answer in name of his reverence. Name by which I was highten irrevelant is. Regarding thy escort, they shan't be present here.

– You can take them out, if it's needed. – Adaiel almost cut into elder's sentence.

– Soldier – elder turned to the guard in doorway – They the two. Out of council wing, on courtyard.

– *Natuwaga wingya aw Hcaerone-Wyar.* – guard switched to tanungawan

– *Walnghan awonga wiyo, Wankhce-Wyar.* – replied elder with warmer voice.

Iseren and her companion obeyed, they let the guard lead them outside.

„And consiliarius could wait.”

Soldier likely shared her mindset, as he watched the facade with the same uneasy mien.

– Better we go back to vestibule. – she tried to convince him.

– *Naliiwikg awonga watlinga aw.* – soldier said back in apologizing tone.

– Nie znam tanungańskiego.

„Presumably he said the same, but about the old speech.”

Only when she pointed to the entrance building, soldier understood what she was proposing. She also noticed that his mien was proud once again.

„Good he calmed down. Maybe consiliarius will manage that by himself..”

– Ye back. But where's Adaiel? – Svjetane whispered anxiously. – Did he..

– He is not arrested, worry not. Although he force-joined the moot.

– Iseren.. You was supposed to watch over him! – woman hissed.

– Close to miracle that is. He does not sound a reason of mine and soldier hither.

– By the murrain.. – Svjetane put an fist on her forehead. – Then why ye came back?

Iseren proceeded to summarize the situation.

– He what? – Svjetane cutted into middle of story. – He really cried to yer face? And broke the agreement?

Girl nodded.

– I'm so sorry.. Oh and I stopped yer story. Continue.

Iseren obeyed.

– Quite an ale lad brewed. – commented Svjetane, when Iseren was done with summary.

– Better I could not put.

– And crazied he pretty well. What now, for enemies he has us now? I thought he only wants do everything by himself also show how wise and resourceful he is.

– This does not lead us anywhere. – stopped her Iseren.

– Likely ye don't in mood for the topic. So we shall not speak about that.

– If you say so.

– Want to relax? – tried Svjetane. – Hodhoke could sold us some wisdom..

– No. – cutted out Iseren. – We shall wait for consiliarius. In silence.

Party had difficults to assess passage of time during their stay in palace; without consiliarius's authority they weren't certain are they permitted to leave vestibule. At some point company of soldiers returned to their positions, they were left without any possibility to contact with any

potential courtian that could get interested with three strangers in palace. Right now the watch didn't change, it seems no one from court will interpose to their presence. Iseren was impressed how eminent the guard was standing. If not march for few drops of sandglass, they would believe those are statues.

„I do wonder, how such soldiers perform in clash..” – girl thought. – „The same goes for their weapons, glaives. Very inventive combination of sword with spe..”

– Company? – whisper of Svjetane brought her from reverie. – We may have a problem..

– Reason? – Iseren asked.

– Look at the throne hall.

She peeked from vestibule, at the hall her sight met four soldiers and courtian in colourful robes. They appeared as though they seek for someone, they went in a conversation with palace guard. One of watchmen as for answer directed the men right at the mercenaries.

– They look for us, no doubt. – muttered Svjetane. – Any ideas ye have?

– None. – girl admitted.

– We shall go to them. – suggested Hodhoke.

– Ye mad? – huffed Svjetane.

– He is not. – Iseren backed the Thaelrikhan. – They will find us regardless. Maybe they will appreciate the cooperation.

– Fine. – woman gave up. – Better we not regret this.

The three came from behind column, taking a tame pace towards the stranger courtian. His protectors upon seeing them didn't lower their glaives, yet sent them vigilant gaze. Courtian himself turned to them, put haughtily hands on chest. Iseren bowed to the man. He responded with the same gest. Warm at first sight cooled down, once man looked back at mercenaries.

– I did not expect you will show by yourself. – accent of his was well practiced, which was rare occurrence amongst hitherto met tanungawans. – This will ease the process.

– Process? What awaits us, if we may to ask? – tried to find out Iseren.

– I shall reveal along the way.

The girl quickly explained the situation for the rest, them, not having any else choice, went after the stranger. Man started to lead them through various parts of palace complex, with pace so swift it was difficult to keep up to it.

– With who I have pleasure? – returned to queries Iseren.

– With messenger. Name of mine is an unimportant matter. I only serve as receiver of instance's word. – clarified messenger.

– I do not pressure then.

– Glad to hear. – he paused to bow to passed by courtian. – Ah and also. I promised to unveil what process I meant. His reverence expects you. On private audience. Out of imperial moots.

– Regarding the council, forgive us our brusque coming. We don't know your law.

– Not to me you shall apologize. But I think his reverence's auspice will reach you, and naturally your.. Comitee?

– Tribune, also captain for us. – corrected him Iseren.

– Tribune.. Unusual title. Many years will take knowing our cultures.

– You say it as if we had a future together.

– We will, is it not?

– Frankly, I don't know.

– So may it remain that way. Aware I am that raising one's curiosity to let it unsated is improper, but bonding me interdict to reveal any information under threat of torment convince me to such boorish act. I can only tell you, you have endorsement from many council participants.

– Who are those participants, if I may to know?

– Dignitary having privilege to serve his reverence with advisory. High ranked soldiers, veterans, thinkers.

– Soldiers were with the peaceful concept?

– Army was first with it actually. They had their reasons.

– Related with war I suppose.

– Officially I cannot tell thee.

– And unofficially?

– As partially said, I value my life too much. – man smirked gloomily.

– There. Guest quarters. Your councilor expects your presence. And it was pleasure to meet you.

– Glad I am too. – Iseren bowed in farawell.

The three was left alone in front of the fair-sized house. Iseren looked around, she found similar quarters, all of them was built from wood in airy presenting construction.

„*So difficult to believe that winds didn't claim those houses.*” – she thought. – „*Tanungawa and its fiefs have verily captivating architecture.*”

– Iseren? – cautious question from Svjetane brought the girl from observation. – Do we wait for something?

– Not at all. – girl shook off reverie. – We shall go in, if Adaiel awaits us.

–