

A book

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I

THE CASE OF THE NIGHT-RUNNER

* * *

Note: this work uses the convention of placing the surname before the given name.

As the dim moonlight forspread through the ever-waking boughs of cedars rustling in a gentle lullaby among the placid wind, and the nearby creek, once a leviathan waterfall from the distant peaks, flowed as it always did, a young person with flowing lavender hair in open clothing sat on the birch-plank floor of the fifth-story loggia, enjoying a rare hour free of mundane housework. Cytaen Myllada, no more than thirteen years of age at that time, once could fantasize of tales and legends, war and peace, the great and the small, that lay beyond the cedars, or even this village, and had even written of them, but now her imaginations had nearly run out. After all, speculating what is there does not compare to actually knowing what is there, nor does mere knowledge compare to seeing these places firsthand.

Myllada also held a long-standing interest over mathematics and nature, interests that her parents, allegedly desiring an ignoramus to perform chores and marry young, would not tolerate. Having seen no interior of a school or library, she had learned to read using a book she had received eight years ago from an eccentric instructor, stashed in a closet alongside seven score pages of her own writing, avoiding the wrath of the flame.

By then, this inquisitiveness had vexed the young person for no fewer than three thousand nights in the confines of the mansion uneroded by time, wherein one could not find any traces of modern society.

The unexpected clamor of bushes snapped her out of reverie. Myllada, who seldom had the opportunity of conversing with those outside her family, transitioned into a kneeling position, peering over the rails in order to discern who, or what, made that sound.

Flashing a cloak as dark as the rest of its outfit, a form scurried along the side of the building.

Loudly enough for the figure to hear the sound, but quietly enough to avoid waking up anyone else in the house, Myllada whistled.

The figure stopped and turned around, running to the source of the whistle.

Knowing that any speech would attract attention, Myllada brandished her

hand, receded into her room, pulled out a sheet of paper and a pen, and scribbled a message before folding the paper several times and tossing it onto the needle-covered grounds, ensuring that the letter did not land on a lower loggia.

The note thudded on hitting the ground, at which the unidentified scampered to collect it, before bowing shallowly and making haste out of the forest.

As the surroundings of the house again became desolate, Myllada again felt the hopelessness of residing there. But with this cloud came a silver lining: the narrowest probability that whomever she spotted would respond to her plea; help her escape the wretched prison.

* * *

As the sun rose, a person, having returned home not long ago, opened a note that flew from a mansion untouched by centuries past. Not only was the letter unsigned, but the handwriting flew in all directions, hardly organized, and a style unexpected from someone who would live in such a place.

I have been stuck in this house for many years, without a day of school, being raised as an ignoramus whose only purpose is to maintain the house and marry young. You are one of the few people other than family members whom I can reach.

Please consider replying by any feasible measures. If I find you helpful, then I will find something for you in return. Make sure to arrive at night and bring clothing.

The recipient wondered why the sender asked for clothing – perhaps the sender was naked? In any case, there was work to be done, to which the message was completely irrelevant.

* * *

By midday the excitement over the mysterious visitor has eroded, and the possibility of any further external contact seemed a distant dream. *That person will never come; what do I have in return?* Myllada pondered as she swept the corridors, lapsing for a few seconds.

“A woman who does not sweep is worthless!” came a deep yell behind her, shocking her back into the monotonous task.

I could count the people who use that word with one hand. Well, on the bright side, if I’m worthless, then it shouldn’t matter much to get out of here! Myllada humorously concluded while joining thought and movement into the same rhythm. *But, of course, I can’t just brazenly say “I’m useless to you” and frolic out through the door.*

* * *

Once again the moonlight diffused through the tree-branches and save the ever-running creek and the whispering of the trees all was quiet. Myllada was

in her room tonight, lying in bed, when she heard the familiar clamor of bushes and opened the door to the loggia in response.

It appeared to be the same night-walker, now peering upwards toward her vicinity. The figure observed the trees, as if it were finding a path into the house, but after a long moment, it left behind a large sack and ran away into the depths of the woods.

Whatever it left... it must be coming back, but for what? pondered Myllada as she receded to her room. She opened the closet door and pulled out a stack of papers hidden behind the immodest clothing she had. Kneeling toward the moonlight, she picked up random pages to read and held them to the air.

Sturdy wooden bridges span the mountains between which the river was born, connecting the buildings suspended in the air. Most of the rooms are open to the cold air, with tall windows with no glass.

Near the valleys tunnels a veten wide are bored in the walls of the mountains, leading to mineshafts reaching up to three navso underground.

And another:

In the forests to the south there once existed a great city, two navso across, whose tallest structures could be observed from eighty navso away. One who traveled through it would be confused about whether it was day or night.

It has been long since it was flattened to ruins, but several visitors still frequent a mysterious shack near its center –

Hearing a whistle, Myllada opened the door to the loggia and noticed a contraption brought by the night-runner – what seemed to be a tray with a crank to the side.

Upon depositing the sack onto the tray, the figure turned the crank, causing the machine to lift the tray up to the fifth floor using some sort of metallic arm.

Myllada retrieved and opened the sack, finding a pair of sandals and a plum-colored robe. Inside the robe was the note she had sent, with a message on the back: *Can you get out?* to which she, still in the open dress, and discerning that the platform obviously could not support a human being, took out a pen and replied:

All of the doors are sealed. Perhaps I could jump off, but how would I return?

II

THE TAILLESS LONG-TAIL

* * *

When Myllada rose again in the morning, she felt that she had not slept enough, but her father was yelling for her in the voice she had learned to abhor. Her name, her appearance, her voice – she detested nearly everything in her current life, but now was the wrong time for absentminded mentation, and she reluctantly stood up and opened the door to the rest of the edifice.

At the table over the early meals, always eaten in sleeping-clothes, her father inquired, “Thou lookest half-asleep. Hast thou been awake all night?”

“I have not,” replied Myllada, while sipping her tea. The taste, she noticed, was slightly exotic.

* * *

Another night fell and Myllada was alone in her room, putting on the clothing that she received the past night and anticipating another visit, reading her old compositions to keep herself occupied.

Suddenly, she felt exhausted and could not concentrate on the passages. A desire to sleep encroached on her mind, more influential than the anticipation of a friend, and she, still covered to the feet and down the arms, unfolded her body and laid her head on her right arm, allowing a curtain of darkness to descend.

* * *

Myllada woke up, face in a bucket of water. To the side there was a person no more than four and twenty years old, with short dark brown hair, as well as a lantern, which was somehow lit without a flame.

Rising into a sitting position, Myllada asked, “How did you get in?”

“One of the windows wasn’t sealed properly. My name is Darmjarel Telto.”

“Cytaen Myllada. Where’s your tail? I can’t find it.”

“I’d like to look at your necklace. It looks quite attractive on you.”

Myllada pulled out a fine golden chain fitted snugly around her neck. The red gem at the front was cut into a rhombus, but there was an orange mist trapped inside it.

Telto almost jumped in surprise. “This is a *tracking charm*. Long since they’ve been banned. As long as it’s on, whoever put it there knows where you

are. Severing the chain isn't of any use either; that person will be notified with immense pain. Now if you could find where the two ends of the chain were connected, you could disconnect them and avoid these measures. However, the necklace is hot to the touch for anyone but the wearer."

"Now, how difficult is disconnecting the two ends like that?"

"Finding the joining point isn't too difficult; you can just look for an abnormality in the chain. The hard part is actually disconnecting them without triggering the notification; as doing so requires precision. Even connecting the charm into a full circle is a huge feat."

"That's almost impossible, much less doing it the night of your escape."

"If they dare to use forbidden magic like that," pointed out the acquaintance, "they wouldn't hesitate to kill a person of anything less than pure blood. This is a dangerous place to meet; we should gather a short distance from here. A sleeping person can't track you, of course. And for this purpose, I brought something." Telto pulled a knotted rope out of a sack. "Tie this to one of the pillars out there and climb down. And take a bag too."

"Thank you very much."

"So you can read and write, is that correct? Do you enjoy it?"

"I can. I used to enjoy writing, but now my imagination has run out. At the same time, I'd like more books to read."

"I'd like to talk more, but morning is approaching, and I'd like to survive. I will see you next night."

While Telto, carrying the lantern, leaped from the loggia, Myllada started stashing the rope and the bag into the closet and changing into the open dress, crawling into the bed before sleep caught her again.

III

THE SPIRE TO THE SKY

* * *

When the old man Nasrelten opened the door to his daughter's room, he was puzzled to see a bucket of water inside.

"Why is there a bucket of water in thy room?"

To which Myllada replied, "The room was hot."

"Beware: I am not a foolish man. If thou thinkest of departing without my consent, I will promptly encounter and escort thee back here. Now let us eat." The old man left toward the table.

Myllada had no choice but to follow the old man, and she recalled the tea tasting slightly unusual. *Perhaps it contained a sleeping ingredient.*

* * *

Once again did night fall, but so did a heavy rain, sliding off the leaves and assimilating into the ground. Myllada, not wanting to read that night, knelt toward the exterior in the clothing given by Long-Tail, with the rope to her side.

The pattering of the rain muffled the whistle, but Myllada could detect it; in response, she opened the door and walked outside to tie the rope to one of the pillars and slide across it onto the muddy ground, making a splash and dirtying her feet. Without saying a word, Telto ran away, prompting Myllada to follow her under an old spruce tree, whose soft floor of spent needles were moistened only by the occasional drop of rain that managed to pass through the canopy.

The cold light from the lantern turned on, lighting the underside of the tree with a white glow. Telto opened her own bag and took out a small book.

Looking at the pages, Myllada scooted herself beside Telto while she opened the book and started reading aloud, following the elegantly printed letters.

In the great days of Asnar, winter came every year and covered forests and plains in an untouched blanket of snow. Winter after winter, the snowflakes flew down onto the ground and piled up two reašyr high, and the two sisters frolicked across the land, leaving no footprints, neither above the other.

That is, until the fall of Asnar and the succession of Fenran, when the snow clouds advanced less and piled up lower each year, and

the summers grew warmer. They prayed to the Commander of the Sky to undo this effect, yet still the snow melted more quickly every spring and became less inclined to visit when autumn had stripped the trees of their leaves.

At last on the end of winter of the 1289th year, when the snow piled up no more than a half reaser, the elder one cursed the Commander for the diminishing cold season.

In hearing this curse, the Commander snatched the gift of coldness and imposed an eternal summer where they dwelt, to the degree that even the shade became too hot for the two. The sun scorched the mud into bricks, and the river fell an avanta.

The younger sister, while seeking retreat in the lukewarm stream, thought and told to the elder about building a spire to reach the heavens and knock down its potentate.

For sixteen years they advanced the heavens, brick by brick, digging the ground for materials, forming the walls and the stairs, no longer being equals but rather having the elder command the younger.

After sixteen years of sweltering heat, the spire reached half of the clouds, overlooking the Evil-Telling Mountain, and with a bow they shot the Commander from her cloud, dropping her onto hard soil. The spire toppled, dropping the sisters onto the earth, their falls softened by the white layer deeper than ever before.

Myllada interrupted, "They didn't start speaking a different language than before, did they?"

Telto paused for a few seconds for a breath, the replied, "They still spoke the same language: our language." She continued:

Upon seeing the spire topple and the ground shake, magicians from the surrounding areas investigated what happened. They found the remains a suitable place for them, as their insides felt warm and filled with magical power.

The newcomers showered thanks onto the sisters for a shelter. They replaced the mud-brick walls with stone and lit the interior with torches, and near the edges, they built new rooms.

What was the center of the spire became a great library, lit by the sky, with more than one million books, the shelves towering like the trees of an old forest, filled with works from all directions and distances, from the common to the esoteric.

Across a door, the air was warmed by giant candles, and the walls were made of sandstone from the deserts. Scrolls and books spanned the tables, their text in an illegible script.

And across the hallway, beyond another door, once an underground river was a great canal, two and a half navso long. If one manages to swim that distance, then one encounters another door.

Past that one is a garden of unusual, almost otherworldly flowers. It seemingly floats in outer space, the stars shining brightly, and yet another door lies at the end.

What is beyond that door? A former resident has been known to construct esoteric devices, but has long since left for greater ambitions. No one knows if there is another door, let alone what may exist behind it.

And thus the edifice came to be known as the Castle of Magic Snow.

Myllada added, "I apologize for being asleep last night."

"An ingredient with an unpronounceable name. Ingest it in the morning; be quick asleep at night. Where did you find it?"

"I suppose it was in my morning tea. If I don't drink it, though, the old man will get suspicious."

"Could you swap the glasses when he's not looking? I could make a distraction."

"Only when no one else is looking."

For a short time, only the rain made any sound, while the halo of scarlet light made its first appearances in the east. Telto lifted Myllada, carrying her to the rope back up.

"Let me have your clothes and I'll bring them clean next night."

Feeling guilty for having another person do her chores, but at the same time knowing that doing so was also the only way not to get caught harboring a friendship forbidden by her parents, Myllada climbed the rope and took off her clothing. She threw them down and, after untying and stowing the rope, collapsed on the bed naked.

IV

THE LAW OF THE TETRADEUS

* * *

The next morning, the rain ceased to fall, and Myllada could hardly wake up that, when the old man came into her room, he thought that she might be ill.

“Art thou well, my daughter?”

Recognizing the opportunity for a day off, Myllada, remaining in her bed, replied, “No, I am not.” Now that she said it, she truly might not have felt well.

“Then thou shalt remain in bed. Be dressed, but do not overwork thyself.”

* * *

While Myllada was in need of more sleep, the day was still dull and uneventful when she was awake, and, without a clock in the room, she scrutinized the passing of the clouds across the vivid blue sky through the window, imagining kingdoms behind them. Myllada, however, knew from the book that clouds were formed from water vapor, throwing her imagination through the clouds, into the ground.

And that the sun was a star (contrary to what the old man insisted), too hot to live on.

Or that the stars were too far away to visit.

Or the moon only reflected the sun’s light.

Or trees can only become so tall.

Or the world did not expand in a plane into infinity, but rather into itself as a sphere.

Or the Castle of Magic Snow was only a tale, and not reality.

Even if it were, would the sisters have been more content if the snow did not recede and the castle had never been built, or if all happened as in the story?

And *this* reality was only several *etago* in area, devoid of knowledge, with no worthwhile endeavors, only the drudgery of housework, or when fortunate enough to be ill, lying in bed, and doomed to commit early to another person and not choose him – except that this reality was not the only one, and today she could jump out of the window and abandon it forever – if only she had not dirtied her clothes yesterday night.

Myllada stretched her arms and extended the right one over the lower area, rubbing it like the gentle breeze blowing through the window (which the old man had left open), until the knob turned and the back door creaked –

“*Myllada!*” gasped and scolded the old lady Cytaen, who arrived to take her to a bath, quickly cocking her head away and covering her eyes. “Why is thy hand where it is?”

Unable to speak, Myllada slowly shifted her hand away from the area. “No, no reason! It was just a coincidence, mother!”

“Now come with me.”

More energetic than at sunrise, Myllada, still in bed-dress, followed her mother down the stairs, toward the bathing room, a granite chamber with the only windows being the wide ones near the ceiling, entering one of the doors inside while the old woman retrieved several buckets of water.

Now without any clothes, Myllada felt a rough, soapy cloth scratch her, with torrents of water continually raining down, before the woman, strapped *nenfya* drenched, rubbed her body with soft towels and wrapped a long, thin sheet around her many times and pushed her into the water.

Even the sheet did not dull the pain from the ice-cold water – not to mention the bucketfuls that her mother poured over her head every ten seconds, leaving Myllada unable to admire the scenery through the windows. Beneath her audible shivers was a silent prayer to not die from hypothermia – to see it stop any time. Just as the frigidness was about to surpass Myllada’s endurance and she was about to start screaming and pass out, her mother commanded sternly, “Get out.”

The young person processed a thousand different apologies and promises through her head before she felt the sheet being unwrapped from her and towels drying her, this time, more thoroughly, giving a hint that the brutal coldness was now over.

Her mother, gently enunciating, “Thou seem’st well enough,” dried herself and carried her child on her back to another door. On letting Myllada slide off her back, the old woman covered her with a delicate layer of chalk from head to toe.

Great, well enough for some festival. I’ll probably walk limp for the rest of my life too.

* * *

They arrived by apparition to a garden near a brick houses, Masters Nasrelten and Cytaen wearing masks, with the elder child of the latter name beside them. (The younger child, naturally, was still at home, too young to attend.) Candles gave a dim but sufficient light on the many-colored flowers, while quiet music played in the background.

Having been exacted to stay at her parents’ side and not wishing for retribution, Myllada clutched her mother’s hand, whispering, “I do not feel that well.”

“Please stop making excuses.”

“I really don’t –”

Myllada felt a pinch on her back.

* * *

Two hours passed, with Myllada passing them by fondling the grass and the flowers, when she heard her name. She looked up, wondering why she was needed, when her parents pointed to an evacuated center, occupied only by another man, as well as a boy two years older than she.

Myllada took several steps in that direction, but suddenly she gained an insight on what was happening and took a step back.

The crowd went quiet.

“Go forward.”

Several seconds passed before Myllada scurried, still barefoot, although even doing so quietly didn’t prevent the others from noticing her run away.

Myllada jumped around the mansion a quarter of the way before she hopped into a bush to buy a few more hours.

* * *

Four hours passed when Myllada felt a touch and suddenly found herself at home. The mother sobbed, her tears washing away the powder off her face.

The old man Nasrelten first uttered a single word: “What?”

Myllada felt that if she waited a few minutes –

“What is thy problem?” the old man exploded in fury.

Not knowing how to reply, Myllada froze in dread –

“*What is thy problem?*” repeated the enraged person.

“That...” and she paused. “I am worthless to you and therefore should be forced out of this family.”

In a softer voice, the old man refuted,

What will thou get outside this home, thou wretch,
For what a cold and bitter place that is
And weak in mind and body thou canst be –

“Because you made me so, and when you die!” raised she the volume of her silky voice.

The response appeared in a firm tone, “By the time we perish, thou wilt be married.”

“I do not wish to be married – to depend on another mortal for my success.”

“This is against the nature created by the Four Gods; when it is shattered, the shards will stab society.”

“And when you prove that there are four gods and no more; when you prove that they wrote rules; when you find the correct one, then I’ll gladly marry.”

As a reaction the old man collapsed, and his spouse, wiping up her tears, warned, “It has already been too late to return. Carry thy father to the room, and beware that I expect the entire house cleaned by sunrise,” before returning to wash herself and go to bed.

Myllada, on the other hand, walked down the stairs to the basement, gathering a broom and a rag, and back up to the first floor to carry her father to the room. She wet the rag and picked up the particles of chalk remaining on

the floor, then returned to the basement and sat on the floor until she was sure that both of her parents were sleeping.

After half an hour, she checked to see that the bathing-room was unlit, and washed herself there in the dark (after all, it is hard to clean a house when covered in chalk).

Managing to discern some footsteps on the southern side of the domicile, Myllada crawled up the stairs to her room. The familiar sound of the flying tray started, and she picked up the clean sandals and robe, as well as a wide-brimmed hat, all of which she put on in her room before taking the blanket and running to the kitchen.

It did not take long for her to reappear with a sack full of food. Myllada pulled out two sheets of paper; on the first, she wrote, in the most haphazard handwriting that remained legible:

*I AM WORTHLESS TO YOU!
MAYBE I WILL BE MORE USEFUL TO SOMEONE ELSE!!!
SIGNED, YOUR USELESS FIRSTBORN!!!
(P. S. I took some of your food; it should be less than what you
spend on me.)*

On the second, more neatly:

*Just escaped the union.
We're going for good. Gather a pile of leaves below.
Bringing some food too.*

Myllada left the first note on her bed (not hers anymore) and the second on the flying tray. Telto wound the crank the other way, eagerly read the letter, and piled up leaves a half *avanta* high.

Meanwhile, Myllada packed the book and her loose writings into her bag, coiled the rope over her left shoulder, and jumped off the ledge...

V

A DIVINE PROMISE

* * *

Myllada landed with a soft thud, albeit with her hair all over the place and her hat off-center.

Swiftly and lightly did Telto run, hardly making any sound, and swiftly and lightly did Myllada follow her. By then the moon was only half its size, but the stars shone almost as brightly as it did on the first encounter.

Behind bushes and trees, Telto had cut eight of the iron bars from the fence, and near that opening Myllada stopped. "Give me the knife."

Telto handed Myllada a makeshift knife, with its blade sticking out at a peculiar angle from the handle, now wrapped in paper. Myllada first made two cuts through her hair at the shoulder level, and then took out the amulet, aimed for the chain, and pulled the blade through it, grinning as she heard a distant cry of pain.

Dropping the severed necklace, the two dashed through the improvised exit, straight toward an unpaved dirt path...

* * *

While Telto was experienced with running long distances, Myllada was wound down when they reached a small wooden hut next to a lake. It had few windows, all of them plain, and a boat was propped to its side.

Telto opened the door and turned on the lantern. Myllada followed, silently appreciating the austerity of the interior.

"I live with my parents here. Let's scare them," whispered Telto.

As they crept toward the bed, Telto put down the lantern.

* * *

"What in the world are you doing this late?" gasped the one with Telto's hair.

The other, with long red hair, added, "You almost scared us to hell!"

"I came here with someone," Telto pointed to Myllada.

The dark-brown-haired one asked, "Do you two know each other?"

Myllada answered, "Yes."

And the red-haired one: “Anyway, we always welcome visitors.”

The red-haired person, appearing forty-eight years old, flipped a lever, flooding the kitchen with a cold white light.

Curious of what arcane sorcery could generate light without a fire, Myllada questioned, “How did you light the room like that?”

“Electricity,” that person chuckled. “Did you travel through time?”

“Her parents wanted her to marry young, so I’d say so figuratively.” Telto, too, wanted to know more about Myllada’s origins.

“What’s your name, young person?”

“Cytaen Myllada. It seems to me, too, that I’ve stumbled into the far future.”

“Ercelco Šypros,” introduced the red-haired person, who promptly drew five fish out of a white box and carefully placed them on a pan.

“And my name is Darmjarel Cidene,” followed the brown-haired one. “Telto, even you look weary. How far did you run?”

“Six *navso* forward and six back. For my partner it’s just the six back.”

Noticing that Myllada was taking a loaf of bread from her makeshift sack, Cidene thanked her. “What brought you here, stranger?”

“I didn’t like living there. Couldn’t go to school at all –”

“(Nalarylar marahatan es, what kind of parents were hers?)”

“and had to teach myself how to read, forced to wear immodest –”

“(speak of the devil!)”

“and, in general, held worthless unless I was cleaning the house or something. I first saw Telto four days ago, in fact. Dropped a note, and surprisingly she came back the next night. The night after, I fell asleep. This person found an open window, climbed inside, and submerged my head in water.

“She asked for my necklace, which was actually a tracking charm. It’s fortunate she noticed; otherwise, we’d be doomed by morning! I told her that I wanted to read more books,

“and the following night in the heavy rain, she brought a book and read it with me under a tree –”

“(that explains the dirty clothes! If I’d known –)”

“I returned the clothes to her for the day, so content that I forgot to put on clothes before going to bed.

“I was sleepy the next morning, so my father thought I was sick, so he left me in bed. Spent most of my waking hours staring at the sky –” she carefully omitted the part about onanism – “until my mother opened the door to take my bath. That was cold enough for me to think I’d be walking limp for the rest of my life.

“Then she spread chalk on my body, and I wondered what was happening. Took me down to the closet so I could put on an outfit – of course, showing the sides (speak of the devil again) – and my parents and I held hands.

“We suddenly appeared at a garden near a brick house, filled with soft chatter and thousands of candle-flames, reminding me of fireflies. At the center was a stone-brick circle, with six paved paths diverging, their borders delimited by trellises.

“For the most part, I was bored. There was food, but I had to be careful enough not to wipe off the chalk. I spent most of my time with the grass and flowers.

“Then my parents called me and pointed at the circle, where a priest stood with an open scroll and a young person a few years older than I was. I eagerly took the first three steps before realizing what they were trying to do.

“Knowing that I couldn’t go forth, I ran back instead, across one wall of the mansion, and jumped into a group of shrubs and hid in a hole.

“By the time I was found, it was too late. I saw myself back at home, one parent crying and the other raging in disgruntlement. I don’t remember the whole discussion, but I do recall that not marrying was against the law of the gods.”

“How many gods?” interrupted Telto.

“Four. I’ve probably angered them quite a lot.”

Šypros, still frying the fish, chimed in, “Ah, but we believe in only one god, who loves all who act kindly and use reason.”

“Just imagine what would have happened if all hadn’t occurred as planned,” added Cidene. “I know what I’d do if I were the old man in that case. I’d let you back in, give you a warm bath, and find the real reason that you’d want to be somewhere else.”

Myllada rested her arm on the table, lowered her head, and let her tears be absorbed. “I’m sorry... you are the kindest people I’ve ever met.”

“Well, you’ve known only three other people, right?” answered Telto. “It’s a fifty-fifty chance.”

By then, the cooked fish arrived at the table.

Myllada continued, “eventually, he decided to make me clean the whole house that night –”

“(that’s unreasonable.)”

“and sometime later, when the rest of the family was sleeping, I listened to Telto’s footsteps and the sound of the flying tray. Got back the clothes she gave to me, took some of the food, and wrote them a note.”

“What did it say? What did it say?”

“Ah, I definitely memorized that.”

I AM WORTHLESS TO YOU!

MAYBE I WILL BE MORE USEFUL TO SOMEONE ELSE!!!

SIGNED, YOUR USELESS FIRSTBORN!!!

(P. S. I took some of your food; it should be less than what you spend on me.)

Explosive laughter.

“Asked my friend to pile up some leaves for a soft landing, and jumped over the rails. When we reached the place where some of the iron bars were severed, I asked Telto for a knife. Cut my hair – it used to reach over here –” pointing somewhere mid-back – “, you know – and that tracking charm, and buried both of them in the ground.”

* * *

The sun was now rising.

Myllada helped herself up. “Well, I have to go soon. I don’t want to land on square one again.”

“Telto,” Cidene asked, “you’re going with your friend, right?”

“I will.”

“I pray for both of you; make it back alive!”

The birds sang the song of the morning sun, and the lake reflected the axiomatic scarlet glimmer. Myllada and Telto continued along the path, satiated from the late dinner and feeling reinvigorated.

From then on Myllada found it more fitting to believe in their god and to follow their advice.

VI

SIXTH CHAPTER

* * *

The dirt path gradually vanished and became only a line clear of trees, and when there was no actual grassless area anymore, the trees, displaying the newborn leaves, closed down until the clearing was only two *avantar* wide, too narrow for two people to travel abreast, and thorny brambles spanned the path. Myllada, her hat now tied to her back, was grasping Telto's shoulder in order to avoid falling.

Telto couldn't handle another person's weight. "Stop grabbing my shoulder! I might fall too!"

Myllada complied and knelt on the ground, digging through yesterautumn's deciduous leaves, and fished out a straight stick that towered to her shoulders, firmly prodding the ground with it. "Sorry, didn't want to lose my balance."

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In an half hour the forest opened to a wide, rushing river foaming white, unsuitable for swimming. Not far from them was a shelter constructed from a cliff, and fishing nets scattered in its vicinity.

Myllada put on her hat as they approached the house, leaving prints in the sand.

Out of nowhere, a stray arrow flew across the air as Myllada felt a heavy tug on her robe. Only then did she read the sign:

There is NOTHING free here!
Trespassers WILL be shot!

"Stop being careless here; this isn't your home or mine anymore!" warned Telto as she tore down the post and scurried back into the every-man's-land.

Another arrow flew and hit Telto's back –

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They were now inside a small cave in the middle of the forest, lit only by the electric lantern and the stars, the unreachable stars.

"Why'd you tear down the sign post? That was probably an absurd act."

Telto remained silent as Myllada cleaned her wounds and laid down the stick that was retrieved to her side.

Surely she must have a reason, however unusual. I wouldn't shoot everyone coming on my land, but if someone broke... In any case, we're completely defenseless here. "Can you stay here for some time?"

"What reason?" Feeling a fraction of the pain she did before (as well as mild humiliation), Telto put her clothing back on.

"Gathering materials."

"I'd say proceed."

Myllada did gather sticks and cut thorns, but, in fear of losing her friend, never lost sight of her.

* * *

Another day, of course, came, and Telto arose.

Amused by the amount of sticks, vines, and food retrieved (Myllada consulted her book for every plant collected), she smiled and immediately took some of the sticks and vines.

Not having slept for a day and a half, Myllada laid her head on Telto's lap, watching her friend weave a net out of those vines.

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The sun's feet touched the horizon, splashing a splosh of pink and orange. Myllada found herself lying down on grass, next to the river, where Telto, holding a handle to a net, was catching fish. Myllada tidied her hair and started to sit to the left of Telto.

Noticing someone on her side, Telto commented, "You don't seem afraid of many things. I can run farther than you, and I can catch more fish in a day, but I still fear the unexpected arrows and imaginary creatures in the dark."

"As long as you're here, the only fear I have is of my family."