**Five Letters (None Complete)**

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**2900 words**

*Anyalcze*

*The Sign of Three Pears*

*17 Chalcedony 1223*

My dearest brother,

I kiss you upon your left cheek, I kiss you upon your right. And with formality satisfied, I ask you, *where is my money?* You promised you would redeem me from this garlicky wasteland! I weep with desperation. We are Sarkoszys, you and I. How is the world fallen, that one of us should be reduced to—oh, I cannot put it to paper, though I must hear it the chamberlain say it five mornings a week. "Good morning, Your Grace. Your *tutor* is here." That word, "tutor". It is an iron spike, no, a pair of them, one hammered into each ear with the gusto of a tradesman. I swear in blood, I am *this* close to throwing myself off the walls of Her so-called Grace's so-called castle from shame.

Her Grace… Oh brother, my brother, put out of your mind the buxom Praczny maidens in those slim volumes we discovered beneath the account books in Father's library, so soon and so creatively unmaidened. Her "Grace" has the physique of a bison and half the wit. She can barely speak her own tongue; such decency as I have left forbids me from describing what she does to *ours*. Never have I loved our language more than I do now, when I must listen—no, must *collaborate*, may the unnamed saints forgive me—while my dullard pupil flays it and then shits upon its wretched remains.

To paint salt on the burn, the hopes I was so foolish as to express in my last letter regarding her brother have been most cruelly slaughtered. (Did my letter reach you? If so, then *where is my money!?*) He at least can conjugate a verb, but his intelligence is of a low and cunning sort. I admit, I mis-read him.

Oh, I can hear your guffaws now, you churl. Me, mis-read a boy? Yes. That is how cloddish this crapulent wilderness has made me. Oh brother, my brother, you must rescue me. You must—

My apologies. The courier rose from his table as if to depart. It is my plan to give him this letter directly, so as not to attract the attention of Her Grace’s rumormongers, who alone among the clod-witted inhabitants of this dungheap have impressed me with their zeal. I feared I had missed my chance, but he sought merely to relieve himself. I think him no keener to be out in the rain this night than the innkeeper's pigs, who are farting and snoring by the fire not three strides from me.

But, the brother. In place of verb conjugations and well-rolled R's, I filled *his* lessons with tales of derring-do, taking care always to point out how the heroes in them know more than just the hewing of his limbs, but are instead equally adept at climbing ropes and picking locks, at skulking and scurrying and all manner of thieverous what-not. And of course, from there it was but a carter's nudge to persuade him (though never in so many words) that a hero-to-be like himself had a right, nay, a *duty*, to acquire said skills. And how better to do it than by filching a few odds and ends from his sister's chambers? Oh, but his eyes lit up at that. His sister, who wears more gold on two fingers than he has to his name and still calls him "darling Pupsy" in front of his friends. Oh yes, he—

Another false alarm. The courier stirred once again, but only to scratch the ears of one of the innkeeper's pigs in order to disguise his own release of flatulence. Pfah! Have I mentioned the garlic these people eat? Oh brother, my brother, please—I will shave my head and swear my soul to the Balance, only send me fifty bezels for the carriage home and lodging on the way. Or sixty, should you love me, so that I may drink myself senseless each night so that memory of this place does not overburden my dreams.

So, again, the boy. I thought him caught, like a sparrow in a spider's web. He would do the skulking and scurrying (his heart pitter-pat the while, I am sure, an ear taken or worse should he be caught in the Women's Yard uninvited), and I would dispose of whatever he brought me. And of course, should he find any of Her Grace's correspondence at hand, well, why should *he* be the only one in the family embarrassed in front of friends? There would surely be *something* in her private letters that would be broth and barley for court gossip, and more practically, insurance for us should she realize—

*On the road southeast of Nevy Rav*

*The first week of Chrysoprase, 1224*

*Sweet's words by Buckle's hand*

Mistress,

Excuse handwriting please. Master says, something hunts us. I say, I do not see its shadow, I do not hear its cry. Master says, horses know more than men what it is to be hunted, so I darken my mouth and write what he tells me to.

The letter with this comes to us in Nevy Rav. There is an early storm, so I find work in the Graf's stables to pay for master's hay and barley and a place that I can sleep while I wait for your agent to make himself known. When I tell the stablemistress we will leave on the day, she tells me I must speak with the postmaster. "There is a law," she says. Every traveller must carry mail if there is mail to carry. She says there will be coin in it. I say, my horse and I want only to be over the mountains to Darp, but it will draw eyes, a poor traveler refusing coin. And as you say many, many times, "There is no letter not worth reading."

(Master asks, am I writing clearly? I say, I will write more clearly if you walk more slowly. Master says, if I walk slowly, we will be dinner.)

The postmaster asks me what road we take. I say, south to the Nettelin, then upriver to the Black Grass. He finds three letters that wish to go that way, then tells me to come back in the morning for more. I say, to be away today. He says, no, there is a law, the postmaster must have the criers announce mail for the south, and I must wait the day. I weep and plead, but he says, there is a law, then gives me a shaved quarter bezel to pay for lodging. I make repairs to master’s saddle and our bags and then spend the evening in the inn you have told me of, scratching the ears of pigs, but your agent does not come.

On the dawn, we return to the postmaster. There are no more letters, so we take the three, and a note with the postmaster's mark to say they are not stolen, and leave by the cattle gate.

A man waits for us there with his hood pulled low. I think he wishes to steal what I carry. I put my hand to my sword, but he raises his empty to greet me. He says, good fortune that he has not missed me, for he has a letter that the postmaster is not to see, and then makes with his hand the sign I was told to watch for to show he is your agent. He gives me the letter with a half bezel of good silver and a promise of a full bezel more upon its delivery in Polgotseny. Others approach on the road, so he leaves me.

(Mistress, master says to tell you he was *skulking*. He says to tell you he almost asked, "What is the secret password?" just to see what the man would do.)

Master has me ride off the Great Coast Road onto an oxcart track after mid-day to open the letter and read it to him. The seal is easily lifted. (Excuse handwriting again please. We move more quickly than before. If master begins to trot, I will put this aside. May the First Woman and the Last Man shelter our souls.)

The handwriting in the letter is that of a man, Uwsian, well-schooled and right-handed. It is good paper, but cheap ink and a poor pen. There are pinpricks in the page. The master says, it is a way of secret writing. Then he says, something comes. I say, I do not see its shadow, I do not hear its cry. Master says—

*Thokmay Prince Gandan (renounced)*

*The University, Gandan-in-Gandan*

*19th Malachite, 1231st Year Since*

*The Lady Kembe*

*Her residence*

*Ossisswe*

Most honored lady,

Please excuse my audacity in approaching you without prior introduction, but I have recently come into possession of two letters whose disposition I believe may be of substantial interest to you, and am hopeful that some mutually profitable arrangement for their disposition or destruction can be found.

The matter is this: for the past year, I have been preparing a thesis for submission to the University in pursuit of the rank of Scholar Ordinary. At the advice the Balance Petcharatiriv, I selected as its subject the causes of the recent rebellion in Uws. "Half of the survivors wound up here when it was over," (if I may quote the Balance directly), "So why not ask them what in the saints' names it was all about?"

Accordingly, I have spent these past months asking exiled landgrafs and former knights-justiciar when they first heard that the Sarkoszys had raised their banner, why they decided to put on rebel ribbons, &c. It was during one of these visits that I came into possession of the letters to which I alluded earlier, the first pages of which I have copied and appended to this of mine. In between draughts of a particularly pungent home-brewed *otrava*, their owner informed me that in the years prior to the rebellion, it had been his honor to serve as a knight-warden of Nevi Rav. Some time in the spring of 1224, one of his patrols came across a badly wounded Darpani with a Gifted horse, in whose possession he discovered several letters. In the confusion of events, he claims, he set the letters aside, only thinking of them again these seven years later because of my questions.

The letters are, to wit:

Item, from a "Gentleman", written in the style of that scurrilous travelogue, *The Customs, Laws, and Language of Northern Praczedt: A Guide For Those So Fortunate As To Have Been Born Elsewhere*. This appears to suggest that the "Gentleman" was *Sra* Georgiy Chorichiakov Sarkoszy, one of the leaders of that rebellion and later husband to Her Grace the Duchess of Anyalcze.

Item, from the rider of a Gifted horse, most probably the Darpani courier mentioned above. The letter's intended recipient is not named, but is addressed as "Mistress", a title which, as all Cherne knows, your agents often use for you.

This second letter is what has prompted mine to you, as it suggests that you were more than just an observer to the events of YS 1224. I have found it impossible not to speculate on how the current rulers of Uws would react if they learned that the rebellion's leader was an agent of yours. At the least—

*The University*

*Gandan-in-Gandan*

*Yellowsday, 3rd Tourmaline, 1231 YS*

*The Lady Kembe*

*Her residence*

*Ossisswe*

Most Learned,

Please excuse the soldierly language I used this morning—I am not accustomed to words writing themselves on my shaving mirror, and did myself a minor injury with my razor when they appeared. By way of apology, I hope you will accept the apple brandy that accompanies this letter; it was laid down in the last year of His Highness my grandfather's time, and the Balance Petcharatiriv tells me that it may bring back fond memories for you.

Thank you also for the letters which I found had appeared on my desk. I agree, the one purporting to be from me is a creditable forgery, and might well have fooled a reader without your special gifts. In answer to your questions:

Item, yes, someone *did* burst into flames a little after noon yesterday, to wit, my tutor, a Scholar Stipendiary named Andrae Ghislaine é Marcque. He came to Gandan from Araña some eight or nine years ago and has been my occasional tutor these past two years. I have spoken to my father's Minister of Rumors, who assures me that her agents never had any indication that Learned Andrae was anything other than he seemed.

Item, no, I do not recall the Learned being particularly despondent over the past few months. I agree that Gandan's winters may seem damp and gray to someone accustomed to southern skies, but he had weathered several such with no apparent ill effect. And if I may be so bold, I would also venture that if he *did* find our weather, food, or conversation unbearable, a man of his intelligence could undoubtedly have found a more reliable way of committing suicide than attempting to blackmail a magician.

Having answered your questions, I would now be grateful if you would be willing to entertain some of my own. From the scorch marks on the forged letter, the Balance infers that you used it to work this morning's spell, and wishes me to ask whether you used Idjfikan's Long Reach or the Bantangui variant of Moescher's Immolation. I myself am more interested in the other pages, as they bear directly upon the thesis I am indeed preparing. Fully a dozen of the University's faculty have speculated at one time or another on the identity of the author of *A Guide For Those So Fortunate As To Have Been Born Elsewhere*. If the first letter is trustworthy, it would put that matter to rest.

And when read in light of the second letter, it does suggest that your agents may have been involved in the events of YS 1224. If this is true—

*Ossisswe*

*Greensday 22 Sapphire '52*

*Thokmay Prince Gandan (renounced)*

*The University*

*Gandan-in-Gandan*

Your Highness,

Received yrs of 3 Tourm. this morning. First page intact but stained, other pages missing. Deduce from this that fifty-year-old brandy was too great a temptation for at least one courier on the road between Gandan and Ossisswe. Doubt anyone at this end would open something addressed to me; suggest inquiry at your end, followed by whipping.

Regarding questions in yrs, I receive more inquiries regarding historical, legal, and genealogical matters with each passing year. Were I to answer even a tenth part of them, I would have no waking hours left to devote to the present day. And even were I to answer, would you actually know more than you do now? If I said a Gifted horse named Sweet was doing my bidding in Uws at the time of the rebellion, would you then know the truth? No—you would instead have to ask yourself whether I was misleading you for some further purpose own. (You would most certainly ask yourself that if I said I did *not* have an agent there and then, would you not?)

Once you enter this jungle, you are lost. Was the first letter a forgery? Some scoundrel could have impersonated *Sra* Georgiy Ch'kov so as to wheedle money from his brother, or to embarrass his family. Or perhaps the first letter is authentic but the second a forgery intended to embarrass me, or the first two authentic and the one from the Learned Andrae a roundabout attempt to engineer your murder by my hand.

And what of yrs? That bottle of brandy—was the idea of sending it truly yours, or did it grow from a seed Balance Petcharatiriv planted in your mind? Perhaps it signals, "War with Lhabde seems certain," or, "I have run out of pistachios, please send more." You cannot know.

And what of *this* letter? Is the hand that holds the pen that of Lady Kembe, or of some rival who wishes to lead you astray for reasons of their own?

You ask, are these letters authentic? I say, as much as any: they are letters, and that is all we can know.

*Kembe*