



PRIME WORLD

MORE THAN A STRATEGY
DEEPER THAN AN RPG!

PLAY AT PLAYPW.COM

Vadim Panov
The Primachine

Nothing in this world rivals an ocean view in beauty, its restless waves in perpetual motion, extending so far that no human eye could ever see and no human mind could ever comprehend – only in awe can we behold their majesty; nothing else is as sublime.

The ocean enchants us, entrails us, and the incredible power it wields can easily make even the greatest among men feel as a piteous grain of sand. The ocean never hesitates to remind us of how easy it is to lose one's way in its wild vastness.

Philosophical Musings, Invariat Convivial.
Year 67 of the Prime Era.

Prologue

It was not from the rocking deck of a delicate ship that Invariad Convivial studied the ocean, but from a tall tower whose sturdy walls merged with a mighty cliff. The once-spacious room, now rendered claustrophobic by countless bookcases, Convivial had been converted into a study to which he would habitually retreat, where the tidal roar of the majestic ocean would play counterpoint to the train of his thoughts. – Here, he could meditate on the view and his heart would be at ease.

But today...

“No matter how great and how mighty the ocean might be, it is bound by its coastline. The notion may be ridiculous, but bound it is. The ocean’s incredible strength is fully manifest only where we find the actual ocean – in its domain, its prison”.

It suddenly dawned on Invariad that the ocean was much like he. Powerful, almighty and yet bound in the coastal prison, and even the tiniest grains of sand smile at his mind-boggling powers with pity.

“I am imprisoned!”

The saddest thing was that he had built the prison himself, and its walls were his very ideas, his very feelings. How can you make the walls tumble down when they are inside you? How can you make yourself reject everything that has been the very substance of your existence for years on end?

How?

And yet – to remain imprisoned is unbearable. Even the ocean breaks free at times! It pours its rage over the cliffs of the coast and strives to break through, to drench the woods and fields in the salt of its victory, crushing everything that stands in its way. The ocean can shake off those shackles that seem so unyielding, if only for a few moments. The ocean never rests – it wages constant war against its prison for all eternity. So if the great Convivial is the ocean, it means that...

“Invariad!”

A woman’s voice tore the scholar from the deep contemplation into which he had sunk as he stood by the lancet window. Even though the magnificent panorama failed to give him the usual sense of peace, and the scholar remained burdened by ominous thoughts, the sight of the low breakers as they rolled stubbornly against the reefs that lay at the foot of the tower had nevertheless managed to hold Convivial’s attention so firmly that he’d altogether missed the steps behind him and the creak of the opening door, which is why he gave a start when he heard her call out his name. He turned around in a fast, hectic motion, looked owlishly at the woman who had entered his study and unselfconsciously stroked his bushy white beard.

“Agatha?”

“It is I, indeed, my dear Invariad. Do you think anyone else would have the temerity to enter your lair unbidden?”

The woman laughed softly, and her melodious laughter awoke the familiar yearning in Convivial’s soul. That well-known sweet yearning whose charms rivaled those of the ocean.

“Agatha...”

Agatha Louise Maria Francesca Andrea, Lady Cobryn, Her Worship, the ruler of the

great and wealthy Cobria, the southernmost Dokht province. Her Worship was not merely a hereditary title – her unrivalled beauty was worshipped by every minstrel in the Imperium.

“You seemed saddened, my Invariat,” said the Lady with concern. “Did anything untoward happen?”

Can she truly know nothing of what has happened? Or is this all just a game?

Invariat shrugged noncommittally and stroked his beard once again, with a gesture famous throughout the Imperium.

“Our experiment...”

“You told me that the development was proceeding according to plan and that you would be capable of overcoming all the hindrances. Does Invariat Convivial now doubt his own powers?”

...Convivial...Convivial

“Pray forgive me.”

How does one break the wall inside of oneself? Gradually, most likely. But what if that isn't an option?

“We have an experiment of paramount importance to look forward to,” Lady Cobryn smiled. “We’re all jittery to some extent.”

“We are indeed.”

She didn’t just mention the experiment out of the blue. She knows everything and steers the conversation towards the necessary topic. Agatha, Agatha... You’re an open book to me; what a pity that it has taken me too long to learn to read.

“I heard you sent Jan Glassblower to Fichter?”

This seemed as a by-the-way remark, but Convivial shuddered internally:

It begins!

He stroked his beard again.

“There are some books that I require.”

However, the nervous gesture was a dead giveaway. The savant was lying, and he was making a mess of it.

“What about my library?”

“Even you cannot collect every book in the world.”

“I agree,” Agatha nodded, and carried on in her careless conversational manner:

“You are aware that the Touched have been haunting the highways in ever-increasing numbers as of late, and I thought it would be imprudent to let so skilled an assistant without any bodyguards.”

“A great idea,” said Invariat in a measured tone. “Thanks.”

“However, there appears to be a small misunderstanding,” Lady Cobryn continued in the same friendly tone. “Smasher couldn’t catch up with Glassblower.”

“There are two roads that lead to Fichter.”

“Which is why I sent Ulle Hoarfrost in Glassblower’s pursuit.” Agatha looked at the savant attentively. “Who also failed to find anyone.”

“I told Jan to be circumspect,” smiled Convivial. “You were perfectly right to point out that the forests were teeming with the Touched...”

“What’s happening?” asked the Lady with an unexpected edge in her voice. The friendly conversation was over; the savant was confronted by an irate ruler requiring a direct and intelligible answer. “What’s your game?”

"It's the opposite," sighed Invari. "The very opposite of a game, Agatha. I am through with games."

He took a few steps across his study, eyeing the books on the shelves with an absent-minded smile and returned to the open window that offered a stunning view of the ocean's ceaseless struggle against coastal captivity.

"I believe we've gone too far."

"Oh, you believe, do you?" asked Lady Cobryn sarcastically.

"I do," said the savant resolutely. "Our plan is a monstrosity."

"We shall bring peace to all humanity!"

"What about the price?"

"It's acceptable."

"It's monstrous."

What would you know of monsters?

Agatha realized that the worst had happened – the savant's beliefs and convictions had cracked, and Lady Cobryn knew nothing of how to handle this affliction. Convivial was no stranger to periods of doubt, lack of confidence, panic... Like so many other great men, he had a very sensitive nature, yet he shared with them his ability to achieve his goals. He believed they were correct. This belief was now gone.

"I received reports about the Primachine being blocked," said Agatha icily.

"I have introduced a number of changes that interfere with its functionality." The savant didn't deny anything. "I had to think about it. And talk to you."

"About our plans?"

"Precisely."

"I shall not turn back."

Convivial nodded.

"Thank you for an honest reply."

"Thank you for letting me reply," Lady Cobryn changed the tone of her voice yet again; it had a special fervor to it now. "Invari, what's happening? Why have you..."

"Become disappointed?"

"Come to doubt."

"It's nothing short of disappointment, Agatha, mark my words." The savant fell silent for a moment. "We are headed in the wrong direction. We shall turn the entire world upside down..."

"Wasn't that our goal?"

"...and plunge it into chaos." Invari chose to ignore the Lady's remark. "They will defend themselves, and the resulting bloodshed will be horrendous. We haven't thought the consequences through well enough."

"Yes we have, and our way is the right way!"

"They're people, too!"

"They were!"

"And that's what they'd like to stay!"

"Heroes are a menace to everyone!"

"Our plan won't leave them with any choice but war!"

"And what would they be up to now?" The long discussion finally made Agatha lose her cool and start venting her frustration at Invari. "They know nothing but war! They are being prepared for war! They are trained to kill without second thoughts, without

hesitation – all they do is use that monstrous power of theirs for murder! Once there are enough Heroes, they'll be unleashed, and peaceful lands shall burn! Blood and death are all they bring, these Heroes, and they're a menace to our land, nay, every land!

“The war will break out, no matter what happens!”

“We can prevent it!”

“No, we can't!”

Lady Cobryn took a step forward.

“What did you change in the Primachine?”

The fury finally surfaced, and there was a shadow of fear in the savant's eye. This was the very first time that he saw the ruler of Cobria in such a state.

“Agatha, stop this!”

“Answer me!”

“Let us discuss this matter later.”

“You have betrayed me.”

“No!” Convivial wanted to continue, but the door opened and Tom Scowl stepped in. He was Lady Cobryn's favorite troubleshooter – a wiry Hero armed with a strangely curved weapon that looked like a cross between a sword and a straight razor. This was truly a very bad sign, and the prepared words melted in an attack of terror. “Agatha, stop, I beg you.”

However, the savant's terror only firmed the Lady's resolve.

“You'll have to answer my question.”

“We have always discussed the really important decisions.”

“This is precisely why I got so angry when I found out that you broke the Primachine without giving me any warning whatsoever. You have betrayed me.”

“I wanted to draw your attention to the severity of the situation.”

“You have succeeded. Tom!”

Scowl had already reached the centre of the room, and was a mere five or six steps away from Invariat, which was next to nothing for a true Hero.

“Agatha, will you come to your senses?”

“You can still undo what you have done.”

“Call off your dog.”

“Speak the truth!”

“No!”

Tom dashed forward – swiftly, as only Heroes can, but he was too late. It wasn't even a step that stood between Convivial and death, but the lightest of all gestures.

The instant Scowl dashed forward, the savant leaned back against the open window and the ocean roaring far below, the breakers crashing on the black rocks. It was the only escape he could find.

“No!”

It seemed to Agatha for a moment that Scowl might manage to catch the falling savant by the mantle and drag him back to the safety of the study. For a moment, she believed that all may not yet be lost. Then she realized that the Hero was too late and that the old savant's body was flying towards the rocks below, in an instant gone for all eternity.

Part 1. GRYDWALD



Everything comes with a price. Grydwald's position as a relatively large trading centre made it radically different from the surrounding sleepy towns and villages of the Forest of Idmar. An efflorescence of trade implies large sums of money, and those always attract the avaricious – some of them honest, others, less so, and a good number of outright gangsters to boot...

“Halt!”

“I’m a local!”

“Johann, is it?”

“None other.”

“I didn’t recognize you.”

It is easy enough to get confused in darkness. Nobody would waste powerful modern lamps on this part of Grydwald – they would rather conserve the Prime. The old type with candles wasn’t serviced by anyone. The darkness was near-complete, but the clangor made by a running guard made it easy to identify them in the dark.

“Have you seen him?”

“Aye.”

“Where’d he run off to?”

“To the river! He means to make it to the Kleika! He’ll take the route across Falcon Field...”

“He’ll never get through!”

“He made it past the two of us easily enough.”

“It’s all right, Johann. They’ve already sounded the alarm. This part of town will be

cordoned off very shortly.”

The voices were moving away, and Jan Glassblower risked looking out of the shelter that he’d found at the very last moment.

Are they really leaving the alley?

So they were. They hadn’t noticed him.

Glassblower let out a deep sigh and carefully emerged from a broken barrel that was used as a large dustbin by the locals. The stench was overpowering, which may be why the guards were loath to search the barrel’s contents.

So you won’t let me get to the river, will you? That’s bad. That’s very, very bad... But let us see if you can stop me...

Using the river as an escape route was Glassblower’s only opportunity to escape from the suddenly hostile city of Grydwald. The stone walls are tall, all the gates are locked, the guards made a lot of mistakes, but they’ll come to their senses soon enough. Not on their own, obviously. A host of grumpy officers will come, furious from the lack of sleep, bang a few heads together and issue orders to look for the fugitive a whole lot more efficiently. All by the book. The worst part shall begin when the Heroes turn up – and that much was inevitable. Unfortunately, there’ll be more to them than the oafish locals who’d spent their whole lives hunting the Touched in the local forests. No, those would be real hounds, trained by Lady Cobryn to hunt humans. However, even hounds can be taken care of – the pronged gun is loaded and there’s enough Prime for a shot or two. Glassblower was damned if he’d let the Cobrians take him without a fight.

I’ve got to make it to the boat!

That puny vessel that he bought yesterday, hidden near the docks. He could use the water to make his getaway, in the darkness, alongside the coast, unseen behind the reeds and the green hedges made by the willows. He could definitely get away like that. All he has to do is reach the riverbank...

Jan winced as he adjusted the bandage on his arm – a crossbow bolt fired by one of the guards had found him in spite of all precautions, and he set forth along the dark alley known as Falcon Field, inching his way towards the river.

* * *

“Why aren’t the lamps burning?”

The Touched take you, what is this mess? The city is by no means poor, unlike the rest of the Idmar backwater, and it’s built of real stone. There are posts with Prime lamps sticking in the dirt alongside every paved road, and for all the good they’ve done, they might as well be stuck in the middle of a malarial swamp.

“By executive decree of Lord Dathos.”

“What decree would that be?”

“On austerity and frugality...”

Provincials stingy about using Prime, which costs a pretty penny. They only use it to illuminate the castle and the city square. That much is clear, but why aren’t any of the regular lamps burning? Bloody savages.

Lachard clenched his fists.

“You can spare me further details.”

“Also, this is the last street that has lamps – there are none in Falcon Field...”

“Didn’t I tell you to shut up?”

“As Your Grace commands.”

The torches held by the guards shed enough light onto the face of the Grydian officer, which was why he held back a satisfied grin: how do you like that, you twit? We do things our own way over here, and that’s how we like it. So don’t go about looking all high and mighty...

And yet the officer held the grin back, since the last thing he wanted was a real confrontation with Marcus Lachard. The Cobrian’s eyes were frightfully icy, and the Heroes behind his back looked impressive enough.

“I just wanted to explain...”

“You succeeded.”

“Well, there you go, then.”

The Grydian would never assist the Cobrians in their hunt for the dangerous criminal of his own volition – all of them are just too damned clever for their own good, but Lord Dathos had given the orders, and so instead of staying in a warm and comfy bed the officer had to walk the streets in the company of the arrogant Cobrian.

“Where was the fugitive seen last?” asked Marcus glumly.

“Near the Smoky Hearth Tavern,” answered the Grydian readily. “Then he did a runner and headed for Falcon Field – there are enough nooks and crannies there to hide.”

“Where are we?”

“Next to the Cunning Casper Tavern.”

“Are there any maps of Grydwald to be had?”

“There are two.”

“Where may they be?” asked Lachard, getting ready for another attack of cleverness.

“One’s in Lord Dathos’ castle, and that’s where the other one is, too.”

The Cobrian gritted his teeth, the Heroes behind him muttered something in discontent, [Warlord](#) Smasher said something about sabotage under his breath in that rumbling bass of his, but the officer had a bulletproof explanation:

“Lord Dathos’ edict, austerity and frugality.”

Indeed – why mess around with maps when every guard knows Grydwald as the back of his own hand? As for those pesky visitors, well, too bad for them – they’d be better off keeping well away from other people’s towns.

“Right on, I remember that bit about frugality.”

Lachard felt as though he was in the middle of an unpleasant dream. Late night, a town without any lamps and dozens, or maybe even hundreds, of curved streets, side-streets, alleys and cul-de-sacs, with himself at the centre of it all, Marcus Lachard, lonely as the Obelisk of Grandeur at the Square of All Things Nice and Wonderful in the Imperial capital. Glassblower knew where to hide, the bastard – the fugitive could be found only by experienced hunters in this rabbit’s warren of streets, not witless oafs grown soft from the soporific life in Grydwald. Yet he needed to conduct his search before too long, lest he might be forced to comb through the entire bloody Forest all over again.

“How the hell do you live here, anyway?” Lachard winced.

“Frugally,” replied the officer immediately. “As per the decree of Lord Dathos.”

Marcus was perfectly aware that the lousy Grydian was mocking him and trying to pass for a parochial dummy, but he could do nothing to punish the rascal – he was in dire need of help from those who knew this infernal hellhole of a city well.

“Do you have any crime here at all?”

“There’s no escapin’ that, is there?”

“And how do you deal with criminals? Frugally?”

“Quickly, Lachard. Quickly.”

There was a note of superiority in the officer’s voice, which made Marcus ask a puzzled question:

“So how do you do that?”

“We use the Finder Cart.”

“The what?”

Lachard didn’t expect this. A Finder’s Cart? Here? In this utter dump of a town?

“Ah, here it is,” the officer pointed to the approaching caravan and added with pride:

“Last week Basileus the Miller lost a prize-winning cow – it took us two hours to get it back.”

“Hoofsteps?”

“Manure. We put some in the Finder Cart and found the cow instantly.”

“Bright lads.”

“Lord Dathos doesn’t employ any other sort,” replied the proud Grydian, altogether missing Marcus’ sarcasm.

In the meantime, two heavy horses slowly drew the Finder Cart nearer. The door in the caravan’s rear opened, and a bearded guard, who was in charge of the search, peeked out.

“Can we begin?”

Marcus caught a whiff of garlic and pickles on the bearded guard’s breath – apparently used to mask the smell of alcohol.

“May the Wyrdkin gobble the lot of you up!”

Marcus’ shoulder twitched.

“It’s way past high time.”

However, the bloody Grydian paid no attention to Lachard and watched the officer faithfully.

“Can we?”

“Get to it,” said the officer regally.

“Aye aye, sir!” barked the bearded guard.

He disappeared into the caravan, remembering to close the door behind him. Two seconds later a whiff of the engine was heard, and pointing petals slowly emerged from underneath the opening roof. They were mounted on a thin metal rod and looked like a withered grey flower about to come to life and point the scent of the prey out to the hunters.

“That’s something, at any rate,” sighed Lachard inwardly. “This may yield some results, after all.”

Finder Carts were made by the artificers from the capital exclusively. They were costly, gobbled up a lot of Prime and could only be serviced by trained personnel, but they could be used to find anyone at all who’d leave a trace of any sort within the range of three miles. The receptacle of the intricate mechanism would have to be loaded with something known as a “trace”: a piece of skin, hair, blood, saliva or excrement – any bodily part or fluid of whoever needed to be found. This is what ate up most of the valuable Prime. Afterwards, the petals would rise and point in the direction of the prey. The analysis didn’t usually take longer than five minutes; therefore, when Lachard realized the process was taking longer than usual, he impatiently banged his fist on the caravan.

“How long is it gonna take you? What’s going on?”

“Sir!”

“What was that?”

It took Lachard a moment to realize that the officer, who stood to attention bold upright, wasn’t stirring him, but rather someone behind his back. He turned his head and cringed: a slender youth in an expensive burgundy doublet emerged from Cunning Casper Tavern. He was rather tall and thin, with a shock of black hair and a short beard whose shape was a result of many efforts of the provincial barbers. The young man had brown eyes, a straight narrow nose and a chin that was too narrow to be called determined. The beard may have been part of a plan to hide this shortcoming from sight. There was a [Fire Fox](#) lurking behind the young man’s back – a tall red-haired Hero maiden serving as bodyguard. The girl had an amazing figure and looked stunning, but the way she looked at the Cobrians was anything but friendly, if not outright hostile.

“Hell’s bells, it’s the bloody heir!”

Marcus had had his fair share of conversations with the presumptuous offspring of the provincial lords and was well aware of their unfortunate habit of meddling in any affair that attracts their interest. Were the youth sober, Lachard may have stood a chance of persuading him to keep away; however, the young man’s prurient smile and uncertain gestures testified to the success of his night in the tavern. Apart from the aroma of fine wine, Marcus caught a whiff of noxious perfume that was a particular favorite with the prostitutes of Idmar, which made the Cobrian feel another wave of disgust.

“What’s happening?” The youth hiccupped and stared at the Finder Cart in amazement. “What’s gone missing?”

There we go, the Touched take your liver!

“We’re hunting down a dangerous criminal, Lord Carlos.”

“One mentioned by yours truly earlier to your most esteemed father,” Lachard bowed. His Heroes reluctantly followed suit.

“Oh, it’s you...” the young lord cast a sidelong glance at the Cobrian and turned back to the officer. “What’s been done?”

“The approaches to the river have been blocked, Your Lordship. We have an extra protective detail dispatched to the walls. We shall determine the location of the miscreant with respect to Falcon Field and start combing the area at once.”

The peppy report put the heir in a playful mood. He giggled, hiccupped, giggled again, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, kicked one of the Cart’s wheels and enquired:

“How are you proceeding with the search? Manure again?”

The cow story must have left a lasting impression in the provincial town of Grydwald.

“We’re using blood this time, Lord Carlos. We managed to wing the knave.”

Lachard couldn’t help noticing that in the presence of the heir, the officer’s demeanor has undergone a radical change – his replies were clear, well delivered and strictly to the point. His local accent seemed gone, too.

“Is the criminal all that dangerous?”

“He wounded two of the guards.”

The cur’s eyes lit up.

“How interesting!”

The boy appeared willing to top his night of adventure off with a hunt for an armed and dangerous footpad. Must be his pluck playing up – or could it be the wine? Lachard stifled

a curse and tried to save the situation:

"The criminal is extremely dangerous, Lord Carlos," said Marcus quickly. "He is ruthless and excellently armed. I am of the opinion that you should refrain from risking your life unnecessarily."

"And did I ask your opinion?" asked the youth insolently. "Opinions are like arseholes, everybody has one. It is, however, considered proper to keep them out of sight in polite society."

The officer guffawed. Lachard clenched his fists again, while the insolent cur turned to his lady friend:

"Shahmana, game for a hunt?"

The Fire Fox chuckled.

"How could I say no?"

Apparently, she wasn't too wild about the Cobrians, either.

"Great!" The tavern owner's groom brought two steeds over, and Carlos flew up into the saddle with agility that surprised Marcus. He hiccupped again and enquired:

"I can't see the doggies. Where are they?"

"Unfortunately, the dogs haven't been brought, Your Lordship," said the officer guiltily.

"Oh, never mind," the heir waved his hand dismissively. "What does the Cart tell us?"

"The fugitive is west of us."

"Me and Shahmana – we'll head for him directly. You and the guards approach from the north. Lachard, you and your team, approach from the south."

"Lord Carlos, this is dangerous..."

Marcus tried to stop the cur one last time, but his warnings went unheeded once again.

"To action!" The young lord produced a long dagger from a sheath hanging on his saddle and looked at his lady friend. "How does a bit of fun sound?"

"Fabulous!"

* * *

No voices can be heard anywhere, nor footsteps, nor clang of armor, but all of it matters little – the guards are close at hand. It's just that the officers were already awake and making their oafish subordinates act with more caution. The encirclement grows tighter, and every second spent in the dark alleys of Grydwald brings him closer to either death or Cobryan captivity, which also means demise preceded by a lengthy torture resulting in him sharing every single scrap of knowledge with his torturers – Cobrians were as well versed in the art of torture as they were in the art of war, so he had no illusions about his alleged resilience.

Leave me be, Grydians. This war isn't yours, hasn't become yours yet – and it never will if you let me go... Please let me go...

Jan knew he had to keep his cool, have his wits about him and stay very cautious, but... But he was no warrior, and had never been one. He held on as long as he could, but the events of the last few hours managed to break Glassblower after all, and all he could do on his way to the river and salvation was whisper a meaningless prayer.

I am no enemy of yours, Grydians, I'm but a common man. They called me a criminal, but those who accused me are a thousand times worse than I. Why do you trust them so, Grydians? Why can't you let me go...

"Halt!"

They ran into each other at the corner. Both had sneaked along the walls towards a single corner, then peeked out only to see each other. A muscular guard with his sword unsheathed and the puny Glassblower, nervously clutching the pronged gun. Jan wouldn't have stood a chance in a duel, but the Grydian made a mistake. The guard was accustomed to obedience; he knew people would follow his orders. Additionally, he wasn't wont to kill on sight. He had been trained to apprehend criminals, which is why he yelled out:

"Halt!"

This was a fatal error. Glassblower clumsily thrust his pronged gun forward, then jumped back, staring at the guard in terror, as the dying man wheezed hoarsely.

The sharp prong entered the guard's side where one side of his cuirass was tied to another. It went in deep, and when it came out, hot blood gushed onto the dirty paving.

"No! I didn't mean to!"

A wheeze. The man fell to his knees, then all the way to the ground. It was over in an instant.

"What have I done?!"

Jan realized that in that moment he had become a mortal enemy of the Grydians. There was blood between them now, and no turning back. It was their war now.

I didn't mean to...

His first murder, the terror, the encroaching guards, the merciless Grydians, the Heroes... Everything was fused together in Glassblower's mind and then exploded like a Prime bomb, destroying the remnants of his self-control. He no longer heard the sound of approaching hooves, could no longer understand which way he was going and stopped being stealthy – he perceived the situation as hopeless.

"I didn't mean to!" Glassblower ran towards the river. "Didn't mean to!"

"Did you hear that?"

"A shout!"

"Let's go!"

Carlos spurred his steed on, and the horse carried him swiftly toward the side street.

"A body!"

"He's dead." Shahmana had already dismounted and was examining the guard's body with her fingers. "He died less than a minute ago!"

Shahmana Fidget was an experienced Hero; she was never wrong about anything related to death.

"The bastard is nearby!"

"So he is!"

Carlos looked around nervously, trying to track the killer with his eyes, and his hunter's excitement was

gradually being replaced by rage.

"All of this because of a simple commoner?"

Not quite. The commoner isn't all that simple – it's a Grydian! A subject-to-be! One of those people I'll be responsible for once I am Lord.

The rage demanded a release of some sort.

"Where'd he run to?"

"Can't seem to figure out," muttered Fidget, crouching over the pavement. "Most likely..."

“A light!”

“Got it!”

The Fire Fox waved a hand, and an exuberant constellation of sparks formed some ten feet above her head.

“Can you see the footprints?”

“I...”

Shahmana was interrupted by the loud echo of a shot; doubtlessly a Prime shot – those cannot be mistaken for anything else. A bolt of pure energy incinerated Shahmana on the spot.

“No!”

Two losses over the course of two minutes was far too many. The thought that the miscreant might wield some other Prime weapon (a bomb, for instance) didn’t even cross the irate Carlos’ mind. He had quite forgotten all the warnings, and even managed to forget about his own self for a moment. Carlos dashed forward, enraged, his only and all-engulfing thought being of revenge for slain kinfolk.

“I’ll kill you!”

The guard was dead; Shahmana was dead, too, and somebody had to pay the price.

“You scum!” Carlos noticed the fugitive’s black shadow when the shot was fired, and has been keeping it in sight ever since. He spurred his steed on; upon seeing the murderer turn into a narrow side street, he jumped off his horse, ran after his prey, and slashed at him just as he drew near.

“Swine!”

“Don’t!”

Glassblower somehow managed to parry the blow. The pronged gun has an excellent blade of a very tough alloy, sharpened to a deadly edge; it can be used for slashing and stabbing, but it’s no weapon for fencing. The fact that his opponent was armed with nothing but a dagger was no matter. A pronged gun is a complex weapon and one fit only for a Hero – and a special kind of Hero, at that.

“Son of a whore!”

“No!”

Another blow; the blade scratched Jan’s wounded arm, which had only just stopped bleeding, and his bandage now dripped red again.

“Filthy swine!”

Crisis hardened Glassblower’s resolve. He yelled and dashed forward, trying to slash at his opponent, or, maybe, wishing to hurry the inevitable.

Carlos dodged the clumsy blow as though he were in fencing class, and confidently plunged his blade into Jan’s ribs.

“It’s all over, all over...”

“Die, you bastard!” The young man looked at Glassblower, now suddenly still. “Be cursed, you filthy maggot.”

“I am indeed a bastard. I have murdered. I have killed twice. I will die an ignominious death, but I must still tell...” Jan whispers hoarsely, dropping the heavy pronged gun with a clang. “The Primachine...”

“What was that?” Carlos screwed up his face as he stared at Jan.

Let him hear me! Please let him hear me!

Jan whispered with his last breath:

"A secret... Lady Cobryn is building a Primachine... She intends to change everything... The whole world..."

"Ye gods, who is this man..." A thought crossed Carlos' mind. "What could this mean..."

The rage evaporated, and the young lord no longer saw a criminal before him – just a dying man. A tiny, miserable-looking cur, desperately trying to utter his final words...

"The Primachine..." said Jan once more, before slumping to the ground.

"Young master!"

The alley became well lit and crowded. At least a dozen guards came running, every other man holding a torch. Lachard and two of his Heroes appeared, instantly dismounted, then edged their way to the body and looked upon the dead criminal in silence. Even the Finder Cart came rattling by, although nobody paid it any heed.

Virtually everyone who took part in the search gathered in the narrow alley. The Cobrians looked tense; the Grydians took turns singing their praises for the young lord, admiring his courage and nodding their heads respectfully. Carlos replied something, chuckled, and wiped his dagger on a piece of cloth someone had given him. But the final words of the deceased miscreant kept ringing in his mind:

"The Primachine... Lady Cobryn is building a Primachine..."

* * *

What is this before me? Clouds?

Why would these be clouds? Can I fly?

No, I cannot fly – I never learned. The sky is closed to me. I cannot soar as a bird, and the clouds do not descend beneath me, to race before my eyes.

The clouds are the children of the sky, so this must be a haze. Or a fog. These suspended particles... they conceal an incredible power...

What is power?

Am I this power? Does the fog give me power? What is this fog? Is it alien to me, or is it I? Am I the fog? Why does my mind linger here?

I am the fog, and the fog is Prime.

Prime.

...

The next thought came as a whiplash: *I died!*

...

Through the fog, the heat haze and the multicolor clouds. Gradually feeling heaviness in newly forged arms, power in freshly made muscles, the body taking its first breath, thoughts becoming clearer and clearer.

I am waking up.

I am coming back to life.

I am returning to this world to do the bidding of my lord as well as my own, and the Prime makes it happen. Prime is at the core of everything.

Does Prime want me to return?

* * *

When the Inductor opened, Dathos remained at the control panel, curtly saying "Welcome back!" over his shoulder without turning back. Heroes came back to life naked,

and Fidget explicitly asked the lord to avert his eyes after her revival. She wasn't shy about anything... Fire Foxes were never seen anywhere without their red fur getup with the cute ears and the glorious tails. Nobody knew whether those were camouflage that appeared after resurrection or whether the bodies of the Hero Maidens really changed from contact with Prime, and this secret was meant to be kept. Certain lords may have disregarded the requests of the Fire Foxes, but Dathos kept his word. He waited for Fidget to get dressed before he stepped out from behind the machine.

"Good morning, Shahmana."

"I stand to serve, Lord Gryd."

"Please don't be that formal, Shahmana. We're alone here."

I am the fog. I am Prime... I am never alone – Prime is always with me.

"As you command." Fidget bowed her head. "How is the young lord?"

"He's fine."

"I didn't look after him well enough."

"Carlos is young. He has a temper and goes looking for adventure even where he knows better."

"The young lord hunts for glory."

"Or he's too idle."

"He'll be a great warrior."

"He might – if nobody kills him in a dark alley first."

Was that a hint? Or just a slip of the tongue? Is he angry?

The Hero Maiden bowed.

"Lord Gryd, please forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, Shahmana. You covered Carlos with your body and saved him from that shot, and he took care of the rest. The criminal was dealt with."

"A single shot?"

The Hero Maiden looked affronted.

"There's no way a single shot would take me all the way out. Even from a weapon such as that."

"That gun packed a lot of power," said Dathos. "The criminal was well prepared."

"Was he a Hero?" Fidget raised her eyebrows.

"No, just a mortal."

"Where would he get such a weapon, then? And enough Prime to charge it?"

"We are looking into it."

"I see..." Fidget wanted to keep on talking, to ask about the Cobrians, but she was cut short by an attack of dizziness. She shook and grabbed the Inductor, then hissed: "Blast it all!"

It was the "second step weakness" – the revived Hero feels perfect and even better than perfect, the power overflows every cell of a Hero's body like a volcanic eruption, and the Hero yearns for action. Anything – sex, going into battle, running a few laps, as long as it takes an earnest effort. However, in a few minutes the power vanishes, and Heroes feel weakened and dizzy; a reminder that hits them right over their proud heads: "There are limits to your power!"

"Hey, how are you feeling?" asked Dathos compassionately.

Fidget shook her hair.

"I'm fine."

I am Prime...

“Need a rest?”

“I... I stand ready to serve the young master.”

Shahmana’s weakness made it difficult for her to conceal her feelings well enough, so the lord heard the disappointment in her voice and realized what had caused it.

“Did you expect to see my son here?”

The Fire Fox looked embarrassed for a second, but then raised her head up proudly.

“I had indeed hoped so, Lord Gryd.”

Carlos should have come out of gratitude, if for no other reason. Or he could have apologized – the alley was lit up on his orders, which made me a target. I have been resurrected, but death always implies pain, even an instant death. I remember each death – without fear, but I do not savor the memory. The young lord was the reason for my recent ordeal, and ought to apologize at the very least.

“I told Carlos I would see about your resurrection come evening,” replied Dathos calmly. “I had to lie to him.”

“Why?”

Lord Dathos smiled thoughtfully:

“Carlos handles the Prime Inductor perfectly well, but he does not yet understand the reason behind the ceremony. He does not realize how important it is to Heroes and lords alike. All he sees is your immortality, your ability to resurrect after you fall in battle, which is why he lacks proper respect for death. Before he can meet those who return, he must understand what you go through.”

“What do you mean?” asked Fidget, bewildered.

Is he trying to say Carlos has to die?

“He has to grow up a little,” Dathos smiled again and stroked the young woman’s cheek. “He might have offended you, Shahmana. Not deliberately, of course, but simply because he isn’t ready to handle such a task as greeting a revived Hero.”

He must be right.

Real lords can read their Heroes the way fathers can read their children. And being fathers is exactly why they can read them. And they maintain peace within the family.

“You’re a good man, Lord Gryd,” whispered Fidget.

“So is Carlos. But he’s so young. When I leave...”

“My Lord, please...”

“Do not interrupt!” said Dathos harshly. He stood silent for a moment and continued: “When I am gone, Carlos will have no one but you.”

“And his mentor.”

“No,” the lord shook his head. “I trust you, Crossbow, Rusty Moustache and Hurricane far more than the mentor.”

“Is that because you hold our catalysts?”

“It is because we are bound together, Shahmana. We are kin.”

* * *

“Shush!”

“Eard somefink, ‘ave ye?” Peg-Ear asked instantly.

“Friared if ah know,” One-Eye whispered back.

“Why’d ye shush, then?”

“Might of ‘eard sumfink.”

“Did ye or didn’t ye?”

“Dunno.”

Peg-Ear shook his head.

.....
There was nothing more frightening to the smugglers than to encounter in an impenetrable thicket an accursed Wyrdkin, the hideous monsters who roamed the forbidden lands ever since the ancient catastrophe. The earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and rains of fire and poison, which had afflicted people so terribly in the days of the Cataclysm, eventually abated little by little. Things started to look up with the discovery of the blessed Prime that gave people such enormous power, and yet...

Everything comes at a price, and this time the price was Wyrdkin. ...

“Didjer ‘ear that?”

“Sumpfink ‘owlin’?”

“A crunchin’ sound, that’s wot it was,” said the terrified teamster of the first wagon, although nobody had asked him for an opinion. “It’s like somethin’s gnawin’ on a bone. ‘Ewman bone, by the sound of it.”

“A pox upon ye, numskull.”

“Wot was that?”

“Put a sock in it!”

“Aye sir!”

“That was no ‘owlin’,” whispered One-Eye. “That was heavy breathin’... A wood demon, that’s what it is, bruvver dear, there’s no other kind ‘ere.”

“We’ll ‘andle one wood demon,” replied Peg-Ear, also in a low whisper. “Any others?”

“That was a crunch, not breathin’. A crunch...”

“If I ‘ear another sound from ye, I’ll cut yer bloody throat!

The teamster bowed his head.

It’s rather hard not to make any sounds when you’re in pitch black darkness, with some invisible but doubtlessly enormous thing gnawing on some poor sod’s femur right in the middle of it, isn’t it? Could it be a teamster of another wagon that was moving some contraband across the Nine Woodpecker Forest and never made it through? The huge thing is crunching human bones now, and the rest of them are salivating and licking their snouts as they listen to the approaching wagon train.

“To arms, lads,” commanded One-Eye in a loud voice. “To arms, if ye don’t wanna be munched down without any salt!”

The brothers’ gang was small but trustworthy. The two dozen old hands that accompanied the wagons on horseback have been all around the Nine Woodpeckers and the Dead Maggots, and even ventured into the Perilous Bottom, trying to find out whether the rumors about the treasure hidden there were true or false. The fighters weren’t afraid of the Touched – they were somewhat wary of them, of course, but they weren’t ones to turn down a good fight.

“To arms!”

The spears and the axes were held ready, and all the crossbows were cocked. Nevertheless, the wagon train carries on at the same unhurried pace without lighting any other torches than those lighting the way for the wagon in front. The Touched are incredibly stupid, and yet there’s no point to give them any undue warning. Let the beasts

draw nearer.

"If it's a wood demon, we kill it," said Peg-Ear again.

One-Eye didn't get enough time to reply...

The hungriest always attack first; the weakest always get the least amount of food, that's how it goes. This is why the first ones to attack the wagon train were the "hornies" – short bastards barely reaching up to a man's waist who had once been goats – or goatlings. The "hornies" had very weak horns, so they used short but broad hatchets instead – particularly to hamstring horses, which was their most dangerous feature.

"Wyrdkin!" cried Peg-Ear, but his cry was redundant – none of the old hands missed the moment of the attack.

Fighting the weak but numerous and agile hornies would be a waste of time. The moment you stop, even if you manage to get two or three beasts with a single strike, some nimble critter will definitely get to the horse. Therefore, the instant the old hands heard the "Wyrdkin!" cry, they spurred their horses on, trying to shake off the hornies and realizing perfectly well that they would soon encounter something worse.

Such as the so-called "stoneflingers", for instance.

As soon as the wagon train left the hornies behind, a swarm of heavy stones whistled above the road, advertising the presence of the stoneflingers – little but deft critters with arms reaching all the way down to the ground. There was no way of deflecting the heavy cloud of projectiles; the only way was to tear through the barrage, so that's exactly what the gang did, swearing and whipping their mounts mercilessly. The teamster of the first wagon was the only one whose luck didn't hold out – a well-aimed stone hit him in the temple and he fell to the ground. Nobody waited for him.

Their hands were full, anyway.

"These are small fry! Small fry!" shouted Peg-Ear, whipping his horse. "If there's no one else here..."

He nearly fell off his mare, which had just got on its hind legs. Then he grew pale.

For what would appear in the middle of the road, emitting that loud and horrible sound known to all people, but a forest demon?

"Awww, shit!"

The horse whinnied in panic.

"Charge!"

The forest demon swung its club; the next second he was pincushioned with about a dozen crossbow bolts – the old hands heeded their leader well.

Nobody intended to kill the enormous beast with crossbows – the forest demon merely received a hint that its quarry might be in the mood to fight back; the gang quickly fell into battle formation. One-Eye took five men and went back to the last wagon to keep the small fry at bay. Three of the mercenaries who knew magic better than others put their weapons away, calculating what the best time for a strike would be; the rest of the mounted fighters, led by the irate Peg-Ear, attacked the forest demon.

"Die, you swine!"

The huge forest demon, twice as tall as any human, swung his rough club around with a speed that would shame any Prime mill. It was slowly but steadily approaching the first wagon. Its hairy body was covered by rough armor made of thick wooden planks, which would be difficult to pierce with a sword or a spear; setting it aflame would be no picnic, either.

A swing of the club made the young Klincha and his horse crash into a tree. The thing instantly received a painful strike aimed at its eyes courtesy of one of the wizards; however, the forest demon didn't so much as miss a step.

The monster swung furiously, and Peg-Ear barely managed to evade a blow, spurring his horse on in the nick of time.

A forest demon was a dreadful foe, but this didn't mean its opponents stood no chance. The old hands knew how to handle the larger Touched perfectly well, and their actions were well coordinated. Four of the fighters circled around the forest demon to attract its attention, while the mages hit the monster with ranged attacks and the rest of the gang stood ready to strike, holding their spears before them.

The forest demon swung wildly and missed again. This time it didn't manage to assume a defensive stance in time, and the experienced Ampichawa, who well knew an opportunity to strike when he saw it, drove his spear into the demon's hairy torso. Ampichawa's mount was moving at a decent speed, and about a quarter of the spear went in, tearing the beast's flesh asunder.

The monster howled, but it was too late.

"Get it!"

Peg-Ear spurred his mare on and plunged his spear into the forest demon's stomach that was for the moment unguarded. The cunning Ungilon took advantage of the fact that the demon had slowed down a bit and threw his axe, which went right into the monster's left eye, while the three wizards set the beast's thick wooden armor ablaze with a simultaneous attack.

The wounded and singed forest demon was enveloped in smoke; it dropped the club and took a step towards the forest. There were spears stuck in its sides and an axe in its head, and it became disoriented with pain for a moment, but that condition wouldn't last, and the beast was still extremely dangerous. In a few seconds the monster would go amok and charge at the enemy, its wounded and panicked state making it only more dangerous.

However, nobody intended to wait that long. They might take the beast down, but escape was the wiser choice.

"Onward! Whip the horses! Let's move!"

The old hands had managed to drive the forest demon from the road, and were whipping their mounts relentlessly, trying to get as far away from the danger as possible. The wagons shook and jumped as the convoy sped on, and nobody noticed when a strange coffin-like box fell out of the last wagon. The box turned to the side as it fell, hit a stone as it landed, and opened wide.

And there it remained, emanating the delicate aroma of Prime...

* * *

Marcus spat at the innkeeper, missed – the stupid Grydian managed to dodge it – and swore again, slamming the door to his room loudly.

"The food is crap, the wine tastes like piss, the women..." Lachard hadn't had an opportunity to sample the local talent, but was nonetheless certain they wouldn't rate higher than zero point five on a scale of one to ten. "This is the worst dump I've ever seen! Even Parochia in Lambandon seems a suburb of the capital in comparison."

The mats were stuffed with straw, the blanket stank of socks, the word "pillow" wasn't understood by anyone including the innkeeper himself, and the sheets were covered in

suspicious spots, which, fortunately, weren't wet. Dathos had offered the Cobrians the hospitality of his castle, but Lachard declined, since his present accommodation allowed for more freedom, and was now regretting his decision, venting his foul mood on whomever he encountered.

However, the main reason for his dissatisfaction wasn't the revolting bedding, but rather the disastrous hunt.

It would seem that everything had gone as expected. Glassblower was dead, and Lady Cobryn's first task complete, so one might as well relax. However, the fugitive's strange behavior kept worrying Marcus – why would he linger in Grydwald for three days and let them take him down as a result? Before the hunt he told the Heroes to take Glassblower alive, wishing to question Jan on the matter of his strange behavior, but that damned cur Carlos managed to throw a spanner in the works, and now he would have to look for all the answers on his own, using nothing but his wit and his ability to come to the right conclusions.

"Are they all Glassblower's possessions?"

"Absolutely," was the somber response of Warlord Maximilian Smasher, the strongest Hero in the party sent to chase the runaway Jan, who even gave a slight nod for emphasis. "This is all he had."

"Did anything stick to the guards' fingers, perhaps?"

"No idea."

"What was that?"

"Nothing," Smasher came to his senses. "I checked."

He turned away.

Smasher didn't like Marcus. The mighty Hero simply didn't sense the necessary power in Lachard, who couldn't spend more than five hours in saddle, always needed rest, and was worth absolutely nothing as a warrior – Marcus would be even worse than your run-of-the-mill guard in battle. His knighthood seemed little more than a title. Smasher implored the Lady to send no one but her Heroes, proving to her that a mere human would only get in their way and slow them down, but Lady Cobryn wouldn't hear of it. "Lachard is going with you!" That was final, and you can't really argue with the Lady. She even appointed Marcus head of the expedition, telling Smasher to heed his words as though they were her own.

Smasher wasn't bitter or anything, but he still felt cheated somehow.

"Where was Glassblower staying?"

"At the Six Corners Inn," reported Smasher. "He waited for three days, claiming he was a merchant waiting for his wagon due with the next train. Nobody knows what he did while he was here. We have gathered everything we could find in his room."

"Any written records? Books, ledgers, scrolls?"

"None."

"Secret places?"

"None."

"Did you look for them?"

"Aye."

"Did you search well?"

"Perfectly well."

“Hmm.”

It would make more sense for Lachard to go to the inn himself and conduct a personal search of Glassblower’s room. However, there was a certain split in the team as of late, and Lady Cobryn’s strict words have been gradually evaporating from Warlord Smasher’s head, which is why Marcus had given the humiliating order to conduct the search to put the contrary Smasher back in his place.

“Did you use a Prime detector?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

Smasher grew crimson.

“I told you, it’s all here.”

Lachard carefully examined the objects on the table. He grew pensive for a moment, trying to tie the collection of assorted objects together mentally, and then muttered, “Very strange indeed.”

“What exactly?”

“What exactly what?”

“What exactly did you find strange?”

Lachard looked at Smasher in amazement. Heroes usually refrained from filling their heads with anything more complex than martial arts. Over the entire course of their journey, Lachard’s companions hadn’t asked a single question about the reasoning behind Lachard’s conclusions, which is why Smasher’s question suddenly made Marcus feel a patronizing sort of sympathy to this curious but limited creature.

“Most of these,” Lachard pointed at the objects on the table, “were Glassblower’s personal effects, right?”

“He had a bag for keeping them,” confirmed Smasher.

“Heavy enough, wasn’t it?”

“To you, maybe, but not to a Hero.”

“Or a pack mule.”

“What was that?” Smasher asked, confused.

“Nothing. You might recollect that Glassblower was no Hero.”

Smasher removed his helmet and scratched the back of his head.

“Aye, but I still don’t understand why his personal effects seem strange to you.”

...

“Let us consider these, for instance.” Lachard took four thin metallic bracelets into his hand, which were strung onto a larger open hoop. “They’re the Five Rings of Naquipouqui, one of the most complex Adornian artifacts – these were forged by a powerful mage. The work costs five hundred thousand silver pieces because it takes up to three months. You have to pay for Prime and the Candaban alloy separately.”

“And what are these nicookies for?”

“The Rings of Naquipouqui, you mean,” smiled Marcus. The bracelets are worn on one’s wrists and ankles, and the hoop is worn on one’s head; the whole setup makes the wearer invisible.”

“Can I try it on?”

“Don’t be silly. Anyway, there’s no Prime in it. But what could it mean?”

“What?”

“The artifact was used recently.”

“Might as well have been used a long time ago.”

“Remnants of concentrated Prime.” Marcus placed one of the bracelets under Smasher’s nose. “Can you smell anything?”

“Yesterday,” grunted Smasher. “The artifact was charged as recently as yesterday.”

The Warlord, just like any other Hero, was particularly sensitive to Prime.

“Thanks for proving me correct,” Lachard placed the bracelets back on the table.

“You are no Hero,” Smasher observed. “How did you conclude that the artifact was used recently?”

“I’m capable of cogitation... Now, what else have we got here? Isn’t this a beauty – a full set of Goldhunter’s Lockpicks!”

Marcus jangled a bunch of strange keys that Smasher almost left behind in Glassblower’s room, believing them to be worthless rubbish. The instruments didn’t so much resemble keys as key blanks. Thirty lockpicks altogether, of every conceivable shape and form, they had one common feature – there were no grooves or notches anywhere; every key was perfectly smooth.

“Unfinished, are they?” suggested Smasher.

“Oh dear me, no. Forged perfectly by a master craftsman,” Lachard eyed the lockpicks with admiration. “Each one of them contains a Prime charge. The thief chooses a pick of a suitable size, inserts it into the keyhole, and it assumes the required shape automatically. Moreover, these lockpicks reveal secret hiding places. It’s an extremely expensive artifact, Smasher, and a very rare one. To this day, I’ve never held a set in my hands – I’ve only heard of them before.”

Marcus suddenly fell silent.

Smasher mumbled to himself for a moment, but then the pause in conversation was taking too long, and so he asked:

“Remembered something?”

“Yeah, the fact that these lockpicks are usually used for cleaning out lords’ treasure vaults,” replied Marcus slowly.

“Lots of rich merchants in Grydwald, aren’t there?”

“Could be...” Lachard returned to Glassblower’s possessions. “Ever heard the term ‘Deliria’?”

“The sleeping potion?”

“An intoxicating potion, to be precise.” Marcus took a closely stoppered vial, opened it a tiny crack, and carefully sniffed the viscous blue liquid. “Bang on the money. Adornian Deliria. From a fine batch, too.”

“Makes people see things that aren’t there, doesn’t it?” recollected the Warlord.

“Or look right past the things that are. It’s better than a sleeping potion that way – the guards remain awake.”

“And the thief passes right under their noses.”

Lachard nodded his agreement, then asked quietly:

“Don’t you find it somewhat disconcerting that Invariat Convivial’s favorite apprentice would turn out to be a thief?”

“Well...”

“And this is the case where he kept concentrated Prime crystals. I wonder what became of them?”

“He must have used them up over time,” the Warlord shrugged. The abrupt change of

subject confused him a little, but he managed to get over it and carry on with the conversation. “The thief used one of the crystals to kill a Hero.”

“Possibly, the last one.”

“But why didn’t he charge the Five Rings? He could have got away unseen...” A second later Smasher slapped himself on the forehead. “Because the crystal was already inside the pronged gun, and he couldn’t get it back out.”

“Glassblower had the best set of instruments for breaking and entering in the whole world, and we were on his tail,” said Lachard, thinking aloud. “He had money – almost five thousand silver pieces, no less – he should have tried to shake us off, yet he remained in Grydwald for three whole days. Why?”

“No idea.” The Warlord made a helpless gesture.

“We have to speak to that heir,” said Marcus resolutely. “Glassblower may have wheezed something before he died, and I want to know all about it.”

“What for?”

“In order to discover whether or not he managed to divulge anything while he exhaled his last breath. To be able to give Lady Cobryn a full report. Or are you merely going to claim, ‘We killed him’? – until someone reveals that it wasn’t even us who did it.”

“I didn’t intend to be that brief. From what you’ve told me, I gathered that Glassblower had decided on a thief’s career. He robbed Invariat’s workshop, took the most expensive instruments, then went on a burglary spree all across the country, picking locks and robbing treasures. Grydwald does a lot of trade, the local lord is anything but poor, so Glassblower decided to linger and poke around in his dungeons.”

“Poke around in the dungeons, eh? Sounds like a good idea... You know, Smasher, sometimes I get the idea that you may occasionally prove useful.”

“Thank you... What?” Smasher went crimson again and stared at Marcus, enraged. “What did you just say?”

“Easy now, it was a joke. May not have been one of my best, but I didn’t mean to insult, either...” Lachard squinted. He was definitely thinking of the Warlord’s phrase about poking around in the dungeons. “You know, Smasher, I am of the opinion that the cur lied to us. He’s hiding something.”

“What could he possibly be hiding? Neither Glassblower, nor Convivial have visited Grydwald before – you checked, didn’t you?”

“I must be absolutely sure there are no traces left,” said Marcus firmly. “This is the Lady’s wish.”

Carlos Gryd was the last one to see Glassblower alive, and there were no witnesses to their encounter. If Jan managed to say anything at all to the heir, the chase will be rendered utterly pointless.

The secret must be kept.

“Killing a commoner or a guard is one thing; a lord is a whole different kettle of fish, even if it’s a young lord,” muttered Smasher. “I’ll follow your every order, but the Lady does not like rash decisions.”

“So you’re beginning to doubt, are you?”

“I could see that you didn’t like Carlos Gryd.”

“It is our mission that I am concerned with first and foremost.”

“I should hope so.”

Hope so?! The numskull is familiar with the concept of hoping! Ha! Three times ‘Ha’! He’s

got the nerve to doubt my decisions!

"Carlos could have told everything to his father," said Marcus calmly.

"Told him what? What could the brat have found out?"

"Whatever Glassblower told him."

"What could he have told him, anyway? What did the youngster learn?"

"That's what we'll have to find out – and take the necessary measures if we must."

Smasher knew what Lachard was implying – but to attack Lord Gryd in his castle, filled with guards and Heroes... It was a brave plan indeed – or a reckless one.

"There are only three of us," muttered Smasher.

"Three's plenty, Smasher," corrected Lachard. "Three well-trained Heroes with a great deal more combat experience than the scrawny locals. We have the element of surprise working in our favor."

"The Grydians are on the alert."

Marcus stared at the giant Smasher with such intensity that the Hero gulped against his will, feeling like the greenest of recruits who'd just crossed the Commander-in-Chief.

"Lady Cobryn has entrusted us with a secret. She's counting on us, and I don't intend to let the Lady down." A pause. "Do you?"

"Yes... I mean, no, I don't."

"We'll talk to the local lords, and if I find their behavior suspicious, you will attack, and Grydwald will lose its two top provincials. Is that clear?"

Marcus spoke on behalf of Lady Cobryn, and Smasher had no option but to bend his head.

"As you say, Lachard."

* * *

Grydia was a large and wealthy province, which was also quite peaceful – a rare occurrence in these troubled times. Lord Dathos preferred to remain on good terms with his neighbors instead of fighting them. He forgave small slights and gave no reasons for the more serious kind, which was why Grydia knew nothing of internecine conflicts, more or less likewise the rest of the Forest, and so there were few Heroes in Grydia – just four.

All of them were in the courtyard of the castle, warming themselves in the morning sun and conversing lazily.

Warlord Heinrich Hurricane was doubtlessly the mightiest Hero in Grydia. A scarred and grizzled old warrior and a childhood friend of Lord Dathos, he stayed by his side throughout the entire War for the Misty Grove. Hurricane was interested in nothing but the art of war from the earliest age – he trained, he killed, and he earned the reputation of the greatest knight in the Forest, leader of the Grydian heroes, the commander of their small party and second only to the old lord in authority.

Hurricane stood next to the porch of the Academy, discussing something with Jacob Crossbow, a free-spirited [Duelist](#) who never parted with his elegant and extremely dangerous pronged gun – a unique weapon favored by Heroes of his ilk which sported a very sharp blade. Crossbow's mercurial and carefree nature balanced his selfishness, just as his skill with the pronged gun balanced his dislike of discipline. Jacob could barely stand to be ordered around, but he respected Hurricane and so eventually forced himself to get into the spirit of teamwork.

The third Hero, [the Highlander](#) Archibald, better known as Rusty Moustache,

remained silent, as was his wont, with his back leaning against the wall. He had a prominent mop of hair, bushy eyebrows and, obviously, a very bushy moustache; his outlook was glum in the extreme and spoke so little that he was often mistaken for a mute. His only real attachment was his two-handed sword, long and razor-sharp, which he was holding it even now, as he stood guarding the safety of the castle yard.

Last, but not least, was the Fire Fox known as Shahmana Fidget. A tall and shapely young woman whose playful attire (a short hooded jacket and an even shorter skirt) was complemented by vulpine ears and a luxurious red tail. The element of the Fire Foxes was fire, as was obvious from their name; some of the lords considered them incorrigible pyromaniacs and preferred to kill them off from a distance. Their fiery arrows flew fast and true, which was why Fidget was given the task of looking after the son of old Lord Dathos – her presence made close-quarter combat a great deal less likely.

At the appearance of the heir the Heroes stopped talking, which was natural enough, and turned their eyes towards him. Carlos didn't feel too pleased to be at the centre of their attention, but nevertheless approached Fidget at a leisurely pace.

"Shahmana!"

"Happy to see you in good health, young lord," the girl curtsied.

"I'm the one who's happy to see you alive and well," smiled the young man.

"I thank Lord Dathos."

"Thank you for covering me."

"It was my duty."

"The first question Shahmana asked upon awakening was about you, young lord," Warlord Heinrich added in a low respectful rumble.

"I finished what we'd started," reported the youth.

"Lord Gryd," said Fidget impassively. "You behaved very bravely."

"Rubbish," Carlos remarked as he thoughtfully rubbed his chin.

He suddenly realized he was really happy to see Shahmana alive and unharmed. He knew that Heroes could resurrect and that their deaths were temporary, and was casual about it, taking it for granted, but... Something appears to have changed. Shahmana died right before his eyes; she died protecting him, following his idiotic order, and her first question upon revival was about him, her hapless master.

Was that loyalty?

Doubtlessly. And loyalty had to be rewarded.

The next moment Carlos thought that dying should be anything but a pleasant experience, even for those who know they will return. You may resurrect, but the memories of your final seconds will stay with you, and likely forever, the feeling of life leaving your body, the pain, the blood, and, possibly, the terror. Do the Heroes keep the memories of all the final moments they've experienced over the course of their dangerous lives?

I've never asked about that...

What could it be like to live with the memory of all your deaths? To fall into the abyss again and again, to endure excruciating pain? Doesn't that mean that being a Hero wasn't all beer and skittles, and that the price exacted for the power and the incredible abilities you got might be a little too high? Wasn't that what made Heroes crave simplicity and refrain from pondering complex matters, simply as a way to stay sane?

The pause was getting embarrassingly long; the Grydian heroes started to utter coughs

and took turns glancing at Hurricane, and Carlos surprised himself by saying,

"I would like to apologize to you, Shahмана. If I didn't order for the alley to be lit, the bandit wouldn't have managed to take proper aim, and you... You would..." The young lord became confused, but managed to bring his apology to conclusion: "I've made a mistake. I'm sorry."

To say that the Heroes were amazed would be a huge understatement. Hurricane grunted loudly and gripped his long grey beard, Jacob's jaw nearly fell to the ground, and the Duelist stared at Carlos as though the latter had just sprouted a pair of wings. Archibald nearly dropped his sword. Fidget was the only one who stayed calm, as though she heard what she'd expected to hear.

"You are becoming a true lord, young master. Your father will be proud of you."

A true lord? Someone obeyed by the Heroes for reasons beyond the fact we hold their catalysts? Somebody who realizes that the Children of Prime are no toys? Someone who sees the Heroes as people, and not just as mighty warriors that can be sent into any peril with no second's thought?

I may have just heard a very important compliment.

Carlos became embarrassed. ...His shoulder jerked, and he changed the subject. "Why are you all here? Hurricane?"

The Warlord took a step forward and bent down a little – Carlos could barely reach up to the mighty Hero's shoulder. In a low voice he answered:

"Marcus Lachard, the envoy of Lady Cobryn, requested an audience with your father. He is accompanied by a trio of Heroes, and Lord Gryd ordered us to stay in the castle. Just in case."

"Very prudent of him."

"I agree."

The Emperor ended internecine conflicts quite ruthlessly, being reluctant to let any of his vassals lay their hands on more than one source of Prime, but he hasn't managed to completely root out this shameful phenomenon. The Lords knew that another war with their southern neighbors might be inevitable, but they couldn't go against their nature, and still wasted resources on skirmishes and territorial disputes to get an extra piece of woodland or a flood plain. Lady Cobryn, whom Marcus represented, was renowned for her aggression, and so Lord Dathos had good reason to take precautions, the enormous distance between Cobria and Grydia notwithstanding. The lords didn't always fight for plains or woodland, after all – sometimes conflicts resulted in a change of dynasty in a given province.

"Shall you stay right here in the yard?"

"Depends on where Lachard's Heroes are staying."

"Well said." Carlos nodded to the warriors and headed towards the left wing's entrance...

* * *

"Thus, my lady, if we disregard the expenses associated with keeping the court, the guard, and the Heroes..."

"Avestachus, would you please keep it short?" asked Agatha from her armchair. The Lady of Cobria had already grown tired of the treasurer's monotonous mumbling, and had only been pretending to listen to him for the last few minutes, trying to keep awake.

“Just give me the numbers.”

“This year the treasury’s revenue was five hundred thousand silver pieces higher than what we received the previous year. And a million more compared to the same month last year.” The Head of Treasury beamed. “Those are excellent figures, in my opinion.”

Avestachus’ smile was always rather ugly and fake – he made the impression of being coerced into smiling under pain of torture, but Lady Cobryn knew that the increased revenue was a source of true joy for the old man. To him, money became an end in and of itself a long time ago; money was a cause for which he lived his entire life, and every coin that went into the treasury was like a personal victory to him. Avestachus proved his honesty and dedication time and again, and Agatha trusted him completely in all financial matters.

“Your idea to lower the road toll and commercial levy made perfect sense, Your Ladyship – people are indeed more likely to travel via Cobria, which is an extra source of revenue. Six new inns and seven pubs have been opened over the last three months, and they all pay their taxes regularly. The people celebrate your rule.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“And so it is indeed.” Avestachus lowered his head.

The Lady’s response was a faint smile; she turned her attention to the map that hung on the wall – a most artful representation of her vast domain. Her Cobria – a green, warm and prosperous land, but a harsh land nonetheless. Her home.

Cobria’s very existence was a great challenge to the stereotype in the Dokht Imperium regarding southern provinces. The bountiful land yielded two crops a year, the sun shone year-round, the forests were full of game, and the oceans were teeming with fish. ...In another time, the land might have been a vast tropical paradise, but this was not meant to be.

Cobria’s location was in the southeast of the Imperium – it was a strip stretching between the ocean and the Free City of Fichter along the mighty Ihlva, which was the natural border between the Dokhts and the Adornians. Or, rather, became a natural border after the battle-hardened Dokhts gave the impudent Southerners a proper bloodbath – that happened a while ago, long before the Battle of the Misty Grove, and showed that they would defend their land to their very last breath.

However, there were other enemies besides the Keepers. Apart from the dangerous neighbors, Cobria was constantly plagued by the pirates, who were masters at concealing themselves among the skerries, the Touched that came from the Primezone, and the monsters that came from the ocean – the Cataclysm spawned beasts so foul that even the Heroes could hardly contain their revulsion, and the winged Zwees that came from the faraway islands... There were many foes to fight, and so this southern land raised weathered border guards who were well familiar with death instead of laid-back merrymakers.

“... our treasury is greater than that of any imperial lord, and will doubtlessly outshine even the Imperial Treasury, given just a little time.”

The sudden rise in the income had made Avestachus quite optimistic.

Agatha smiled and asked, “Is that all?”

“Yes, Your Ladyship,” replied the old man.

“I am pleased.”

“Thank you, Your Ladyship.”

The Treasurer carefully placed his papers into his bag, made a floor-sweeping bow and departed the study, walking always with his back towards the door. The next report would be from Malibor Petit, who was Head of Mining Operations in Cobria, but she heard some suspicious huffing and puffing from the anteroom, a few strong expressions, a groan, and a person who came into Agatha's view – instead of Malibor, it was Lieutenant Coucouser, red as an overheated kettle.

"An urgent report from Sir Lachard, Your Ladyship! The message arrived with the pigeon post five minutes ago."

The young man must have taken considerable effort to tear through the ranks of the administrative staff, and fervor like that had to be rewarded.

"Very well, Lieutenant," Agatha nodded with a smile. "You were absolutely right to tell me about the report immediately. Thank you."

Everyone in Cobria knew that the Lady's life was subject to a strict routine. Her daily schedule was filled up to the minute; every appointment had to be on time and could not last a minute longer than scheduled. Agatha did not like interruptions, which is why the young Coucouser found her gratitude most encouraging.

"I live to serve Your Ladyship." He saluted and gave the Lady a parchment scroll.

"Don't leave just yet."

Agatha tore the binding thread and quickly scanned the report, omitting all the extraneous verbiage such as "Your Most Gracious Ladyship" and "Your Most Humble Servant" by sheer force of habit. Her father taught her to check for whether or not the respectful wordings were intact, but paying them no attention beyond that, so as not to perceive flattery as enjoyable.

Judge people by what they do for you, not by what they tell you.

Now where was the essence of the message? Ah, here it is:

"... Your Ladyship, I am thoroughly convinced that we are finally on Glassblower's trail. A reliable source has divulged that the accursed killer headed towards Grydwald, so I shall immediately..."

The date?

Lady Cobryn looked at the bottom of the letter; it was written in Ulmerg a week ago. That meant Lachard was already in Grydwald.

The good thing about Glassblower going back to Grydia is that Marcus will be able to kill two birds with one stone.

Lady Cobryn reclined on her armchair and fell into a reverie, squinting at the Lieutenant, who was standing at attention.

She had long planned an advance on the Forest of Idmar, the soft green underbelly of the Imperium that would make a perfect base whence one might proceed further north, towards the capital. If Grydia, ruled by the senile Dathos, is firmly in her grasp, most of the foresters would gravitate into the Cobryan sphere of influence in six to twelve months. Add thereto all the southern lands and a number of provinces in the west; their collective voice will be strong enough to make Emperor Paul listen.

For listen he must.

Agatha looked at Coucouser absent-mindedly:

"From this moment on, any message from Sir Lachard is to be given full priority; I wish to receive the messages as soon as they are delivered, regardless of what time of day or night it is or what I am doing at the moment. Is that clear?"

“Aye, Your Ladyship!”

“You are dismissed.”

The Lieutenant snapped his heels and turned towards the door.

“Ask the next briefer in.”

“Aye, Your Ladyship!”

Lady Cobryn dropped the message into a desk drawer and closed her eyes for a second.

Do you see that, father? I'm succeeding, I am succeeding in everything!

* * *

The gargantuan hall was brightly lit by countless Prime lamps; it was crowded with boxes housing ingenuous contraptions, and other much larger mechanisms, equally intricate. Liquids of different colors were bubbling in the copper vats that stood on powerful burners – the scientists were preparing the reagent concoction for the experiment. Some of the vats were open, with vapors clouding above them, others were sealed and their vapors were sent to distillers or condensers to be mixed or separated further. There were pipes laid everywhere in the hall – for pure Prime from the lake and the reagents that were to be used for the final mixture prepared in six metal reservoirs and a huge transparent jar placed at the centre of the hall.

Eight pipes converged at the lid of a huge rectangular chamber made of glass with a pentangular construction inside it and a naked man whose each limb was tied to one of the pentagram's points.

A sacrificial victim. The final ingredient for the rite invented by Hirawa and Convivial.

The cube had no floor – underneath the unfortunate there was the bell of a thick pipe that led to a huge tank.

“We're ready, Lady Cobryn – we can begin any minute.”

Hieronymus Vick, the leader of the group of scientists who had been living at the Primachine facility for three years now, was visibly nervous: he kept rubbing his sweaty hands and kept looking sideways, afraid of meeting Agatha's eye. He looked much more confident while Invariat was still alive – a brilliant administrator capable of implementing that genius' every concept with skill and precision. His performance before Invariat's demise elicited no complaints, but now... poor Vick became the project leader all of a sudden, responsible for the outcome, and his brilliance became much duller.

“Are you sure?” asked Lady Cobryn coolly.

“Inasmuch as we can judge...”

“I see,” Agatha interrupted Hieronymus and looked at the Adornian. “They aren't sure.”

“I'd be surprised to hear they were,” Hirawa eyed the scientist with arrogance. “Invariat was a genius; these are mere apprentices. Were anything to befall me, not even the best of my apprentices could act as a sound replacement.”

“All they needed to do was to restore the machine to working condition – and they had built that contraption themselves in the first place.”

“Under Convivial's guidance.”

“But they aren't blind, are they?!”

“Let's see what they've managed to come up with.” The Adornian dismissed Hieronymus with a wave of his hand and smiled to Agatha. “Let us begin!”

“Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

The Lord walked alongside the machine, looking at the puffing mechanisms with contempt – a true Adornian, Hirawa couldn’t stand technology. He ascended the metallic dais installed opposite the glass cube, sighed as he studied the crucified man, and nodded. Poor Hieronymus pulled the main lever with a sweaty hand.

The Primachine came to life with a hum. There was a smell of Prime, engine grease, steam, and all sorts of vapors – all of them components of Invariat’s secret concoction. Cogwheels started spinning, pumps started hissing, and the solution filled the pipes.

Agatha gripped the handrails tightly.

“It begins!”

Prime was pumped from the lake, but not only to the cube. There was Prime in every solution, distributed across the entire hall. Sucked into enormous reservoirs, transformed and processed by Invariat’s reagents, the colors transforming in a seemingly chaotic dance. The Primachine began to hum with greater strain, with an edge to it now.

The chronometer mounted on the ceiling slowly ticked the seconds away, attracting as many glances as the puffing machine.

“Nine minutes!”

The critical period, according to Invariat.

Agatha looked at the transparent cube again. A bluish gas was filling it – initially, the gas had been radiant, but the radiance was leaving it rapidly.

The formula will be ready and vaporized – just like the Prime pumped in from the lake. The solutions will be mixed under high pressure in the cube, becoming a single substance, and that very moment...

The concluding chord will sound.

“Kontarbardar de khlop de riz!”

Finally, it was Hirawa’s turn. He started to cast his spell, and the condemned man screamed horribly. Although the cube’s thick walls were perfectly soundproof, Agatha felt the unfortunate’s scream echoing in her very soul.

“Badar zavey karr! Baday ousid ousilla!”

Words were of secondary importance in Adornian magic – the most important process was taking place inside Hirawa’s soul, in his mind’s eye. Hirawa knew what his objective was, and altered the substance that was entering the cube accordingly. Focused on nothing but the task, deep in concentration, he no longer resembled a courtly dandy, having become too grand a figure.

“Asbortarg zavey khounimr!”

The mage’s voice grew louder, filling the hall, drowning out even the hum of the Primachine, thus demonstrating to everyone where the main scene of action was in this experiment.

“Khadam!”

Hirawa didn’t have to be near the victim to kill – his right hand made a flickering gesture aimed at the terrified man’s chest, and death blossomed inside the transparent cube.

“Come on,” whispered Agatha, gripping the hand rail. “Come on... Now!”

“Come on!” prayed Hieronymus silently.

“Please!” all his assistants followed suit.

“Well?” inquired Hirawa sullenly. “Anything?”

Will this death in Prime remain an ordinary death, or will it give birth to...

Five seconds. Ten. Fifteen.

Fifteen heartbeats. The gas that filled the cube remained lusterless.

A failure.

“Damnation!”

The dejected savants were hugging the walls; Hirawa approached, looking no longer like a great mage, but more like a doused parrot.

“I’m sorry.”

Don’t be. You’ve done your best. I know how you tried. It was my mistake. Indeed, it was a mistake to trust Invariat.

“We need Convivial’s records,” uttered Lady Cobryn coldly. “Glassblower might have them. Or maybe they weren’t found in the Fichter hideout, maybe they’re stashed away in some secret place...” She went hoarse, but only for a second. “Invariat must have left some records behind.”

“Why would he record how he broke the Primachine?” inquired a surprised Hirawa.

“I want to find every record of its construction,” Agatha continued sternly. She turned to the savants. “You lot keep on searching for what went wrong. If I see no progress in two weeks, some of you will start to die.”

* * *

...

“I invited Lachard to stay at the castle, yet he chose an inn,” Dathos recollected grumpily, trying to find other examples of the Cobrian’s impertinence. “Is that not a sign of disrespect?”

“On the contrary,” Hans shook his head. “Lachard is here on Lady Cobryn’s bidding, and thus demonstrated great tact. He is letting us know that he has no wish to be a nuisance.”

“But he demanded an audience!”

“He requested one most humbly.”

“You defend him?” Dathos raised his eyebrows in surprise.

The mentor lifted his hands in dismay and sighed.

“You are obviously prejudiced against Lachard, Your Lordship, and I endeavor to arrange matters in such a way that Your Lordship’s anger about last night’s events would not have any adverse effects on the political situation.”

Dathos’ surprise turned into utter bewilderment.

“Grydia is so far away from Cobria that it is preposterous to imagine that we share common political interests.”

“It is known well to both of us that Lady Cobryn tends to think many steps ahead. She has interests throughout the whole Imperium, and who knows...”

“Did I miss anything?”

The heir walked in uninvited and unselfconsciously interrupted Hans halfway through the sentence.

“Carlos!”

“Your Lordship,” the mentor bowed.

“We’ve just been discussing those Cobrians,” Dathos told his son.

“What’s the point of discussing them?” Carlos plopped down on the armchair and

crossed his legs.

There were a few bottles of good red plonk on the low carved table that stood forlorn in one of the corners, but the young man didn't feel brave enough to suggest that they have a drop or two. He knew that his father wouldn't approve of drinking this early in the day.

"The Cobrians got what they wanted, and they're free to leave. I don't think we should interfere with their departure."

"Spoken like a true lord," Dathos chuckled.

"They have requested an audience," reminded Hans.

"Hurricane said as much in his report." Carlos looked at the mentor sideways. "Why would Lachard want to meet again?"

"He may be wishing to express his respect and gratitude for your assistance and that of Lord Dathos in the apprehension of a dangerous criminal."

Hans tried to sound grand, intending to massage the young man's ego, but he achieved the opposite result:

"A dangerous one indeed," Carlos scowled scornfully, surprising his father.

"The criminal killed Fidget," reminded Dathos. "This wouldn't be easy."

"The criminal got lucky," Carlos shrugged. "It was my fault – I made Shahmana a target when I ordered the alley be lit."

"One needs to perform the shot," noted the mentor. "To take aim..."

"Don't lecture me on combat, Hans, we've discussed the details enough in the course of my studies," the young man waved him away. "One thing I'm certain of is that the man I had killed was no warrior."

"He killed a guard and wounded two more."

"This only means that our guards have grown heavy and complacent, and need to polish their skills. You might want to look into that, Hans."

Carlos had never treated his mentor this disrespectfully before. The reddening mentor turned to the lord and uttered, barely managing to hide his fury:

"I believe the young lord is still overexcited."

Dathos had no time to respond.

"The young lord believes there's something rotten in the kingdom," Carlos said loudly and also turned to face his father. "I was not present at the first audience you gave this Lachard, and so I don't know whom we are discussing. What was the name of the miscreant?"

"Jan Glassblower," Hans wasted no time replying. "He was an apprentice of Invariat Convivial."

"*The Invariat?*"

"Yes, him," the mentor confirmed. "Jan Glassblower enjoyed Invariat's complete trust and managed his affairs. A few months ago he killed his teacher, robbed him..."

"Hold on, hold on..." Carlos interrupted Hans yet again. "Could you explain this again, please? Killed him and robbed him, you say? How long had Glassblower been Invariat's apprentice?"

"I'm not certain," said the mentor, somewhat embarrassed. "Ten years, I believe."

"So this Glassblower was a loyal apprentice of Convivial for ten years, and then killed him out of the blue? And robbed him, to boot?" The young man looked at his father in feigned surprise. "And you believed this?"

Quite, Dathos thought with a start. Why would he, out of the blue?

Two days ago, when the Grydian lord was examining the documents signed by the Imperial Prosecutor of Fichter, he had no doubts about the course of action he would have to take. Everything seemed perfectly simple and obvious, but a single question asked this young man turned everything upside down. Why would Glassblower kill his teacher? Because of money? But Jan spent years learning from Invariat and had such skills that he could go into business on his own and be a smashing success. The Touched take it, something doesn't fit!

However, the lord didn't get a chance to speak in defense of his son.

"You are still too young, Carlos. You have not yet learned that anything is possible in this world," said the mentor in a sententious voice.

And instantly received a sharp retort from Carlos: "Youth doesn't stay with you long, but your wits last your whole life. I may have little experience, but I still don't believe that a loyal apprentice could kill a scientist of Invariat's fame – not for money. We have not been told the whole story."

The lad has grown, thought Dathos, looking at Carlos, now red from the heat of the argument. He's still hot-headed and needs to acquire our family's level-headedness, but that is merely a matter of time. In a year or two I'll be able to pass the lord's coronet to him without any worries.

Which would let Dathos enjoy his long-awaited and long-deserved rest.

"The circumstances of Invariat's death have been established by the guards of the free city of Fichter, Invariat's place of residence over the last few years," said the mentor hoarsely. "Afterwards, Lady Cobryn, who had a very high opinion of Convivial, swore to avenge his death. And indeed, she appears to have kept her word."

Hans looked confused, and the old lord decided to support him. One may doubt all one wants to, but official reports are a serious matter, the Touched take them, and they have much more authority than questions out of nowhere. His son will do well to understand the power of the Imperial bureaucracy sooner rather than later.

"That's right, Carlos," said Dathos. "Lachard has shown us all the relevant papers, including a letter from the Imperial Prosecutor of Fichter."

However, the young man wasn't about to give up. He was stubborn, and he didn't want the mentor to have the last word, either.

"Why would Lady Cobryn want to avenge Invariat's death?"

"She had a very high opinion of Convivialthe man."

"So what? Father is of a very high opinion of the locks made by Isotherm Anykey, but if the artificer dies tomorrow in a drunken fight, we're unlikely to send Heroes to avenge his death."

Once again, Carlos was right.

"This much is true," Dathos nodded his agreement with a smile.

Hans' nostrils flared and he found it very difficult to restrain himself. "There are rumors that Lady Cobryn and Invariat were... close," said the mentor at last, emphasizing the word "close". "It is also reported that Invariat had left the capital for Fichter to be closer to Coburg and Lady Cobryn."

"She slept with Convivial?" asked a flabbergasted Carlos.

"Why not?"

"A liaison of that sort could tarnish her reputation."

"Lady Cobryn can afford many things," Hans shrugged. He managed to put a lid on his

temper and carried on in his usual calm and reasoned manner. “Incidentally, Invariat wasn’t a nobody – he was a prominent scientist and a legend among the Dokhts, a favorite of the Emperor himself. Invariat Convivial is the honorary president of the Academic Council...”

“Father?” Any serious conversation that Carlos participated in would eventually have such a moment: a hushed “Father?” and a quick glance at the lord. Carlos wasn’t ready for full independence just yet, and he needed advice and encouragement. “Can Lady Cobryn really afford, uh, many things?”

Carlos managed to focus on the most important piece of information supplied by the mentor. He deduced that it was the most important part and that Hans meant more than a mere tryst with a savant by “many things,” so he wanted to know more. Carlos wasn’t aware of why he needed this information, but felt that Lady Cobryn’s omnipotent attitude was somehow related to the last words uttered by Glassblower and the secret guarded by the apprentice of Invariat Convivial. A secret he died protecting – and, possibly, the reason for Convivial’s death as well.

The Primachine...

“You would like to know about Lady Cobryn?”

“I would.”

The lad’s growing up, and quickly, too! He appears to have come to the conclusion that one needs to be fully informed before making a decision.

Dathos smiled.

“Just before you arrived, son, we were discussing the country’s political situation with Hans.”

“We’re at the centre of the Forest,” the young man snorted. “What concern of ours is the political situation? It’s the Emperor’s headache.” He cast a sideways glance at the mentor and added: “May he reign forever.”

Hans nodded in a self-important manner, as it was his role to witness these obligatory words of respect. However, Dathos felt wounded by his son’s isolationist attitude.

“You don’t care what happens to the country?”

Carlos heard this one before, and came up with an all-purpose answer long since:

“Can we affect events in any way at all? All the decisions are made in the capital by Emperor Paul himself, may he reign forever, and his gormless minions who delude themselves into thinking that they lead the Dokhts.”

“Each one of us can change the course of events, Carlos,” Dathos replied dispassionately. “The lords, first and foremost. It matters not whether we sit right here in the Forest or have a castle in the mountains, whether our domain is vast or negligible. We are all responsible for our state. We rule over people and must strive to make life better throughout the Imperium. We’ve had our share of ordeals – the Cataclysm, the Touched, the War... The Prime Era is tough on us and keeps giving us harder and harder challenges, and we must realize that we cannot survive if we stand divided. If the Emperor is the only one to think of the country, the Adornians will take us barehanded.”

“I don’t quite understand what you’re getting at.”

Carlos wanted to find out more about Lady Cobryn, and he found himself drawn into one of those tedious discussions concerning the Adornian menace. The actual topic may have been of some interest to the young man, as a matter of fact – he was greatly interested in the events of the War for the Misty Grove, for instance – but the young man

remained extremely skeptical about the menace from the south. To him, the beautiful Naphana was the embodiment of all things Adornian, and what could be expected from her but pleasure?

“Let me explain if you don’t.”

Lord Dathos approached the large map that hung on the southern wall of the study and took a deep breath, trying to decide where to begin. Mentor Hans leaned against a bookcase and once again marveled at his unique ability to nod off while retaining an expression of keen interest on his face.

“As you know, son, our country came out of the War for the Misty Grove victorious, powerful, and united. Imperial power was the main force of victory, and the defeat of the Keepers resulted largely from the lack of unity among the Southerners...”

“Yeah, I’ve read about it,” said Carlos.

“And I was actually there,” reminded Dathos.

“Isn’t it a pity that I missed it?”

“War isn’t as much fun as it’s reported to be, son,” said the lord gravely. “You can take my word for it: I enjoy taking care of everyday affairs in Grydia a whole lot more.”

“What about glory?”

“Glory won’t feed you, or plough a field, or make a machine...”

The Primachine...

“However, we have drifted off course.” Dathos rubbed his chin. “Nobody disputed Imperial power after the victory; however, with the passage of time, the cruelty of the Keepers faded from memory, so we have convinced ourselves that the Southerners are no longer a danger and lost our vigilance. Especially while the Obelisk of Truce still stood at the border... We became supercilious and self-righteous; Heroes and Prime have aggravated these revolting traits enormously.”

“Why is that?”

“Because even a weak Hero can defeat dozens of soldiers. The regular army became marginalized, and the Heroes obey the lords, not the Emperor, which makes their owners even more arrogant.”

“And foolish.”

“It’s not just them – it’s everyone. The Lords see that Prime is the very foundation of their power.”

“Yeah, and we’ve got plenty!”

“For the time being,” said Dathos. “However, the deposits of the Misty Grove turned out to be less than our savants had expected, and they’ll begin to run dry soon enough.”

“So we’ll go south!” Carlos’ eyes lit up. “We’ll take our Prime back from the Keepers!”

“The Keepers believe it’s theirs by right.”

“Whose side are you on, anyway?”

“I can only be on the side of the Dokhts.” The lord smiled sadly and continued. “The Keepers of today are a far cry from what they used to be like during the War for the Misty Grove. They have learned many things and made many important conclusions, and they’re really itching to have their revenge.”

“We’re stronger!”

“We were stronger for as long as we were united,” said Dathos, loudly and unexpectedly harshly. “This is the very conclusion that I wanted you to make, son: we won because we were led by Ferraut, and there was no squabbling among the lords. But Prime and Heroes

have changed the lords, and some of them have grown rather ambitious.”

“They intend to rebel against the Emperor?” Carlos was surprised.

The young lord had no particular awe for the crown, but he respected the supreme ruler enormously – after all, the brother of the regnant Emperor was the one who had led the Dokhts to victory in the War for the Misty Grove.

“You mean there’s a rebellion in the offing?”

Instead of responding, Dathos returned to the map.

“The free city of Fichter, which is the only place where there is trade with the Adornians, is right here, on the banks of the Ihlva, the border river. Cobria is here, a little further north – it occupies the Cob Peninsula. You might think it a faraway province whose lords are just as peaceful and loyal to the Crown as yours truly or my Forester neighbors, but this is not the case. The Cobrians were the first ones in the Imperium to face the Keepers in battle – they fought off their raiders and even drove the Southerners away from their shore of the river, having established the border at Ilhwa a long time before the Emperor signed a treaty to that effect. The Cobrians took the brunt of the onslaught of the Southerners and they stood their ground, and the revenge they took on the Keepers afterwards was horrible.”

“Most of the heroes of the War for the Misty Grove were from Cobria,” added Hans, all of a sudden. “They were the fiercest warriors.”

“I used to admire Lord Friedrich Cobrynn,” nodded Dathos. “He was a valiant and resolute fighter. His daughter, Agatha, inherited her father’s finest qualities.”

Now that the conversation was back to Lady Cobrynn, Carlos was all ears again.

“After her father’s death, Agatha has managed to retain all of his Heroes and assistants. She rules Cobria with an iron hand. She is intelligent, cunning and driven, and nobody knows what’s inside her head. She just goes for it, and her power grows from day to day.”

“What kind of power?”

“Agatha married her neighbor, Lord Merth, at the tender age of twenty; her husband was fit to be her grandfather. The old man died three years later, and Merthyria disappeared from the maps of the Imperium – it’s a part of Cobria now.”

“How could that happen?” Carlos was astounded. “The law...”

“Smervia’s source of Prime had run dry, and Agatha received the permission to join the lands to her domain from the Emperor himself.”

“Well, that’s all right, then.”

“But Agatha didn’t stop.”

“Let’s not beat around the bush, Lord Dathos,” said the mentor out of the blue. “Lady Cobrynn wasn’t allowed to stop.”

“Nobody can really confirm it, Hans.”

“There were rumors.”

“Rumors are just that – rumors.”

“Could you please be more specific?” inquired Carlos acridly.

“One year after the demise of Lord Merth, Cobria was attacked by Lord Hurius. He was a grand-nephew of the ruler of Merthyria and offered Agatha to split the lands; he attacked when she declined the offer.” Dathos grew silent for a while. “Many are of the opinion that Lord Hurius was provoked into participating in this reckless adventure by Emperor Paul himself.”

“So as to curb Agatha’s ambition a bit,” volunteered the mentor.

“I think I can predict the outcome,” the young man smiled ironically.

“Lady Cobryn put the invading army to complete rout and placed her cousin on the Hurian throne.”

“Emperor Paul could not object to that, seeing as how Agatha was acting in full accordance with the law.”

“Hmmm...”

Carlos realized that the internal affairs of the Dokht Imperium were nowhere near as boring as he had once thought.

Why didn't father tell me about this lady earlier? By all the cogwheels in the world, she sounds impressive!

“Lady Cobryn would act with more finesse later on – she sent diplomatic missions, arranged things with rulers, bribed some, threatened others, and is reported to have killed a few tough ones. She is believed to have influence over the entire south of the Imperium, and she doesn't look likely to stop.”

“Why doesn't the Emperor strike at Cobria?”

“He has no cause to – Lady Cobryn doesn't break any laws and keeps emphasizing that she is absolutely loyal to the crown. However, she hasn't visited the capital once over the last five years or so.” The lord smiled. “Agatha is circumspect.”

“And intelligent,” said the mentor.

Nobody argued with that.

“She will never risk an open rebellion, because the lords depend on Prime, and most of it is produced by the Company, which belongs to Paul. Local deposits are puny, so let us be frank: for the time being, Prime is one of the main instruments used by the Emperor to keep the lords in line. But if Agatha manages to change the situation and get her hands on a source of Prime, the Dokhts are in for some entertaining times.”

“The Primachine...”

Dathos twisted about in the armchair that he had occupied after stepping away from the map, and continued calmly:

“This was precisely what Hans was referring to when he mentioned a change in the political situation. Grydia is a long way from Cobria, but we have authority in the Forest, and Lady Agatha appears to have some serious plans. The audience requested by Lachard may have lasting consequences.”

“Will he offer you an alliance?”

“He won't be able to, since any such alliance would be a conspiracy against the Emperor,” the lord shook his head. “He's going to make some other offer.”

“What kind of offer?”

“I don't know.”

“So now we must decide on what to do once we hear it,” Carlos made the conclusion himself. “Shall we report it to the Emperor, or shall we not?”

“Precisely, my son.”

The young man turned towards the mentor.

“Weren't you supposed to advise my father to report all his suspicions to the Prosecutor?”

Hans sighed heavily, as if trying to comment upon the fervor of youth, and replied:

“Grydia has become my home, Your Young Lordship, and I would like to see it prosper further under your father's wise guidance. Which is why my advice would be not to spurn

Lady Cobryn.”

A most evasive answer, and one that was quite unfit for a mentor sent to Grydwald from the capital. Why would Hans be so cautious? Could it be his friendly feelings towards Lord Dathos, or...

“Are you scared of her?” Carlos looked at the mentor, amazed.

“Intelligent people don’t get scared; they give proper evaluation to whoever they must deal with,” muttered Dathos. “Lady Cobryn is extremely dangerous. She also has the opportunity to ascend to the throne.”

“How would that happen?”

“A year ago Paul’s wife died, and there were rumors of some of his associates voicing the suggestion that he marry Agatha.”

“Doesn’t he realize how dangerous she is?” Carlos got confused.

“He understands it better than we do,” said Dathos earnestly. “But he’s got the Imperium to think of, and he must keep the Dokhts united and strong, which may tempt him into marrying for political reasons.”

“How about the prince? Isn’t he the heir apparent?”

“Life is unpredictable – especially in the capital.”

“I would not ascribe any bloodthirsty intentions to Lady Cobryn...” Hans started, but Carlos interrupted him once again:

“I would!”

“Why?” the mentor was astounded.

“Because Glassblower said the following before he died: ‘The Primachine. Lady Cobryn is building the Primachine. She will change everything. The whole world.’”

Lord Dathos and mentor Hans examined Carlos silently for a few long seconds, then exchanged a glance, and Hans asked cautiously:

“Was that all?”

“Yes.”

“But what does it mean?”

“I have no idea,” Carlos shrugged. “Have you ever come across the term ‘Primachine’?”

“There are many Prime machines.”

“I am certain that Glassblower pronounced it as a single word, as though he meant to draw a distinction between the Primachine and your run-of-the-mill Prime machines. It must be something unique.”

“Something he paid for with his life,” muttered Lord Gryd.

“This is true, father. Judging by what I’ve learnt about Lady Cobryn, we can come to the conclusion that she is building some incredible device.”

Hans shook his head in disbelief.

“A Primachine? Incredible?”

“Don’t forget about Convivial,” said Dathos in a singsong voice. “He was a genius, after all.”

“The Primachine... What could it be? A weapon of some sort?”

“Prime weapons don’t surprise anyone in our day and age,” the Lord smiled acidly.

“Now that we have Heroes, Prime weapons are important, but not strategic. It must be something else.”

“A secret...” whispered the dying Jan.

Yes, agreed Carlos in his mind. A secret. What a pity you haven’t told me what it was.

And what a pity I killed you.

* * *

“A whole tower with a real Prime cannon?” Tom Scowl chuckled as he examined the front gate of Castle Gryd. “How do they live here?”

[The Eraser](#) wasn’t present at the previous audience due to a prior engagement downtown, and he was now studying Lord Dathos’ stronghold with the curiosity of a Hero who’s accustomed to breaking and entering as opposed to regular entering, wiping out enemy resistance, or infiltration, when guards and Prime alarms are deceived and defeated by cunning and unexpected strikes.

“They live a sleepy life,” replied Maximilian Smasher, who was following Lachard on a mighty steed. “They don’t wage any wars against their neighbors and they try to kill the Touched at a distance from the city. The peasants don’t revolt. They don’t need many cannons.”

“You can grab them empty-handed,” Ulle Hoarfrost ventured an opinion.

His voice was muffled by the mask that he wore, as was the custom of the [Faceless Ones](#). Some of the wittier dandies speculated that the Faceless had faces so scary they frightened their owners, but all such speculations were made in hushed tones – nobody was brave enough to mock the merciless killers openly.

“Not sure about bare-handed, but if we plan our attack well, this trash heap won’t last an hour,” Tom grunted.

“Don’t wag your chin too much about the attack,” grumbled Lachard. “The locals know their way around a forest, and they have keen hearing.”

“And dull blades.”

“We don’t know it yet.”

“We’ll find out.”

“I told you to be quiet!”

“Alright, alright...”

Even though Lachard expressed his displeasure with what the Heroes were saying, he agreed with their opinion: any competent military person would smile at Castle Gryd patronizingly at best. The walls weren’t tall enough, the moat wasn’t deep enough, there was but a single tower with a Prime cannon near the gate – what kind of a fortress was that? How was one supposed to defend it? If the Keepers make it this far, they’ll detail a single regiment to take Grydwald, and the task will be completed before breakfast.

Adornia is a long way off, Marcus reminded himself. The only threat in the Forest comes from the Touched and the neighbors, ignoramuses like Dathos.

Those who were covered in moss and who had lost their conquering spirit a long time ago.

The Obelisk of Truce was destroyed last year – war is imminent, numskulls! How are you going to handle it? Half-asleep? Under austerity provisions?

Once again Lachard became convinced that Lady Cobryn’s plan was correct – she was the only one who really thought about the future of the Dokhts. No other ruler did.

You call my Lady impertinent and self-righteous? So may it be. Yet her far-sightedness is unequalled!

As he was heading to the castle, Lachard was still uncertain about his treatment of Lord Dathos. Would negotiations suffice, or would he have to resort to Plan B, which entailed

violence? Lady Agatha intended to gain control of Grydia, the most important land in the Forest of Idmar, whose lord had enormous authority with the foresters, but she said it would be up to Marcus to choose the method.

You'll be right there and see everything for yourself, so you should decide for yourself, too. I trust your prudence.

Yet his prudence was giving way to the revulsion evoked by this ancient lord and his drunkard of a son and Marcus' scorn for the foresters in general.

You hide from the Keepers behind our backs and hope that if a war breaks out, we'll have to go through another bloodbath in the name of all the Dokhts. Cowards, that's what you are!

"How many heroes has the old man got?" inquired Scowl in a laid-back way.

"Four," replied Smasher gruffly.

"So they're all accounted for, then."

Lachard came out of his reverie and looked around.

The castle's spacious yard was empty but for a few guards at the gate and a few peasants, near the kitchen, unloading a cart with game, as well as the four Heroes idling at the porch of the Academy.

"Could this Dathos be afraid of us?" the Eraser grinned.

"If they weren't here, you'd say Dathos was an idiot," remarked Smasher.

"I'll say he's an idiot anyway," Scowl shrugged. "Why show us the whole set? Two would be enough for a proper display – others should have hid behind the buildings and struck us in the back."

"Who's gonna off the fat hog?" inquired Hoarfrost, making an almost imperceptible nod in the direction of the local Warlord.

"Whoever reaches him first," Tom giggled. "And since I'm faster than the lot of you..."

"The decision has not been made yet," Warlord Smasher tried to rein in the Eraser.

This remark sealed the fate of old Lord Dathos: Lachard couldn't let an opportunity to humiliate Smasher pass him by.

"The decision has been made," said Marcus resolutely. "Begin in half an hour."

Smasher opened his mouth to respond, but Tom managed to beat him to it. He jumped off his mount and winked to the Grydian Heroes in a friendly way:

"How's it going, brothers?"

"Greetings to you, too," the local Warlord replied in a low rumble and, hinting that good manners were obligatory for everyone, Heroes included, introduced himself.

"Heinrich Hurricane."

Hoarfrost's shoulders jerked, and Marcus realized that the faceless one was laughing behind his mask, making fun of Heinrich's grand nickname.

"That's some name," replied Scowl to the Warlord. "I'm Tom." He instantly got to business. "How are things in Grydia? Got any problems with the jerboas? No signs of decline in your annual milk yields, are there?"

Lachard sighed – Tom was incorrigible. He dismounted in a dignified manner and ordered the lackey who hurried to meet him:

"Report the arrival of Sir Marcus Lachard, a knight of Lady Cobryn."

* * *

Since Lachard didn't come to Grydia as an official envoy, but rather to take care of

business, as it were, this produced a certain quandary concerning protocol. They were lucky the first time – the Cobrians arrived when Lord Dathos was in the yard of the castle, mediating a dispute between some peasants and some merchants (a lord's responsibilities entailed those of a judge as well). The event that would later be pompously dubbed an audience took place right there, among guards and commoners, and it took very little time: Lachard voiced the request, showed the documents to the lord, and received permission to hunt down Glassblower. That was pretty much it.

This time the requested audience had an official status, which complicated matters. Receiving Lachard in the throne room, with the entire entourage present, was out of the question as above his rank, and a conversation in a study would be deemed an offence to Lady Cobryn, who had sent him. A solution presented itself eventually: the Cobrian was invited to the throne room, but without preparing the room for the visit in any way at all – even the main chandelier remained unlit. The darkness of the room was a hint that Lachard's request for an audience did not make the Grydian lord very happy.

"Lord Dathos," the Cobrian entered and gave a low bow. "Overjoyed to see you in good health."

"No changes in that department over the last couple of days, Sir Lachard," the Lord chuckled. "What did you want to discuss?"

Dathos did not respond to the Cobrian's respectful greeting or wish his Lady a long reign, which did not go unnoticed by Carlos and Hans, who stood right next to the throne. This behavior verged on insulting, but Lachard chose to ignore it. The Cobrian's tone remained calm and meek.

"First and foremost, I would like to thank you for your invaluable help and support in what concerned the capture of the dangerous criminal Jan Glassblower. As you know, Her Ladyship swore revenge, and now..."

"On the grave of the great Invariat?"

"What was that?"

"I thought that the inconsolable Lady Agatha swore to have her revenge upon Glassblower on the grave of the great Invariat." Dathos made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Was I wrong?"

"Er..." Lachard squinted unpleasantly, but instantly regained control of his emotions and confirmed it just as respectfully: "You're quite right, on his very grave. I was present at the event in question."

"In this case, I am happy to have been of service to Lady Agatha," said the lord evenly. "Give my warmest regards to your lady and express my condolences for her loss."

"Condolences?" Marcus got confused again.

"We were talking about Invariat Convivial," reminded Dathos. "I assume he must have been valued very highly by the lady, since she gave an oath to avenge his death."

Carlos had a sudden thought that he'd never seen his father so cold and aloof. He wasn't one to try to behave like one of the boys with the courtiers and the commoners, but he didn't simply act differently in the presence of the Cobrian – he became a perfectly unfamiliar person. A perfect stranger sat on the throne, openly mocking the knight who had requested the audience.

"Oh, your condolences, by all means," drawled Lachard. "Convivial died a while ago, and I..."

"You were otherwise engaged."

“Quite so.”

“But now that you have done your duty and captured your criminal, you can return to your lady triumphant. I’m certain there’s a reward waiting for you.”

“Lady Cobryn is just,” nodded Marcus.

“You know her better than I do.”

“She is also extremely attentive to details,” added the Cobrian. “Her blessed sight leaves nothing out.”

“A quality of a good ruler.”

“I agree with you there, Lord Gryd.”

“So why don’t you go to Coburg and share all the details with Lady Agatha?”

It would appear that one couldn’t get more explicit – Lachard was obviously told to leave. However, the knight chose to ignore the lord.

“Unfortunately, I do not know all the details that concern the demise of the vile miscreant,” said Marcus with a shadow of a smile. “When we arrived at the scene, Glassblower was already dead.”

“Wasn’t that your mission? You were charged with killing Glassblower, and now he’s dead.”

But Lachard was in charge of the conversation now, and he pursued his objective relentlessly.

“Please don’t misunderstand me, Lord Gryd – I am aware that my request might strike you as impertinent, but I would like to discuss the last moments of Jan Glassblower with your son.”

The tone remained respectful, but there were metallic notes underneath. The short Cobrian made it known that he intended to get what he had come for.

“Aren’t you crossing a line here?”

“I apologized in advance, Lord Gryd.”

The atmosphere was getting rather heated, and Carlos decided to speak:

“Father, I am of the opinion that this man’s curiosity should be satisfied,” said the young man, looking at the lord. “After all, Lachard is but a loyal servant who wishes to give his lady the fullest information on the assignment that he had carried out. We would be delighted if each of our subjects treated their responsibilities with this much diligence.”

“Thank you, Your Young Lordship,” Marcus bowed.

“What did you want to ask me about?”

The Cobrian studied the young man, as though he were trying to commit his every feature to memory, and then inquired politely:

“Did Jan Glassblower say anything before he died?”

“No, he died in silence.”

“Without making a sound?”

“Why, no!” Carlos laughed. “He shouted something, as one does in the heat of the battle, then swore, I think, and then he died – when my dagger pierced his chest.”

“What exactly did he shout?”

Carlos shrugged.

“As I’ve already said, they were regular battle cries, more like a roar than a shout. He may have promised to kill me, but I wasn’t paying that much attention, being otherwise engaged.”

“Engaged how exactly?”

"Why, dodging Glassblower's attacks and trying to stay alive." Carlos feigned surprise quite well, exposing the stupidity of Lachard's question. "You may agree that it commanded my full attention."

"Quite so, Your Young Lordship," admitted Marcus. "I'm glad you succeeded."

"So am I. Is that it?"

"How about right before his death?" asked the Cobrian quickly. "You pierced the criminal's chest, you approached him, you felt his breath, possibly the smell of blood as well – I know you were excited, but at that moment you already knew you were safe and all your attention was focused on the dying enemy. He was whispering something, if I'm not mistaken, and you heard every word."

"He cursed me."

"Didn't that trouble you?"

"He was no mage," Carlos waved the question away.

"You didn't know it at the moment."

The young man seemed floored for a second, but then gave a confident reply:

"All I knew is that I'd escaped death, and I didn't give a damn about curses."

"I see." Lachard looked at Dathos, then at Hans, then stared Carlos right in the eye and told him in a defiant voice:

"I don't believe you."

* * *

"You ain't supposed to!" Scowl guffawed mockingly as he eyed Archibald, who'd been getting more irate by the minute. "And I don't give a toss whether or not you believe me, anyway – got that, Highlander? It was just as I'm saying, anyways – our [Quarrier](#) Rudolph Coppermine was holding the three-headed dragon down when I chopped off every head, got that?"

"Not a single Hero can hold down a three-head," said Jacob, looking at Hurricane sideways.

"Yours can't," said Tom defiantly. "You haven't seen any real ones."

"Are they all blabbermouths like you?" inquired Fidget.

"To be like me, a Hero must have more than what's in here," Scowl pointed to his biceps. "You gotta have something in your noggin, too. Ain't anyone told you?"

A short chuckle was heard from behind the mask of the faceless one. Shahmana couldn't help giving him the evil eye, Jacob grew pink, and Rusty Moustache became even glummer. Only the Warlords remained nonchalant. Hurricane and Smasher stood face to face and exchanged glances in silence, looking like two armored rocks. Alike, and yet completely different.

"I hear you let some three-headed dragon do you in last week," said Smasher gruffly. "Couldn't budge it, could you?"

"And I heard you attacked Lord Yrch when he was hunting," replied Heinrich in the same key. "And then Lady Cobryn had to put you back piece by piece."

"Lord Yrch attacked us," Smasher remarked.

"Of course he did," Hurricane nodded.

Only true warriors became Warlords, strong and honest, which is why Heinrich's remark got to Smasher.

"We don't do sneak attacks."

“Then why are you travelling with these degenerates?”

The Warlord was raised in the knightly tradition, and therefore disliked Erasers and the Faceless Ones, and Dathos had given his word to Hurricane that his team would have none of those.

“We were tracking a criminal.”

“An interesting answer.”

Heinrich managed to demonstrate the extent of his scorn for Smasher’s companions with a single phrase. Smasher looked uncertain for a second, then repeated in a booming voice:

“We don’t attack sneakily.” He grew silent for a second and concluded: “We do our lady’s bidding.”

He swung his heavy mace.

* * *

“Are you trying to imply I’m dishonest with you?” Carlos considered himself a good liar, and he was greatly irritated by Lachard’s acumen.

“I’m not trying to imply anything, I am accusing you of lying,” Marcus was just as irritated and stopped speaking in respectful tones in a matter of seconds. “You’re telling lies.”

“This is outrageous!”

“Hans!” Dathos glanced towards the mentor. “Tell the guards to march this scum out!”

“But you’ve given Sir Lachard an audience, Lord Gryd, and you...”

“Have you forgotten whom I represent here, you provincial buffoons!?” roared Marcus. “When Lady Cobryn demands an answer, it must be full and to the point! Her Ladyship does not suffer liars gladly!”

His fingers gripped the sword’s hilt.

“I’ll throw you out myself!” Dathos rose from the throne, enraged.

“Allow me, father!”

What had started as a respectable audience was rapidly degenerating into a common row. Angry Carlos, Dathos, blinded by rage, and the impudent Lachard were at each other’s throats already. All they lacked was a signal.

It came – as the sound of the door flowing open.

“Treason!”

A bloodied Fidget dashed into the throne room; without further ado, she hurled a firebolt at Lachard, but...

Lachard was expecting the attack and managed to dodge. The bolt hit the stone wall, producing a shower of merry sparks; a moment earlier, Hans the Mentor had run Lord Gryd’s chest through with a dagger.

Their perfidious attack instantly gave the Cobrians an opportunity to even the odds and even gain an advantage.

Hurricane survived – Smasher’s mace destroyed the cart that had stood behind the Warlord, but Heinrich managed to step aside and instantly pushed the Cobrian in the side. Smasher lost his balance for an instance and barely managed to stay on his feet, which gave Hurricane an opportunity to pull out his sword. The very next moment the Warlords clashed in a fierce battle, showering each other with heavy blows. Their moves seemed simple enough – strike, parry, strike, parry and so on, but they had such power

that only the strongest Heroes could hold their ground under such hits. But the Warlords had that strength. Hurricane and Smasher turned out to be worthy of one another, and nobody could predict the outcome of the battle with any certainty.

Archibald Rusty Moustache also sprang into action. Scowl's insults made the Highlander angry, and readiness for battle was the only way he could express his anger. Archibald parried the sneaky attack of the Faceless One and instantly counterattacked, making Ulle step back.

Jacob, however, was caught by surprise. He stood closest to the Cobrians and was about to make a witty comeback, so he had lost his vigilance and thus was the first one to die. Scowl ran Crossbow through, then swiftly pulled his blade from the body of the astonished Hero, who hadn't even started to feel the pain yet, and decapitated Jacob with his second strike, imbibing the unfortunate Duelist's Prime.

"Cobryn and victory!"

"Cobryn and victory!" roared Smasher and Ulle.

"Gryd and glory!"

"Cobryn and victory!"

Three against three. However, Archibald's long sword gave him the opportunity to keep both the Eraser and the Faceless One at bay, and so Hurricane shouted out his order:

"Fidget! Save the lord!"

And Shahmana rushed for the throne room.

* * *

Damned Lachard may have been a shorty, but he turned out to be agile as a vole and strong as a wyrdbear. Carlos' reckless attack was fought back at once, and the agitated youth realized two things, namely, that this foe had more skill than anyone he'd ever fought against, and that a dagger was no weapon against a foe armed with a sword. The worst thing, however, was that Lachard instantly attacked, and not only because it kept getting more difficult to fight him back. Carlos was the owner of the castle by right, he was on his turf, and he was attacked perfidiously; he'd expected that Marcus would bolt, but he didn't take a single step back!

A lunge.

Another lunge.

Where's Fidget?

Pride? For Wyrdkin's sake, forget pride! You need help! Instantly! Someone has to sort out the bastard Lachard and take care of Hans!

Hans!

Carlos barely managed to dodge the mentor's lunge. He managed to scratch the traitor's arm with his dagger, but instantly had to jump aside from Marcus' sword.

Parry.

Lunge.

Parry. Parry.

Father's dead, the guards are taking their sweet time.

"Fidget!"

The next move gave the young man an opportunity to glance in her direction and he understood why Fidget was slow to come to his rescue – she was holding the door that was being beaten down by someone.

Damn!

“Carlos Gryd, I accuse you of the murder of your own father, Dathos, Lord Gryd!” proclaimed Hans the Mentor loudly.

The traitor grabbed a sword to complement his bloodied dagger and was about to strike the final blow and kill the heir to the domain personally.

“I accuse you of high treason and conspiracy to murder Invariat Convivial!”

What is he talking about?

The door came off its hinges with a loud crash. There were two firebolts, somebody’s scream, Hurricane’s roar, curses, clang of iron, mad laughter of Hans the Mentor, and Lachard’s approaching sword...

We’ve lost!

Fidget is near, which means that the last line of defense was broken and that Lady Cobryn’s experienced and well-trained Heroes were storming into the throne room.

Where are the guards? Where is everyone?

The solution hit him out of the blue.

“Give me time!” cried the young man. “Two minutes, then meet me in the yard!”

“Aye aye!”

Shahmana took the young lord’s place, and Carlos ran towards the secret passage.

* * *

They almost managed to even the score.

Almost.

They played the combination out with perfect precision. Hurricane threw Smasher back with a well-placed blow, but his next lunge was lopsided. Or, rather, seemed lopsided. Heinrich opened, the Faceless One tried to reach him, got reckless, and there was a loud “Splat!” as Rusty Moustache, who had just approached, split the foe in two with his sword – diagonally, to make sure he’s properly dead.

“Gryd!” roared Hurricane, attacking Smasher with renewed power.

If they could hold out just a little bit more until the arrival of the guards, just a tiny bit, but... There were no “tiny bits” available this time, because Archibald took the risk of attacking Smasher; that very moment, Scowl made Fidget step back, and then split Rusty Moustache’s side open. The Highlander wheezed hoarsely, Tom swung at Heinrich, and Smasher, no longer engaged by his opponent, smashed Archibald’s skull with his mace.

* * *

His first thought was to run to the yard. The guards were there, after all, and they could offer some support. Carlos opened the window, and the first thing he heard was:

“Carlos killed his father!”

That bastard Hans!

The mentor stood on the cart and shook his fists. His face and his arm were bloodied, his clothes were torn, and there was righteous anger in his eyes.

“I am an eyewitness! I saw it all! Carlos attacked Lord Gryd like a madman!”

Will they believe him? Damn, they will! The guards have been obeying the mentor for too long; they have grown accustomed to trusting Hans. They saw him as their leader.

I should have stood at the head of the guards! I!

There was a stampede; a door was flung open.

Is this everyone?!

“Carlos, we can’t hold them back anymore!”

Fidget. Her “censer”, which was filled with little glowing embers, was almost empty – her supply was all spent on firebolts.

Hurricane is covering their retreat. Crossbow and Rusty Moustache are dead. They are retreating. They are losing! The well-trained Cobrians are impossible to defeat.

“We must flee!”

Flee!

Carlos’ head is spinning – from bitterness, rage, anger, and humiliation.

He’s about to flee his own castle, his own city. Flee like a criminal, hearing outraged cries behind his back:

“He’s a murderer!”

“Murderer!”

“He’s got the blood of Lord Gryd on his hands! The blood of His Lordship!”

Flee into the Forest from my own guards? From Grydians? Flee like that? I’ll be better off dead!

He waves his dagger, moving in a dreamlike state, and gives a muffled cry:

“I won’t flee!”

There are tears running down his cheeks.

“Fidget! Hurry up!”

These words are roared by Hurricane.

Shahmana grabs Carlos by the shoulder and pulls him along through the window – the young man can do nothing against the Hero Maiden. They jump onto the roof and run to the stables. They hear Heinrich’s footsteps behind him, and one of Fidget’s farewell presents sets the room they’d just left ablaze – the Fire Fox used a curtain of flame to divert their pursuers’ attention and created an illusion of herself that the Cobrians attacked.

We must flee... Father’s dead... We’re running away...

Black smoke is oozing from the windows in proof of the words of mentor Hans:

“Carlos Gryd is a patricide!”

Hurricane knocks down a gaping guard and swings the gate open.

“Patricide!”

They jump onto their horses’ backs.

“Patricide!”

Grydwald’s farewell to the heir was truly merciless.

* * *

There are different kinds of dreams, but the one seen by Marida turned out much better than the reality that she woke up to, when she opened her eyes after the image of her beloved Relevethar was blown away as incorporeal mist.

There was nothing original about her very first thought:

Where am I?

She was in the middle of a thicket, dark and musty. The canopy formed by mighty trees obscured the sky completely – their thick entwined branches formed a veritable roof over Marida’s head, while the bushes and saplings that hid virtually everything around her from sight could be perceived as the walls of the impromptu dwelling. The young woman was standing in the middle of a small clearing. A small and bumpy road crossed it – two

dirty tracks leading nowhere. She stood and looked around her in astonishment – from the forest to the strange box that she had just escaped from, to the vestiges of a recent battle scattered all around her, such as arrows, whole and broken, pieces of armor with slash marks on them, someone's arms, somebody's hand, ear... and bodies... or, rather, carcasses. Marida came to, surrounded by bits and pieces of massacred Wyrdkin.

How did I get here? The young woman was far from panic – she was deeply amazed. A forest? A battle? Wyrdkin? She pinched her arm. Am I still asleep? Am I...

The next moment it hit her.

Vitalia! I was in Vitalia! I fell asleep at the inn. I was having dinner... I suddenly felt very sleepy...

I was abducted! Me!!!

An incredible conclusion, but a logical one as well, and one that explained everything.

I was drugged, but I... I saw... I remember...

Vague visions that seemed as mere inconsequential figments preceding the actual dream.

Masked men are entering the room. They are wary, they hold their weapons ready, but once they realize Marida cannot fight back, they relax...

They grab her under her arms and carry her to the inn's inner yard...

Her limp feet dragging down the stairs...

A box that looks like a coffin... This was no simple box – it dispersed a Prime-based sleeping solution inside it...

Shit! Marida angrily kicked the remains of her prison. What does it all mean? Who will answer for it all?

She felt a chill the very next moment. She remembered that there were several carts in the yard; each contained two boxes. So her friends...

We've all been abducted!

This was quite unbelievable, but the forest, the abandoned road, and the massacred Wyrdkin confirmed everything: everybody has been abducted.

But why? Who would need to? Who dared? Where were they taking us?

Marida was fully back to her senses now, shaking off the Prime-induced stupor, and her thoughts became perfectly clear, notwithstanding the rage that had gripped her.

I must find out everything!

She didn't know where she was or whether she could find any help, and didn't know who could be trusted, so she took the only decision that made sense to her:

I know where the kidnappers have gone – the tracks on the dirty road led to the north. I'll catch up with them, free my friends, and we'll get answers to all our questions!

The young woman was no longer hesitant. She spat on the broken box and resolutely headed after the wagon train.

People who are only familiar with the deep waters of the Ilhwa by hearsay, and those who fail to appreciate all the nuances and hardships of a smuggler's honest toil, imagine the Reed Island in a very straightforward and unsophisticated way. Their mind's eye, if they have one, of course, sees a steep rock that divides the Ilhwa's white waters roughly in two. Rocky as it might be, it has a number of groves that provide ample shadow for all sorts of smuggling-related activities. The island's largest mountain was pitted with numerous caverns that concealed huge trunks filled with coins, gems and other regularly needed objects of value from prying eyes. Commoners are called commoners because

everything about them is common, from the tops of their heads to the soles of their cheap boots. They find it hard to understand that it is common practice to choose inconspicuous locations for shady deals of all sorts, and what could be less inconspicuous than a rock in the middle of a river? Only a stone bridge built by smugglers for the purpose of smuggling.

Therefore, in reality the Reed Island did not contain a single piece of land, let alone caverns. Ilhwa was particularly wide here, right at the junction of the Nine Woodpecker Forest and the Dead Maggot Swamp. Its left side near the Dokht bank remained deep, but the right side was marshy and covered in reeds, hence the name of the non-existent island. The green tangle covered a distance of over ten leagues, and no force could possibly control them, which is why the smugglers used the Reed Island as a safe haven for their business meetings. All the intermediaries had to do was give the parties with business interests perfectly clear directions, such as: go straight ahead from the lone ash tree, and then head toward Mount Rotten Tooth visible beyond the Dead Maggots when you're about halfway through. Start quacking like a duck once you're in the reeds, then listen for a heron's cry and you'll meet one another eventually.

And meet one another the smugglers did.

Apart from each other, they occasionally encountered the Touched that lurked among the reeds looking for prey and military patrols – the Island remembers many things. The Ilhwa was shallow here, and there were many boxes filled with goods at the bottom of the river, dumped by boats that ran into patrols, as well as rusty swords that the smugglers used to defend themselves against the border guards whenever they thought they had a chance. There were also skeletons in plate armor at the bottom and skeletons without any armor, boats with holes in them, and coins that were never used in that last bargain. There were other corpses close nearby, with wounds in their backs inflicted by their business partners or even their own teammates, others torn to pieces by the Touched, and a few unfortunates who simply drowned – that happened, too. Reeds seemed to grow taller and taller, as though all those corpses were nutritious.

“Did eh say quack?”

“Eh did.”

“Quack!”

“Ah’m done quackin’.”

“Ah sed quack!”

“Ah’m fed up widdit!”

The one-eyed Skullcotton stared at the sidekick who dared to talk back in grim surprise.

“Ah’ll feed yer up awroit, shit’ead! Ah’ll feed yer up wiv yer own bones, swot ah’ll do, ye stinking toad. Ah’ll bleedin’ well...”

“Cut ehs throat an’ be done widdit,” suggested Peg-Ear.

“Who’s gonna quack then? Mebbe you?”

“Ah carnt quack.”

“Eh can.”

“Cut ehs ear off, then.”

“Quack! Quack!” the fed-up smuggler could read his cues well enough.

“Make it sound more pleasant!” demanded One-Eye.

“Ah’m not in a pub wi’ some bird to keep it pleasant, loik,” the quacker kept talking back.

"Did yer just open yer filthy gob again?" Skullcotton inquired, gripping the hilt of the dagger.

"Ush!" Peg-Ear raised his hand. "Sounds like an 'eron's coff."

"Erons don't coff," pointed out the quacker.

"Wot do they bleedin' well do? Clang?"

"Cranes clang. 'erons cry."

Skullcotton didn't have the time or motivation to argue with his smart-alecky sidekick. He made a mental note to punish the sidekick for impertinence and insubordination later on: *Ah'll show'im clevah once we're done 'ere, loik.*

"Anyways, fink ah 'eard an 'eron."

"Or some sorta Wyrdkin," said One-Eye without much enthusiasm.

"Wyrdkin start makin' noise once they're close enuff to pounce..."

"A pox on you an' yer big gob!"

"Must be an 'eron, then."

"Let's row," decided One-Eye, and the lads in the boat put the oars into action.

The only reason why the Skullcotton brothers were successful smugglers was that they never let themselves forget that they were smugglers first and successful second. They also kept it in mind that the middlemen arriving from across the Ilhwa were cutthroats just like their good selves, which is why there were no wares in the scouting boat that roamed the reeds in search of the designated meeting place – just armed men. Just in case, as it were.

"Quack!"

"Quack-quack!"

There was a rustle in the reeds some thirty feet away, and a creaky voice asked:

"Skullcottons?"

"Both present," confirmed Peg-Ear. "Peg Leg?"

"That be me."

A few more strokes of the oar, and two low boats that looked exactly like each other nearly crashed into one another.

"Hello there, brothers."

"Awroit Mu."

Cobryan border guards were much harder on the smugglers than they caught than their Adornian colleagues. Instead of leaving them without an eye, they cut off some limb as first warning, chosen at the captain's discretion. This is why, apart from a wound-up crossbow, you could also see a sturdy crutch right next to Mu, who was sitting in the aft of the boat. There was also a small chest partly covered with a piece of canvas.

"Where are the goods?" inquired Peg Leg after a cursory inspection of the Adornian boat.

"Where's the money?" asked Peg-Ear in a similar intonation.

"Right here with me."

"Is it now?"

"It is, it is," Mu tapped the chest's lid. "I'm not the most honest of people, but in our business ripping off your partner is a strict no-no."

"Why's that?" Skullcotton was floored – some of his success was owed to his ability to strike his partner in the back when the time was right.

"Why don't you think for yourself?" suggested Peg Leg.

"Ah fink, the faster we all run off, the better," said One-Eye glumly.

"Row off," said Mu.

"Wha'evah."

"I need to see the goods to row off."

"And ah needs to see the dosh."

"Certainly, here you go."

The two boats stood board to board. Peg Leg opened the lid on the little chest, and the Skullcottons were delighted to see the stacks of silver coins.

"Is everythin' in, then?"

"I told you – the circumstances of this transaction were too grave for me to go for a petty rip-off," Mu shut the lid on the chest. "Your turn."

"We 'ave the wares all good an' ready, too," Peg-Ear let out a shrill whistle. In a few moments, five boats approached the rendezvous spot, with two long boxes in each. Or, rather, the first four were loaded with two boxes each; the last one was half empty.

"Our initial arrangement specified ten heads of livestock," noted Peg Leg gruffly.

"Ah remember," Peg-Ear didn't disagree. "But we ran into some Wyrdkin in the Nine Woodpeckers, loik, an' one of them boxes fell orf."

"Why didn't you pick it up?"

"We couldn't get all the Wyrdkin," said the other Skullcotton somberly. "We've 'ad to buzz off, pronto. Musta been at least seven o'them forest demons, wot loik."

"It's a toll innit," Peg-Ear snorted.

"Pity 'bout our lads, though," added One-Eye. "We lost four."

Mu shook his head, closely studying the siblings as they were giving their explanations in unison, then scratched his chin pensively and said in a soft drawl:

"Well, brothers, it's probably for the better that one of the livestock got away. Now I've got a good reason to let you go."

"Eh?!"

The Keepers in the front boat jumped into action: one of them grabbed his sword, another pulled an oar out, some stayed back, but Mu remained completely unperturbed and didn't even try to reach for the crossbow next to him. This made One-Eye rein his rage in a little.

"Wotcha mean by that, let us go, eh?" he inquired, eyeing the Dokht with suspicion.

"Wanted to rip us off, didn't you?"

"Nope," Peg Leg shook his head. "Someone tried to convince me to rip you off."

"They tried, mah arse!" Peg-Ear roared. "Like ah'd believed that"

"Shut up," commanded One-Eye. "We're listening, Mu."

"Thanks." The Dokht tapped his fingers on the lid of the chest a few times. "Apparently, brothers, we're part of a very lucrative and extremely dodgy bargain. I've been given a hint... not anything remotely resembling an order, mind you, just a hint that it might be better for all parties involved if you never left the Reed Island. How do you like that?"

"Who gave you that hint then, eh?"

"The client."

"The bastard!"

Peg-Ear swore profusely, loudly and rather meaninglessly, before his attention returned to the conversation led by his brainier sibling.

"Wotcha know about the client, Mu?" inquired Skullcotton.

“Nothing, alas,” Peg Leg sighed. “I was paid so much I didn’t really deem it worthy to run a check on him. That seems like an oversight from my part.”

“Eh gave us the coffins an’ lotsa bread in advance,” Skullcotton scowled. “Must be some top rankin’ scum doin’ somefin’ dangerous as hell.”

“I am of the opinion that we are in the employ of some lord,” Mu nodded. “And I think your death wasn’t supposed to be the end of it.”

“Wha’ would be, then?” asked Peg-Ear.

“Mu’s tryin’ to tell us eh’d be offed ‘imself,” One-Eye uttered a low and gloomy rumble.

“I’ve always said that you Skullcottons are the living example of just how true the saying about two heads being better than one is,” Peg Leg grinned.

“Oi, mind wot you’re sayin’.”

“What is it that you dislike about my compliment?” Mu chuckled, but got gravely serious in a second. “I’ll tell the client that you’d gone off to clean up, look for the remaining head of livestock and its coffin, which is why I allegedly let you go. Then he might think twice before he tries to pull anything on me.”

“Why would eh?”

“Cuz eh’d have to off everyone who’s in it or leave everyone alone, loik,” explained One-Eye. “An’ this client can’t touch us, anyways.”

“Wot if eh does?”

“We’ll start gettin’ scared, wot loik.” One-Eye looked at Peg Leg resolutely. “Wot about the dosh?”

“You’ll get it all, minus the share of the missing head.”

“Fair ‘nuff,” Skullcotton agreed. “With that kind of bread we’ll hide well enuff that not even the top Adornian mages will find us, let alone that bastard of a client. Good luck to you, Mu.”

“I’ll need it,” agreed the Dokht.

* * *

They split up!

Split up! Split up!

Marida didn’t know what to do. A few minutes earlier, her plans for the future seemed perfectly clear: find a suitable moment, take out the smugglers guarding the “coffins”, and free her captive friends. Then they would kill the rest of the scum and torture the name of their perfidious client out of the Skullcotton brothers. Marida was certain that the cowardly slave traders would start singing right away, but she was resolved to make them suffer as long as possible. A day or two, if the Skullcottons could handle that. The sweet thoughts of the tortures that she would inflict upon the slave traders kept Marida going while she was in pursuit, but...

But what was she supposed to do now?

She caught up with the caravan too late – the wagons had already been unloaded. Fortunately, Marida noticed the last boat as it sailed off and instantly jumped into the water to follow it – with neither weapons, nor any kind of special preparation. She intended to go about her plan while they were deep in the reeds, but realized that a fight involving the unsteady boats might result in the “coffins” getting overboard and sinking. She decided to take her time; it turned out that her decision was wise – the Dokht with the peg leg brought a large group of armed men along.

She heard only every other word of the conversation that followed, but she realized that her friends were being handed over, and this was her biggest disappointment: she already believed the Skullcottons to be dead men and was extremely reluctant to let them go before she could have her revenge. On the other hand, the Dokht with the peg leg and his entourage evoked emotions that were just as strong.

All right, you filthy sods, I'll see you again...

The young woman looked at the Skullcottons, who were departing towards the Adornian coast, with hatred, whispered a curse and started to swim silently in the wake of the Dokhts to follow her friends and find the swine who had ordered them to be kidnapped.

* * *

They left Grydwald with surprising ease. News of the events in the castle hadn't spread that far yet, and so nobody tried to stop the madly galloping horsemen. Any of the townsfolk that found themselves in the way of the riders scattered; some bowed, having recognized Carlos, while others shook their head in disapproval of such reckless behavior, but everybody was thinking more or less the same: "The heir must be off on an important errand. Something must have happened..."

Having escaped Grydwald, they took the Imperial tract in order to get as much distance between themselves and the city as they could; in about a mile and a quarter, Hurricane, who'd taken the lead, turned off the highway and into the Forest. Nobody argued with him – the old warrior knew the local forests better than anybody.

The narrow road formed by just two tracks among the trees soon became a barely visible path, and, a while later, even the path disappeared. They turned off the highway just twenty minutes ago, and Carlos was already thoroughly lost, yet Hurricane did not stop and carried on stubbornly, taking them further and further into the Forest. At some point, the Warlord told them to dismount in order to help the horses cross a ravine, then he got back into the saddle, and the slow journey across the forest continued. Twenty more minutes, then another hour, two hours... As the evening approached and the exhausted Carlos decided that they would probably ride all night long, Heinrich gave them a sign to stop.

"Our hideout is here."

These were the first words uttered by any of the fugitives since their hasty departure from the castle.

Hurricane dismounted very slowly – he still hadn't recuperated completely after the battle. He took a few steps forward, sat down near the most unremarkable tree stump and pressed it in a strange way – the top, the side, then the top again. There was a hum and the small hillock some ten steps away from the stump rose above the ground all of a sudden, sporting a door and a window and transforming into a small earth hut under their very eyes.

"A Prime shelter," Carlos coughed.

"Right you are," replied the Warlord. "Hobble the horse."

Giving orders to a lord? Shahmana paused for a second, awaiting the young man's reaction. Will he be outraged or will he comply? Will he realize that there were no servants on this expedition, or will he make a scene? How did old Dathos raise his son?

It turned out the old lord raised his sole son and heir just fine. Carlos did nothing to

show that Hurricane's suggestion struck him as the least bit inappropriate, nodded his agreement and instantly asked:

"Who built the hideout? City artificers?"

In other words – who else may know about the secret place? Is pursuit likely?

A good question, and a timely one.

Heinrich smiled approvingly and rumbled:

"We built the hideout ourselves. We asked what we needed to do, took the blueprints and the mechanisms from the engineers, and mounted everything ourselves. So that nobody would find out."

"Even father?"

"Your father was our lord; we had no secrets from him."

"How about Hans?"

"Mentor Hans didn't give have any authority over the heroes," Fidget pointed out.

"Oh, of course..."

Carlos wanted to ask what they were supposed to do next and come up with some plan, but he was somewhat surprised to find out that his companions went about their business. Hurricane entered the hideout, came back a few minutes later, carrying a jar of healing salve, took off his armor, slowly, but unaided and demonstrating no weaknesses, and started to put the salve on his wounds. Fidget also moved slower than usual, but did not show her weariness after the battle in any other way. She unsaddled the hobbled horses, gathered some brushwood and lit a smokeless fire. Then she took the jar from the Warlord and proceeded to take care of her own injuries.

"We have jerky and biscuits," reported Hurricane.

"That's great."

The Heroes paid no attention to the young lord. Apparently, the fact that he didn't get in the way was good enough. Hobbled his horse, did he? Offer support if you like, but getting in the way is still a bad idea. As for the local mosquitoes, they demonstrated a great fondness for royal blood and attacked Carlos as though he were their first prey in a thousand years. The accursed insects managed to bite every exposed part of the young man's body and got to quite a few unexposed ones as well, which constantly made him twist and scratch. Finally, Carlos' curiosity got the better of him:

"Why do they bite only me?"

"It's the Prime," grinned Heinrich. "Our bodies have their protection."

Prime, Prime, why does it always have to be about Prime? It's everywhere and nowhere. It heals and revives, and makes killing a whole lot easier, too. A deadly enemy and a trusted assistant. Prime...

They sat down to their supper in pitch darkness that was barely lit up by the flames of the fire. Jerky and biscuits as promised, and water instead of wine. As for sleeping arrangements, it's probably the ground, or a narrow bench inside the earth hut at the very best, underneath an old blanket, and listening to every single rustle with alarm.

But that was a fugitive's unfortunate lot.

A fugitive...

Although they escaped a few hours ago, Carlos hadn't really thought about what had happened until the present moment. Only now did he feel sad because of losing his father and realizing what he had lost. His life didn't just change, it was turned around completely; moreover, it was in mortal peril now, since the emperor hated ingrates among

the scions and relentlessly punished those who would raise a hand at their parents.

Could I have made a mistake by fleeing Grydwald? Could I have confirmed Hans' preposterous accusations by my own two hands, or, rather, by my own two feet? Maybe I should have stayed...

But what good would that be? The Cobrians wouldn't have let him defend himself before a Grydian court – they would have seen the battle through to its logical end, namely, the demise of an inconvenient lord that became just as inconvenient a witness.

They wanted Grydia, and they got it. All I can do is... Fight!

The word sounded as a decision – and not any spontaneous decision, either, but one taken upon careful deliberation. A decision of a true lord who would never give in without a fight. The decision of a ruler.

I will fight, Carlos promised himself. For myself and my father. For my name and my honor. One against all if I have to. And until the end!

There was nothing else left to do, anyway.

Carlos brushed away the crumbs from his knees and turned to Shahmana, who was sitting opposite, coughed, and said softly:

“Your wounds heal quickly.”

The bruises that Fidget had on her exposed arms were gone, and the cuts looked old, leaving no doubt that they would be gone before the morning.

“Prime,” the Hero Maiden shrugged.

It doesn't merely make them strong and resilient. It heals. Every cell of a Hero is imbued with Prime; basically, they *are* Prime. Prime's children. Prime's warriors.

“What is it like?” asked Carlos, all of a sudden.

“What's what like?”

“Prime.”

Hurricane grunted, and then grew silent, studying the young man carefully. Fidget wavered for a second, but then answered in a low voice:

“It's inside me.”

And those words told him everything.

What is Prime like for a Hero? It's just like the Hero him- or herself. They are fused together inseparably, forever.

It was time to get down to business and discuss their further course of actions, but Carlos couldn't help asking another question:

“What's left of you?”

He could all but sense their discontent in the tingling sensation on his skin.

Dathos warned his son that Heroes reacted to such interest with extreme displeasure and urged him to refrain from discussing that topic, ever, but Carlos decided differently. He was the lord now, and the lord has the right to ask about anything. And the Heroes must answer.

At the very least because he, Carlos, Lord of Gryd, hobbled his horse all by himself.

“This isn't a good question,” drawled Shahmana.

“I know,” replied the young man calmly. “But I would like to hear the answer nonetheless.”

Did they understand? The next phrase showed that they did.

“Each of us remembers what we were like before,” said Heinrich pensively. “But we all like it the way we are now. We realize that we have changed, and we accept this fact.”

“How well do you remember yourselves as you used to be?”

“Just like anybody else – it gets worse as the time goes by.”

“Time and circumstances are the factors that change people,” volunteered Fidget. “We are changed by Prime. I see nothing but advantage in it.”

“Father told me that you weren’t aggressive before you became a Hero Maiden.”

“Any Hero wishes to fight,” said Hurricane gruffly.

Shahmana’s response was more oblique:

“I’m not aggressive, but I see force as the only solution to problems. Prime has given me a lot of power, and it’s hard to resist the temptation to use it.”

“This is no temptation; it’s our life. Prime tells us that our way is the way of the warrior.”

Carlos sighed and thought that many people went about the very same way, even without Prime – war was in their very essence. Our essence. This much is true about each and every one of us.

“We fought against Adornia, now we squabble among ourselves, only to have another clash with the Southerners in a while. That’s life. Or is it us?”

The next moment he was torn out of his sad reverie by Shahmana’s words:

“I was lucky I had your father next to me,” said the young woman in a soft voice. “I don’t know what would have become of me without his support.”

“What did he do?” Carlos was confused.

“He was my Lord.”

And he gave answers to his Heroes. That’s what every Lord does in his own way. Carlos wanted to have a serious talk about the Heroes with his father at some point, but there was always something that got in the way. “We have plenty of time,” Dathos would say, bringing the conversation to an end. Now there’s no time and he hasn’t got a father anymore, so he’ll have to find the truth all by himself – or, at least, find the right way to make sense of the nuances and pitfalls of communicating with the Children of Prime, to sense the bond that develops between the lord and the Heroes, to find the knots that tie their souls together into a single web. The correct answer appears to have been found: the lords are no masters; they are the anchor that holds the Heroes back against the tide of emotions evoked by Prime.

“We are your link to the people, since you are so far from being human now. We are your pathway into the world. Without us you’ll be aliens.”

“Was my father a good lord?”

“Yes,” Hurricane nodded, a fraction of a second ahead of Shahmana.

“I’ll try to become worthy of his memory.”

“We can see as much.”

“And we’re grateful for it.”

Carlos threw a few twigs into the fire, grew silent for a moment as he stared at the burning flame, and said resolutely:

“Now let us discuss our further course of action.” He was more than resolute – he spoke as the leader of their team. “Any ideas?”

“There are weapons and clothes in the hideout, as well as money and a wee bit of Prime,” reported Fidget. “Enough for a short trip.”

“The question is, where are we headed?”

“The capital?” suggested Heinrich, looking at the young man searchingingly.

“Why?”

“To stand before an Imperial court,” replied Hurricane, sounding somewhat surprised. “You’ll give them your account of the events, and Fidget and myself will be your witnesses.”

“It’s my word against Hans’.”

“You’re a lord.”

“And Hans is in Grydwald now,” remarked Carlos soberly.

“But why did he betray you?” Fidget wondered. “I just don’t get it.”

Dathos was a good lord, and that outweighed any counter-argumentation in a Hero’s opinion.

“Hans is an unlanded noble from an old family – a third son forced to serve as a mentor,” explained Carlos. “I think that Lady Cobryn offered Hans the Grydian throne.”

“How could that be possible?”

“I am the only heir; if I’m accused, Grydia will have no lord, and the Emperor will have to appoint a new ruler. And who’s a better man for the job than the mentor who knows Grydia as the back of his hand?”

“As simple as that?”

“It’s much more complex than it sounds, but Lady Cobryn’s got lots of friends, and Hans is reported to have studied at the Academy of Lords...” Carlos winced. “And right now he’s busy fabricating proof of my culpability. He’s very clever.”

“He’s backstabbing scum.”

“They aren’t mutually exclusive, you know.” The young man grew pensive for a moment. “And it’s a long way to the capital...”

“And the Cobrians will be looking for us,” Shamana got it. “Lachard will definitely think we went to the capital.”

“Quite so.”

“Let them look,” Hurricane said dismissively. “I know the Forest better than anyone.”

“And what they’ll say in the courtroom is that I’d been in cahoots with Glassblower and killed him for that very reason.”

“For what very reason?” Heinrich wasn’t following.

“For the reason that Glassblower became an unwanted witness – he was followed by honest Cobrians and brought them right to me.”

“With all due respect, Carlos, you’re too young to be involved in intrigues of that sort.”

“In that case they’ll pour dirt all over my father’s name. Or prove that I’m more experienced than I look. If we take into account Lady Cobryn’s influence, the judges might be deaf as posts, and I’ll be pronounced a criminal, a patricide, and an accomplice of the cruel Jan Glassblower, the betrayer of the late great Invariat Convivial.” The young man paused for a while. “Now I’m convinced that Invariat was killed by Lady Cobryn.”

“She had a reason?”

The Primachine...

“There’s a secret,” said the young lord slowly. “Before he died, Glassblower said a few words that led me to the conclusion that Invariat had built something completely out of the ordinary for Lady Cobryn. I paid little attention to it at first, but now I believe it’s high time to make sense of what’s been going on.”

Shamana’s eyes lit up.

“Lachard will think I went to the capital, which would be the most logical thing to do,”

said Carlos, trying to make his voice sound as firm as possible. “Whereas we shall head eastwards, to Coburg.”

“Yes!” shouted Fidget.

“To Coburg?” asked an amazed Heinrich.

“They’ll be looking for us anywhere, but not on the road that heads east. We’ll manage to gain some time, get closer to Lady Cobryn and maybe get to the bottom of it all.”

Carlos raised his head proudly. “Lady Cobryn attacked me in my own castle; it is only fitting that we pay her back in kind.”

“This is impossible!”

“And that’s the very reason why this endeavor might be a success – the adversary will not believe it possible. It’s all up to us.”

“I’ll go,” Shahмана nodded.

“To storm the Three Peaks?” inquired Heinrich sarcastically.

“We’ll have to visit Fichter first,” said Carlos.

“Why’s that?” moaned Hurricane.

“Invariat Convivial spent the last few years of his life in Fichter. I have to find out what he was up to and try to establish the actual circumstances of his death. If I manage to prove that Convivial was killed by Lady Cobryn, I’ll clear my name.”

“What if you don’t?”

“Then we’ll head on toward the Three Peaks.”

“A brave plan worthy of a true lord,” said Shahмана.

“It’s reckless.”

“But...”

“I’ll do the talking now,” said Hurricane harshly and eyed Carlos heavily. “You are putting our lives at risk.”

“As well as my own.”

“But you have no other option.”

It was out at last.

The old Warlord’s words made perfect sense and had a very sobering effect.

Carlos can do nothing but try to reach the mighty Lady Cobryn – a reckless, suicidal mission. Whereas the Heroes have a choice. Experienced and well-trained Heroes are in high demand and will find employment with nearby lords easily.

“Hans didn’t manage to lay his hands on your catalysts,” said Carlos under his voice.

“They were kept separately from the Prime inductor, in a safe hiding place that only I can open.”

“This is inconsequential now,” Hurricane chuckled. “You won’t be able to get them from the Forest.”

He raised his white eyebrow, as though meaning to ask: “Any more trump cards?”

“He’s ready to risk his life,” said Shahмана thoughtfully.

“What about us?” Their lord had no Prime inductor, and he had no catalysts, either, which meant that a Hero might fail to resurrect after death. “Are you ready to risk it, Fidget?”

Shahмана looked away.

“I didn’t expect you to suggest a retreat, Hurricane,” said Carlos glumly. “You’ve known my father since you both were children.”

“Him, not you.”

“You’ve known me all my life.”

“So what about it?”

What about it? Doesn’t it matter? Doesn’t the son of Dathos stand in the rays of his father’s glory?

Apparently, he doesn’t, thought Carlos. I must get out of this mess all by myself. Or die trying.

Oddly enough, the young man felt no fear – just anger at the foes and the cowardly Warlord.

“If you wish to leave, I’m not holding you,” said Carlos firmly, looking Heinrich in the eye. “Thank you for getting us to the hiding place.”

Fidget gasped. Hurricane hemmed and hawed for a while, then nodded again and tried to explain himself:

“I loved your father, Carlos, but he’s dead. And I owe you nothing.”

“I’ve realized as much, Heinrich. Farewell.”

“I’m fifty-six years old, just four years younger than your father, but when I became a Hero, I got an enormous amount of power. I feel young again; I can resurrect, and I want to live my life to the end. But that entails avoiding mistakes, and following you would be a huge mistake.”

Was he ashamed? Possibly. However, Carlos cared little about Hurricane’s pangs of guilt now – he was facing enough problems of his own to be concerned about the defector’s reasoning. Carlos wasn’t attentive as he listened to the Warlord; when Heinrich finished, he simply repeated:

“Farewell.”

“Farewell.” Heinrich looked at Shahmana uncertainly. “Aren’t you coming along?”

“I gave my oath,” said the girl in a chilly tone.

“Lord Gryd is dead.”

“But not me. Carlos, my lord, is also alive.”

“Your choice.” Hurricane went to check the horses and prepare for departure. “Need a hint on where to go?”

“We’ll find our way on our own, thank you.”

“Keep going through the Forest for as long as you can – it’s better to be near the Zone than to move across the Ychaian fields, you’d be exposed there. If you do as I say, you’ll manage to reach Fichter without leaving the woods.”

“We’ll get there, rest assured about that.”

“Fair enough,” the Warlord jumped into his saddle. “Farewell.”

And he rode away into the night.

Part 2. FICHTER



“An abandoned road, you say?” Carlos slapped himself on the forehead, killing another mosquito bold enough to attempt feasting on noble blood, and cursed under his breath. “There are surely enough living things around.”

The further into the Forest, the larger the bloodsuckers became; now they looked more like little bats than insects – horrible little spawn of the Touched.

Or maybe that’s what they really were.

“When I return to Grydwald, I’ll order the scientists to invent some ointment that keeps mosquitoes at bay. High time the useless gits were put to some use.”

“There are many abandoned roads,” said Fidget softly.

She ignored his remark about the ointment, being long weary of Carlos and his whimpering about the hardships of being on the march. She filtered the word “Grydwald” out of her perception, because she didn’t want it rubbed in, but it was nonetheless quite uncertain whether or not they would ever get back home. This is why she mentioned the roads – just to say something, for anything would be better than swaying on the horses that plodded on ever so slowly in utter silence.

“Where do they lead?”

“Nowhere.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re abandoned.”

Shahmana’s reply sounded final and to the point – from the point of view of a Hero, of course, and Heroes were notoriously reluctant to stuff their heads with extraneous matters. When Heroes encountered paved highways that have long since been forgotten and grown over, roads that started out of nowhere and ended quite abruptly, they didn’t bother to reconnoiter them – why would they? If the roads were suitable to their purposes, they used them; if not, they rode on by.

“They can’t lead nowhere, can they?”

Fidget shrugged vaguely, giving every possible visual clue that she cared little about the matter, but the young man kept at it:

“Is it that you don’t know, or you don’t want to tell me?”

“Most of these highways don’t lead anywhere and end up in the middle of a swamp or a thicket.” The Hero Maiden paused for a moment. “Hurricane told me once that all the abandoned roads converge at the centre of the Forest, but whether or not that was true hasn’t been verified by anyone.”

“No one went to check?”

“None of our lot, at least.”

“Heroes, you mean?”

“That’s right.”

As Shahmana gave her reply, she thought that Carlos had managed to sense the deeper meaning of her phrase, instantly knowing that “our lot” were Grydian Heroes, and not Grydians in general. They were her lot first and foremost – no one else.

Well then, a Lord has got to understand everything, after all.

He’s too young!

But a lord already – or I would never have joined him on this hopeless journey.

“Did any people travel the abandoned roads?”

“They say they did.”

“And?”

“People lie,” Fidget snorted.

“Why?”

“What else can they do?”

Puny, frail weaklings incapable of withstanding the dangers of the enormous Forest.

“Search for truth. Show curiosity. Just search for something,” replied Carlos with an unexpected edge to his voice. “They may lie at times, but the lies of those who were too scared to reach the end of the road only egg the others on. If these could do it, I’ll manage it, too! That’s what people think when they listen to tall tales; then they set off themselves and reach their destination. They do! They get there because of all the tall tales, don’t you get it? They learn the truth, because at some point they get the itch to go on, to find out where the abandoned roads lead. People do lie, Shahmana, but then they get up and go on their journey.”

While you Heroes are lulled into inaction by your power.

The young man didn’t say these words, but they were in the air, and hurt Shahmana with the sharp blade of truth.

There’s so much we can do, yet we never strive to accomplish anything but warfare. Whereas people, these feeble, fragile and mendacious human beings – not all of them, of course, but still many – are ever so resilient in their forward motion and their attempts to discover and reach the new and unknown. What is the force that drives them? Is it a weakness? An attempt to grow stronger? Or do they keep going because they are human? I speak out in arrogance, but I know nothing of where the abandoned roads may lead, my power notwithstanding.

“I’m sorry,” said Fidget softly.

“You were right,” said Carlos glumly.

“So were you.”

After Hurricane's departure, the young man instantly suggested to Shahмана that they call each other by their given name and dispense with all the formalities. Fidget did not object, having realized that Carlos needed a friend and not a bodyguard after everything that he'd been through, and thought that they wouldn't have been able to have this conversation back in the day.

"I sometimes get the feeling that the difference between us and the rest of the human race is even greater than the difference between the Dokhts and the Keepers," said the Hero Maiden in a quiet voice. "We have virtually nothing in common."

"Yet you remain human."

"Prime has driven a wedge between us."

"And yet you remain human," said Carlos stubbornly. "And for as long as we all remember it, we'll be able to live in peace and move forward side by side."

"Do you really believe in it?"

"I see no other way," said the young man with conviction.

It appears that I've been really lucky to have this lord.

This fugitive lord, so young and so green, whose views were mature enough to make many a grey-haired old-timer proud.

I will serve you, Carlos, Shahмана gave a voiceless promise. *I will serve you, even unto my last breath.*

"Prime didn't drive a wedge between us – it just came into existence and changed the way of the world that we'd been accustomed to. Some people have been chosen and given extraordinary powers, and this force appears to have given us a challenge of sorts to see if we can handle it. And now everything depends on no one but ourselves."

"What exactly?"

"Whatever happens next. Will people and the Heroes manage to coexist? How well shall we be able to handle the aftermath of the Cataclysm?"

"That serious, huh?"

"Yes, that serious," said Carlos gravely. "Prime, the Touched and the Heroes came after the Cataclysm and changed the world; this means we can only build something new by a common effort."

Fidget stayed silent for a short while, and then suddenly returned to the topic that they appeared to have left behind them a while ago.

"The abandoned roads were built in the epoch of the Old Imperium, before the Cataclysm."

"That much is clear."

"I heard – not just from Hurricane, but earlier on – that all the roads converge in the heart of the Forest at an enormous temple to the Old Gods. There used to be many temples in the Forest, but that one was their main holy place, their – what's the word – pantheon."

"Has anybody ever seen this temple?"

"No."

"But you believe in it?"

"I've heard this story from a number of people," said Fidget slowly. "So I do believe in it."

But she'd never been tempted to follow the abandoned road to the very end.

"The Old Gods are dead," said Carlos casually.

“But they used to visit this world back in the old days.”

“People believed in them,” said the young man. “Whether or not they had actually existed is something nobody knows.”

“Everybody knows that magic existed before Prime.”

“That makes Prime stronger than the gods.”

“How’s that?” Fidget got quite confused.

“The gods didn’t survive the Cataclysm.”

“What if Prime is what remains of the gods?”

This rather sudden statement made Carlos shudder.

“What do you mean?”

“All we know is that the Old Gods perished in the catastrophe,” said Shahmana soberly.

“What if they didn’t die? What if they transformed into Prime?”

“That’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“Because Prime is a substance that can be used by the scientists for such purposes as lighting and explosive devices. Can you use a god in metallurgy, for instance?”

However, Shahmana’s thoughts made the young man think of something else.

Isn’t she being a little too articulate?

Every Hero that Carlos ever talked to was limited in some way and incapable of complex reasoning, which made the young man listen to Fidget’s words with growing surprise.

“The Adornians believe Prime to be the force of the world itself that broke through for some reason – not a substance at all.”

Old Gods, Adornian views and other highbrow topics... Shahmana felt perfectly at home discussing things known only to educated people. Was she aware of what she was saying? Yes, she was. But...

Where is all this coming from?

“The force of the world itself is too general a concept, but you wouldn’t expect the Keepers to know any better,” said Carlos. “However, Prime is something that can be studied, as I said earlier, and our savants are busy doing just that. Prime can be used to perform some work, inside a machine or a weapon, maybe. But the main thing is that you cannot communicate with Prime.”

“How about the Call?”

The famous Call of Prime, heard by everyone whose destiny was to become a Hero. It was the sign that some people got – it told them they were the chosen ones.

“You know it better than me that the Call is no voice and doesn’t speak with words,” Carlos waved his hand. “It only sets the mood, gives you an understanding of what needs to be done. Anyway, drunkards hear their bottles call to them when they reach for the booze.”

“We are no drunkards.” Fidget was offended.

“I didn’t say you were,” the young man backtracked.

“You compared us to drunkards.”

“Sorry if you found that insulting.”

Shahmana shook her head and fell into a short reverie, pondering the young lord’s words, and then asked:

“How would you explain the advent of the Heroes? Were we created by the scientists?”

Or by Prime?"

"Is it easier for you to believe in gods?" Carlos inquired ironically.

"The Keepers believe that the old gods aren't dead."

"Let them believe all they want, it doesn't matter."

"The Keepers prefer to treat what we are trying to study as a matter of faith. They believe Prime to be beyond our understanding."

"Your words confirm their barbarity."

"But nobody can deny Adornian magic."

"Prime-based magic," emphasized the young man. "And we aren't trying to deny the power of Prime."

"Yet we know nothing of its nature."

Since neither Carlos, nor Shahmana could present any proof, the discussion ended up in a stalemate, and the young man decided to take a less academic approach.

"I didn't expect you to be so well versed in such lofty matters."

Even if Shahmana was affronted by that, she didn't show it.

She shrugged, as though trying to shake off the unpleasant question, but replied in a calm voice.

"It's important to me, Carlos, and important to all of us. You are trying to imply that the Heroes are, uh, simple. This is true and I won't argue against it. But Prime has become our very essence, and we can't help thinking about it. We talk to other Heroes, ask questions of scientists, remember their answers, and make our own conclusions. We want to know who we are."

Which answer will you like more? What will happen if the Heroes, all the Heroes in the world, realize their superiority? Decide that the changes in their bodies were a result of a certain "power", as the Keepers put it, and not a mere substance? How will they treat common people in this case?

They constantly observe us, after all. They observe, they make their guesses and assessments, and come to conclusions. They call us puny, fragile and weak. This will shortly lead them to the notion that the Heroes should have more rights. A lot more rights.

"But I liked what you said a lot more," said Shahmana. "We must stay human, regardless of Prime."

Carlos did not respond to those words. Fidget had her eyes bent on the ground as she pondered her response, and the young man was the first one to notice the constructions that came into view once they took a turn.

"A hamlet!" He stopped the horse instantly. "Abandoned?"

"More like wealthy." Fidget had much keener eyesight and she could see at a greater distance, too, so it wasn't difficult for her to understand that the hamlet was inhabited. "There's a barn, a pig pen and a stable... There are people here."

Carlos and Fidget were wary of pursuit, and chose their path in such a way that it led across the remotest parts of the Forest, avoiding anything inhabited, so they didn't expect to encounter any human habitation on their way.

"How do they survive here?" the young man wondered.

"Hunting, fishing, growing vegetables."

"You sound like all they have to worry about is food."

"The Touched don't normally venture into such remote corners."

"But the locals are sure fierce..." said Carlos.

“What makes you say that?”

“See for yourself.” On the right side of the road there was a pole with a skull perched on top of it. A human skull. “I don’t like this place.”

“But the owner is surely a prudent fellow,” Fidget snorted.

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you ever heard of the Gizarbazaar Warblers?”

The Hero Maiden approached the pole and tapped the smooth skull, polished by the wind and the rain, with her finger.

“Should I have?” asked Carlos gruffly, feeling affronted by Shahmana’s flippant gesture.

“In the days of the War for the Misty Grove it became known that the Adornians accumulate Prime in a much greater concentration than the Dokhts...”

“Which is why there are mages among them,” Carlos interrupted the girl. “I’m aware of all that.”

“You’re a lord and you know about Adornian mages because you will once have to face them in battle. As for commoners... Commoners draw their own conclusions. In Gizarbazaar, for instance, they noticed that the skulls of Adornians, and those of their strong mages in particular, continue to attract free Prime even after their death... Erm... the death of their owner, that is. Not as much as it did while the owner was still alive, but quite enough for household usage. If you put a few wires inside made of a special alloy, Prime makes them shine.”

“So it’s a lamp, then.” Carlos finally got it.

“The people of Gizarbazaar are known for their creativity,” Shahmana chuckled. “However, they only found a use for the skulls – bones don’t attract Prime, must be something about their shape.”

“Disgusting.” The young man was nauseated, but couldn’t help asking: “Why are they called warblers?”

“They make a warbling sound when the wind is blowing,” Fidget snorted. “Sounds a bit like weeping.”

“Shit.”

Carlos felt very much like smashing the bastard “lamp” to smithereens, but his common sense prevailed – he had no wish to antagonize the locals.

“After the truce, the Gizarbazaar Warblers were banned, but you still encounter them in the oddest places.”

“In the households of prudent owners.”

“You got it.”

And those consider themselves people as well, thought Carlos all of a sudden. So the Heroes must be like them, huh? Those who use skulls as lamps? That’s one thing I’d prefer to avoid.

“Let’s scram,” suggested the young man.

“We’ve been noticed,” Shahmana sighed, pointing to the man who’d just come out of the house. “And I wouldn’t like to attract his attention by sudden flight. Let’s exchange greetings, water our horses and move on.”

Decent but very simple travel gear that they had taken from the hideout hid the true identity and social status of the travelers. A rough jacket and trousers made Carlos look like a regular young man, while Fidget tied a scarf over her head to conceal her vulpine ears and put on a long skirt to hide her luxurious red tail. They agreed on a cover story –

they were a rich merchant's assistants who'd fallen behind a caravan after a battle with the Touched and were now trying to reach Fichter.

"Wouldn't it be a better idea not to tell them where we're going?"

"They'll definitely ask."

"Let's say we're going to Clangsville."

"Agreed."

The prudent owner put Gizdarbazaar warblers everywhere – along the road, at the distance of some twenty steps from one another, near the gates, on the fence and inside the yard. The grinning skulls looked somewhat scary, but the hamlet turned out to be perfectly ordinary in every other respect. There were four large and squat houses built of thick logs – Carlos estimated that each could hold three or four families. There were a barn, a shed and a stable, too, all built very sturdily as well. The palisade was so strong that it would probably hold a forest demon back, and there was a moat in front of it – not too deep, but kept in a working condition, with sharpened spikes at the bottom. The inhabitants of the hamlet must have had their fair share of encounters with the Touched, but they were apparently reluctant to move away for some reason.

"May peace favor you," said Carlos loudly as soon as they went in through the gate.

"Greetings to you as well," replied the man who stood at the well.

He looked just like the hamlet – squat and sturdy. A leather band held his mop of hair in place, and a simple shirt was girdled by a piece of string; his coarse trousers were tucked into a pair of boots that were made just as coarsely.

"Got lost, have you?"

"Something like that."

"Only too easy in our neck of woods," the man waved his hands. "Where were you headed?"

He did look at the travelers with wariness, but there was no aggression in his eyes. – the man stayed calm, as if he'd meant to say: "Don't expect anything untoward from me, but stay in line yourselves, or else..."

There was no need to elaborate on the "or else" – a heavy battle axe leant against the well, and there was a cocked crossbow within arm's reach.

"We're headed for Clangsville," said Carlos, dismounting. "We didn't expect to find a hamlet here."

"Everybody has forgotten about us," the man grunted.

"Even the Touched?" the young man cracked a joke.

The joke fell flat – the hamlet dweller replied in earnest:

"The Touched come."

And he stroked his short beard.

"Will you let us water our horses?" Shahmana dismounted as well and approached the men.

"Why not? Water them all you like, we've plenty of water."

"Can you show us the way to Clangsville?"

"There's but a single road here, you won't miss it." The man drew some water from the well and handed the dipper to Carlos. "With my blessings."

"Thank you." The cold water from the well made his teeth ache, but the young man thought it was very tasty, anyway. "That hit the spot."

Carlos handed the dipper over to Fidget.

“And you’re headed to Clangsville, aren’t you?”

The young man used the background story they’d agreed upon in advance: “We’re a merchant’s salesclerks – we’ve lost our caravan.”

“I haven’t seen any caravans here.”

“The caravan was travelling along the road. We bolted when the Touched attacked and lost our way. This is the second day that’s we’re roaming the Forest.”

“Happens.”

“It sure does.”

“Would it be possible to buy some food off you?” inquired Shahmana. “We haven’t been all that lucky with our hunting.”

“Sure, you can buy some food.” The hamlet dweller seemed placid enough. But then he said suddenly: “Or you could just leave.”

He said that with malice that seemed to have surfaced from deep within.

“What...”

The surprised Carlos wanted to ask the reason for such a drastic change in the man’s behavior, but realized his tongue didn’t obey him well. Or his arms. Or his feet. His head was rapidly filling up with molten lead, getting hotter and heavier by the second.

We’ve been drugged! Carlos realized he was falling. *Fidget!*

But the loyal Shahmana couldn’t help even if she’d really wanted to – she dropped to the ground, a second later, but drop she did, immobilized by what must have been an enormous dose of the drug.

“Salesclerks, eh... Well, well...” The hamlet dweller was pleased with himself. He spat on the ground and started to unsaddle the horses, for he was truly a prudent owner.

* * *

Some might think that the lords controlled the Heroes with their authority unchallenged, since they had the ideal instrument of control in their hands – the Catalysts, unique artifacts used for the resurrection of a slain warrior. Apart from that, the lords were the sole owners of Prime inductors, but... There’s always a “but” that will diminish any advantage – or cancel it out altogether. In case of the lords, it was the Heroes’ ability to create new Catalysts. In theory, any of them could go looking for a new ruler, which put the lords in a somewhat precarious position: the Heroes’ lives depended on them, but the former were no slaves and didn’t allow the lords to mistreat them. The lords kept their distance to demonstrate their superiority, but didn’t forget to demonstrate their respect to the children of Prime.

So the lords remembered that the Heroes don’t like to stay dead for too long.

This was the very reason Lady Agatha descended into the Prime inductor chamber only an hour after sensing the death of Ulle Hoarfrost – the Cobryan ruler gladly touted her care for the Heroes whenever circumstances permitted.

Darkness.

Pitch darkness...

Many Heroes could go on and on about the vivid pictures they saw during the process of their resurrection. Some compared them to multicolor clouds, the bright colors of a carnival procession at the end of a long winter and even to Adornian attires that look so much like the plumage of exotic birds. Many Heroes said that nothing under the moon is more wonderful than this fanciful churning of Prime that gives new life, and they were

ready to admire it time and again, even though the price of resurrection was death.

Many Heroes.

But not the Faceless Ones. Not the ones that even Prime itself feared. No, not them.

Darkness was the only thing Ulle Hoarfrost saw as he was coming back to life, darkness and nothing but – no shades of grey, no shadows or hints of spots of light, no hope. The Faceless One didn't perceive it as a cloud, but rather as sticky black slime, the swamp mud that paralyses one's movements before it drowns one in its malodorous depths. Therefore, Hoarfrost didn't feel anything but revulsion at the recollection of the filth that gave him life, time and time again, and the image assumed by Prime for the Faceless Ones, the filth they had to wade in.

And wade they did, their malice and hatred growing.

"I'm glad you're back, Ulle," said Agatha loudly, mindlessly leafing through a thick copy book with the "Instructions".

"Your Ladyship..." Hoarfrost gave an elegant bow. "I'm so sorry you had to waste your time and your Prime on me."

"Don't be silly, Ulle."

"I got killed," recollected Hoarfrost guiltily. He wasn't vexed by the pains of dying yet another time – like other Faceless Ones, he withstood his suffering stoically and even learned to enjoy these journeys through his private hell. Hoarfrost felt something else – shame. "I lost the battle."

"These things happen," said the Lady in a measured voice, closing her book. "You lost, but you fought bravely and valiantly... You did, didn't you, Ulle?"

"Would you doubt me?"

"That's one of the reasons I appreciate you – your fierceness. As for Prime..." Agatha made a dismissive gesture. "Prime doesn't matter, Ulle. You're back, and that's the most important thing."

"Thank you, Your Ladyship."

The Faceless Ones were among the few Heroes who did not resurrect completely naked – they came into the world already masked. Lords joked that Prime refused to look at its most ruthless children, either out of fear or disgust, which is why the mask got treated as a part of their bodies. It was removable, of course, but the Faceless Ones didn't remove it often.

"Where were you killed?" asked Lady Agatha. She sat in her armchair and watched Ulle dress in an indifferent way.

"In Grydwald."

"Should I expect any of the others?"

"No, Your Ladyship, we were doing fine. The losses won't exceed the acceptable limits." Ulle paused for a moment, giving his shirt intense scrutiny, before adding: "That would be me."

It is very unpleasant and extremely humiliating to consider yourself an acceptable loss, but nothing could be done about that. In his exchanges with Lady Cobryn, Hoarfrost preferred to stay honest – she was the only person in the whole world whom the Faceless One genuinely respected.

"Why did Marcus decide Grydia needed a change of regime?"

"My impression was that he'd got sick of Dathos and Carlos. But Sir Lachard may have had other reasons as well."

"Got sick of them, did he?" A smile parted Lady Cobryn's lips. She liked the way Ulle phrased it. "Carry on."

"Sir Lachard went in for an audience; we spent half an hour in the yard of the castle, in accordance with our instructions, and when Sir Lachard didn't come out, it was time for action."

"Time to strike the Grydians in the back, you mean."

"Quite right, Your Ladyship." The Hero didn't mind such minor details.

"Unfortunately, we couldn't manage to overwhelm the Grydians – they were ready for an attack and engaged us in battle." Hoarfrost adjusted his belt with a sharp tug. "I got killed as we were breaking into the throne hall. Dathos was already dead by that time."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"What about his son?" Agatha frowned, trying to remember the name. "Carlos, was it?"

"I saw him scarper from the throne room."

"Was it a tactical retreat, or did he intend to leave the castle?"

"I have no way of knowing, Your Ladyship."

Lady Agatha didn't see much of a difference – even if Carlos managed to escape, he'll be caught in another part of the Imperium and executed, because...

"Did Lachard prepare the clues necessary to implicate the young man?"

"Yes, Your Ladyship," the Faceless One nodded. "Carlos Gryd is charged with patricide and being an accessory to the murder of Invariat Convivial. He'll never clear his name."

Another smile: Lachard, her most gifted assistant, has scored another one. It would be good to know why Marcus decided to change the Grydian dynasty, but Agatha trusted in the knight's common sense and already forgot Ulle's words about him being sick of the Grydian nobles. Lachard wasn't known for letting his emotions get the better of him. If he decided that old Dathos needed to be taken out, he must have had his reasons.

"Now let us talk about Glassblower, Ulle. How did he die?"

"He was killed by Carlos Gryd."

This one stung.

"Carlos?" Agatha squinted. "Why not you lot?"

The Faceless One got really embarrassed, since this time Lady Cobryn spoke of a major oversight on their part. He cast his eyes down, sighed, and replied dejectedly:

"The brat was coming home from a party, saw the hunt and expressed a wish to join. Unfortunately, he was the one who ran into Glassblower. We were too late."

"Did Glassblower say anything before he died?"

"That's what Lachard was trying to establish during the audience."

Seeing as how the audience ended with the overthrow of Dathos, the accursed Glassblower didn't have the decency to die quietly – and blabbed something to Carlos. Marcus tried to tie up the loose ends, but... nobody knows whether or not he succeeded, nor what he had told to the Grydian brat.

Agatha realized she'd have to wait for a courier or a message by pigeon post and sighed deeply, cursing her lack of foresight once again.

A few years ago an itinerant savant came to the Three Peaks in search of protection – he suggested a daring project for a mechanical Prime device for long-distance communication, which would make a conversation with the capital as easy as talking to someone in the next room. Agatha instantly realized just how dangerous the invention

could be – the ability to communicate with any province would help to consolidate the power of the crown, and gave orders to execute the dangerous genius, marveling at the idiocy of the Emperor who wouldn't spare any money or Prime at this project. Only later did she realize that she really had to lock the savant up and make him develop the device for her own use. She could certainly have used it to speak with Lachard now.

Isn't it a pity that I sometimes lack the patience to think through the consequences of seemingly unimportant decisions?

"Let's go back to Glassblower, Ulle," suggested Agatha. "Did you find any records among his personal effects? Notebooks? Books? Diaries?"

"No, Your Ladyship, none of the above."

Jan might have told Carlos where he had hidden Invariats notes... This must be why Marcus had to play it hard.

"But Sir Lachard opined that Glassblower's possessions were rather weird," said the Faceless One, remembering Smasher's account. "There was an amulet of invisibility, extremely expensive Prime-powered lockpicks, and a potion of confusion. Sir Lachard concluded that the set resembled a burglar's kit a little too much."

"A burglar's kit? How very strange."

"Sir Lachard said the very same thing, Your Ladyship."

"Was there any Prime among Glassblower's personal effects?"

"Sir Lachard said that there was a substantial amount of Prime, but Glassblower had used it all up."

Invisibility, lockpicks, potion of confusion... Did Jan decide on a burglar's career? It would make sense, in a way – he is being pursued and accused of murdering Convivial, so why shouldn't he make use of the excellent set of artifacts, seeing as how he was an outlaw now, anyway? On the other hand, Glassblower had his sense of ethics, a commoner though he might be, and Agatha didn't think he'd make a convincing burglar. Therefore, lockpicks and the invisibility artifact had some other purpose.

"We must have overlooked something."

"Beg pardon, Your Ladyship?"

A Hero remains a Hero in any situation. Hoarfrost said "strange", and instantly forgot about this definition, indifferent to pondering it or finding out the details.

Which is just fine, Agatha smiled inside. Until the Heroes learn to make proper use of their noggin's, we'll keep ordering them around.

"Ulle, you must instantly go to Fichter."

"Aye aye, Your Ladyship."

"First of all, you must help Captain Gutscher with receiving the Adornian cargo and make sure there are no loose ends."

"I understand, Your Ladyship."

Hoarfrost knew the nature of the cargo in question.

"Secondly," Agatha drummed her fingers on the armrest. "Glassblower's escape began from Fichter, but you and Lachard hadn't given him an opportunity to linger in town – you got on his trail and he was forced to head west. I assume that Glassblower has left some unfinished business in Fichter. Try to find out what it was."

"Aye aye, Your Ladyship."

* * *

What does goat dung smell like?

Carlos would never think of asking as silly a question about so unsavory a substance – he'd never had an opportunity to. The heir to the Grydian throne and livestock excrement existed in different realities, which never overlapped. Well, there may have been some overlapping on the soles of the young lord's shiny boots, but that was that. And Carlos was hardly unhappy about this state of affairs – on the contrary! The young man would have given much to stay blissfully ignorant of a number of minor details pertaining to livestock farming, but alas. The first thing he did was cringe from the heavy smell that was making him gag, and instantly wondered, rather irrelevantly:

What does goat dung smell like? Is this it?

Carlos didn't know why he'd thought of goat dung and not bovine (or, say, porcine) excretions. A picture of a goat stuck in his memory – a bleating, shaggy horned creature, and a bumptious one to boot, blocking out every other candidate.

“Shit...”

“Carlos!”

“Shahmana!”

The young man managed to handle the nausea by swallowing his saliva and taking a few deep breaths, trying to convince his body not to react to the stench. His head, heavy as an iron ball, was also beginning to clear, and Carlos asked the next question:

“Where am I?”

“Trapped.”

“Thanks, Shahmana, you've found a very concise answer.”

“You're welcome, Carlos,” giggled the Hero Maiden. “You're most welcome.”

So, firstly, he was sitting next to a wall made of logs on a heap of wet... straw, it's got to be straw. That was the very source of the stench – it also made his trousers wet, creating the impression of someone who had wet himself.

Ugh, revolting!

His feet were free, but his hands were shackled. The wrists were held by metallic bracelets with chains that led to wall fixtures. It was also pitch dark and impossible to tell whether it was day or night, and the smell...

I wonder whether this could really be goat dung.

The young man got up, kicked the stinky bedding away, finding it more pleasant to sit on the ground, and called out to his companion again:

“Shahmana!”

“Yes, Carlos?

According to the sound, Fidget was on his right, some five steps away.

“Are you all right?”

“Apart from the fact that I'm bound.”

“Chains?”

“No such luck, Carlos. They realized I was a Hero and did their best. They tied me to a post and wrapped me up in rope.”

Shackles of the kind that were holding the young man wouldn't have stopped Fidget, but she couldn't tear through layers of strong rope without a substantial portion of Prime.

“Shit!”

“I couldn't agree more.”

The next moment the young man heard a sarcastic question:

"Had a drink from the well too, didn't you, Lord Carlos?" It was followed by just as sarcastic a chuckle. "My commiserations, but there's a silver lining to everything, you know – now you're a full member of the Small Hamlet Appreciation Society."

"Who the hell is that?"

"You should know better," Shahмана responded. "He says the two of you know each other."

The Hero Maiden came to much earlier than the lord and already knew they were sharing the prison with another unfortunate.

"We met only once..."

Carlos thought the voice vaguely familiar initially, but now that it had deferential notes in it, he could finally recognize its owner:

"Acacius?!"

"I am flattered, Lord Carlos. You've managed to recognize a modest Primologist, even though we barely exchanged a few words, some days ago. Our encounter seems to have left a lasting impression, and I'm sure..."

"He goes on a bit, doesn't he," Fidget snorted.

"Make him shut up."

"My hands are tied."

"They are, and quite literally so, Lord Carlos, quite literally so. If it hadn't been for this detail, the most esteemed Lady Shahмана would doubtlessly make this poor savant the target of her ire without hesitation, but..."

"This is unbearable," the young man moaned.

The Primologist's logorrhea managed to dwarf even the disgusting smell, and the only thing that Carlos worried about now was how to make Acacius shut up. Meanwhile, the latter sang like a nightingale.

"You don't know how impossible this is, Lord Carlos, you really don't know, and believe me, you don't need to know it. I spent a whole night in this shed – utterly and completely alone, can you imagine that? There was no one to converse with, and oh, how I yearned to talk to someone about the perils of my state, to discuss the new ideas that I got in those moments when mortal danger seemed imminent..."

"Shahмана, will they kill us?"

"I hope so," said the girl acidly.

"And that will be a most lamentable event for the whole world, my friends," proclaimed Acacius. "Because in this case I won't be able to publish my new discovery that's as inspired as all my other discoveries. Are there mountains in Grydia, Lord Carlos?"

"They're more like hills, really," the young man responded automatically. Then he came to his senses: "What the devil do you care?"

"Benefit, put a sock in it!" roared Fidget.

But Acacius didn't seem likely to back down.

"Do you do any mining?"

There was so much unfeigned interest in the savant's voice that Carlos decided to respond:

"Father has discovered deposits of iron ore."

"Do they use mine carts to get it to the surface?"

"Yeah."

Why shouldn't I chew the fat, anyway? thought the young man sadly. *Otherwise I'll be*

forced to think that we'll be killed soon.

"And now, young man, imagine a mine cart that is five... No, ten times larger!" exclaimed Benefit.

"It won't fit into the mine," said Fidget unpleasantly.

"Who said anything about a mine?" Acacius arched an eyebrow. "Don't interrupt, young lady! I intend to build a gigantic cart for something other than ore. Forget the ore! Although you can use it to transport ore as well, why not? And my cart won't really be a cart, but rather a... a car! A gigantic cart, or a rail car! One that will carry a whole bunch of people. Or ore. Yeah, you could use a freight car for the ore and a passenger car for people. Something to that effect."

"I believe we're already dead," Shahmana exhaled sharply.

"But why were we sentenced to eternal torment?" asked Carlos. "What are we being punished for?"

"Rail car! I have invented the name 'rail car' and am hereby applying for a patent. The Grand Benefit Rail Cart!" declared Acacius. "You two will be my witnesses. Preliminary specifications, just for the record: a roofed metallic cart with a cargo box or seats for passengers, moving along a pair of rails..."

"Moving on its own, is it?" inquired the young man acidly.

"On its own? Lord Carlos, you disappoint me. Who taught you? Wherever did you see a cart that moved on its own?"

The young man recollected his visit to the Grydian mines, where the locomotive power was provided by a number of unfortunate beasts of burden, and shook his head.

"A single ass won't be able to move a large cart, and I'm really not all that sure that several asses..."

"Several asses? Seems like an apt description of whoever taught you natural sciences," a heated-up Acacius interrupted him. "A large rail car – nay, even several large cars forming a chain, will be able to move without any asses."

"Horses?" suggested Shahmana.

"Camels?" added a merry Carlos.

"Dragons?"

"It would be a good idea to have three-headed dragon pull the carts instead of killing them," the young man giggled. "But you'd need to patent a way of taming those beasts first."

"Two wood demons could easily pull a large rail car." Fidget realized that the young lord was making fun of the savant, and joined in eagerly. "Although they would take ages – the bastards are slow."

"You might want to patent a special whip," said Carlos. "Benefit's Amazing Acceleration Whip."

"Primitives! Primitive intellectual pygmies incapable of seeing the splendor of my genius!" The anger that was now heard in Acacius' voice appeared to be strong and unfeigned. "You think I invented a large cart, eh? Pah! I sat here all alone, chained to this bloody wall, and invented an automotive cart that will pull the rail cars behind it. I'll call it a Primobile! Benefit's Geniastikal Primobile for Great Conveyances. Got that? You'll be my witnesses for the record. The name will have to be patented, likewise the contraption itself. In our day and age..."

"Speaking of which," Carlos interrupted brusquely. "How much more have we got?"

The abrupt change of subject got Benefit perplexed.

"Whatever gave you the idea I might know anything about that?"

"Because you've been here longer than us."

"Incidentally, how come you wound up here before we did?" inquired Fidget. "We rode at a pretty decent speed."

"And why did you end up here, anyway?"

"Because I got lost," Acacius confessed.

"You were headed for the capital, if memory serves, so you should have taken the opposite direction no matter what route you were planning to take."

"You remembered, Lord Carlos! I'm flattered. You have no idea how much your recognition means to me! Acacius got inspired and almost started choking on his words.

"You're going to deny it, of course, but I can see that the communication between us has left a lasting impression on your soul. This was the first time in your life when you saw a truly educated person, and said person drew you to him... yours truly did, that is..."

"Shahmana, any chance you might spit fire in his direction?"

"Alas."

"What a pity."

"Not a pity at all," the savant giggled. "I was indeed going to head towards the capital, Lord Carlos, you're absolutely right there, but the minute I left the gates of Grydwald, the incredible concept of the Primobile visited my mind..."

"You told me it was invented in captivity."

"You, regular and, in a way, primitive people cannot begin to imagine the very complexity of my thinking patterns," Benefit replied proudly. "They come to me in portions. One thing, then another... Those concepts may not go anywhere, but they're very clever, at any rate... As I was leaving Grydwald, I thought that animal traction was so completely outdated. All those horses, asses and camels... They're slow and... you have to feed them. And they require sleep. And they get their feces all over the roads. And so I thought - 'Wouldn't it be nice if all the towns in the Imperium were connected by a network of iron rails instead of roads.' Two perfectly straight rails, and self-propelled carriages moving along them at an enormous speed..."

"All the more reason for you to go the capital," Carlos chuckled. "The Emperor is itching to get involved in yet another grandiose construction project."

"You're still very young, Your Lordship, and there's no denying it," Acacius sighed. "Apart from the Emperor, may he live longer than he'd like to, the capital is filled with toadies, sycophants, lackeys and all the other kinds of misappropriators of Imperial funds; I happen to be extremely reluctant to deal with those."

"Why?" Shahmana was puzzled.

"Why didn't the idea of doing some misappropriation of your own strike you as attractive?" asked Carlos. "The majority of itinerant savants who came to Grydwald wanted nothing else."

"Because the project that would involve the construction of a road of rails, one that would permit travelling at a mind-boggling speed, is going to be of enormous interest and profitability to the state in particular and the whole world in general," Acacius declared loudly. "This project is the future. So if I, a modest scientist and an itinerant Primologist, will simply take this idea to the capital, it will very soon be taken away from me by speculators and evil-wishers – everyone will be eager to slice off their share of the

construction pie, especially considering the scale of the project. So I decided to go to Fichter. Oh, wasn't that a brilliant idea! I jumped off the cart and started to run around it in circles..."

"An automotive cart?"

"No, horse-drawn, to my greatest regret. I kept running around it and saying: 'Fichter! I need Fichter! It has rich merchants who know enough to value speed!' The railroad is the future of trade, and they'd understand it in Fichter. I intended to make a presentation of my project before the merchants and arrive in the capital with enough funds to serve as equity stock, but..."

Acacius whimpered all of a sudden.

"Is he crying?" Carlos was surprised.

"Looks like it," confirmed Fidget.

"He finally realized we're trapped, didn't he?"

"Who's going to build the railroad now?" Benefit wept. "The idea is obvious: a self-propelled cart on two iron rails speeding away towards the horizon... Some second-rate, talentless savant will come up with the idea at some point and reap all the glory – instead of me!"

The weeping got louder.

"I think that Acacius really wanted to get involved in some misappropriation of Imperial funds, but his evil fate decided against it," said Shahмана in an indifferent manner. "Tough luck."

"I could have completely transformed the Dokht Imperium as we know it!"

"It's not that bad, Acacius. You're alive, after all," Carlos sighed.

"Alive for the time being," corrected Benefit. And blew his nose loudly.

He seemed to have got through his attack of melancholy.

"By the way, does anybody have an idea why they may have taken us prisoner?" asked the young man. "I agree this is wild countryside, but jumping at passersby like that is bad manners."

"Do they intend to eat us?" suggested Fidget. "Some remote parts of the Forest have problems with provision."

The Hero Maiden decided to start with the least optimistic version.

"How about the hunting?"

"The Touched may have chased the animals away."

"Okay, let's assume as much," Carlos nodded, imagining himself on the carving board and not liking the prospect one bit. "What you're saying makes sense, but the thought that I might end my days as meat spread fills me with sadness."

"They fed me this morning while you were asleep," said Acacius smugly. "So you can forego the cannibalism version."

"Either that, or they wanted to fatten you before the slaughter," said Shahмана scornfully.

"The breakfast was rather sparse," noted Benefit instantly.

"I'm sure I saw a smoke house among the buildings."

"That much is natural for a hamlet."

"Got any other ideas?" asked Carlos.

Were they alone with Shahмана, the young man would have thought that the hamlet dweller was after the reward that the perfidious Cobrians must doubtlessly have offered

for his head, but the presence of Acacius invalidated that version. It appears that the locals grabbed everyone without distinction. Something as mundane as robbery? Could be. The horses, the possessions, the weapons and the money – the prudent owner will definitely find a use for all those. But in that case, they should have killed the owners on the spot. Or were the hamlet dwellers intending to hold them for ransom?

“I do have a thought, but you’re not going to like it,” said a suddenly serious Benefit.

“Tell us, then,” demanded Carlos.

“Have you noticed that the hamlet stands near an abandoned road?”

* * *

It was raining hard all morning, and even though it was a warm rain, a real summer shower, it caused the travelers lots of problems. The horses were slipping on the wet road and their speed slowed down to a slow walk. On top of everything, a strong wind started blowing, and the soaked and heavy clothes made one shiver. Lachard was dreaming of an inn – a large hall with a fireplace; he could sit nearby with a mug of hot mulled wine, in a soft armchair, with a warm quilt over his feet, but... there were no inns in this part of the Forest. People were scared of the Touched that haunted these parts regularly, so Marcus’ dreams would not be realized just yet. All he could look forward to was a smoky fire made from wet branches – a far cry from a fireplace; you could barely keep yourself warm with that.

“Are you sure everything will go as planned?”

Lachard could handle the hardship of the journey, but the endless whimpering of Mentor Hans – former mentor, that is, and currently acting in the capacity of a lord, irritated the knight incredibly. The traitor worried about his future and kept bugging Marcus with idiotic questions.

“You know the law just as well as I do, Hans. If a lord dies heirless, or if an heir is unfit to govern, which is the case with us, the Emperor is entitled to appoint a new lord. Ferraut doesn’t choose all by himself – he is advised by the court, so... we made sure you’d be recommended for it.” Marcus found it distasteful to talk to the mentor, but business was business – the traitor was part of the Cobryan team now, and you had to be polite to him. Until he disappoints Lady Agatha, of course. “We have prepared all the papers and greased all the wheels. The Emperor will sign the decree in a week’s time... So you’ll become a lord, don’t worry about that.”

“Thank you.”

“Just make sure you keep the next mentor in check.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Hans smugly. “I won’t make the kind of mistake Dathos did. I’m no fool.”

Every scoundrel known to Marcus (and he knew quite a few) thought themselves brighter than everybody else. Of course – they did the right thing at the right time, didn’t they? They took the other side when the time was ripe, or managed to strike someone in the back, or just turned away, pretending not to notice the massacre of friends or allies. They survived. They got their reward. But Lachard was certain that their behavior had nothing to do with intelligence – the guiding stars of such people as Hans were cowardice and the instinct of self-preservation. Truly intelligent people think up machinations that involve scoundrels and traitors, use them, reward them, but then waste them without any second thoughts if the necessity arises, because people who betrayed their allies once

would never be trusted again.

Marcus had hoped that the former mentor would shut up, but he kept trying to think of potential obstacles that may take the Grydian throne away from him:

“What if some nephew of Dathos turns up and decides he wants to claim my domain for himself?”

Then we'll kill him...

However, Lachard didn't give that reply, reluctant to give the traitor an additional reason for glee. He winced – the droplets that fell from a wet branch got under his collar – swore under his breath and muttered gruffly:

“Dathos and Carlos have no close kin, and if any of the third cousins twice removed start making claims, you can hint at your friendship with Lady Cobryn. That should calm them down.”

“I'll make sure all my neighbors are aware of our friendship.”

They're no fools – they've made their conclusions a long time ago.

However, Lachard said something else aloud:

“That's the spirit. But don't say anything untoward.”

“How could I?” The former mentor went silent for a moment. “Is she really a beauty?”

“She's absolutely dazzling,” confirmed Marcus with a smile. “No one in the Imperium could rival Her Ladyship's beauty or charm.”

Hans had never met Lady Agatha, but that meant nothing: political friendship didn't necessarily imply mutual visits. The main thing for the time being was that the secret pact had been signed.

“I am somewhat worried about the interrogation by the Chief Imperial Prosecutor.”

“A mere formality,” drawled Marcus. “Jesiah Sweet is old and hasn't taken part in any investigations for ages. You'll be interrogated by someone we can fully trust.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. The crown will be on your head in less than a month.”

“That's great!” Hans couldn't contain his delight.

“Don't forget who put it on your head.”

“Oh, how could I possibly?”

The mentor realized it a long time ago: no one and nothing in the whole world could save him from the anger of Lady Cobryn – neither the Emperor, nor the guards, nor the Heroes. You could reach an agreement with the Cobryan Lady; she could make most dreams come true, and she could elevate you to a position of great importance... But this position would invariably be lower than the summit occupied by Agatha herself.

Hans wanted to continue the conversation, but, fortunately for Lachard, some riders appeared from behind the trees – the road had an eastward bend.

“Who are these?”

The alert Heroes rode forward, covering Marcus, Hans, and the guards who had accompanied the mentor, but a few seconds later Smasher said in a low rumble:

“The Prosecutor.”

He and Scowl stopped, letting Lachard and Hans ride in the lead.

“That was quick,” grumbled Marcus.

Lachard had sent the courier for the Imperial Prosecutor of Grydia, who was visiting a nearby land, before he even asked for the audience, but he didn't expect him to return so quickly.

“Lachard!”

“Emile.”

“Glad to see you.”

“Reciprocally.”

The Prosecutor’s companions (five guards in soaked cloaks) stayed behind, giving their superior an opportunity to have a quiet conversation with Lachard and Hans.

“Mentor... Or, rather, future Lord Gryd...” Emile smiled a thin-lipped smile. “How do you do.”

“Good afternoon.”

Hans was normally very respectful to the Prosecutor, but now you could hear a few barely recognizable arrogant notes in his voice – the traitor was already trying on the crown and getting accustomed to behaving “like a lord”.

The Prosecutor realized as much and added some venom to his smile, then turned to Marcus again.

“Have you found the cur?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“And you have no idea where he might be?”

“None whatsoever.”

“In that case, I’ve got some bad news for you.” Emile came closer to Lachard and said under his voice: “I received a message in the pigeon post this morning – a young lad fitting our description was seen in the vicinity of Tyshdale. He was accompanied by a good-looking redhead.”

“Fidget?” asked Hans.

“The description fits her.”

“Where was Hurricane?”

“On a reconnaissance mission, perhaps?”

“They’re heading south,” Marcus shuddered.

“Yes,” nodded the Prosecutor. “And we have only cordoned off the roads leading north, assuming the brat would go to the capital.”

But Lachard wasn’t listening.

“A thousand curses! What’s his business in the south?”

“Could he be wishing to take his revenge upon the Lady?” Emile chuckled.

However, Marcus did not share the prosecutor’s glee.

“Carlos is no idiot – he understands that he won’t be able to reach the Lady.”

“He’s got two Heroes.”

“The Warlord and the Fire Fox,” added Hans.

“Yes, he does have two heroes, doesn’t he,” admitted Marcus after a pause.

But how can the Warlord and the Fox help the fugitive lord? They cannot, not really. All they can do is lend some dignity to his demise. Is the boy aware of that? He is. Why has he gone to Cobria, then? Lachard didn’t like the very first answer that came to his mind.

“I must go to Fichter,” he said in the tone of a man who had already made his decision. “I’ll try to intercept the cur before he gets to Coburg.”

“Are you afraid of him?” the Prosecutor looked surprised.

“I’m reacting to changing circumstances,” explained the Cobrian. “Besides, I have to see this mission through to the very end.”

“I agree.”

“What about me?” Hans looked lost. “Marcus, weren’t you supposed to be my witness?”

“The evidence has already been given over,” snorted the Prosecutor. “Sir Lachard’s testimony has been entered upon the record, while Lachard himself...”

“Has been wounded in a battle with the Touched,” suggested a somber Marcus.

“Precisely. Has been wounded, and is currently being treated, which makes it impossible for him to visit the capital.”

“Emile, I need a set of Imperial travelling papers issued in my name – I want to be able to change horses as frequently as possible.”

That meant a change of horses at every Imperial station alongside any Imperial highway. This document would let Lachard reach Fichter in a matter of days – all he would need was resilience.

“I’ll give them to you in a minute.”

The Prosecutor dismounted and produced a portable stationery set from one of his saddlebags.

“But why is the brat so important?” inquired a disappointed Hans. The traitor could not believe that the Cobrian would leave him – His Lordship of Gryd, no less! – in the middle of the road. There was something perfidious about it, and humiliating to boot.

“Carlos is acting unconventionally,” explained Marcus. “He should have hurried to the capital in hope of presenting his case to the Emperor, but he went south – to Cobria. This means he’s an idiot. Or, alternatively, that Glassblower had told him a lot more than the brat told you and Dathos.”

“Told him about what?” asked a confused Hans. “The Primachine?”

And he heard an even more humiliating reply:

“You’re best off not knowing. And forget the word ‘Primachine’.”

Lachard nodded to the irate traitor and directed his horse towards the Heroes.

“A change of plans, lads – we’re going back south.”

“What happened?” asked Smasher.

“Carlos is headed for Cobria.”

“Let him,” Scowl sneered. “He’ll be in for a warm reception.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Nobody’s looking for the brat in Cobria, so it might turn out that nobody will meet him there at all,” explained Marcus. “He’ll have an advantage.”

“What kind of advantage?”

“The element of surprise.”

“He’ll be offed the second he turns up.”

“What if he turns up with a lot of backup?”

Scowl scratched the back of his head, then shrugged.

“Well... Whatever you say, then.”

Heroes didn’t care much about their destination, but the Warlord decided to demonstrate that he could also participate in planning as an equal.

“Send a message,” he suggested to Marcus.

“We have no pigeons, and chances are the courier won’t make it through.”

“What if the brat decided to escape to Adornia?” suggested Smasher.

“What if he intends to kill Lady Cobrynn?”

“Lachard, that’s ridiculous.”

“Would you take your chances, then?”

Smasher buttoned up. The Warlord did not plan to take any chances in such matters.

“Hans said that Carlos knew of the Primachine,” continued Marcus in an even voice. “But what if the brat didn’t spill all the beans before his old man? What if Glassblower told him more than that?”

“In that case the cur should have gone running to the capital.”

“Alternatively, Glassblower could have told Carlos something that might upset Lady Cobryn’s plans.” Lachard sighed. “We’ve made a mistake and it’s up to us to set things right. We’ll head south immediately. We can ride day and night, and the Prosecutor will issue us a set of Imperial travelling papers.”

“We’ll manage, but how about you?”

“You’ll tie me to the saddle if you have to.” Marcus gave Smasher an ugly look. “However, you, Smasher, will carry the express message to Lady Cobryn.”

Very rarely, in cases of paramount importance, when an express message needed to be sent to the castle, heroes carried these “express messages”, either voluntarily or following orders, as was the case with the Warlord. This meant dying in order to resurrect in the castle as soon as possible. Rulers didn’t like to waste precious Prime on this method of communication, but Marcus had the Lady’s permission and he knew it was worth it.

“Why me?” protested the mighty Smasher.

“Because Scowl weighs less – the horses will carry the two of us easily, and you’ll be holding us back.”

“Cackle, cackle . . .” The spiteful Eraser couldn’t hold it in, and Smasher deplored his huge size for the first time in his life.

The Warlord frowned, but didn’t argue any further. All he asked was:

“What am I supposed to tell Lady Cobryn?”

And he gave himself a promise to have his revenge on Lachard, whatever the cost.

* * *

“I don’t want to die!”

“Shut up!” said a frustrated Carlos.

“Nobody wants to die,” sighed Shahmana, who was lying on the cart.

“I want to die least of all!” cried the unfortunate Benefit, who looked at one of the guards obsequiously. “Listen, my good man, would it be possible to . . .”

“No!”

“But I only . . .”

“Shut up!”

“But why?!”

“Don’t be silly, half-pint,” said the hamlet dweller in an amiable way as he approached the cart (the very same Sir Prudent who was keen on decorating his estate with skull lamps). He was heading the procession, but decided to return to the prisoners when he heard the commotion. “You are about to receive a great honor.”

“May I skip the honor, please?”

“Shut up!”

“Acacius, stop panicking!”

“But what else am I supposed to do?”

What else indeed. Their worst fears have come true – the hamlet dwellers were no robbers, and any attempt to placate them with a promise of ransom was doomed. These people cared little for money, and this became obvious the second they entered the shed.

They came in the evening – or, rather, closer to midnight. The prisoners had been kept in the dark and so they lost track of time; they realized it was dark when they were brought outside. Closer to midnight... One of the doors creaked, the light of the torches blinded them, and three muscled men entered the shed. Carlos recognized one of them as Sir Prudent.

"It's a great day today, idiots," said the hamlet dweller as he eyed the prisoners with a grin. "Today you will fulfill what you've been destined for since birth."

This sounded menacing to say the least, but nobody asked any questions just then. Carlos, Shahmana and Acacius were studying the hamlet dwellers' clothes.

Which were extremely odd.

The prisoners hadn't thought of what their kidnappers would look like when they would come into the shed. The very question seemed irrelevant. How can someone who lives in the Forest dress? A rough overcoat, a shirt, trousers and boots; all the clothing is likely to be homespun and made right here at the hamlet by the men's wives and sisters. The prisoners did not expect anything out of the ordinary, which is why they were baffled by their captors' appearance.

Sir Prudent was dressed in a white loincloth with silver embroidery, elegant leather sandals and a silk cape held around his neck by a silver chain. The hamlet dweller was cleanly washed and wore an incense-like scent that mixed with the shed's stench in a fascinating way. His companions were long green hooded robes and looked more like foresters as portrayed by vagrant actors.

"Did we arrive in time for some celebration?" Carlos tried to make a joke.

The answer he heard was far from encouraging:

"Indeed, and you're our most important guests."

The hamlet dwellers didn't talk any further. They dragged Acacius and then Carlos outside, chaining them to the cart that stood in the yard. After that they brought out a bound Shahmana with the aid of three strong men.

"Where are you taking us?"

"Your guess was correct: it's a celebration."

"But where is it?"

"Close nearby."

They proceeded further along the abandoned road and into the depths of the forest.

Having left the hamlet, they walked about half a mile to the west and then made a sharp turn, heading for the very centre of the thicket. First Carlos thought that they were being taken along secret paths, but then he realized that they were still on the old road – the cunning hamlet dwellers had masked its bend very diligently.

"A secret hideout?"

"People have stopped believing," said Sir Prudent, who stayed near the prisoners alone, in an earnest voice. "They mock the ancient gods and persecute those who have kept the faith. This is why our holy place is concealed from all strangers."

Shortly after that, the road brought the procession to a large clearing with a proud temple of black stone standing in the middle, confirming the hamlet dweller's words. The temple wasn't very tall, but it was built with amazing skill. It rested upon a small three-section foundation and was surrounded by brightly polished pillars. Two of those had crumbled down, but this fact didn't make the temple any less impressive – it only emphasized its majesty and the power that allowed this ancient construction to withstand

the relentless blows of the Cataclysm.

Before the main entrance to the temple stood the altar – a large white stone covered in semi-obliterated lettering, and a tall priest stood immobile nearby, dressed in a luxurious scarlet gown. The priest's long hair was held in a bow by silver tiara; there were thick bracelets on his naked muscular arms, and on his wide chest hung a curved ritual knife in a pearl-embroidered sheath.

"Three of them!" proclaimed the priest loudly, having spotted the procession. "The Goddess will be pleased!"

He didn't need to elaborate on what exactly the unnamed goddess would be pleased about.

"Curtains," whimpered Benefit. "This is it."

Carlos had to keep his body from shaking violently as he tried to remain outwardly calm.

"Don't whine."

"We're all going to die. And the Hero Maiden can't help us."

The clearing and the temple were lit by torches stuck into the ground, which gave more light than the warblers. The prisoners saw that their arrival was awaited by about thirty people of different ages, from adolescents to old-timers. Men wore light green capes, and women, even the oldest ones, had their bodies covered by nothing but diaphanous gowns. Everything stood ready for a feast on blankets spread on the ground – platters with roast meat, vegetables and cheeses, as well as jugs of wine.

The priest's words were met with shouts of delight. The locals were apparently eager to begin the celebration.

"I told you that you'd be our most important guests tonight," the hamlet dweller chuckled.

"We'll be sacrificed," moaned Acacius. "Then when they are doused in our blood, they'll indulge in fornication until dawn. Orgies and such... I have read about these rites. There was a whole cult in the Landay Mountains, but the Emperor..."

"We'll engage in deeds of piety, not fornication," Sir Prudent interrupted the savant, speaking in intimidating tones. "To honor our great mother – the Goddess of Fertility."

"She never accepted human sacrifice!" Carlos cried out. The altar was getting closer, and the young man was becoming afraid. He knew little of ancient deities, but his horror wouldn't let him stay silent. "The Goddess of Fertility was good and wise!"

"But the people made her irate, and so she left this world. We have to placate her."

The Cataclysm had left a strange mark on the minds of the local nuts, and they managed to come to the only conclusion that they believed to explain everything.

"How many have you murdered?"

"Sacrificed," corrected Sir Prudent.

"How many?"

"Not enough to bring the goddess back."

It made no sense to argue with the hamlet dweller – he had already made all the necessary decisions and wasn't going to stop.

"You'll be honored way beyond your miserable positions, you mangy sods. You'll meet the goddess face to face..."

"Wouldn't you like to trade positions?" hissed Shahmana.

"But who would perform the next sacrifice, then?"

The logical answer floored the Hero Maiden.

"The Goddess of Fertility did not accept blood," said Acacius through clattering teeth.
"Your sacrifices insult her. You are killing your goddess with your own hands."

"Do not blaspheme."

"Or else what?" shouted Carlos, trying to put on a brave face. "You won't be able to sacrifice us? Afraid I'll insult the Goddess?"

"Not her, us," corrected Sir Prudent. "If you piss off the priest, your death will become a torture. We'll impale you instead of tearing your heart out. And we'll dance around your writhing body."

"For a long, long time," added one of the guards.

"Looks like we're done for," muttered Fidget.

"Isn't that the truth," the young man agreed dejectedly.

"Say your goodbyes," suggested the hamlet dweller. "I'll have a word with the priest and then I'll be back."

He proceeded to the altar in a businesslike manner.

The fanatics gathered at the steps of the temple, trying not to miss a single word of the priest's speech. The guards too were absorbed by what was being said, only occasionally glancing at the prisoners, who got an opportunity to discuss the perils of their position.

"Any ideas?" asked a glum Carlos.

The shaking had stopped, but there was an ugly chill inside the young man.

"I don't want to die!"

"Acacius, remember your dignity."

"You're a lord, so you think about dignity. Me, I'm a man of humble origins! I don't want to die! Do you think I could convert to their religion?"

"I don't think that would change anything," said Shahmana philosophically from her horizontal position at the bottom of the cart. "The death of a true believer makes the sacrifice more effective."

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"It feels that way to me."

"Yeah, but you can't kill those on your side, can you?"

"Fidget, can you promise me one thing?" asked the young man.

"Anything, my lord."

Shahmana had appreciated Carlos' courage, and her reply was as respectful as she could make it.

"Maybe they'll have to cut through the ropes to kill you and you'll manage to break free."

"Maybe."

"If I go first and you manage to break free after that..." Carlos swallowed the lump in his throat and continued: "Avenge my death if you can. Avenge it well."

"I swear it, my lord," said Shahmana in a quiet voice. "But I do hope they grab me first."

"We haven't got much else to hope for."

"I just wish it wouldn't be me..." moaned Benefit.

"Are you done there?" The hamlet dweller was back, looking pleased. "If you are, it's time for us to begin. The great priest is of the opinion..." The crowd of the faithful erupted in cheers at this point, and Sir Prudent had to wait out the noise. "So, as I was saying, the great priest opines we should begin with Half-Pint. Then we'll sacrifice the cur,

and you, dear Hero Maiden, will be our main course.”

“I don’t want to die!”

“Damn!”

“Bastard!”

“Grab the halfwit!”

The guards unchained Acacius from the cart, grabbed him by the arms and quickly dragged him to the altar. Carlos felt nauseous.

“I’ll have my revenge all right,” promised Shahмана through clenched teeth. “I’ll get you scum – even from the world beyond!”

“First victim!” announced the priest.

“I don’t wanna die!”

“So be it!” bellowed the fanatics in response to the priest’s call.

The sacrificial blade flashed, razor-sharp and thirsting for blood. Shahмана swore profusely; Carlos felt a chill, Acacius screamed, spread-eagled on the altar, and the priest laughed...

The next moment his face screwed up in a grimace – a crossbow bolt hit him in the shoulder.

“No!”

Blood splashed the nearby parishioners, but it took the frenzied fanatics a while to realize what was happening.

“So be it!”

It was only at that point that their unison chant was interrupted by a piercing, terrified screaming from the back of the crowd.

Those who stood at the back were the first victims of the Warlord, who jumped into the clearing, smashing skulls and bones by blows of his heavy mace.

“Grydia and glory!”

“Hurricane!”

“Heinrich!”

“Save me!”

The fanatics finally understood that they were being slaughtered and tried to organize a counterattack – the men came armed with spears and axes, even to the orgy, but regular people could not do anything against an enraged Hero, no matter how hard they tried.

The Warlord did not wish to expose his mount, so he attacked on foot; however, the unfortunate fanatics didn’t live long enough to notice the difference – Heinrich’s speed and attack power resembled a true hurricane. A broad swing of the mace, and two men fell to the ground at once; the shield deflected a spear, and the counterattack knocked the fanatic into the ground. All of this took a scant few seconds – incredibly short seconds running at the speed of a wild fire. Strike upon strike... Heinrich didn’t finish off any of those who ran for the forest, since he didn’t want to end the salvation of his friends with a slaughter, but those who dared to stand up against him were destroyed relentlessly.

The strikes continued...

Blood, broken bones, screams of people running away... Heinrich cut his path to the ancient temple through a wall of human bodies, and the path was soaked in blood. Five or six full seconds have passed since the beginning of the massacre, but the clearing was transformed completely – dead bodies, blood and weapons covered the ground, as well as food that had been trampled underfoot in the stampede and knocked-over torches. A

mournful howl came from the forest, and then there were even more corpses.

The wounded priest tried to hide inside the temple, but Heinrich smashed the door to smithereens, and a mighty blow to the priest's head dotted the battle's last "i" with a bloody splat.

"May all the Prime devices in the world bless you," muttered Acacius from his hiding place behind the altar. "You can't even imagine how timely your arrival was."

Since nobody was in a hurry to get the chains off him, Benefit started to look through the guards' pockets, hoping to find a key. The Warlord approached the cart and cut the ropes that held Shahmana.

"How are you?"

"Just fine now, thanks."

The maiden took her knife, came to Sir Prudent, who was writhing on the ground with his ribs fractured by Hurricane's mace, and slashed the scoundrel's throat in a single move.

After that, she repeated:

"Just fine now, thank you." She wiped the blade on the dead man's clothes, straightened up and squinted. "We have to get back to the hamlet."

"Our horses are there and all our stuff," added Carlos, whose chains were being removed by Acacius, who'd just managed to free himself.

"Mine as well," Benefit butted in. "I don't remember whether or not I've told you, but I was travelling on a road cart – an amazing, outstanding road cart that has been upgraded scientifically by yours truly..."

"Everything's okay at the hamlet," said Hurricane, casting a puzzled glance at Acacius. "I've locked up everyone who stayed behind in the shed. They won't touch our stuff."

"That's peachy, then."

And peachy it was.

The travelers even regretted that their return to the hamlet didn't entail any adventures – the lucky escape filled Carlos, the Heroes and even Acacius with euphoric confidence, and they wouldn't have said no to a good battle against the Touched or the returning fanatics, but it was not to be. The locals decided they've had all the contact with an enraged Hero that they would ever need and didn't turn up anywhere near, and the Touched either didn't want to bother the Grydians, who looked so confident after their victory, or simply weren't present in the vicinity.

At any rate, they reached the hamlet without incident. They conducted a thorough search in the houses and retrieved their stolen possessions. Upon some consideration, they decided to take some provisions with them – just enough to reach Fichter, and then gathered near the stables. It was decided to ride out at dawn, which was some two hours away; nobody was sleepy, so they just chatted, taking their time getting ready for the journey.

Shahmana told Heinrich the details of their journey with Carlos, who had found a suitable moment and followed Acacius to the well.

"Have you decided what to do next?"

"I..." Apparently, Benefit was prepared for this conversation and intended to respond in his usual excessively verbose manner. "The very moment when..."

"Can we do without your logorrhea?" inquired the young man coldly. "We aren't in the shed, or in shackles, so there's nothing to make me listen to your verbiage."

“Nothing?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

Acacius decided not to argue. He sighed and shrugged, instantly transforming into a feeble and confused old man, and then said pleadingly:

“I need to get to Fichter. I told you as much.”

“Will you chance going on your own, or will you join us?”

“I’ll be happy to join if you will have me – it’s dangerous to travel alone. Also, there’s the matter of my road cart – it is very conspicuous after my scientific upgrades, and every scoundrel will wish to take it away from me...”

“Didn’t I tell you to dispense with the verbosity?”

“Aye aye, Your Lordship.”

Carlos rubbed his neck.

There was no consensus on whether Benefit the Chatterbox should join their party or not. Fidget, fed up with Acacius after their time together in prison, suggested to leave the savant behind, claiming that his endless chitchat was making her sick. Hurricane was kinder and pointed out that it would be cruel to leave anyone in the middle of the Forest, and that the road cart can be used for the cargo, which would make things easier for the horses. Apart from that, added Heinrich, it will make sense to keep Benefit under close guard, because nobody could be certain whether he would go about his own business once their ways would part, or whether he would run right to the guards to claim his ransom.

Therefore, the decision was up to the young man, and he was understandably doubtful.

“Are you aware that I’m being accused of having murdered my father?”

“Yes, Lord Carlos, I am.” Acacius didn’t try to play stupid.

The young man gave him a long stare, and continued after a pause:

“So?”

“It’s none of my business, Lord Carlos,” said the savant resolutely. “But if you’re asking me whether or not I intend to give you away to the guards, the answer is no, I do not. You have saved my life, and Acacius Benefit has some notions of honor.”

Now it was up to Carlos to decide whether or not he could trust the savant’s word. Since it’s impossible to come to a correct conclusion about someone you barely know, Carlos decided to side with Heinrich and keep Benefit under observation.

“All right, you may come with us,” nodded the young man. “But your logorrhea...”

“Believe me, Lord Carlos, this trait inflicts even more suffering on me than it does on you,” said Benefit hotly. “I do indeed tend to go on a bit, but that much is a result of my outstanding education as well as years spent teaching the Theory of Seams and Joints at the Department of Mechanized Primology of the Auld Brigadoonsbury University of Philosophy and Engineering Sciences. The necessity to teach complex scientific matters to ignorant students has left me with the penchant of saying overmuch, since that was the only way any knowledge could get into the thick heads of those I had to teach.”

“Shut up and get packed,” ordered the young man.

He turned around hurriedly and went to the stable, where Fidget and Hurricane were waiting for him.

“I don’t want to leave him behind.”

“A good decision, Lord Carlos,” boomed the Warlord. “Only time will tell whether or not it was the right one, but it’s a good one nonetheless. You shouldn’t leave people in peril.”

"Yeah... you're probably right..." The young man looked at Hurricane and realized they instantly had a few bones to pick between them. "We believed you were gone, me and Fidget."

"You were right, Lord Carlos, I was indeed gone," confirmed a smiling Hurricane. "But I've been following you all the time."

"Why didn't you come with us?"

Heinrich gave Carlos a long stare and then asked:

"You won't hold it against me, I hope?"

"You've just saved my life," said Carlos, and then realized he'd just repeated the words of Acacius. "You're an old friend of my father's – possibly, his only friend – so how could I hold anything against you?"

"In that case..." Hurricane smiled again. "Don't let this make you uneasy, Lord Carlos, but I did have to test you. I had to see whether or not you were in fact as brave as you'd wanted us to believe – whether you were worthy of being called your father's heir."

Carlos expected to hear something to that effect. He did feel somewhat miffed about the very fact that he'd been subjected to a test, but upon some consideration the young man realized that if he were in Hurricane's shoes, he'd have done the same – you can show complete loyalty only to someone who has your complete trust.

"And?"

"You weren't put off by having to travel with just a single Hero – the loyal Fidget. Lord Dathos would be proud of you."

"It was stupid of me."

"It was brave of you, Lord Carlos."

"But I got trapped."

"Experience will come with time," promised Hurricane with certainty in his voice. "You have an indomitable will, and that's the most important thing. You didn't merely accept the challenge – you counterattacked, decided to get your enemy, and that showed me your true mettle."

"I always said Carlos was brave," added a pleased Fidget.

"You're a woman, so you felt it. As for me, I needed proof." Heinrich bowed his head. "I will be honored to serve you, Lord Carlos."

"Just Carlos."

He'd established a more trusting relationship with Shahmana already, so it would be stupid to keep his second Hero at a distance.

"All right, Carlos."

The Warlord smiled again, demonstrating his acceptance of the new rules. His mood was nothing short of stellar.

"We shall serve you, Lord Carlos," added Fidget.

The Heroes have chosen him! They recognized his leadership! They're ready to follow him to the edge of the world and stand against Lady Cobryn, the Adornians, and anybody who would get in his way. They were under his banner!

The young man was overwhelmed by emotion. Pride, joy...

Above all, I have to keep a cool head!

"I haven't accomplished anything yet, my friends," said Carlos resolutely as he looked at the Heroes. "But I swear that I'll try..." Words wouldn't come. The young man didn't know what to say in such situations or how to communicate the emotions that were

overwhelming him, and so his words came haltingly. “I swear you won’t be ashamed of me, ever.”

And perhaps these were truly heartfelt words – as they did not come smoothly and lyrically, but rather tore their way out from the very bottom of his heart, revealing all that which lay inside it.

“We already aren’t,” said Shahмана softly.

“And you won’t be able to spoil anything – you’ve found yourself.”

“There’s another thing you should know...”

Should I tell them? The very next moment Carlos felt appalled at having wavered. We are together. Henceforth and forevermore. I am their lord and I have to be honest with them.

“What should we know, Carlos?”

“I’ve managed to take the catalysts away from Castle Gryd.”

The Heroes stared at the young man in mute astonishment for a few seconds, and then...

“What!?”

“Our catalysts?”

“How did you manage it?”

“Did you have them with you the whole time?”

“All the catalysts?”

“You must be joking!”

“No, I’m not,” said Carlos, happy with the impression he’d made. “Yes, I’ve had all of them with me all this time. And, yes, I have them all, including the catalysts of Archibald and Crossbow.”

“Will we be able to resurrect them?”

“If we get to a Prime inductor.”

“Are you sure you can handle one?”

“I studied at the Academy of Lords, didn’t I?” said a slightly miffed Carlos. “Even though I may have behaved in a somewhat, uh... free manner as of late, it doesn’t mean I can’t get anything done.”

“We must get back to Storia,” said Heinrich resolutely. “It’s only two days away, and Lord Storhold is an old friend of your father’s. He’ll definitely let you use his Prime inductor.”

“Lords have no friends,” uttered the young man coldly.

The tartness of his observation stunned the Heroes – they assumed it referred to them in some way.

“Is that so?”

“Among other lords, I mean,” explained Carlos. “Power changes people – it makes them do base things that they call compromise. I am being hunted by Lady Cobryn. She is strong and smart, and her web enfolds the entire Imperium; she is doubtlessly aware of the identities of all the parties I can ask for help. Therefore, Storia is out of the question.”

“I agree,” Fidget sighed.

“We can get to the Prime inductor secretly.” Hurricane kept at it.

“Have you got any burglar skills? Or equipment? What do you know about breaking and entering?”

“Nothing.”

"There's your answer." Carlos enjoyed this dialogue as much as he had enjoyed the Heroes swearing fealty to him – it was a demonstration of who made decisions here. Weighted decisions. "We must follow our plan. First we go to Fichter and discover the circumstances of Invariat Convivial's death, and then... then we'll pay Lady Cobryn a visit."

* * *

"We should've killed the Adornians," muttered John Woodcutter for the third time, and blew his nose into the palm of his hand. "We'd agreed to, didn't we? Not killing them may mean trouble."

Peg Leg Mu has been ignoring his sidekick's observations so far. He was sitting on the boot of the first cart in silence, absent-mindedly bobbing his head as the cart passed over the bumps on the road, and playing out different scenarios of negotiations with their clients, but couldn't help responding this time, since John's ceaseless mumbling was getting on his nerves.

Mu yawned widely, thus demonstrating that Woodcutter's worries were groundless, and drawled:

"They're our insurance, John, our insurance, see?"

"If the client decides to take us out, the Adornians you released won't stop him – he'll only get irritated," replied Woodcutter instantly. "He'll do us in regardless."

"They will, they will," promised Peg Leg.

"How?"

"I didn't merely release these idiot brothers," Mu giggled. "There was a serious reason – they'd lost a head of livestock. And that ain't no mere livestock, either."

"So what about it?"

"A chain of events, John, a chain that we can use to get out of this crap," explained Peg Leg. "The Adornians that we let slip have left some serious traces, by the looks of it, and there's no point in touching us."

"Far-fetched," disagreed Woodcutter.

"I see no other way of escaping death," Mu sighed.

John didn't like this remark at all; having thought about it well, Woodcutter spoke again:

"Why the hell are we keeping our appointment, then? If things are as bad as you say they are, we have to dump the merchandise and lie low."

"We won't be able to hide from them," replied Mu sadly.

"Why? You don't even know the identity of the client."

"I have my guesses."

"Care to share?"

"I won't, or you'll have problems sleeping at night," Peg Leg snorted. "But I'll tell you this much if you're interested: my own greed has let me down. I went after a huge amount of money and lost my circumspection. I wouldn't agree if I'd known all I know now."

"What if we turn ourselves in?" asked Woodcutter sombrely.

"To whom?"

"The Imperial Prosecutor. They say the new one has only just arrived; this one's honest, he really cares about nothing but the law."

"Oh really?"

"I'm telling you. Right before our departure I heard that two gaming den moguls approached him with their gifts as per usual; he'd kept them locked up for two days, and promised he'd cut their hands off if he caught them again."

"He isn't honest because he's only just arrived; he's honest because he takes pride in his service," Peg Leg winced. "I heard he cares little for money – his career is more important."

"All the better. If he's honest, he shouldn't give us away to the client."

Woodcutter was a clever fellow in general. He knew his responsibilities perfectly well and performed them diligently. Mu even trusted John with caravan driving whenever he didn't manage to do it himself, as well as large amounts of money. But in some areas Woodcutter was mind-bogglingly naïve.

"Want to put in some honest toil at the mines, do you?" asked Peg Leg with a mirthless grin. "Or excavate Prime from the Misty Grove until you're all covered in sores? An honest Prosecutor will hear you out, say thanks, and then put you inside for contraband – see now? Don't even think about giving up – my opinion is that it's better to perish in an honest fight than in a forced labor camp."

"You can come to an arrangement with the Prosecutor."

"The argument is pointless, John. If my hunches are right, not even the Prosecutor can rescue us. So our only hope is the chain that's taking shape about now."

Mu sighed heavily and turned his head away, still pondering the upcoming conversation.

* * *

"Damn, damn, damn..." Marida got out of the water, crawled a few feet across the sandy bank and lay still in exhaustion. "Damn!"

Confidence is a good thing, but overconfidence is a harbinger of doom, and Marida felt this to be true in the very marrow of her bone. When she had entered the Ilhwa, Marida had no doubts that she could swim across the river in the smugglers' wake and would be able to stay unnoticed. She'd been convinced that she'd have to wait for the smugglers to unload their boats, but decided it would be for the better and give her enough time to dry her clothes in the hot summer sun.

Things proved more difficult in reality.

The slave traders were the first to let her down. They were discussing their affairs in the reeds for ages, and Marida, who had been submerged up to her neck, got rather chilly. When the smugglers finally parted ways, the young woman was horrified to realize that she wouldn't be able to swim as fast as the boats. She could just about manage it in the reeds, but when she got to the deeper part of the river, the current started to carry her off very rapidly. The river appeared to be mocking the unfortunate Adornian woman and punishing her for her earlier confidence. She made heroic efforts and tried her hardest, but every new stroke took an ever-greater toll on her. The slave traders had disembarked at the Dokht coast long since and started to unload the boats, while Marida was still near the middle of the Ilhwa, trying not to drown and cursing her recklessness. She could barely move her arms and legs, water kept getting into her mouth, the soaked clothes were dragging her down, and what had seemed like a picnic became a real torture. Anger was the only thing that kept Marida from admitting defeat. Anger at her own self.

She knew it to be her duty to get across the river. She knew no one else could help her

friends and despised her weakness. She was overcome by self-loathing, whispered the worst, most demeaning insults at herself, and... kept going.

She concentrated on staying afloat and allowed herself only the odd occasional stroke, gradually approaching the shore and salvation. She had long lost the slave traders from sight, but was certain that she would be able to find them again a little later, after the horrendous crossing.

Damn...

Marida turned over onto her back and closed her eyes, blissfully letting the warm sunrays caress her skin.

How much time did she lose?

A lot, a whole lot.

Will she be able to find the slave traders?

Probably. Possibly. Not now...

All she wanted to do right now was keep on lying down and breathing, savoring the realization that the ordeal had finished. There was a hard journey ahead, and she would have to get across Dokht lands, wary of the Touched and patrols alike, and then fight the slave traders, but that was yet to come.

Not now...

I'll succeed, I will, the girl gave herself a promise. *I just need some rest... A tiny bit of rest...*

* * *

"So Marcus made you a 'courier' just to get the news of Carlos across?" asked Lady Cobryn, puzzled.

"Yes, Your Ladyship," said Smasher respectfully. "We were out of pigeons, a messenger would take too long, and Lachard deemed it possible to sacrifice me."

Agatha noticed the Hero's hurt feelings and tried to cheer him up:

"I'm sorry it turned out like this."

"I am ready to do my duty, whatever the cost," said the Warlord in a low rumble.

"That's why I value you so much."

But Agatha's last phrase was said somewhat absent-mindedly – she was concentrating intensely on the message sent by Lachard.

Carlos Gryd.

Lady Cobryn threw the brat out of her head a long time ago. Who cares whether or not he's alive? It matters little whether he's hanging from a gallows tree or roaming the Forest, after all. Lachard was an expert in implicating people, and the Imperial Prosecutor was bribed, which meant that Carlos had no chance – he was doomed to die. He had to die by any account, didn't he? And yet the boy struggles on – and not merely struggles; he's managed to do something unforeseen, which made Marcus abandon everything else and head for Fichter at top speed.

Could Lachard have made a mistake? But when could that have happened? When he didn't kill Carlos – or just now, when he rushed in hot pursuit? How dangerous was the young Gryd, really?

People make mistakes – even intelligent ones like Lachard. However, the knight had an amazing intuition and could usually foresee trouble a long time before it materialized, and Lady Cobryn always kept this penchant of his in mind. Therefore, the report and the

means of its delivery made a strong impression on Agatha.

What if I'm the one who's mistaken? What if there's some game going on to my ultimate downfall that I have overlooked? What if I was drawn into Grydia for a purpose – to be accused of high treason? Or is Carlos the cur merely a random figure that exists solely as a result of Lachard's carelessness? Will the Grydian brat be able to upset my plans?

Doubt... What could be more natural, and who could quite evade it?

Some people doubt often, virtually all the time, to the extent that their entire lives are but sequences of doubt and surrender. A regular person simply "has these moments". However, strong people don't indulge in doubts very often. Strong people, and, most importantly, intelligent people, never rush – they plan, scout for talent, calculate the results of their actions. They realize that it's better to get half of what they wanted today and wait until tomorrow to get it all, than to smash your head in a reckless attempt to bite off more than you can chew. Intelligent people don't merely know their own moves – they know their opponent's possible reactions as well, and they can start doubting only if their enemy manages to surprise them.

"I don't think that the boy Gryd will be any impediment to us," said the Warlord softly.

"He is no boy anymore, Smasher," Agatha smiled sadly. "Carlos accepted the challenge and went to Cobria, which means he has become a man. A lord."

"I told this to Lachard and will repeat it to you, Your Ladyship – let him come. We'll kill him."

The Hero didn't see any problems – he ignored them deliberately, trying to solve every issue that arose by brute force. But that is the very lot of a Hero – to destroy everything that needs to be destroyed for the greater glory of his lady.

"Carlos knows what's in stock for him," said Agatha softly.

She said it to herself rather than addressing Smasher, but the Warlord replied nonetheless:

"So what about it?"

"The fact that he's moving forward anyway, Smasher. Carlos keeps moving east, even though his only assets are two Heroes and a patricide charge."

"He's an idiot, Your Ladyship, there's no doubt about that. I am of the opinion that the Gryd brat is blinded by desire for revenge and knows not what he's doing. All we need to do is wait for him to get to Grydia to twist his head off."

And once they do that, it will be obvious that the cretin Lachard journeyed east for nothing and made him a "courier" for no good reason. Her Ladyship will realize as much and punish Lachard publicly... by impalement, for example. Because no one can take on airs when they talk to a Hero as strong and respected as Maximilian Smasher.

I shall come to the square where they'll execute you regularly – just to spit at you, Lachard, the Warlord gave himself a promise. *I will...*

"You are going to Fichter," said Agatha in a no-nonsense voice.

What?!

"Aye aye, Your Ladyship," Smasher bowed and instantly inquired, "But what for?"

"If Carlos is really as much of an idiot as you think and wants to kill me, he'll come to the Three Peaks and be killed here." Agatha made a pause. "But I am of the opinion that things are really much worse. I think that Glassblower sent the young Gryd to Fichter to run some errand that he couldn't run himself, and you are going there immediately. You'll rejoin Lachard, and you'll bring the matter to an end together."

That bastard will be in command again!

“Aye aye, Your Ladyship,” muttered Smasher, barely managing to conceal his anger.

Doubt, vague, half-formed suspicions, weaknesses... There is no solution, and even the most pragmatic of Dokhts who trust in nothing but solid science occasionally feel like getting a sneak preview, to lift the unwoven veil of the future and to find out how it all happens in the end. To cheat destiny...”

One might say, what could be easier? Make your plans and check them against a clairvoyant’s opinion, and you’ll be invincible, but... There’s always a “but”, alas. Prophecies are never clear, and the ambiguity of interpretation makes the plans that had seemed infallible seem amazing in their obvious stupidity. But then it turns out that the planning was perfect, and the error was in the interpretation of the prophecy. Who’s to blame for everything that’s gone wrong? The clairvoyant? Or whoever doubted too much? Who?

Another problem is the overconfidence brought on by the ability to sneak a peek at the future. You think that the future cannot be changed, but time mocks you by weaving a completely different pattern on the fabric of reality, and you realize that you had to work instead of indulging in self-congratulatory complacency.

Agatha’s father taught her to be careful about the way she treated the prophecies of clairvoyants and not to trust anyone blindly – not even as strong a clairvoyant as Yolanda, and the lady knew he was right from her own experience. Agatha rarely tried to see what the future had in stock for her, preferring to rely on logic and intelligence, but now it seemed to her that there was no other option. Lachard felt a menace, but she didn’t see anything herself and could not assess the danger that Carlos posed. She did not understand how to react to the danger, which meant it was high time to pay old Yolanda a visit – the old woman could read the future a long time before the advent of Prime. Lady Cobryn’s father gave the old woman one of the castle’s towers to dwell in.

“Agatha.” When the lady arrived, Yolanda jumped up from her chair and started to move forward, leaning on her cane. “Agatha!”

She was little and hunchbacked, and her face with a mouth that had three yellow teeth was found repulsive even by battle-seasoned Heroes, so she didn’t venture outside her part of the castle often. The old woman’s face resembled a crumpled parchment, there was a huge wart on her long nose; grey hairs sprouted on her chin, and the eyes were the old woman’s only attractive feature – they were large and bright green, and glistened just as brightly as they did when she was young.

“I expected you.”

“Well, you’re a clairvoyant, aren’t you?”

“I am, I am indeed...” Yolanda grabbed Agatha by the hand and looked her in the eye. “Been a while, hasn’t it?”

She missed her. Lady Cobryn knew how fond the old lady was of her, and treated her like a favorite grandma, but she didn’t visit Yolanda often. She limited their contacts deliberately to resist the temptation of sneaking peeks at the future more often.

This is why she replied coolly:

“Have many visions piled up, then?”

“There are a few.”

“Good ones?”

“They vary.”

Yolanda was old – incredibly old for a world that survived the Cataclysm and the horrors that came in its wake. She remembered the Imperium – not the Dokht Imperium, but the one that preceded it. She witnessed the advent of Prime and the Touched, the formation of new countries and the War for Misty Grove. She had seen it all and remembered it all, and she kept a remarkable clarity of mind at her centenarian age, a virtual impossibility in this world.

“Just don’t tell me you’re not seeing me with a crown on my head.”

“I’ve been seeing you in a crown for quite a while now, Agatha.”

Lady Cobryn automatically touched the golden coronet, but instantly got a grip on herself.

“You know perfectly well which crown I’m referring to, Yolanda.”

“Of course I do.” The old woman hobbled to an armchair and sat down (she received the privilege of staying seated in the presence of Cobryan lords from Friedrich), having taken a box of pills from the table. “My age... I don’t know how much more I’ve got...” She took a drink of water and reclined on the back of the chair. “I tire quickly and get sleepy right away. I’m just like an infant.”

“I sometimes think you’ll last forever, Yolanda,” Agatha smiled.

The best doctors available took care of the ancient clairvoyant’s health – three Dokhts and three Adornians, and they all said that the old woman was unusually spry for her age.

“What good is life if the true joys evade me?” sighed Yolanda. “Look at me, Agatha, look well: I eat, sleep, talk, think and foretell the future, but do I live? Do I feel the fire burning inside of me? Do I enjoy my existence? Don’t repeat my mistakes, girl, be sure that you don’t.”

“I shouldn’t live too long?”

“You shouldn’t stay on your own, Agatha,” said Yolanda gravely. “It’s way past high time for you to have a child.”

“I have a purpose in life.”

“That’s what I thought, too – before I realized that there is no purpose, no matter how great, that could give you simple human happiness, the real thing. Unfortunately, it has taken me too long to realize this.”

Lady Cobryn wanted to give a scathing response and say that she hadn’t found a man she would want to sire her child yet, so there was no need to rub it in, but the old woman suddenly decided to cut to the chase:

“The future isn’t always open, Agatha – I warned you that you chose a hard road, and now, to my great regret, I see that I wasn’t wrong.”

“The greater the prize, the harder the road,” said the Lady slowly, now fully alert.

What did you see, Yolanda?

“To make the future favorable, you must never turn back.”

“Then I’ll create the future myself.”

“That’s what it’s all about, Agatha – only you can do it. And the future will be just the way you create it. Didn’t your father teach you this?”

“He did.”

“So don’t you ever forget about what’s truly important, in order to avoid disappointment once your future catches up with you.”

Nobody dared to talk to Lady Cobryn like that – nobody but Yolanda. The old woman’s wisdom combined with her talent for seeing the future made Agatha, like Friedrich before

her, hold her tongue and listen. The decision to act upon hearing the news – or to refrain from acting – was theirs, but still they listened without interrupting.

“You expected me,” said Lady Cobryn hoarsely. “So you know what this is all about.”

“There is a proud young knight in your way.”

“Carlos Gryd.”

“I don’t know his name – I can only see his bravery.”

“The bravery of an idiot?”

“No, the bravery of an intelligent man who’s very, very angry,” sighed Yolanda. “The young knight is indeed inexperienced, hot-headed and all that, but his moves are well thought-out and audacious. He is led by his heart, but his mind helps him not to make too many mistakes.”

This means Lachard was right – the boy is indeed dangerous.

“Is Carlos very dangerous?”

“Very.”

Lady Cobryn couldn’t help but crack her knuckles when she heard this “very”, short as the twang of a crossbow string.

“About a week ago, I didn’t like the shape of clouds at sunset,” continued the old woman in a gentle voice, turning to the window. “You know how much the clouds can tell you, especially on a full moon, and it was full moon that night. The clouds spoke of a serious impediment in your way and were splattered in blood.”

“Clouds often look splattered in blood at sunset.”

“Which is why I look at them often,” Yolanda smiled. “Great plans always entail blood.”

“Why haven’t you warned me?”

“Because clouds are fickle and unreliable. It is hard to read them, and I’m old and weak. Two days later there was a good opportunity to read the future on a mutton shoulder, but the signs were vague, and I know how you dislike nebulous signs. So I held my peace again.”

You could have told me – in that case, perhaps, I wouldn’t have been so hasty with Grydia.

“Therefore, I waited for this morning to come and looked into my crystal ball.”

The old woman grew silent again and kept looking through the window, as though she was afraid to meet Lady Cobryn’s eye when she gave her the bad news.

The future is always vague and nebulous – you can never see the whole picture, and having a few hints can help you with embroidering the correct pattern on the fabric of what’s to come. Or, just as easily, prevent you from doing so. So, Lady Cobryn, will you listen to what the old clairvoyant has to say, or not? Are you prepared to trust in yourself alone, or do you require a hint?

I need a hint, decided Agatha. There’s too much at stake, so I must know what the old woman stays silent about.

“What have you seen?”

“Not much at all,” replied Yolanda sadly. “The ball was full of images of blood and steel.”

“Will there be a battle?”

“You may win, you may lose, nothing is certain. But for now, Agatha, you must focus on this boy – he’s the main danger now. Your encounter was not happenstance – it was meant to happen, and Carlos Gryd isn’t as simple as he looks – his possible future is as

grand as yours.”

That very moment Agatha realized why Yolanda started their conversation with the much-hated topic of childbirth.

“We can have a common future?”

“This pattern is the most beautiful of all,” the old woman whispered. “When I saw it, I couldn’t help crying.”

* * *

“It’s bigger than I thought,” said Carlos thoughtfully. He stopped his horse on a hillock and was studying the panorama of Fichter that was beginning to fill the horizon. “A whole lot bigger.”

“Indeed, it’s a bit larger than Grydwald,” Acacius chuckled.

“That it is.”

“Some people say that Fichter is even bigger than the capital, they do – but I don’t believe them, of course, because our capital is where Emperor Paul himself lives, may he have only pleasant dreams, so it can’t be smaller than any mere city, even if it’s called a free town. Merchants are no fools, either – they realize that making the Great Emperor himself, may his thoughts always stay pure, irate, is not very prudent. The merchants say that Fichter is smaller, but I think that...”

“Shut up,” roared Hurricane. “Now!”

Two days filled by Benefit’s endless chatter made the Warlord regret his earlier compassion. First he wheezed quietly, occasionally leaving his companions under the pretext of having to reconnoiter, then he started grumbling, and by the end of the second day felt he perfectly fine about telling the chatty savant to shut up, admitting publicly that Acacius should have been abandoned at the fanatics’ hamlet. Even a direct threat only made Benefit shut up for an hour – after that, his nature got the better of him and his verbiage started to spew uncontrollably.

On the other hand, Carlos and Fidget were beginning to get used to their companion, whose voice became part of the natural background, like the sound of the trees. Additionally, the savant had visited Fichter before, which made him a source of necessary information.

“Each time I come here, I get this idea to count the people, but I keep getting sidetracked. It’s either some sort of business, or a headache, or something else... People keep getting in the way – they walk around, they mix, and it gets hard to remember whether or not you’ve already counted them... The city’s big, too, and going down each and every street is no mean feat...”

“Size doesn’t matter,” said Shahmana reasonably. “People in Fichter are just like the people everywhere else.”

“Only the Dokhts, you mean,” agreed Hurricane.

“But they live differently,” Acacius immediately thought it necessary to elaborate. “Not like the Grydwalders.”

“That much is clear.”

“If they live differently, they must think differently, too,” elaborated the savant. “And if they think differently, they must be quite unlike the Grydians.”

“What do you mean – unlike the Grydians?”

“They can rip you off,” explained Benefit. “Happens all the time in big cities.”

“Everybody cheats.”

“They’ve got their own ways, and they watch all strangers very attentively, from everywhere. If you break any rules, they will call the guards on the spot. The townsfolk aren’t too keen on strangers.”

“Why’s that?”

“They aren’t too keen on anyone, really,” said the savant readily. “I am of the opinion that it results from close cohabitation. What’s life like in a big city? Houses are right next to each other, the streets are as narrow as a path through a briar patch, and you will invariably bump into someone if you walk across them. This is why the townsfolk dislike people – they’re sick of everyone.”

“Just like the Adornians,” snorted Carlos.

“There are lots of them in Fichter.”

“I didn’t know Adornians lived in cities,” Fidget seemed surprised.

“Cities, forests, what’s the difference?” The young man shrugged. “They don’t like people.”

“Keepers are people, too,” said Heinrich gruffly. “And they don’t like Dokhts.”

“Keepers, people?” Shahmana made a scornful grimace.

“Who else?” asked Acacius with unfeigned interest.

“Mages.”

“Keepers became mages after the Cataclysm as a result of exposure to Prime. They had Prime oozing out of every orifice – it was in their water, in their food and so on, so they became imbued with it, as it were. Back in the olden days we didn’t differ from the Keepers at all, not even in name, and we lived in a single Imperium.”

“The Dokht Imperium?”

“No, the other one – the old one.”

Carlos had read a number of books about the government that predated the cataclysm and was aware of the old Imperium, but he didn’t interrupt the savant – instead, he held his peace and found himself listening to Benefit’s conversation with the Heroes with a sudden curiosity.

“Why did they wage war against us, then?” asked a surprised Shahmana.

“Actually, we were the ones who started the war – because of Prime. We had precious little, and the Keepers had a lot, which is why we decided to fight them.”

“I don’t trust Keepers,” Heinrich interrupted the savant. “And now it appears that I don’t trust the townsfolk as well, if they’re such rotten bastards.”

Acacius sighed, but didn’t say anything, much to the surprise of his companions. He jerked his shoulders and turned his face to Fichter, the only free town in the whole of Praia.

Fichter had a very convenient disposition – the wide Ilhwa narrowed here a little, and there was the rocky Ihlves Island in the middle of the river, which made the construction of a bridge a whole lot easier. Actually, back in the days of the Old Imperium, there was a small village on the site of the city, whose name got lost over the ages, whose major distinguishing feature was the very bridge across the Ilhwa. Not the largest among bridges, and not the most heavily used, either – there was no shortage of ways to get across a river back then, but a very sturdy one, built to last.

People were yet to appreciate the quality of the Ihlves Bridge properly – it happened much later.

During the Cataclysm, Ilhwa raged in a terrible flood that resulted in complete destruction of everything that had been built near the banks of the river. Bridges, houses, harbors – not a trace remained of any of those. Some had been submerged completely, others turned into rubble and have been washed away into the ocean, and only the Ihlves Bridge remained standing. Not without taking some damage, of course, but it has survived nonetheless – all the superstructures were lost, but the mighty stone piers remained. People who returned to Ilhwa eventually put wooden boards on top of them to get across. The Ihlves Bridge resurrected, and for a long time remained the sole umbilical cord that tied together the former provinces of the Imperium. A new settlement appeared in its vicinity.

The initial settlers were guards – Dokhts and Adornians were alike in their vigilance in terms of border patrol and detaining aliens, but as time went by and people started to establish their post-Cataclysm routines, merchants started to join the guards. Exports to the south included simple household items that the arrogant Adornians were reluctant to make themselves, rope, honey, furs and metals. Imports from Adornia comprised brightly colored fabrics, gems, simple magical artifacts and Prime. The trade encountered many impediments initially, since the ruling classes of the two newly established states were very suspicious of each other, and in the times of the War for the Misty Grove the bridge was burnt down. However, by that time Fichter already had the reputation of an important trade centre, and the devious Friedrich Cobryn decided to offer his support to the merchants. Immediately after the victory, Lord Cobryn convinced Ferraut to grant Fichter the status of a free town, having proven that honest trade would be a much better source of revenue for the treasury than all sorts of shady transactions that would inevitably flourish if the borders remain completely closed. The Emperor agreed, much to the surprise of the court, and Fichter flourished.

The inspired merchants rebuilt the burnt-down bridge in four months, this time in stone, and transformed the Island of Ihlves into the largest marketplace in the world. The left bank was occupied by the Dokhts, and the houses built here brought fond and painful memories of his beloved Grydwald to Carlos. Stone walls, tiled roofs, rathaus, fortifications – there was a majestic view of the Dokht part of the free city from the hill, and the good weather transformed every opening view into a detailed picture of incredible finesse. The right coast, occupied by the Adornians, could barely be seen. Carlos noticed only the strange roofs of tall towers that looked suspended in air, and gave himself a promise to take a walk across the Ilhwa someday and to admire the strange buildings of the Southerners.

“Shall we spend the night in the city, perhaps?” inquired Hurricane with a smile, and the young man realized it was time to get back to business.

“Acacius!”

“At your service, Lord Carlos.”

“I saw a sack in your cart – there was something soft in it.”

“You slept on it, Lord Carlos,” reminded the savant obligingly.

“Doesn’t matter. What’s inside?”

“All sorts of clothes.”

“Thought as much,” the young man rubbed his chin.

“Clothes?” Fidget was surprised. “Why would a savant have to carry a sack of clothes around?”

"I've got a spacious cart and a tough horse, so I can take quite a bit of stuff with me," explained Benefit reasonably. "The clothes are still pretty decent and can always find a use. For instance, let's assume someone's reluctant to buy a patent for an ingenious contraption off me; well, I can approach them from another direction..."

"So you double as a rag-and-bone man, do you?"

"Uh, occasionally..."

"Show me," said the young man.

Acacius hemmed and hawed, and looked very eager to mention money, but caution prevailed, and the savant sighed: "Of course, Lord Carlos, as you wish." He jumped off the cart, pulled out the sack and dumped its contents into the cart. "Here you go. Nothing remarkable, but everything's clean and the fabric's still strong. It's been used before, but that's to be expected. Some of my clients couldn't pay me with money, so they would offer me a coat or a shirt..."

"I see, I see," Carlos dismounted and made a dismissive gesture. "We'll handle the old stuff ourselves, and you... Why don't you take a leak somewhere, we need to talk."

His cold tone of voice and brusque words had an effect – Acacius sighed and obediently headed for the bushes.

The Grydians gathered round the cart.

"It is unwise to enter Fichter together," said the young man in an even voice, eyeing the Heroes attentively.

"Why's that?" Fidget frowned.

"Because I'm a wanted man. Fichter may be a free town, but it's located in Cobria, and they fear to take a false step with Lady Agatha here."

"We were definitely moving faster than any courier."

"Anything is possible." The young man shook his head. "We need to take our precautions, anyway."

"I agree," the Warlord nodded.

"All right, let's take our precautions," agreed Shahmana, who was eager to start doing something. "What kind of precautions, anyway?"

"Let's discuss our plans first."

"Prime! Since we have no Prime inductor, we have to gather as much Prime as we can to resurrect Archibald and Crossbow."

"That will take too long," pointed out Carlos. "And you know perfectly well that without an inductor, we can easily end up with two freaks with extra feet instead of Rusty Moustache and Crossbow."

He had his ideas about what they would need to do in Fichter, but the young man deliberately held a powwow in order to make the Heroes feel like full team members. Let them make their suggestions, let them participate – this way they'll find it easier to follow his orders disguised as a "consensual decision".

"There are lots of smugglers here, they must have access to Prime."

"Sorry, Fidget, but smugglers really love the color of money," said Hurricane in a low rumble.

"We've taken some from the hideout, and found some more at the hamlet..."

"It won't be enough."

"I have eight Steelmount diamonds," smiled Carlos. "They were stashed away with the catalysts."

None of the Grydians knew the actual price of the gems, but Steelmount diamonds have been used as a synonym for “a whole lot of money” for quite a while, which gave the young man some confidence. Nevertheless, the young lord doubted that he would spend money on Prime.

“Diamonds are great news, but you’ve got to sell them first,” said Heinrich.

“Fidget will handle it,” said Carlos.

“Me?!”

“You’ll enter Fichter on your own and find the right people.”

“Me?!?”

“You won’t be able to conceal your true identity for too long,” the young man nodded in the general direction of the Hero Maiden’s ears and luxurious red tail. “They’ll find you out sooner or later, and we’ll run into problems. Therefore, you’ll ride in openly, claiming to be an envoy of a northern lord.”

“What about you?”

“Myself and Hurricane, we’ll dress as commoners...”

“No,” said Heinrich curtly.

“Yes.” The council was over, now Carlos was giving orders in businesslike, no-nonsense tones. “We shall pretend to be commoners and try to find out what really happened to Invariat Convivial.”

“Just like that?”

“We’ll commence the investigation,” the young man corrected himself. “We’ll find out what we can and then analyze the information we gather.”

“What about my weapons? My armor?”

“We’ll hide them in the cart, and Acacius will get them in.”

“Do you trust him, then?”

“Yes,” said Carlos after a moment’s hesitation. “He’s a weakling, and he’s full of it, but he’ll help us.”

“Why?”

“Because he owes us one.”

“Do you trust him?” the Warlord asked the same question again.

“I’ve had a chance to talk to him at length back at the hamlet; he earned my trust.”

The Heroes exchanged glances.

“Oookaaay,” said Heinrich with extreme reluctance. “You’re the lord, so it’s up to you.”

“Fidget will take all the horses – you and me, we’ll go on foot, Hurricane.”

“On foot?”

Another unpleasant piece of news nearly broke the camel’s back.

“Look at these rags. Do you think people dressed like us can afford purebred stallions?”

Shahmana broke out laughing. The Warlord’s confusion, as well as the ordeal he was about to face, cheered the young woman up and made her forget her own assignment for a moment, one she wasn’t looking forward to in the least.

“Shall we go unarmed?”

“Aren’t you a Hero?”

“I am,” sighed Heinrich.

“In that case, fear nothing.” Leading by example, Carlos started to take off his cloak.

“Where do we meet up?” Shahmana inquired.

“Acacius recommends the Fire & Ice Inn – he says the owner is a certain Martin, and

that it's on Line Street. He reckons it's a decent place." Having remembered Benefit, the young man turned to the bushes and waved his hand. "Acacius, come here!" He turned again to the Heroes and said: "We meet at the inn in the evening."

* * *

Marida ended up wasting a lot of time indeed – an enormous lot of it. She only managed to reach the place where the slave traders disembarked by nightfall, and it took a great effort to find it. She didn't actually recognize it – her entire attention was focused on fighting the current, so she didn't remember any landmarks, but she simply realized it was the place that the smugglers would choose once she got there – the calm oxbow looked particularly fitting for all smuggling-related activities because of its rocky shore and thick bushes hiding it from prying eyes. But Marida would have to wait until the morning to make sure her hunch was correct.

The young woman waited for this dawn like she'd never waited for any other dawn in her entire life. She was exhausted, hungry and dressed in nothing but a light dress, she kept shivering from the cold, occasionally drifting away, but whispering stubbornly each time she came to:

"I'll manage... I'll manage... I'll manage..."

The lives of her friends depended on nothing but her fortitude, and Marida had no right to show weakness.

"I'll manage..."

And manage she did.

The moment the night's darkness gave way to the false dawn's grayness, Marida forced herself to get up, intending to start searching, and almost instantly came across a bush of white nuts that were getting ripe around that time – it seemed as though fate became ashamed of its cruelty and decided to give the young woman a treat.

Having had a snack which restored a tiny bit of her power, Marida found the tracks of the slave traders' carts that took away the boxes with her friends and started to follow them, going deeper and deeper into Dokht territory, dizzy with weakness, cursing, listening intently to every noise and cursing herself for having let the slave traders get so far away.

She didn't stop for a second, occasionally starting to run, and the only thought going through her mind was:

"I have got to get there in time!"

* * *

"Here, is it?"

"Apparently so," said Woodcutter gruffly.

"Apparently, or are you certain?" asked a displeased Mu.

John looked around once again, and started to list the landmarks:

"The rock with two summits and three pine trees in a saddle, that's one. The large stone near the oak tree is two, and the thick grove of walnut trees to the west is three." He looked his boss in the eye. "I'm certain, Mu, as certain as can be."

Peg Leg knew the landmarks of the rendezvous point as well as Woodcutter, and the reason he kept nagging his subordinate was his nervousness. The smuggler had a reason to be nervous – their caravan was running a little late – they had to let a border patrol pass by and hide behind mitutia bushes, and the client was nowhere to be found now.

"He'll get here," said John, trying to put his boss at ease. "He's got no other options."

"True," agreed Mu. "He needs the goods, after all."

"And our heads, too, probably," whined the subordinate, much to the displeasure of his boss.

"Why don't you shut up for a while, eh?"

"I'm not saying anything, am I?"

"Well, keep at it."

Woodcutter and Peg Leg decided not to share their suspicions with the rest of the gang – they were fully aware that the mercenaries will scatter the instant they learn of possible complications, which is why they kept silent. Mu tried to chase every bad thought as far away as possible, prodding his thoughts towards the money promised by the client for this job, and John's remark upset his fragile equilibrium.

"I'm sick enough without your wisecracks."

"Just sick – is that all?" said Woodcutter.

"No, it isn't," replied Mu after a pause.

However, he didn't admit to being afraid openly, either.

Peg Leg didn't like their rendezvous point. Even the dark alleys of Fichter inspired greater confidence – hell, even the Reed Island was better, come to think of it, much better than a clearing in the depth of the woods, right at the foot of the lifeless Finger Mountains. On the one hand, the place seemed ideal for shady deals, since few patrols ever ventured that far, but right now Mu wouldn't mind being a little closer to his home town of Fichter. One had to admit that patrols that arrived to investigate the sounds of battle saved the lives of dozens of smugglers who fell out of sorts with their customers or competitors. The price of such salvation was indeed steep – imprisonment or forced labor, but anything was better than death.

"Have the lads examined the area well?"

"Of course," Woodcutter nodded.

"What about it?"

"Everything's clear."

"Have you put watchmen out?"

"Of course."

Repetitive git. He must have forgotten all the other words except "of course".

However, Mu refrained from scolding his deputy – he nodded his acceptance of the answer and turned away, staring at the gloomy rocks.

Some place this is, damn it all to hell...

The mysterious Finger Mountains were a multitude of long and thin rocks that stood surrounded by thick forests some eighteen miles to the northeast of Fichter. Nobody knew anything about their origin or why they stood here, so far away from the nearest mountain range. They just stood there, and that was that. There were rumors of silver deposit in the Finger Mountains, but the efforts of numerous panners and diggers proved them wrong. Later on there were attempts to find copper, and then iron, but none of them yielded any results – the rocks were empty as a peasant's larder by springtime. There weren't any beasts in the Fingers, either, and few birds flew over this area. Just like the Zone, in other words. Mu had never been to the Zone, but he was certain it was just as barren and lifeless as the Finger Mountains.

May they be blown to smithereens.

“Good afternoon!”

“Shit!”

The watchmen were as alert as anyone would be under the same circumstances, since they realized that everybody’s lives depended on their alertness, but they missed the guest nonetheless – no fault of theirs, since the client didn’t approach from the forest as expected, but came from the Finger Mountains themselves.

“Why the swearing?” It was a tall man with broad shoulders wearing nondescript traveler’s garb – coarse trousers and boots, a shirt and a leather doublet, and his face was hidden by a black half-mask. “Did I scare you?”

He placed his hand on the hilt of his dagger and confidently proceeded to the first wagon, demonstrating that he remembered what Mu looked like.

“Why would we have any reason to feel scared?” inquired the latter cautiously, jumping off the wagon with alacrity.

“That’s right, no one to be scared of – no one else here but us partners.”

The client came alone, having demonstrated personal courage, as it were, as well as goodwill, but Mu realized that the clearing was surrounded by his comrades – a dozen at least, since somebody had to carry the boxes and drive the carts that would take them further. And they didn’t hide out of shyness, but rather because they had the smugglers in their crossbow sights or were stroking the hilts of their swords and waiting for the orders to attack.

Peg Leg even wanted to ask the client a question about his men, but the man beat him to it. He raised his hand to attract the smugglers’ attention and said:

“Don’t be alarmed! My men will come out in a moment.”

Ten riders came out of the forest. Their clothing was just as nondescript, and they all wore half-masks – the client and his men made a considerable effort to stay incognito, and Peg Leg’s spirits soared – they wouldn’t have bothered if they had planned to kill them.

“I’ll buy your wagons, Mu, if you don’t mind,” said the man in a calm voice.

“Haven’t found any of your own?”

“I don’t like to attract unnecessary attention with all the coming and going... The fewer reasons for anyone to wonder what’s going on, the better. A thousand silver pieces for a horse and wagon, is that okay?”

“That’s generous.”

“I know.”

Four of the approaching riders had sturdy leather saddlebags on their horses, and Peg Leg’s experienced eye instantly told him they were packed with silver. A hell of a lot of silver.

His recent suspicions suddenly seemed perfectly stupid.

“A thousand’s okay, if that’s your offer.”

“Deal,” smiled the client calmly. “Now show me the goods.”

Mu licked his lips and said in a low voice:

“About that livestock... I just wanted to report that we’re one head short.”

He felt Woodcutter grow tense behind his back.

“How did it happen?” asked the client, unperturbed.

“The Skullcotton brothers ran into some Wyrdkin in the Three Woodpecker Forest, and so they lost one of the coffins.”

"That's bad. I warned you everything must be carried out without a hitch."

"And I promised as much," confirmed Peg Leg. "Which is why I've taken the liberty of letting the Skullcottons go, giving them explicit orders to find and destroy the coffin at any cost." He gave a cautious smile. "Were my actions correct?"

The half-mask didn't hide the client's eyes, but the slave trader could read nothing in his gaze – the man's impenetrable pupils showed no flicker of emotion. Yet Mu was perfectly aware that the look in the client's eye was merely a mask – a veil, as it were, and his destiny was being decided behind it. He felt a trickle of cold sweat run down his back.

"You have broken our agreement," said the client slowly. Peg Leg drew in a convulsive breath; Woodcutter clenched the hilt of his sword. "But you did have a valid reason to."

Am I saved?

"Thank you," muttered Mu.

"Don't mention it."

The client approached the first wagon, opened the cover and looked at the coffin.

"I want an honest answer: are any of the boxes damaged?"

"None. I swear it."

"Good."

Was I right about the whole thing? I let the Adornians go, and so the client let me go, too?

Aren't I smart!?

This easy, and, most importantly, extremely fortunate solution of the problem that's been eating at Peg Leg, made him euphoric. He'd expected to abase himself, prove his right to stay alive, and, possibly, fight, but the client must have gone through all the options and decided to avoid any undue delays, and Mu was infinitely grateful for it.

The Skullcottons are a trace all by themselves, regardless of whether or not they manage to destroy the lost "coffin". Since the Adornians are still alive, it's pointless to bother us.

"There was a package to accompany the goods, if I remember correctly."

"Of course, of course." Peg Leg rummaged through the bottom of the wagon and obligingly handed the client a backpack. "Here you go."

The man opened it, looked inside, hummed his approval, gave the backpack to a rider who'd approached him and continued:

"Now let's discuss the payment for nine heads of livestock."

Mu was all smiles.

"And your silence."

"That's one thing you needn't worry about at all," said the slave trader hastily. "I have already forgotten every single thing."

"You let me down once, didn't you?" said the client, looking at Mu with a grin (a friendly one – the man was simply teasing Peg Leg).

"But I did have a valid reason, and you've admitted as much yourself just now." The slave trader decided he needed to sound even more convincing, and said: "I'd be a total idiot if I crossed you – I realize who it is that I'm dealing with."

"Oh, really?" asked the client in a jovial tone, with the smile still on his face.

"I just wanted to tell you that you could trust me," continued Mu in a conspiratorial whisper. "I've seen the tattoo on your forearm – you're a Black Eagle, one of Lady Cobryn's Life Guards, and I'll be as silent as a fish..."

Only then, as he was saying the last words, did Mu realize just how idiotic a blunder he'd just made. What a hideous, unprecedented, unbelievable blunder.

“Please! Don’t!”

“You’ve got too loose a tongue,” sighed Captain Gutscher as he drove his dagger into Peg Leg’s stomach.

Trained Adornians, those who have dedicated themselves to the art of war, can move with incredible speed. In the times of the War for the Misty Grove they surprised the Dokhts with their incredible speed, but were defeated by the skill and the tactical knowledge of the armored Imperial troops. The Touched are fast – not all the species, of course, but some of those beasts are so fast they can outrun a flying arrow, which professional hunters never fail to point out. Yet nobody, neither the Touched, nor the Keepers training to utter exhaustion, can compare to the Heroes in speed.

And power.

And fierceness.

Ever since the acceptance of Prime by the very first warrior who had become a Hero, battlefields became theirs alone – in war, they ruled supreme, invincible and deadly.

Peg Leg didn’t realize he was dead yet – he wasn’t feeling any pain yet and kept on standing next to the wagon staring at the client. The crossbow bolts fired by the Eagles from an ambush didn’t yet reach the slave traders’ heads or bodies; the riders’ weapons were still sheathed as Hoarfrost, who’d been missing a good fight, was chopping his foes to tiny pieces. He had been hiding in Finger Mountains, having arrived there with Captain Gutscher, remained extremely impatient throughout the conversation, hoping Mu would make a fatal mistake, and now, overjoyed, he dashed from wagon to wagon, dodging the crossbow bolts, and kept on slashing, slashing, slashing... His blows weren’t instantly lethal – he preferred to give inflict horrible wounds on his enemies that would make them suffer longer. He slashed, jumped away to face a different enemy, slashed again, returned and finished off the dying. He was splashed in blood and roared in fury and delight, terrifying not only the enemies, but the Eagles as well; the latter stayed out of the slaughter and gave the Faceless One the opportunity to relish in the murder to the fullest. He trampled the bodies under his feet, kept hitting the dead smugglers, slashing and roaring.

The Hero was terrifying in those moments. Terrifying and revolting.

“I was too late! Too late!”

Marida wandered around the clearing where the wagon tracks had led her in astonishment, marveling at the grass that was smeared in blood and covered in pieces of flesh and bone – a clearing covered in parts of corpses.

“I was too late...”

The slave traders resisted... No, they tried to resist, but the balance of power was decidedly unequal. Did they ride into an ambush? Unlikely – according to the tracks, the slave traders rode out onto the clearing without any worries and stopped. They waited for the clients – and, apparently, ended up meeting them.

And meeting their death – the recipients of the goods decided to eliminate the unnecessary witnesses. But how could they have handled the armed slave traders with such apparent speed and ease? Mercenaries may not be the world’s finest fighters, but they must have defended their own lives fiercely...

“A Hero.” Marida touched the grass, then touched one of the corpses, and had her suspicions confirmed. “A Hero.”

Only these warriors tend to kill people in a particular way – they absorb whatever Prime

there is in their victim. There is some Prime in everyone – the Dokhts have less of it, but it's there, anyway, and it doesn't leave the dead body immediately – it stays over the corpse as an invisible vapor, as if it was weeping for the deceased. But the slave traders' corpses had none in them.

However, if a Hero was here, the kidnapping of the Adornians must have been planned by some Dokht lord, and that could upset her plans.

The young woman bit her lip, pondering the unpleasant conclusion, and was about to start tracking the wagons further when she heard a barely audible wheezing:

“Help...”

Did someone survive?

“Help...”

Marida slowly approached the slave trader who was lying in a pool of blood and squinted – it was the broad-shouldered warrior who'd caught her attention in Peg Leg's boat, and she was about to ask him a question when she heard:

“Give me some water...”

One glance sufficed to confirm that the man wouldn't last long – the Hero's blade cut his stomach open and slashed through several lower ribs, but didn't plunge too deep and therefore did not give the victim an easy death. The Hero responsible for the massacre at the clearing obviously enjoyed watching his victims suffer.

“Water...”

“I'll give you some if you tell me what happened here.”

Marida thought she'd have to draw the information out of the slave trader, but the dying man already forgot about his request and continued before the young woman could conclude her phrase.

“I'm good at playing dead... Hah! I took them in! Took them all in! Gimme some water! I played dead! And these bastards...”

“Who are they?”

The slave trader grabbed Marida by the arm.

“Avenge our death! Avenge our death and give me some water!”

“Avenge it on whom?”

“I played dead. He slashed my belly open, and I played dead... It hurt, it hurt like hell, but I've taken the freaking Hero in, may he rot in hell... Revenge! Water... Mu realized the guys were Black Eagles and they cut him down... Cut us down... ‘Cept for me... I'm clever... I took them in...”

The Black Eagles!

Marida heard the name before, many times. The Black Eagles were the crack troops who formed the Cobryan Lady's personal Life Guard.

“Lady Cobryn?”

“Where the hell did you come from, Adornian bitch?” The slave trader was lucid again, and Marida realized he was about to take his last breath. “Where?”

“I fell off the back of one of your wagons,” replied the girl honestly, taking the knife off the dying man's belt.

She expected him to swear, but heard something unexpected:

“Want to save your friends, don't you?”

“Yes.”

“Then go to the Three Peaks, painted whore. Go to Lady Cobryn, you Adornian bitch,

and gut her like her bloody Hero gutted me. Promise?"

"Promise."

But there was no need for her to respond – the slave trader was dead.

Marida squared her shoulders, regretting the fact that the bastard died before she could cut his throat, and suddenly heard:

"Halt!"

"Freeze!"

There was the sound of a lariat; an experienced catcher pulled on his rope, and the young woman fell onto the ground.

* * *

"I'm from Moradia, I'm from Moradia, from Moradia... Where am I from? Moradia, of course! Can't you see for yourselves?"

Shahmana had no problems entering the city through the gate – trade was the lifeblood of the free city (its Prime, according to the metaphor coined by Acacius), and the guards didn't impede the travelers – they asked where Fidget came from as a mere formality, looked at the two saddled mounts, and decided they were reserves, demanding a silver coin for passage and turning to handle the next traveler. That was it. However, the girl kept repeating the name of the land that she claimed to hail from, realizing that any error would attract unnecessary attention:

"I'm from Moradia. Lord Elliot Mor sent me to Fichter on an important errand..."

Shahmana was immersed so deeply in her mental exercise that she didn't look around much, so it took her a while to realize that the street she'd been following from the very gate came to its end, leading to an enormous square, and that her way was blocked by a turnpike. Her mount was intelligent enough to stop at the obstacle, and Fidget heard a guard's voice:

"No one is allowed to go any further! You can only go on foot."

I'm from Moradia...

"Why's that?"

The guard winced: "Provincials again!" but vouchsafed an explanation:

"The square is reserved for trade, milady – only merchants with wares are allowed through."

He waved his hand as if to say: "Off with you!" However, the flabbergasted Fidget froze in place, studying what she saw before her in amazement.

The enormous square that spanned the length of several blocks next to the river was filled with shops, stalls, tents and carts transformed into impromptu stands by their owners. There were hundreds – no, thousands of people going back and forth. Merchants, shop assistants, freight handlers, buyers, water carriers, piemen, beggars, thieves and guards. What Shahmana saw before her was a churning mass of people that looked as garish as an Adornian garment and sounded as loud as a colony of gulls. The vendors were extolling their wares, the customers argued about the price, someone complained they had their horse stolen, some beggars were fighting for a copper coin tossed into the dust... There was laughter and there were curses, hard handshakes and ugly looks, and people, people everywhere – you couldn't escape them.

Suddenly Fidget thought that Grydwald Fairs, attended by virtually the entire population of the Forest, were nothing but backwater village markets unworthy of so

much as a mention here, in the true capital of trade.

"Please pass, milady," asked the Guard, who didn't want to be rude to a Hero Maiden.

"I'll leave... I'll leave in a moment."

What impressed Shahmana the most wasn't the square, though – it was the Fair Bridge that began beyond it, the new bridge built by the local merchants after the war. It was a wide as the entire Ihlves Island and de facto continued the marketplace, since it was also filled with shops, stalls and carts; only the narrow pedestrian passages on either side of the bridge remained free for passage.

"Your first time, is it?"

"Yes."

"Provincials..."

The Guard didn't think he needed to add anything else – everything was obvious enough, anyway. There was already some nimble lad running circles around Fidget with the lopsided legend on his grey shirt that read: "Stables for rent."

"You want to get to the marketplace, milady, am I right?"

"Yes," nodded the Hero Maiden, who still hadn't quite returned to her senses.

"Then you have to leave your horses here, orders of the city authorities. We've got a special place right'ere, like, your 'orsies will feel mighty good there, we'll even give 'em some hay, orders of city authorities. One copper for one hour, two coppers for three hours, eight for half a day..."

Fidget remembered Acacius' warnings of deceitful Fichterers and asked:

"What if I don't want to leave my horses in a stable?"

"Worry not, milady," chuckled the guard, happy that the provincial idiot would finally clear the passage. "Johann's an honest chap, he won't rip you off. Who'd want to cross a Hero Maiden, anyway?"

Even if she comes from some backwater half the world away, he added to himself.

"I'll look after yer 'orsies personally, don't fret." The boy already took all three of Shahmana's mounts by the bridles. "They'll be right there, ten steps away."

"All right," Fidget dismounted and counted six coppers out to Johann. "For three hours."

* * *

The Isle of Ihlves, the Fair Bridge and the adjacent marketplaces (one on each coast) were the heart of Fichter and its natural centre of gravity. They were mentioned in all the faraway provinces by the locals lucky enough to visit the free city and come back – they were the stuff of legends and it sometimes looked as though they were the only thing that actually existed in Fichter.

Which couldn't be further from the truth.

The Free City was beautiful in its Dokht part and had a strangely-looking Adornian appendage (the Southerners adhered to the exact opposite opinion, obviously enough), which is why many curious souls ventured to eye the strange constructions erected on the right bank of the Ilhwa by the Keepers. They did so with some trepidation – Southerners were considered untrustworthy, but curiosity would beat caution every time. The tourists would return surprised, scratching their heads and unable to realize how anyone could build houses so strange; later they would tell one another they liked the Dokht style better over mugs of beer – the way it was in Fichter, at least. The exquisite Rathaus and

luxurious buildings that housed all sorts of guilds, numerous mansions built to show off their owners' wealth – everything was built by the Imperium's finest architects and baffled the provincials' imagination. Since the majority of Fichter's tenement buildings were owned by the same entrepreneurs, it could be said that the whole city was built for a single purpose – to show off.

But wealth wasn't the only reason Fichter was famous. Apart from the merchants, the city attracted a variety of artificers – ordinary smiths doing simple repairs first, followed by experienced mechanics capable of building Prime-powered devices, alchemists, inventors and savants... This is how Brainy Street came into being – a street that would eventually become famous because Invariat Convivial spent a few years there.

“Buying?”

“Selling?”

“Inventing? I can assure the acceptance of your patent by the Imperial University.”

“Authentic Learned Council diplomas! Hushhhh... No one should overhear.”

“Inventor brokerage! Attention! For the very first time ever, we have an Inventor Brokerage service! Tell us about your invention, and we'll find someone who may benefit from it for a fee!”

“Mechanisms! Household devices, construction devices!”

“Prime lamps, all models! Budget and high-end lamps available!”

Acacius was walking through the commotion with a smile. He didn't realize just how much he had missed Brainy Street, its hawkers and its offers, its con men, charlatans, double-dealers and true savants, its distinguished artificers capable of building the most complicated mechanisms and their agile apprentices saving up for a business of their own, the aroma of arguments, searches and great inventions.

“Instruments! The best instruments around!”

“Measurement devices of the highest precision!”

There were hucksters scurrying back and forth, dreaming of grabbing some inventor worth his salt by the scruff of his neck; mechanics eyed their potential clients in a dignified manner, smiths hammered away at hot metal, and savants lounging about in the sun, some with huge tomes and others with copybooks for writing down important ideas. The street itself was filled with customers, who looked around and bumped into each other – there were a few villagers shopping for necessary household items, but the majority of the crowd was comprised of Dokht middlemen selecting the wares they would then resell to Adornia, since the Southerners were poor judges of all things mechanical.

“Cutting machine!”

“Strategic naildriver! Simple as a wooden barrel – even an Adornian could use it!”

“World's finest mechanical axe for log-trimming!”

The only quiet place in the whole street was the neighborhood of a spacious mansion of great beauty surrounded by a tall wall of stone. Nobody shouted or called out to their customers here – the nearby buildings were occupied by hotels and the quieter sort of savant laboratories rather than stalls or noisy workshops of the mechanics. One could sit down on a bench and have a rest here, leaving the street commotion of some fifty steps north and south. Invariat Convivial had once lived here, asking for quiet on the street; the denizens of Brainy Street had respected his request ever since.

“Came to pay your respects?”

“What? Oh... Yes.” Acacius nodded and stared at the man who addressed him out of

the blue – apparently a local inventor, cozily reclining against the back of an armchair standing underneath a shady chestnut tree. “Is it that obvious?”

“You graduated from the Booritanian University...” said the inventor patronizingly.

“The Johofarr Academy of Mechanics,” corrected Benefit.

“Doesn’t matter,” the inventor made a dismissive gesture. “Having found no fitting place, you set out on a journey, convinced that the sharpness of your mind and the obviousness of your talent would get you to the very top and that you would eventually become a member of the Imperial Learned Council.”

“I still have no doubts about succeeding.”

“And now you came to Fichter, alone, broke and tired, hoping to find some money or entice a wealthy merchant with some idiotic project,” concluded the smart-aleck. “But before that you decided to mosey all the way to Brainy Street in order to take a look at the house of someone who made all those dreams come true.” The inventor puffed on his pipe. “I sit here every day and observe, and I have seen thousands of vagabonds like you; I know everything there is to know about your lot. But none of you ever truly know anything about Invariat Convivial.”

“You knew him?”

“Knew him my foot,” the inventor snorted derisively. “He was a colleague of mine!”

And he cast a quick glance at Acacius, the way a fisherman glances at his bobber to make sure the fish took the bait.

In six cases out of ten the provincials, astonished by the revelation, offered that they get a jug of wine all of their own volition, eager to please in their desire to touch the legend and hear the rest of the story. Three more would need to be nudged by the very next phrase:

“We would often chat here, underneath this very chestnut tree, sharing our plans, holding riveting discussions about new mechanisms...” An ideally calculated pause. “We were friends.”

But the little bald runt was one of those who remained unimpressed by the inventor’s words.

“You were lucky,” snorted Benefit. “See ya, brother, I’m through here.”

He turned and headed for the northern gate.

“Provincial buffoon,” muttered the “inventor”, shutting his eyes. The sun had almost reached the zenith and the swindler needed to wet his throat, fast. *The next mark had better be more gullible...*

Acacius passed two more blocks, turned into a narrow cul-de-sac, looked around, made sure no one was watching, lifted the grill that covered the sewer, and jumped down into the enormous pipe connected to the system that pumped Fichter’s filth away. The well-implemented sewer system (the developers consulted with Invariat himself) made sure the pipes never overflowed, and the malodorous liquid only reached up to Benefit’s knees. In other words, if we were to recollect every other adventure that Acacius had on his way to Fichter, this journey through the sewers seemed like a perfectly ordinary pastime.

* * *

“Fabrics, finest fabrics!”

“Artifacts and amulets!”

“Rings and bracelets! Earrings from Adornia’s best craftsmen!”

“Largest gems around!”

Having pondered Carlos’ order, Fidget suggested contacting some prominent jeweler – nobody else would pay a decent price for Steelmount diamonds. However, the idea was rejected after a brief discussion – Shahмана was playing the part of a Hero sent to Fichter by some northern lord, and nobody would believe she journeyed so far to strike a straight deal. Any normal jeweler would find an offer of prohibitively expensive diamonds suspicious and call the guards, and the Grydians wished to attract as little attention as possible. This is why Fidget passed the larger shops by, trying to find a trader with “flexible morals”, as Carlos had put it. Hurricane expressed it in even simpler terms: “We need a big fence.”

The only question that remained was how they would proceed about finding one.

Shahмана had never been involved in anything illegal before, and she had no idea how she could find the necessary kind of person in the teeming crowd of the Fair Bridge. How does one strike a conversation? What would she begin with? Blurt out, “Hey, I have Steelmount diamonds for sale!”? That would definitely attract a bunch of thieves and footpads, and killing them off is never worth the trouble...

Her head was spinning – the task seemed impossible. However, Shahмана underestimated the opportunities offered by the complex but perfectly capable mechanism known as “Trade Bridge”. If there’s something you’d like to buy or sell, you’ll definitely succeed – there’ll be someone to help you and show you the right people. Fichter was ruled by the God of Profit, and the experienced traders spared no effort to keep their beloved deity happy.

“Looking for something, milady?”

The lad addressed her in a manner that didn’t strike the Hero Maiden as trustworthy – he was twitchy and thin, and had a piercing stare, very much like a market thief specializing in distracting marks away from the activities of their pickpocket colleagues, but Shahмана was exhausted and relished the opportunity to talk.

“I need a trustworthy person with money.”

“Sounds ambiguous, milady,” an oily smile flashed on the twitchy lad’s thin lips. “Wish to rob someone?”

“Rob?” Fidget frowned. “Of course not – I have a trade proposal.”

“Serious business?”

He’s obviously a thief, but it’s a fence that I’m looking for, after all, not a judge.

“If you get me to the kind of person I need, I’ll give you ten silver pieces,” said Shahмана grandly.

However, to some surprise of the Hero Maiden, her generous offer didn’t elicit the overjoyed response she had hoped for.

“What kind of person do you need?”

“One that doesn’t talk much.”

Fidget thought she was doing everything right – her posture was confident and she requested that they be circumspect, so she didn’t immediately understand why the twitchy lad’s face soured. Incidentally, she never found out that the facial expression in question was used by Fichterers to greet incorrigible provincial bumpkins.

“Not talking much is all nice and good. But, my dear...”

“I’m a Hero Maiden.”

“My dear Hero Maiden, how am I supposed to take you to the kind of person you need

if you haven't told me anything about the particulars of the deal you seek?"

Talk shop here? In the middle of the crowd? Where anyone could overhear? But the very next moment Shahmana realized that the people scuttling back and forth all around them were too busy to pay attention. Some were buying, some were selling, everybody was trying to shout louder than everybody else, and nobody cared about other people's private conversations. Here, in the middle of the crowd, they were as much on their own as they would ever be.

"Gems," whispered Fidget in a barely audible voice.

"Expensive ones?"

"Yes."

"I know who you need to talk to." The twitchy lad thrust his hand forward. "Cardin the Runt, people know me over here..." He pulled the girl after himself. "We need to go back to the left bank."

Left bank or not, it was all the same to Shahmana; however, she wanted to bring some clarity into matters:

"Are you a thief?"

She really wanted to demonstrate her alacrity and show that it wouldn't be easy to swindle her.

"Well, if you need anything lifted, or, say, procured, no one will manage better than me," said Cardin evasively. "That's the kind of business I do."

The response was easy enough to understand, but it sounded unusually casual. The way Cardin talked about it, one could get the impression that stealing was regular business in Fichter – not particularly well-respected, but not a crime, either. This is why Shahmana couldn't help asking another question:

"Dangerous business, is it?"

"Well, it's pretty profitable if you don't get caught."

"What if you do?"

The Hero Maiden was looking for a fence, and had reasons to be curious, so the Runt replied honestly:

"Fichter has harsh laws."

"Just how harsh?"

"There are lots of well-heeled merchants here, and they all want to live in safety. Apart from that, a bad reputation has an adverse effect on trade." Cardin held a pause. "The guards are people, too, and they have to eat, just like anybody else, so there's always room for arrangements of some sort."

"So the guards turn a blind eye?"

"They often do." The Runt didn't hide anything from Shahmana. "But times are harder now than they once were. After the murder of Invariat Convivial, our Emperor, may he sleep through his entire life joyfully, sent a new Prosecutor. He hasn't got much power here – less than in the domains of the lords, anyway, but he does demand results from the guards. And what's a result to them? I am."

"Aren't you afraid of discussing such things with me?"

"Well, you didn't go looking for honest merchants," Cardin snorted. "That means you've got your own trouble with the law."

"What if I'm only pretending to weasel my way into your confidence?"

"Sorry, dear, but one can spot you as a provincial from a couple miles' distance, you

know? The only part you could play would be one of a Hero Maiden from a faraway province..." The lad got pensive all of a sudden. "Hey, have you got any other business in Fichter? Like lifting something from someone? I can do it for a small commission – got kids to feed, you know."

"Kids, you!"

"Never mind my age, I'm a right ladykiller! Think of my offer – you won't manage on your own, take my word for it. Lots of Prime alarm system experts in Fichter these days. You know what they can do? You walk around somebody's house lifting this and that and dumping it into your bag, unaware that the guards were given a signal that someone broke into a residence at such-and-such address. You walk out of the building, and see them standing there with ropes in their hands..." The Runt sighed. "That's how they got Fussy the Quick."

"What did they do to him?" asked Shahmana.

"It's simple enough over here in Fichter – the first time they lay an enormous fine on you. It takes three years to work off the debt. The second time they chop off your hand."

"How about the third time?"

"Few stay in business after the second time they get caught – you need a paw intact to lift stuff, right? But if they catch you doing something else, they chop your head off."

"What about Fussy?"

"It was his second offence."

As they talked, they left the Bridge, crossed the Market Square, and came to a small shop at the very edge of the square. The windows were filthy, the door was crooked, the doorbell rusty, and the lopsided sign that said "Buying and Selling. Your Peka" was long in need of repair.

Fidget suddenly thought that it was the first shop in Fichter whose owner didn't care at all about the way it looked. The doubt was visible on the Hero Maiden's face, and the Runt hastened to explain:

"You'll find Peka the Rotten inside – don't worry, he buys expensive stuff and he's known to be honest at what he does."

"Really?"

"He wouldn't have been working in broad daylight otherwise, and right here in the square, too."

Fidget pondered Cardin's words carefully, decided his reasoning to be sound, and confidently entered the shop.

She instantly realized why Peka was called the Rotten.

The inside of Buying and Selling was long permeated by a strong smell of something spoiled that seemed to have established itself well there, and the first thing to come to Fidget's memory was the shed where they were held by the fanatics.

Are they all in a conspiracy or something?

A moment later, once her sight got used to the darkness of the shop's interior, Shahmana saw its owner – a tall old man who was just as twitchy as the Runt, with a perfectly white but still very bushy mop of hair.

"Do you wish to sell something? Buy something? Trade it, pawn it?"

"Good business," muttered Cardin from behind the Hero Maiden. "An iffy bit o' string, an' not a whistle in the putty ¹."

"There are never any whistles anywhere, according to you," said Peka grumpily. "And

I'm the one who has to deal with the consequences every time."

"Not this time, Rotten, on my word."

Fidget realized that Cardin was doing everything he could to earn his commission and her spirits soared:

"I came to Fichter from Moradia."

"So how's Lord Samuel?"

"You mean, Lord Elliott?"

Peka smiled a friendly smile and tapped his forehead with a bony finger.

"I'm old, I've forgotten many things. And Moradia's a long way off, a week's journey, no less..."

"A month's journey, Peka, it takes a whole month to get here," corrected the Hero Maiden. "And enough of your testing me, I have no time for games."

"What do you have time for, then?"

"Some business. Safe and profitable. And nearly legal."

"If it's legal, why didn't you seek out a reputable jeweler?"

"I don't want any rumors started in Fichter."

"What about?"

It was Shahmana's turn to smile.

"The lord whose name shall remain unmentioned henceforth became the owner of a small collection of Steelmount diamonds."

"Brought them back from a friendly visit as a memento?"

"Inherited them."

"I would like to congratulate the nameless lord with having something so precious come into his hands," said Peka in a heartfelt way. "Steelmount diamonds, large ones, in particular, and well-cut ones above all, are valued very highly in Adornia. Basically, they're the only stones you find only in the north. How large is the collection?"

"I know nothing about it."

"So you just came to talk?"

"Quite right."

"In this case, Cardin found you the kind of person you wanted to talk to."

"And he'll leave right away," said Fidget, handing the promised fee over to the Runt.

"And won't wag his chin too much."

"Cardin's a good boy," muttered Peka. "He knows the rules."

"Think of my offer, dearest Hero Maiden," asked the Runt, suddenly sounding much happier. "If there's anything you need lifted..."

"Scram."

"See you!"

Cardin dashed outside, and Peka the Rotten, whom Shahmana was facing once again, drew an obsequious grimace on his mug:

"Shall we continue?"

The rumors one heard in Fichter, which Carlos was basing his cover story on, turned out to be true. Some of the lords really didn't mind selling their ill-gotten gains to the local fences, like loot from internecine raids or wares carried by a "vanished" caravan. There are the Touched everywhere, after all, and anything can be blamed on the monsters. Once the lords got their hands onto compact objects of great value, they moved

them over to Adornia, thus making certain nothing is ever traced back to them.

"I do hope our conversation will be productive," drawled Fidget.

"As in us performing an actual transaction involving goods?" asked the quick-witted Rotten.

"Got a specimen on you?" he continued in a businesslike manner.

"Of course."

Peka produced a magnifying glass from his drawer.

"Show me."

"There's nothing to look at!"

"We're no idlers," said Carlos gravely. "We're on business."

And he instantly turned away, staring at the independent recruiter's cart that had just rattled down the street: "Time for Prime!"

Time for Prime indeed.

Not everybody is capable of realizing they're hearing the Call of Prime; few will come to a lord and say "Hey, it seems like I'm a prospective Hero." Few will have the decisiveness to take a risk in hopes of resurrecting and becoming different: strong, fast and virtually invulnerable.

So, despite the lords' appeals, many potential Heroes preferred to hide out and avoid the risks. This is where the free recruiters came in. They were experienced dealers and could identify those touched by Prime by their facial expressions, the look in their eyes, what they said in conversation and how they acted, and engaged the likely candidates in long conversations about life and their prospects, plying the hapless recruits with booze if needed, and then offered them a drink of Prime – a risk they had to take in order to become a Hero. The recruiters had good people skills and nearly every candidate they chose ended up taking the cup of Prime to his or her lips, but everybody makes mistakes, and so some unfortunate Dokhts ended up dead in the nearest ditch. If the transformation into a Hero proved successful, the lord whose employ the Hero entered paid the recruiter a special bonus in accordance with a special provision of Imperial law.

"Time for Prime, eh," muttered Carlos, gazing after the wagon.

"What was that about?"

"Oh, just a spell of something..."

Hurricane looked at the young man searchingly, wheezed a little and then asked:

"Are we going to wander through these parts long?"

"As long as we have to. What about it?"

How does one respond to something like that? *What about it?* Nothing! He was just sick of it! He could say that he was sick of it all, of course, but would that be the truth? *Not really*, admitted Heinrich to himself. Spending hours walking the dusty streets of Fichter is by no means an enjoyable pastime, but the Warlord realized they had no other choice and therefore suppressed the nascent irritation. Why did he ask, then? Was he just bored? And how, pray, can you be bored when you expect an attack every minute and see every guard as a potential enemy? Any passerby could be a spy sent by Lady Cobryn, after all. So Heinrich had no opportunity to be bored. But wherefore the question? A silly question, and more fitting for some whiner than him. Was it because he was really tired? Of course not – how could he be tired? It takes more than a mere walk to tire out a true Hero.

The reason must have been that the course of events was completely outside the Hero's

routine, and the circumstances weren't in his favor. Over the long years of Hurricane's service, the armor became an integral part of Heinrich, and he felt out of sorts without the weight of the armor on his shoulders – without his trusted shield and heavy mace and without the feeling of extra power given by the weaponry.

"It just feels too unusual," the Hero finally came up with an answer. "I feel like getting down to some serious business."

"Like bashing someone's head in?" inquired Carlos.

"Well, yeah, for example," the Hero nodded sullenly.

"But you have to know whose head to bash in first, don't you?"

"You're a lord, so it's your business to know."

"Well, I'm in the process of finding out."

"Too boring and takes too long."

"Have patience."

They walked the entire length of Brainy Street twice – from the Rathaus to the northern gate and back again. They browsed the wares of different street vendors, pretending to be comparing prices, stared at the tall fence surrounding Convivial's house, and were about to listen to a savant who claimed to know Invariat well, but the three provincial master craftsmen who shared their wine with the inventor looked at the uninvited guests with such malice that Carlos thought it best to retreat. But he promised himself he would return and spend some time with that man, who was obviously well informed.

By the moment Hurricane started to complain, the young lord had already made his choice, stopping at a mechanic's workshop that displayed a sign that said "Schmulz & Sons. Household and Industrial Machinery."

"Let's choose this one."

"What makes this place better than the others?"

"It's not so much the place as its owner," explained Carlos. "It is information that we're after, not wares, and the esteemed Mr Schmulz strikes me as a suitable candidate: he's hard-working and diligent, but a bit of a chatterbox as well. Just what we need."

"How do you know?"

How do I know? I'm a lord, remember?

Suddenly, Carlos realized that this cheeky answer would have been truthful to a large extent, or even wholly so. Because a true lord needs to be a connoisseur of people, for that is the very basis of his successful, and most importantly, long reign. His poor father and his failure to identify the treachery in Hans served as a prime example.

"The workshop is a wealthy one – the equipment tells us as much, being state-of-the-art and quite costly, and this means Schmulz is hard-working. We can see the machines he assembled himself over yonder, under the canvas, and the way they're made tells us he's diligent. As for his loquaciousness..."

"Yeah! Where did that come from?"

"I have observed how Schmulz behaves with his clientele."

Heinrich shook his head, but refrained from arguing – the lord knew better.

"Do you remember your cover story?"

"My what?"

"Your cover story, Hurricane. Who are you?"

"Your grandfather," said the Warlord in a well-rehearsed tone.

"That's right," nodded Carlos approvingly. "So please behave accordingly. This is your

first time in a big city, so everything worries and upsets you; you're afraid of pickpockets and trust no one. You're afraid I'll get ripped off, and are a bit on the timid side in general."

"I remember, I remember!"

Playing the part of a parochial grandfather struck Heinrich as humiliating from the very start – he even tried to refuse and suggest that he play the part of a brawny bodyguard instead, but Carlos had insisted, and so he was forced to play along.

"Most importantly, Hurricane, you do not butt in. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Don't so much as scratch the back of your head without my command."

"All right."

"Great."

Carlos adjusted the bag that he wore over his shoulder and confidently headed towards the workshop in order to pump a total stranger for information, and a commoner at that.

The young man didn't expect he'd be as calm. He feared he'd be overcome by shyness or confusion and that the uncommon task and environment would make him nervous, but it actually had the opposite effect on him. The realization that he was in charge gave Carlos an indomitable confidence. He felt ready to do anything to play his part – any part at all – perfectly well! He felt he could take anyone in and convince anyone of anything. The young man suddenly realized he was a new and much stronger Carlos now, and he liked this lad much more than the previous version.

He approached Schmulz, who was standing right next to the machines put up for sale, doffed his cap and greeted the mechanic politely:

"Greetings to you, good sire."

Only to be met by a gruff reply:

"I buy nothing, I hire no one. Scram, boy, don't bug me."

Hurricane nearly choked as he heard his impertinence, having forgotten all about the cheap clothing worn by Carlos: *To call the young lord a boy?! Who does he think he is?! Lash the bastard right now!*

However, Carlos did not react to the insult, to the utter astonishment of the Warlord. Moreover, the young man behaved as though he heard what he'd expected to hear. He looked confused, clutched his cap in his hand, and continued timidly:

"It was the furthest from my mind to interfere with the work of as eminent a master craftsman as you, Mr. Schmulz, sir. We aren't from over here, we've come to the glorious city of Fichter from a faraway land, but even in our parts they speak of your machines with respect. If it's a Schmulz logo that a machine has, it's likely to work for a hundred years and twice again as long."

"That's true." A broad smile cracked the mechanic's face.

The flattery may have seemed coarse, but the young man's estimate was correct – the craftsman was eating it up with a ladle.

"Judging by your clothes, you've really come a long way."

"We have been walking the roads of the great Imperium for four long months, with many an ordeal on our way that few ever experience."

"Okay, okay, I get it," the honest Schmulz decided to thank the strangers for their kind words and offered Carlos a copper coin. "Take it and get on your way."

"Thank you, good sire, but my business has got nothing to do with that." The young

man shook his head. "We came to Fichter with a purpose – not to ask for handouts. We've got some money..."

"A purpose?" The mechanic squinted.

"It's just that I can't speak like the cityfolk, so you've mistaken me for a beggar, good sire."

"What is it that you're after, then?" inquired Schmulz, returning the coin to his pocket. "And you do have this... rather meandrous way of speaking. We don't talk like that over here."

"I'm sorry, good sire," Carlos bowed again.

"Oh, get on with it, do away with your apologies. Don't be shy, take it easy."

"We've heard of a great craftsman who lives in the glorious city of Fichter, one Invariat, also known as Convivial..."

"What's your business with him?"

"My name is Rowel Roth, I'm a gifted young savant," said Carlos with true-blue provincial pomposity. "And this here is my mute grandpa Bushel, my only surviving kin after the death of my parents in a winter of withering frost."

"Your gramps sure looks tough," said Schmulz, studying Heinrich's muscles with respect.

"That's what everyone says," the young man smiled. "Few brigands could handle Grandpa Bushel. He can beat anyone to a pulp with his walking stick."

"Yeah, he has that look about him," nodded the mechanic. "So why did you come to Fichter, anyway?"

"We came to Fichter so that I could become an apprentice of the great Invariat, so that my education, paid for in silver, would not just go to waste."

"Education?" Schmulz coughed in astonishment. "Where did you say you were from?"

"From the good city of Bumblecluck, a cold one though it might be, in the sweet and prosperous land of Whooshdia."

"Come again?"

Geography was unlikely to be among the mechanic's favorite sciences. However, if one recollected Acacius, one might come to the conclusion it was a common affliction among their ilk. However, there was another reason why the young man thought of Acacius – his earlier talks with Benefit trained the young lord in the usage of the right kind of words and expressions.

"Whooshdia is almost right in the very mountains," said Carlos immediately. "If you take the Imperial Highway from the capital, for example – not the one that leads into the Forest, to the west, but rather the Northern Imperial Highway, the one that goes into the mountains, you'll have to turn east in two weeks..."

"Spare me the details. I get it, you're from some backwater place in the mountains."

"We have even got a university in Bumblecluck, good sire," said Carlos proudly. "They teach you three different sciences there, no less – weightlifting, endurance racing, and glorifying His Imperial Majesty."

"What about the sciences?" Schmulz didn't quite get it.

"Three of them, just like I said – weightlifting, endurance racing, and glorifying His Imperial Majesty," explained the young man. "Three sciences free of charge. We even had a visit from Lord Phursemidius himself, the Imperial Overseer of Upbringing and Education, and he found the knowledge demonstrated by Bumblecluck students more

than satisfactory.”

The last words were drowned out by the loud guffawing, which the mechanic couldn’t hold back.

“Three sciences,” he moaned through the tears. “Three sciences, no less.”

“Lord Phursenidius believes that to be more than sufficient,” reported Carlos. “And Lord Phursenidius is the brother of the very Phursenidius who organizes fistfights and every other sort of entertainment for the Emperor himself, so his word is good as gold.”

“I understand.” Schmulz was oinking rather than speaking in his desperate attempts to get a grip on himself. “I have nothing but the deepest respect for Lord Phursenidius’ diligent endeavors in the field of Imperial education.” The mechanic finally managed to catch his breath and asked: “So what brought you to Fichter?”

“I want to become an apprentice of Invariat Convivial.”

“With your weightlifting diploma?”

“I’ve got a great diploma – it’s on goatskin parchment, and Grandpa Bushel made a wooden case for it, too.”

“Amazing!”

Schmulz sat down on a bench, packed his pipe and smiled.

To think I wanted to chase these oafs away! Holy cogwheels, who could have thought they’d tell me all that? Haven’t laughed as hard in two years!

But he said something else aloud.

“Didn’t you know that Invariat was dead?”

“Dead?” Carlos feigned astonishment perfectly. “When?”

“It’s been two months now,” replied Schmulz, happy to have found a grateful listener to share his dated news with.

“I don’t believe it.”

“He didn’t just die, either – no, he was murdered,” the mechanic carried on. He lit his pipe and said grandly: “And the murderer was none other but his own apprentice.”

“Crikey!”

“I’m telling you the very truth, my young and talented lad – he got murdered! And the murderer ran away from Fichter. Glassblower was his name, he worked with Invariat for some ten years... And now they say Glassblower got killed, too...” Schmulz gave Carlos, who’d sat down nearby, a searching look. “Get it?”

“Yes,” the young lord nodded. “I mean, no.”

The young man’s lack of due acumen was an even greater delight to the mechanic than the flattery.

What would you expect from a backwater lad... Schmulz bent towards the young man and spoke in a low voice: “People say it wasn’t even Glassblower who killed Invariat, but rather someone else.”

“Who?” asked Carlos with the look of someone dying from curiosity.

“Your guess would be as good as mine,” the mechanic sighed. “There’s serious politics involved, son – this is Fichter, after all, not your Bumblefluck.”

“Bumblecluck.”

“Whatever. Your head would spin at the very thought of the interests that all converge in our city.” Like nearly every other man of a certain age, Schmulz doted on talks about global issues that involved the entire Imperium. “Invariat was no mere savant, either – to think that someone of his caliber would just sit here...”

“What sort of caliber?”

“The greatest. So he wouldn’t so much as let you cross his doorstep with that weightlifting diploma of yours, get it?”

“Well, we’d see about that...” However, Carlos didn’t argue, seeing that the mechanic was ready for a long rant, and listened with the utmost attention.

“My dear provincial friend, things aren’t as easy as they seem at first. People are saying there was high treason festering in Fichter.”

“High treason? Where would that come from?”

“Adornia, of course. They’re a stone’s throw away, right across the river, and you see these multicolor scallywags prance around like parrots or some such. I’m not a great fan, to tell you the truth, but business is business. But people are saying Invariat was in cahoots with the Keepers and even intended to disperse with the power of the Emperor, get it?”

“He’s a savant,” Carlos squinted in disbelief. “Why would he do it?”

“Savants are people, too, and they want their piece of the pie just like everybody else. I’ve been living on Brainy Street since it was built and I’ve seen many things... Do you know how they steal ideas from each other? Local swindlers are hopelessly outclassed – there’s spying, eavesdropping, notebook-stealing and what have you. They must learn all that stuff in their academies...” Schmulz puffed on his pipe. “But the treason must have been true, because right after the murder of Invariat, whammo, the old imperial Prosecutor gets called back to the capital – to give a report, they say. Another one came running to take his place, and accompanied by a Hero to boot. So things are far from easy, very far... This is no Fumbletruck.”

“Bumblecluck.”

“Whatever.” The mechanic made a dismissive gesture. “People are also saying that Invariat wanted to kill Lady Cobryn.”

“No way!”

“Why not? She’s the one responsible for guarding the border before the Emperor – she’s the guardian of this country, isn’t she? Cobrians aren’t the most pleasant folks in the world, but they know their stuff – they keep the Adornians at bay, and maintain order around Fichter in general. So Invariat must really have hated those valiant deeds of theirs.”

“Why?”

“Because he hated his motherland, bumpkin, get it? That’s the way the mop flops. So when Invariat got killed, his house was searched by the Cobrians, and no mere guards or border patrolmen, either – it was the Black Eagles, Lady Cobryn’s personal guards, get it? They went through all his effects and then locked up the house, so it still stands there untouched.”

“Were they looking for treason?”

“Of course they were – proof of treason, that is, not treason itself,” Schmulz harrumphed. The conversation was approaching its natural end. The mechanic emptied out his pipe, scratched his beard and said in a friendly manner: “You’re a bright lad, as I can see.”

“Thank you for your kind words, good sire,” said a confused Carlos.

“I’ve been thinking now... You’ve had no luck with Invariat, but maybe you’d like to become my apprentice?”

“Are you serious?” the young man looked at Schmulz puzzled. “Without any references?”

“Well, you’ve got a diploma, haven’t you?”

“Indeed, on goatskin parchment!”

“Are you a good racer?”

“First in my year!”

“That’s good, you’ll need to be a good runner.” Schmulz lowered his voice again. “I don’t offer apprenticeship to just anyone, my bumpkin friend – you’ll be hired for a trial period first so that I could get to know you better, take a closer look at you, as it were.”

“What’s a trial period?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I invented an amazing machine, one of a kind and necessary in every household, even if it’s a castle. It is called the Schmulz Double-Action Prime-Powered Mouse and Rodent Trap, get it? Double action, with a Prime drive that boosts its characteristics by a factor of six! Who could resist that?”

“Uh...”

“This is where your diploma comes in – you’ll go from door to door and offer my amazing invention to people. It’s pretty inexpensive, but I’m a generous man, and will pay you five copper coins for every machine you sell.”

“Wow, five coppers? For real?”

“Absolutely!”

“And I’ll be able to learn from you?”

The craftsman’s generosity didn’t stretch that far, but he didn’t want to crush the young man’s hopes.

“In the evenings. If you feel like it. We’ll find a place for your gramps, we could use him around the household. Good thing he’s mute, too, I’m not too keen on talkers.” Schmulz clapped Carlos on the shoulder. “How about it, eh?”

“Wow, I can’t believe it,” said the young man in an awed voice. “I’ve only been in Fichter for a day, and I’m already offered an apprenticeship by a master craftsman whose name is known all across the Imperium!”

“Catch your luck by the tail, son.”

“I’ll do my best,” promised Carlos, rising from the bench. “We’ve left our belongings at the inn, can we move them here?”

“Of course,” the mechanic agreed. “I have a free room in one of the wings, you can rent it from me, I won’t rip you off.”

“Great!” Carlos bowed. “We won’t take long!”

And he marched off down the street.

“Have you found out much?” inquired Hurricane sardonically.

“Only that Invariat was killed elsewhere.”

“Whatever gave you the idea?” Heinrich nearly choked. “Schmulz didn’t utter a single word to that effect.”

“That’s the very thing – no details. Therefore, the locals were merely shown the body.”

“Rubbish. That’s just what you want to believe.”

“Could be, could be... The other piece of information is that Lady Cobryn traffics with the Adornians.”

“Read her thoughts, have you?”

“This is based on the assumption that Lady Cobryn killed Invariat and accused him of

her own sins.”

“Why would she say anything about it in the first place?”

“Absolute secrecy is impossible – people see things, get ideas, come to conclusions, and spread rumors. I’ve no idea why Lady Cobryn decided to get rid of Invariat, but she used his death to shift the suspicion elsewhere.”

* * *

“At last!”

Even though Acacius was in a great hurry, he couldn’t get over his revulsion, so as soon as he got into Invariat’s mansion, he headed for the storage room where he got a clean set of clothes and some shoes – the stench from the trousers that had travelled through the gutter made his head spin and made concentrating impossible. If Acacius had had more time, he would have had a wash, too – the Prime pumps served the empty house with water from the well diligently, but the savant decided to resist the temptation after some hesitation.

“I’ll wash at the inn.”

Benefit dumped his dirty clothes next to the chest and proceeded to raid the pantry, where he found a few crackers; he returned to the ground floor hall munching on those.

The previous owner of the mansion lived a secluded life – his cook and his apprentice were the people Invariat spent most of his time with. Now the owner and the apprentice, charged with the murder of the former, were dead, and the cook must have found a different employer. Should no heirs turn up within the next year, the house will be auctioned off, the large and shapely house, with dozens of discoveries made inside it.

“But I’ll poke around in here before I do anything else.”

Having muttered these words, Acacius ascended to the first floor and confidently entered Convivial’s study, a large and well-lit room full of bookcases and uncanny contraptions, most of which were made by Invariat himself. The Cobrians who had conducted the search paid the most attention to the study, likewise the most valuable books; the rest of them lay scattered about on the floor, reminding Acacius of abandoned children.

“I do hope the next owner realizes their value.”

Benefit couldn’t help himself – he picked up a few books and placed them on the shelves. He started to reach for the next batch, but realized there was no time to clean up. He sighed: “Sorry about that...” He stopped at the centre of the room and looked around him searchingly.

“I do hope you haven’t found anything, mates,” said the savant in a singsong voice, addressing the absent Cobrians.

Even if they did find that special something, they are unlikely to have realized what they held in their hands – they probably examined it from every angle and dropped it, the way they did with the majority of the books.

The item for whose sake Acacius broke into Convivial’s mansion looked perfectly ordinary and mundane, and was kept right in the open – on a shelf next to the desk. Nobody who’d been aware of its true value participated in the search, which gave one hope that the object in question was still inside the house.

“The question is – where did you chuck the bloody thing after you’d examined it and pronounced it useless?”

The desk was gutted with gusto – there were empty drawers scattered around it, but not a single paper. Everything written by Invariatic, including the most inconspicuous scribbles, were taken away by the Cobrians. All the trinkets that had once adorned the walls and the shelves of the study were scattered all over the place. Some of them were crushed by Cobryan boots, others ended up halfway across the room from where they'd once stood – Acacius discovered two of the figurines as far away as the corridor, but the main trinket, the one that he had been after in the first place, was hiding underneath an overturned drawer.

“Hooray!”

The trinket in question was a small Adornian mask – palm-sized, carved out of wood and garishly colored. A souvenir of the most mundane sort designed to be bought by Dokht provincials winding up in Fichter. The mask was adorned by four large pieces of glass that represented gems, and the cheapest feathers available – those of the Adornian pigeon; therefore, it didn't attract any attention on the part of the Cobrians. Having made certain there were no secret hiding places in the mask, they threw the trinket away, without so much as a hint that they were holding one of the best-kept secrets of the late great Convivial.

Not your fault, mates, that was the plan.

Acacius inspected the mask. Having made sure that the hard wood wasn't damaged, he removed the feathers, wrapped the object in a clean piece of cloth and hid it in his bag.

All set to leave... He froze as he heard the barely audible sound of an opening door. I'm such a total idiot!

He underestimated Lady Cobryn, who had given orders to install a state-of-the-art security system in the house – she must have been really curious about the identity of whoever would attempt to enter the empty mansion.

Shit! Benefit ran out of the study and towards the ladder to the attic.

The guards, who sprouted up from under the earth – literally – instantly surrounded Invariatic's mansion and cordoned off Brainy Street while they were at it. They demonstrated excellent teamwork and turned out to be a great deal faster than their Grydian counterparts. Only a second ago Brainy Street was lazily digesting another day in the anticipation of the approaching evening. Shop owners started to gather in groups, lighting their pipes and producing jugs of wine. Shopkeepers were taking their time removing the devices put up on exhibit, and the only ones who hurried were the last shoppers who suddenly realized that Brainy Street shops usually shut down for the night.

Life went on as usual – the savant next to Invariatic's house finally parted ways with his provincial guests, Carlos grabbed a jug of wine they'd bought in advance, gave the snoozing Hurricane a push, and was about to start a conversation when the entire street filled up with guards. They came from every alley and cul-de-sac, quickly cordoned the street off, pushing the people in the street rudely and giving no explanations other than:

“Don't scatter! Don't panic! Anyone who tries to escape will be declared a criminal!” The booming voice of the sergeant, who climbed one of the carts, could be heard by everyone, and the crossbowmen who stood right next to him confirmed it grimly: “That's right!” So anyone who'd try to run would get a crossbow bolt between the shoulder blades.

“What's happening?” enquired a flabbergasted Carlos.

“Someone's broken into Invariatic's place again,” a shop assistant who was glumly

hugging the wall nearby told them. "There's a nationwide rumor that Invariat hid enormous treasures somewhere in his house, so they keep breaking in. And the likes of us have to suffer."

"Not the first time, I take it?"

"Someone tries to break in every week. The locals all know that there's a Prime security system installed there, so it must be someone from abroad. They set up roadblocks in order to get all the accomplices."

"Right on..." Carlos glanced at Heinrich, who looked ready for a fight, and gave him a barely noticeable wink. "When will they let us out?"

"In about thirty minutes."

The prospect of spending the next half hour surrounded by the guards didn't encourage the young man much, but there was no way out – they couldn't fight this crowd, after all. Getting away sneakily was a non-option as well – he wasn't a local, and knew nothing of secret passageways.

"We wait," whispered Carlos to Hurricane.

"Wait for what?"

"Wait for them to release us."

"What if they don't?"

"You heard the man – these raids are a commonplace affair. So they've got to release us."

"Anything can happen..."

And happen it did.

Carlos didn't notice the Faceless Hero wearing Cobryan colors right away, since he got distracted by the noise made by some drunkard at the corner, and when he did, the Faceless One was already close, observing the crowd closely from his horse.

"Damn."

They had to get away.

But it was too late, too late, too late...

Carlos froze, unable to move or take his eyes off the terrifying Hero whose face was hidden behind a mask.

"Damn..."

They say no one has ever seen what the eyes of the Faceless Ones look like – unless it was right before death, when one of these merciless Heroes approached the victim to enjoy watching the last of the unfortunate's life bleed away. They also say that the mask is what hides the eyes from everyone, but Carlos could have sworn there wasn't a grain of truth in such idle ruminations. Because that very moment his eyes met the gaze of the Faceless One and he saw recognition in the Hero's eyes.

"Murderer!"

And time freezes, for no mere human can track every movement of a lightning-fast Hero, and the next couple of seconds strike Carlos as a series of twisted freeze-frames.

The dagger of the Faceless One flies towards the young man's chest. Not a special throwing dagger – the regular variety, if somewhat on the longish side, a dagger that is easy to use in battle but silly to throw at the enemy. Carlos sees every feature of the dagger and realizes he'll die in a second. But he isn't afraid – there isn't enough time for him to become afraid, because...

Hurricane strikes the Faceless One in the thigh – with his own dagger, the longish one

that is such a pleasure to use in battle. So Heinrich uses it well. He grabs the dagger from the air and gives the enemy a horrible wound. Blood splashes, the Faceless One appears to be screaming in pain, but his sword is unsheathed, and Hurricane...

Two of the guards are already dead and a hatchet seems to have materialized in Heinrich's left hand from out of nowhere, but the Hero's shoulders are pierced by crossbow bolts, and the red splotches on his shoulders keep growing. The Faceless One hides behind his horse, trying to hold the gaping wound shut with his hand.

"Carlos! Get away!"

The horse!

And the young man realizes that no more than three seconds have passed since the beginning of the battle, possibly less.

"Get away!!!"

The Faceless One isn't fighting – only the guards, which means victory is theirs – even wounded, unarmed and without any armor, Hurricane can kill at least three dozen mere mortals. People scatter, some of the guards' bodies have fallen into dust, the crossbowmen are already dead and the sergeant is trying to fight back with his sword... The Warlord kills, becoming stronger, Prime feeds his body, calls him into battle and urges him to kill.

"We're winning!"

But Heinrich sees more than one Hero and repeats for the third time:

"Get away!!!"

Next picture: the [Lightning Master](#) in Imperial livery. He attacked Hurricane from the flank, but the Warlord manages to turn around and meet the foe face to face. And even manages to parry the first blow. But the dagger breaks with a crack, and the hatchet is too slow to meet the blow. Three bolts pierce the Warlord's unprotected back. "Hurricane..." whispers Carlos soundlessly. The limping Faceless One emerges from behind a horse and thrusts his sword into Heinrich's side. The latter has no armor, so about a third of the sword's length plunges right into the Hero's body.

"Stop!"

Carlos has to get away, but he cannot. He watches Hurricane die and he cannot leave. Or doesn't want to – he's a lord, after all, and the tears in his eyes change nothing about the fact that he is still a lord, and the man about to die is one of his men. So Carlos stays.

"No!!!"

The Lightning Master's hammer thuds into the Warlord's head, and the Hero turns to face the young man. Hurricane's massive body slides to the ground behind his back.

"This is the end..."

* * *

"We're closing! Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I'll show you where the hell I am going, you swine!" Scowl's roar was so terrible that the guard nearly plopped down in fear. "Don't you see the Imperial document, you scum?!"

The unfortunate guard didn't instantly recognize the Cobryan Hero (for that's who was making a noise at Fichter's gate, in his grubby clothes) and was now wondering whether he would survive the encounter.

"Sorry, Your Excellency, I hadn't noticed who you were... You get all sorts here..." The guard opened the gate with shaky hands and stood at attention. "Pray come in, Sir Hero,

Your Excellency... Welcome to Fichter, welcome... You are most welcome here..."

"Shut your trap."

Scowl gave Fichter another exceptionally ugly look and turned to Lachard again, who could barely hold up in the saddle.

"Hold on, mate, just a little left..."

"I'm fine..."

"So I see."

The exhausted Marcus started to fall off the horse in the morning, and the belts used by Tom to hold his companion in saddle stopped working by the evening of the same day - Lachard was completely exhausted, and the Eraser had to support him with his arm.

"We must go to the Rathaus... to the Citadel... call the guards... call some of our men..."

"Yes, yes, of course."

Nevertheless, Marcus' spirit made such an impression on Scowl that he automatically started to call Lachard "mate", a word he used exclusively in conversations with fellow Heroes.

"Where... are you taking me?"

Lachard felt horrible and everything swam before his eyes, but he realized they were in Fichter at last and was now trying to find out where they were headed.

"To a healer."

"What for? I said the Rathaus..."

"He'll patch you up, mate, and I'll find our men in the meantime."

"My duty... the guards..."

"Your main duty right now is to get fixed up, mate. You're of little use the way you are."

Lachard muttered something and slumped to the side again. Another blackout, by the looks of it.

"Hold on, mate, hold on," Tom chuckled, but in a good-natured way, the way he would chuckle at a good friend who'd proven his courage. "We'll get there soon."

Scowl knew the way to Bonesetter Street, where the residence of the healer Mechal stood, quite well, since he often had to bring his wounded companions here, mortals and Heroes alike, and so the gathering twilight did not affect his sense of direction in the least - Tom rode confidently. He dismounted at the gate, unfastened the belts, put the unconscious Lachard over his shoulder and knocked.

"Who's there?"

"Is the owner home?"

"Who's asking?"

"Scowl."

Mechal's servants knew the name of every Hero in Lady Cobryn's service, and so the door opened at once.

"Do you need any assistance?"

"I'll manage," grunted Tom, proceeding towards the small garden.

The healer was already hurrying to meet him.

"What happened? A wound? Some illness?"

"Three days in saddle, non-stop."

"Exhaustion, then..." Mechal automatically struck a well-rehearsed pose, "The Great Healer Thoughtfully Examines the Sufferer", but then remembered how the Cobrians

hated theatrics and switched to a more businesslike tone: "It's gonna take me about two days."

"Lachard must be back on his feet in a couple of hours," said Tom authoritatively.

"But..."

"This isn't a discussion."

"Modern medical science..."

"Mechal, give me none of that. Call your friend the Adornian shaman, pool your collective resources, roll up your sleeves and get to work." Scowl gave the healer a heavy purse full of coins. "And don't irritate me."

"The furthest thing from my mind," Mechal grinned in delight, weighing the bag he'd just received in his hand. "We'll do everything we can."

* * *

"Did everything go as planned?"

"Yes!!! By the Prime inductor, everything went off without a hitch! I did it! I managed it! Hooray for me!"

Only now, upon having completed the errand for Carlos and gone to the inn, did Shahmana admit to herself that, yes, she was in fact uneasy... Uneasy, hell – nervous like you wouldn't believe! She had a reason, too – complying with the order required a real effort. She wasn't sent to the Forest to fight the Touched or the borders of her liege's domain to sort things out with another lord's heroes, or do anything else related to combat. Carlos entrusted her with a most delicate matter, one that required cunning, skill and artistic abilities, and she, Shahmana Fidget, has managed to do everything required of her perfectly well! She'd found the necessary contacts, conducted the negotiations well and brought them to a desirable conclusion. And this victory, one that involved no battles or battlefields, made Shahmana proud.

"I did it!"

The deal with Peka the Rotten was a success. Fidget didn't merely sell one of the diamonds to the fence (the rest of them remained sewn into her belt), but also managed to charge him a hundred silver pieces more than Carlos had expected to get. And that wasn't the half of it! Having received the money, Shahmana started to talk about Prime, and Peka, after a quarter hour of hemming and hawing, admitted that he could procure crystals of concentrated Prime for Fidget. Since this particular item was sold rather rarely, even by black marketers (the lords weren't allowed to sell crystals), the fence named an exorbitant price, but the total cost of the diamonds covered it, and the resurrection of Archibald and Crossbow was beginning to look feasible.

"I'll see you soon, boys, I'll see you soon!"

Fidget was so exhilarated she started to whistle one of the melodies played by wandering entertainers at fairs, quite out of tune, and even kept time by clapping her hip with her hand as though she were playing a drum or a tambourine. Life seemed great, and the future started to take on distinct rosy hues. As she was riding through the gates of Fire & Ice, Shahmana was already past the whistling stage and started singing bawdy ditties in a low voice, surprising the young groom – the Heroes rarely demonstrated such frivolity around mere mortals.

"Unsaddle 'em, groom 'em and feed 'em," said Fidget, dismounting adroitly.

The groom eyed the three horses over and asked:

“Is Your Ladyship staying for the night?”

“My ladyship is staying for as long as she likes.”

She tossed three copper coins to the boy.

“I’ll do my best, ma’am!”

“I have no doubts about that.”

Shahmana entered the main hall, stood by the doors for a while, examining the commoners drinking at coarse tables and listening to the lewd jokes they made about the ubiquitous wenches, and pursed her lips, opining that Acacius’ choice was as sordid as she’d expected. She didn’t spot either Hurricane or Carlos and took a place at a corner table.

“What does Her Dauntless Grace the Hero Maiden desire?”

The waiter was of the kind one would expect to find in an inn of this sort – a chubby round-faced fellow who sounded like a peasant, with oily eyes and fingers like sausages, hardly a charming fellow by any account.

“Do I smell roast boar?”

The smell of roast meat has been violating Shahmana’s nostrils from the very moment she entered the inn.

“A roast boar it surely is,” confirmed Roundface.

“A generous helping of hindquarter and a mug of beer.”

“Coming right up!”

“Beer first!”

“Coming right up, ma’am!”

The waiter rushed off and Fidget smiled broadly, having established that nobody was watching her first. She didn’t care much about the coarseness of the inn – the young woman was certainly enjoying herself.

Shahmana didn’t find the hardships of travelling through the Forest all that grueling, but that didn’t mean she enjoyed life in the saddle. She was a Hero Maiden and accustomed to all sorts of privations, but being accustomed to something is a far cry from liking it, and Fidget never missed a chance to spend a night in the castle, sleeping on the bed and not near an open fire, to have a decent filling meal instead of wolfing down jerky and biscuits or to drink beer instead of water from a nearby creek. Therefore, Shahmana was smiling, having reached the inn and looking forward to a well-deserved rest.

“Your beer, ma’am.” The waiter turned out to be incredibly nimble.

“Uh-huh.”

“And your hindquarter roast.”

Against her expectations, the food served in the inn was good. The beer was fresh, fragrant, and had just the right density. The thick slice of hindquarter roast was well done, the gravy had a delightful smell of garlic, and the side dish of pea pudding was just as aromatic – apparently, it contained some spices.

“More beer,” ordered Shahmana after downing her mug in a single gulp.

“In a minute, ma’am.”

It took the waiter even less than a minute to get a refill, so he got a copper coin for his efforts and Fidget started her meal, taking her time and enjoying every bite, as though she felt that she wouldn’t be able to finish her meal in the stellar mood that she’d been in since the encounter with Peka.

And that’s how it happened. As Shahmana was finishing her roast pork, Acacius joined

her table.

“Enjoy your meal.”

“What do you want?”

Fidget had grown tired of the talkative runt during their travels, so she didn’t greet him too politely.

“I came to warn you.”

“Warn me about what?”

Benefit bent over the table and whispered conspiratorially:

“Your friends are in trouble.”

It sounded important.

“Something serious?”

“Very.”

Fidget put her spoon away, took a swig of beer and told Acacius to continue, tapping the table with the hilt of her knife and realizing perfectly well that Acacius wouldn’t joke about such matters.

“I’ve been to Brainy Street today,” said the savant, still whispering. “Been visiting an old friend, testing the ground for the Primobile project – without divulging any details, of course, you know how those folks are...”

“Get on with it!”

The exclamation wasn’t loud, but intimidating enough for Acacius to give out a short yelp and instantly spill the beans.

“Your friends have been arrested by the guards.”

Shahmana suddenly felt a deathly chill.

Your friends have been arrested. The plan has fallen through. Carlos is in jail, and the only way out led through the gallows.

“You’re lying,” roared Fidget.

“The Cobryan Hero recognized Carlos, the masked one. Hurricane fought back, but...” Acacius twitched his shoulder clumsily. “Anyway, they killed Hurricane and took Carlos to jail.”

“Is he wounded?” asked Shahmana in a hollow voice, taking another swig of beer.

Beer that tasted disgusting, sour and bitter.

When did they manage to swap my mug for this swill?

“No, Carlos is all right. They roughed him up a bit, but nothing serious there. However, Hurricane...”

Fidget asked the next question almost instantly, and it sounded very harshly:

“Did you turn them in?”

Benefit did not look away, nor did Shahmana see any fear in his eyes.

“No.”

Could he be lying? Very unlikely. Had Acacius been a traitor, he wouldn’t have gone to Fire & Ice all by himself – he would have sent the guards, or Heroes. Acacius wouldn’t be able to handle the Hero Maiden alone, and reporting the arrest in order to draw her attention elsewhere didn’t make much sense. Therefore, he was telling the truth.

“How did it happen?”

“There was a raid – the guards were trying to catch some thief, and Carlos and Hurricane ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time.” The savant sighed heavily.
“I’m sorry.”

Sorry? What does being sorry have to do with anything here? You can be sorry about a broken cup, or for a horse that starts limping, you can be sorry about having spent all your money on drink the next morning, but to feel sorry about the arrest of a friend and the death of Hurricane was total and utter crap.

"Thanks for warning me," said Shahмана in an even voice, putting away the beer, which suddenly started to taste terrible.

"I owe you one."

"What does it matter now?"

Hurricane has joined Rusty Moustache and Crossbow, the Cobrians have Carlos, and she's all alone, with no understanding of what to do next. Her lord was no longer by her side.

"I think your best option is to flee," said Benefit in a low voice, looking at the Hero Maiden searchingly.

To flee? Not a bad idea... To leave Fichter before Carlos tells the torturers where the last member of the team is to be found, to head further north and find employment with some lord. Heroes are always in short supply, and any lord would be overjoyed to have an experienced Fire Fox in his service. And no guilt, since everything had gone to hell in a hand basket, anyway.

A good idea, but...

"I can't," Shahмана shook her head.

"Why?" asked Benefit with unfeigned interest.

"Carlos is my lord. He is innocent, and it is my duty to help him."

Her brain screamed: *Don't be silly!* And yet her lips were whispering the words, and the madly beating heart confirmed it: *You're right, Carlos is your lord, and you have got to help him.*

"How?"

Fidget's first idea was a good fight. She was coming out of her stupor, and felt a rising surge of rage and thirst for blood, a customary desire to solve the problem by force, chop the guards into a salad and get Carlos out of prison. It was extremely difficult to let go of that thought, but Shahмана managed to get a grip on herself. She gripped the hilt of her knife so hard her knuckles went white, clenched her teeth, wheezed heavily for about a minute, still looking at the bowl with the remnants of the pudding, and eventually said sombrely:

"A new Imperial Prosecutor came to Fichter, and the locals consider him an honest man. I shall go to him and present my testimony. I saw Lord Dathos killed by Lachard. I am a witness."

Acacius understood the Hero Maiden's inner struggle that had preceded her decision perfectly well, and there was heartfelt respect in his eyes.

"You're really something." However, he advised against the young woman's suggestion: "Fichter is a free town, and the Prosecutor does not have as much power here as he may have had elsewhere. On the other hand, the locals are very fond of Lady Cobryn, so if she says Carlos is guilty... and she will say it, trust me... nobody's going to argue with her. And you'll be called an accomplice, not a witness."

Will it really be like that? Shahмана thought hard of what Benefit had just told her, recollecting everything she knew about the Cobrians, and had to admit that Acacius was indeed describing the most likely scenario.

But that changed nothing.

"I heard you, Acacius. Now scram."

He also had heard everything and warned her:

"You won't manage on your own."

"I can't help it, Acacius, my friends..."

It was only then that Acacius realized.

"Carlos has got your catalysts!"

"Don't shout." Fidget gave Benefit an evil eye and paused for a moment, and then confirmed: "Yes, Carlos does in fact have our catalysts. I could make another one for myself, but Hurricane, Rusty Moustache and Crossbow are in deep trouble. If I don't get our lord out of jail, my friends won't return."

Which meant they wouldn't resurrect and would be gone forever. So there were four lives at stake and not just one, and Shahmana understood perfectly well that if she did nothing to help, she'd never be able to live with herself, no matter where she goes, east or west.

Amazing, muttered Acacius in the meantime. It's really quite amazing... I couldn't even have hoped for something like that...

"Why don't you go and mutter elsewhere? I've got some thinking to do," suggested a glum Fidget.

"Thinking of what? A happier way of dying?"

"None of your business."

"Didn't I tell you that you can't do it on your own?"

The Hero Maiden squinted:

"Are you offering help?"

Just look at this shrimp, will you! He's worth nothing at all in battle, and yet... The very next moment Shahmana remembered that Acacius was a savant. Could he make some sort of a machine to be used in battle, I wonder?

"I'd like to offer you a deal," said Benefit with confidence.

"Me personally?"

"Your lord, really. But seeing as how he's otherwise engaged at the moment, I'll have to negotiate with you."

"What's the deal?"

"I'll help you break Carlos out."

Savant or not, he can't do anything against all the guards that Fichter has.

"I must be bonkers," Shahmana grinned an evil grin. "That's that, Acacius, get it over with."

"I am no fighter, this much is true." Benefit didn't argue. He appeared to have read Fidget's mind. "But I am a savant and I have a few tricks up my sleeve that can be of use in this case. Moreover, I lived in Fichter for a while, and had all sorts of adventures here..."

"So you've been to the local prison," the Hero Maiden finally understood.

"I got a week for disorderly conduct and a fine of five silver pieces." The savant's eyes fell and he looked embarrassed. "I can get a little rowdy when I've had a few."

"Don't make me laugh."

"The furthest thing from my mind. I only look feeble, yet there's a flame that burns true inside me, and woe be unto those who dare to interrupt Acacius Benefit..."

"I get it, I get it." Fidget lifted her hands in the air. Since the savant promised help, she

decided not to tell him to shut up. “Let’s assume you can get Carlos out of the clink. What do you want in return?”

“I have a proposal for an intelligent lord and four Heroes,” said Benefit in a low and very serious voice. “It concerns Lady Cobryn, which makes me think Carlos would be eager to participate.”

“What exactly do you propose?”

“I’m sorry, Shahmana, but I can tell the details to your lord alone.”

* * *

The free town of Fichter lost a substantial part of its appeal in the night time, transforming from a respectable merchant city into a dangerous settlement brimming with sins, passions and vices. The profits from trade with the Adornians went to one’s head like any liquor, and many successful entrepreneurs enjoyed spending their easy money on all sorts of pleasures, whether legal or not-so-legal. However, the line between “legal” and “not-so-legal” was so thin that it could barely be seen in Fichter at night. Countless taverns and pubs poured rivers of wine into their customers’ throats. Dice and cards fell onto gambling tables to cries of joy and screams of frustration. Smoking dens were packed by those whose favorite form of relaxation was to inhale the intoxicating fumes of impure. Painted prostitutes of both sexes giggled in the street, and the smell of money that could be felt throughout the city in the daytime eventually gave way to the pungent aroma of debauchery.

Obviously enough, footpads crept out onto the streets at dusk and patiently waited for waylaid partygoers in dark alleys and dead ends, but there weren’t as many as one may have thought. Everybody used the services offered by Fichter at night: resellers from faraway provinces that came here quite by chance as well as the local moneybags, who were accustomed to order, which is why the owners of pubs, smoking dens, casinos and brothels reached an agreement with the local organized crime a long time ago, and the syndicated criminals kept the footpads at bay for the most part.

“Disgusting,” muttered the Imperial Prosecutor, observing the guards as they studiously “ignored” the prostitutes gathered underneath a streetlight. “They recognized me, didn’t they? And yet they keep pretending everything’s fine and peachy.”

In gross violation of the Imperial Morality Bill.

Richard Bayle Petersen had been in Fichter for a few weeks now, but the local customs still irritated him, and he just couldn’t get used to it all.

“A free town’s lifestyle,” observed the Hero who was riding next to the Prosecutor philosophically. He was a chunky Lightning Master wearing the Imperial livery. “There are lots of prostitutes in the capital, too.”

“Over there people at least take the trouble of maintaining appearances.”

“Are you content with that?”

“With the fact that the guards from the capital merely pretend to be fighting vices?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“The hell I am,” said Petersen gruffly and pursed his lips.

He’d never been content with unlawful acts, and, unlike the Fichter guards, he never turned a blind eye. He served the law with a fanatic’s zeal and exposed criminals regardless of their origins, which made him extremely unpopular in the Emperor’s court, rife as it was with corruption. There had been three attempts on Prosecutor Petersen’s life,

and the fact that the third one fell through was nothing short of a miracle. The Imperial Chancellery received anonymous letters seeking to implicate Petersen every week, and people who testified against him were of high enough rank to destroy any other career, but... Richard enjoyed the Emperor's personal protection: Paul believed him to be the best dog in his hunting pack, and for good reason, too, so he paid no attention to anything said by the Prosecutor's enemies. In return, Petersen had to tackle the hardest cases. For instance, he could be told to go all the way to Fichter in hope of discovering the true reason behind Invariat Convivial's murder. Gryd, who was arrested on Brainy Street, struck Richard Bayle as the most important lead in the case to date.

"Gryd was detained several hours ago – why was I not called at once?"

"We couldn't find you, Your Eminence," replied the Lightning Master politely. "I sent five messengers, and none of them could locate you."

Eddie Thunder's lord was the Emperor himself – Paul, the head of all Dokhts, revived Eddie personally whenever the need arose, which gave Thunder the right to behave as a near-equal of the Prosecutor. He didn't really think of himself as Petersen's bodyguard, which he was – more like a deputy.

"So you couldn't find me, eh." The Prosecutor pulled the reins in order to make the eager horse go lower and explained: "I was inspecting the construction works at the western wall, which is being repaired at the Crown's expense, and I am of the opinion that the thievery there is perfectly outrageous. I'll be honest with you: Ferraut wouldn't have let them get away with it, but our current ruler, may he reign as long as he can, has been giving his subjects a bit of a free hand, hasn't he..." Petersen fell silent for a moment, and then said in a completely different voice: "Then I decided to go for a walk. They've got lovely places over here, Eddie, so beautiful. The forests are nothing like the North – they even make a different noise, you know, and the Ilhwa is a stunning sight at sunset... Are you sure they won't kill Carlos before our return?"

The rapid transition from the softer romantic ruminations to a hard and perfectly businesslike question could confuse anyone, but not Thunder – he got used to Petersen's mannerisms a long time ago.

"I warned the head of the city guards of his personal responsibility for the life of Carlos Gryd," said the Hero in an even voice. "Should anything befall the boy like a smashed head or expiration from diarrhea, I'll have to kill a few people."

"You've got to keep your word," the Prosecutor nodded. "But I definitely want to speak with Carlos."

"That means we should get to see the inside of this prison as soon as possible."

"Sounds funny."

"Thanks." Eddie Thunder held a pause, demonstrating that he did not intend to add a "Your Eminence", and then asked: "Why is Carlos Gryd so important?"

"I don't know yet."

"That sounds funny, too."

"Only at first approximation." Petersen paused for a moment and then asked: "Do you believe that the boy really killed his father?"

The Hero's reply was accompanied by a shrug.

"I've seen lots of things in my life. Some heirs lack the patience to wait until their sires expire from old age, illness, or the activities of their lordly neighbors. The scions hurry to bite off their piece and to taste power, and you know what an intoxicant that is."

Eddie's words made sense, so the Prosecutor had to put it more specifically:

"Okay, let me rephrase that: if Carlos Gryd had really killed his father, would the Heroes have followed him?"

"Hmm..." Thunder adjusted his belt and said in a low voice. "All sorts of things have been known to happen, but..." Heroes are attached to lords, and their catalysts are the price of loyalty. And catalysts aren't any sort of unbreakable fetter, whatever one may think – it is the Hero that makes the artifact unique, not the lord, and should the Hero and his liege fall out of sorts, the Hero can make another catalyst and hand it to a better ruler. "Was Dathos a good lord?"

"Inasmuch as I know, he was."

"In that case, his Heroes would hardly have followed a murderer."

"And that indirectly testifies to Carlos' innocence," the Prosecutor smiled. "The testimony against the young Gryd is given by the mentor, a few guards and the Cobrians led by Lachard. The first three have obviously been bought, especially seeing as how Mentor Hans is but a step away from being crowned Lord of Grydia. So I would really like to know why the Grydians want to do away with Carlos so much."

"He is the last lawful heir to the Grydian domain, and the Cobrians are aiding their puppet Hans."

"Or, alternatively, Glassblower told Carlos something before he died. Something that shook the Cobrians up a bit." Petersen held his peace for a moment and then added: "Or even gave them a good fright."

Three hours. The medics took three hours to bring Lachard to his senses. The knight remained weak and could barely walk, aided by a walking-stick and the Hero's arm, but his mind was sharp as ever, and as soon as it happened, Lachard ordered that he be taken to the Rathaus.

Madness? Strength? Fear of Lady Cobryn? Or could it be fierceness?

Scowl didn't know what to think. The balding and diminutive Marcus gave him a good reason to reconsider his opinion of mortals, whom he'd held in contempt for a long time. Lachard, weak and not resilient at all, turned out to have a spirit strong enough to astonish the Hero, and that came as a complete surprise for Tom. He finally understood why Marcus enjoyed Lady Cobryn's special attention and was entrusted with the most important tasks.

"I've heard of your success. Congratulations." Lachard didn't waste his time on greetings or other extraneous talk. Supported by Tom, he slowly entered the mayor's office and spat out a phrase that sounded more like an insult than praise as he dropped heavily into an armchair. "Well done."

The fat Stutton (Mayor) and the pallid Jubert (Head of Fichter Guard) exchanged glances, but didn't say anything. They'd known Lachard for a long time and had grown accustomed to the knight's ugly temper.

"Did you get lucky?"

"It doesn't matter," said Stanton coldly. "We have seized Carlos Gryd, and..."

"You had to kill him, not seize him," said Marcus in a very clear voice. He was still weak, but retained perfect command of his voice, and Stanton's chilliness was but a breeze compared to Lachard's withering frost. "Which part of 'kill' do you fail to understand? Decapitate him, make him a pincushion for crossbow bolts, cut his throat, split his skull open with a halberd – kill him, may worms crawl out of your every orifice, don't you

understand the meaning of the word ‘kill’?”

Lachard’s impertinence was crossing every line imaginable, but the locals just dropped their eyes – Lady Cobryn held them firmly by the throat.

“We do,” croaked Jubert. “We almost killed the cur, but there was a Hero with him.”

“You were duly warned.”

“What good is this warning to me? There is no lord in Fichter, so there aren’t any Heroes, either. Your much-touted Hoarfrost missed one of the very first blows in that battle, so I was leading my people into the very maul of death.”

“So how did you manage, then?” asked Lachard mockingly.

“Eddie Thunder helped, the Imperial Lightning Master, you know,” the Head of Guard answered reluctantly. “Actually, that’s why Carlos survived – we couldn’t kill the brat with the Prosecutor’s bodyguard watching.

“How about right now?”

“What about right now?” Jubert was perplexed.

“Is Carlos Gryd dead right now?”

The Cobryan’s flagrant behavior finally got to the Fichterers, and the Mayor decided it merited an outraged reply:

“Whatever you think, Lachard, we’re a respectable city and not a bandits’ den,” said Stutton glumly. “We can’t just kill someone we have under guard, especially if it’s a lord.”

“Personal responsibility, isn’t it?” Marcus put a lopsided grin on his face. “Eddie Thunder promised to chop your heads off, didn’t he? I can understand that – I would have done the same thing myself...”

The locals decided it would be in their best interest to refrain from commenting on the knight’s guess.

“Has he been questioned yet?”

“No.”

“That’s good. We’ll come up with something by the morning.”

“The Prosecutor is headed for the citadel – the questioning will take place today, and we won’t be able to do anything about it.”

“That’s bad,” said Lachard in the same tone of voice that he’d used for saying “that’s good” earlier on. “Any suggestions?”

Stutton and Jubert were perfectly aware of what the Cobrian was hinting at, but they simply had no wish to answer. Let Lachard voice the idea and assume the responsibility. They would all be responsible, anyway, but it would be better for Lachard to say it. Yes, let Lachard say it.

“Richard Bayle Petersen has got to die,” said Marcus emphatically. “We don’t approve of curious and ill-behaved Prosecutors in Cobria.”

“He’s got a Hero along,” reminded Jubert cautiously.

“And I’ve got three.”

“The Prosecutor’s lodgings are at the citadel.”

“All for the better,” grunted Marcus. “We’ll get them all at once – the imperial sniffers as well as our cur. I’m too exhausted to keep hopping from one place to another.”

Scowl chuckled. *He can even joke about it!* Once again he thought that Lachard was worthy of respect.

Stutton rose, got a carafe of wine from a cabinet, poured himself a full chalice and downed it in one gulp without looking the least bit embarrassed about it. The prospect of

killing the Imperial Prosecutor scared the Mayor – he preferred bribing officials to killing them.

“It’s your future, folks,” said Lachard loudly, earnestly and without a shadow of sarcasm. “Carlos Gryd knows an important secret, and if it reaches the Emperor, heads are going to roll.”

Cobryan heads first, thought Stutton and Jubert simultaneously.

“All the heads that participated in our lovely little plans,” said Marcus.

Is he reading our thoughts?

“Perish the hope of waiting it out in a safe place, friends, you won’t be able to. The Emperor’s had a grudge against Fichter for a long time, and the old fart is bound to take away your liberties at the slightest pretext. Actually, he won’t need a pretext, for he’ll have a very real reason to act that way.”

“We haven’t done anything to attract the Emperor’s displeasure.”

“You’re friendly with Lady Cobryn, which will be more than enough.”

“We’re small fry – friends one day, strangers the next,” bleated Stutton.

He immediately heard an unpleasant reply.

“You’re small fry with fat wallets – the Emperor is bound to remember that, and the fine you’ll have to pay will be a crippling one. However, there aren’t any guarantees that he’ll stop at the fine. And don’t forget that the merchants will turn the two of you in before you can say ‘habeas corpus’.” Lachard bent forward. “Don’t do silly things, friends – it will be easier for all of us if we clean up properly and forget about the whole affair.”

The Fichterers exchanged uncertain glances.

“Well... probably...”

Nobody could say for certain whether or not the city would lose its liberties, but their careers will certainly be over, and they’ll think themselves lucky if it’s only their careers.

“Now that’s better,” Marcus reclined on the armchair again. “Carlos was accompanied by two Heroes, a Warlord and a Fire Fox. Who was killed on Brainy Street?”

“The Warlord.”

“What about the Fire Fox?”

“My spies have tracked her down,” said Jubert with dignity, as if to say, *in your face, you snobbish swine, we have a few tricks up our sleeves, too.* “There’s a Fire Fox staying at the Fire & Ice Inn, claiming she’s from Moradia.”

“I don’t believe in coincidence.”

“Neither do I. This is why I told you we’d tracked down the Grydian lass.”

“Should I pay her a visit?” asked Scowl in a lugubrious voice.

The Fichterers shuddered – they didn’t expect the Hero to speak up.

“No need,” drawled Marcus pensively, without taking his eyes off the face of the Head of Guard. “Does she know about the arrest of Carlos?”

“I took care of placing a loud and talkative bunch at the table next to hers,” Jubert snorted. “I wanted to see her reaction.”

“Very good,” said Lachard approvingly. “What did she do?”

“She retired to her room.”

“Watch her,” ordered Marcus. “If she tries to get away – kill her; if she heads for the prison – let her, we’ll kill her once she gets there.” Then he smiled a genuinely happy and genuine smile. “Someone’s got to answer for the death of the Imperial Prosecutor, after all.”

The stench in the Fichter prison wasn't quite as bad as the miasma of the fanatics' shed, but it stank all the same. Once again, straw was the culprit, but this time it was inside a damp mattress and not heaped up on the floor. It was what passed for the bed in Carlos' cage. It was a cage, not a cell – the cells of the Fichter prison were located downstairs, in the cellar, and upstairs, on the first and second floors. The ground floor was the "lobby" that enjoyed great notoriety among the free town's criminal element. This is where the "fresh ones" were kept – people who'd just got arrested and were waiting for trial or interrogation.

"Hey good-lookin', what did they take you in for?"

There was an Adornian woman in the cage on the right, young and petite, with short dark hair. She wore a colorful but very dirty dress, whose hem barely reached down to her knees, and a form-fitting jacket. She was sitting on her mattress with her back against the wall of the cage and with her head resting on her knees, so Carlos couldn't see her face, much to his chagrin. The cage on the right contained a mangy lad with cheeky eyes who repeated his question before Carlos could give an answer.

"I'm asking you, what did they grab you for?"

"It was all a rather unfortunate misunderstanding."

"Bloody hell!" the mangy lad guffawed. "Judging by your clothing, you're a right oaf, but you sure know some big words... Educated, aren't we?"

"Yeah, a bit," Carlos snorted.

"Been in Fichter long?"

"Arrived today."

"And went right into the clink? Well done. Why procrastinate?" The mangy lad yawned widely, demonstrating his scorn for clumsy provincials, and introduced himself: "I'm Cardin the Runt. Heard of me?"

"Not yet."

"Oh, you will," Cardin promised. "You'll spend a few months here for that 'misunderstanding' of yours, and the guys will tell you all sorts of things."

"Why should I spend a few months here?"

Carlos didn't think a "misunderstanding" to be a good enough reason for as long a term. The young man had no illusions about his prospects, but he suddenly felt an interest for the particularities of Fichter legislation – there might be a chance of an honest investigation instead of the noose. Unfortunately, Cardin's reply was rather mirthless.

"You should know better what you'll be doing time for." The Runt yawned again. "Our guards are keen on catching fresh ones – they're ever eager to show off their efforts. Our lads sometimes turn you tourists in to keep you out of our hair. Fichter's a wealthy city, so it's a magnet for all sorts of folks... They keep coming and messing things up."

"So you're a local, aren't you?"

"I sure am."

"How did you wind up here?"

"A misunderstanding."

"Not your first time, is it?"

"None of your beeswax." The Runt darkened, as if disturbed by an unpleasant memory, but gave his gruff reply nonetheless: "It's my second."

He spat on the floor.

Carlos sensed that he had hit a raw nerve and pushed on: "Back where I come from,

they put you inside for a year if you've been caught stealing and it's your second offence. How about here?"

"They chop your hand off."

"Congratulations."

"Sod off."

"Gladly."

Carlos turned away – he got rather tired of chatting with the criminal, unnerved by the grimness of his prospects, and moved closer to the other cage in hopes of engaging the petite Adornian woman in conversation.

"Have you heard everything?"

Silence.

"What's your name?"

No reply. The girl just sat there in the same position, with her face resting on her knees, and didn't react to Carlos in any way at all.

"Don't pretend you can't understand me," the young man carried on unperturbed. "I had an Adornian girlfriend once, and I know our dialects are really similar."

The girlfriend remark definitely got to the girl. She raised her head, examined Carlos for a few seconds scornfully, and then replied through her teeth:

"Not a single sister would waste her time on a Dokht. You're so..." She held a pause, rummaging for the most insulting definition, found it and chuckled: "Bland, that's what you are. You're too bland for us to feel anything but revulsion at the thought of intimacy with the likes of you."

She had a narrow birdlike face with very sharp features – a pointy chin, thin lips, a Roman nose and small dark eyes – the girl was perfectly plain by Dokht standards, but Carlos thought her incredibly attractive, and the young man's heart beat faster.

"I haven't always been imprisoned and dressed in such rags, gorgeous. I'm a lord."

"And I'm a princess."

"That makes us equals, gorgeous, so we can speak freely." The young man sat on the floor right next to the bars of his cage to be closer to the Adornian. "I'm accused of patricide by those who want to lay their hands on my domain. Ever head of Grydia? It's in the Forest of Idmar. A good domain – provincial, of course, but I was happy there... Until a very powerful lady that I've never so much as seen in my whole life killed my father. Not personally, of course – she sent some Heroes over. They accused me of everything, so tomorrow I'm most likely to be beheaded." The words poured out of him, arranging themselves into phrases as perfect as though they were memorized, and his fear was pouring out as well – an ugly kind of fear that he was feeling ever since the arrest. The young man could barely hold himself together on his way to the prison, and it took him a great effort to converse with the young thief, but the sight of a pretty girl made the young lord get a grip on himself. "But let's not talk about sad things... Believe me, gorgeous, I was a colorful enough chap before I got into this mess, and I didn't lie to you – I did have an Adornian girlfriend once; we were close."

Carlos tactfully omitted the facts that the young woman in question was a half-breed and one of his servants.

"You do sound like an educated person." The Adornian was somewhat taken aback by the young man's impassioned confession.

"I have no reasons to lie, gorgeous. I wasn't joking when I said they'd execute me

tomorrow, so I cannot be harboring any serious plans for you – we've got the bars between us, after all.” Carlos was sure of every word he said. He was captured, his only asset was Fidget, who wouldn't be able to help, anyway, and that meant he had lost. They would execute him tomorrow. Flirting with an attractive woman was a good way of chasing the darker thoughts away. Was he showing off? Indeed he was, but only to keep from bursting out in tears. *Our encounter will remain but a passing vision, and the greatest reward I could possibly hope for would be a kiss, if that's in the cards.*

His cheeky frankness made the girl smile. Under other circumstances, the Dokht may have got a slap in the face for such words, but here, in prison, they sounded... nice.

“What plans were you harboring for me, then?”

“I like Adornian women – you have that fire inside you.”

“What about Dokht women?”

“I have nothing against them at all, but I still prefer the Adornians.”

Sincerity. It was all a matter of sincerity. The girl could see that the young man in disheveled clothes wasn't lying, that he was indeed educated and, above all, that he really did like her.

“What's your name?”

“Carlos Gryd. What's yours?”

“Marida.”

“Such a beautiful name.”

That hopelessly cheesy phrase sounded like an exquisite compliment for some reason.

“Who's your enemy, Carlos?”

“Lady Cobryn.”

The young woman shuddered in a barely visible way.

“Too bad for you.”

“Too bad for me twice, Marida,” the young man smiled. “First she wanted to lay her hand on Grydia, and then I managed to discover her secret.”

“What secret?”

“The secret that will be the death of me soon enough.”

He wouldn't have a second chance – he couldn't be revived as a Hero, after all, but now that he had calmed down a little as a result of his conversation with the Adornian girl, Carlos was more worried about the Heroes than himself – Rusty Moustache, Crossbow and Hurricane. Hurricane in particular. The old Warlord trusted him and took the risk of going to Fichter, and Carlos let him down.

I should probably tell the Cobrians about the nature of the trinkets that I have in my bag. It won't be any worse on me, but I might save the lads. Lady Agatha is no fool, after all, and she won't just discard a bunch of experienced Heroes.

Lads... How many lords speak of their Heroes in such terms, even when they're sentenced to death?

“A penny for your thoughts, Carlos.”

“Just remembered something,” the young man smiled, rubbing his chin. His beard has grown over the time of their travels, and looked nothing like the well-trimmed beard that looked as though it had been painted on his face and that the young man had been so proud of. “Why did they lock you up? Contraband?”

How does he know?

She had a treacherous thought that Carlos might be a plant, but only for a second.

Marida felt no mendacity in anything said by Carlos – none whatsoever – and so she replied truthfully:

“I got arrested near the big rocks to the east of the city. I was watching some smugglers.”

“Watching?” The young man was surprised. “Why? I mean, why would you be watching them? Are you a smuggler, too?”

“No, on the contrary,” Marida shook her head. “I was kidnapped and brought over to this shore – most likely, to be sold. However, I managed to escape and decided to find out where they would take my friends.”

“Very brave,” said Carlos with genuine respect.

“I couldn’t just leave them... Or maybe I just didn’t know what to do next.” The girl made a helpless gesture. “And I really wanted my revenge, you know. They called us livestock, as though we were animals! Animals!”

“They’re no better than animals themselves.”

“You’re probably right – and that goes for both Dokhts and Adornians. The ones who’d kidnapped us were Keepers, after all.”

That’s how some lords get beautiful concubines who can sing, dance and pleasure their master... Carlos suddenly felt a surge of revulsion.

“Oi, whatcha whisperin’ about?” asked a bored Runt, starved for communication.

“None of your business,” said the young man without so much as a turn of the head in the direction of his interlocutor.

“Managed to talk the wench into something, did ya? Won’t you share with me?”

“Shut your cakehole.”

“If that’s the way you wanna talk, I’ll tell the guards you’re planning to escape!”

Carlos didn’t vouchsafe an answer to the exclamation.

“So why did they arrest you, Marida? For watching?”

“It wasn’t quite so easy.” The girl moved closer to the bars of the cage and lowered her voice. “Somebody killed the smugglers.”

“Crikey!”

“I was really weakened, so I didn’t see whomever it was they were dealing with, so I don’t know who massacred ‘em.” The memory of her failure was like a stab wound in her heart. Marida was caught by surprise at the rocks and got thoroughly confused – she didn’t plan to tangle with the Dokhts, so she didn’t fight the guards, but she was reluctant to speak the truth as well, since she’d been well aware of the sway held by Lady Agatha in Cobria and Fichter. She decided to pretend she was a victim and in distress, which wasn’t far from the truth, in hope that the Fichter guards would let her go back to Adornia. “I couldn’t catch up with them, I just couldn’t, it was too hard...”

“You mustn’t blame yourself.”

The girl didn’t heed Carlos’ words.

“I found a wounded man at the clearing, and he told me they were taking us to the Three Peaks before he died.”

“To Lady Cobryn?”

“Yes.”

Carlos looked at Marida in surprise.

“Whatever does she need Keepers for?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Is Lady Cobryn involved in the slave trade?” This piece of news was completely at odds

with everything Carlos knew about the Cobryan ruler. "I don't believe it."

"He was about to die," said Marida sombrely. "Why would he lie?"

"I wasn't lying ten minutes ago, either, and I'm about to die, too... But why would Lady Cobryna need Adornian slaves? And why does she resort to such extreme security measures? Why did she order to kill the smugglers?"

The Primachine...

"I told the guards that I saw nothing," continued the girl. "But they want some big boss to interrogate me. They told me they'd release me afterwards."

"The Cobrians have the Fichter guard by the throat," said Carlos in a low voice. "If they realize you were from that caravan, they'll give orders to kill you."

"I think so, too."

The young man gave Marida's hand a soft squeeze across the bars.

"Welcome to the club of Lady Cobryna's dead enemies."

She didn't shudder or back away.

"We're still alive."

"It shouldn't last too long."

* * *

"I've heard of your success. Congratulations," said Richard Bayle Petersen loudly and looked at Jubert, who gave a start, with surprise. "Is anything wrong?"

"Everything's fine," blurted out the Head of Guard. "Thank you."

But his pale complexion became even more pallid, and now the Fichterer's face was resembling a mask made of snow.

"It is I who should be thanking you, Jubert – to catch so many dangerous criminals in a single day is no mean feat. Believe me, I'm truly impressed."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it." The Prosecutor turned his attention to the records. "Who's this Cardin the Runt? Your deputy seems to be rather proud of having caught him."

"A notorious thief and con man," reported the Head of Guard. "We got him bang to rights when he was trying to rob the house of Swens the Merchant. This is his second arrest, so he'll have one hand less tomorrow."

"Excellent legislation," muttered Petersen approvingly. "If I understand correctly, the Runt is a local, isn't he?"

"Quite right."

"That's what pleases me most, Jubert – you've finally started to deal with local crime. Formerly your guards only caught miscreants from elsewhere who'd come to your free town in search of loot."

"Not just them."

"Oh, but for the most part."

"Well, you should know," the Head of Guard acquiesced with reluctance.

"And know I surely do," said Petersen emphatically. He held a pause, reflecting on the dialogue so far, and tried to sugarcoat it a little: "However, now I have cause to report to His Imperial Majesty that you've started to deal with crime seriously in Fichter."

"Thank you."

These words were what the Head of Guard said best.

"Don't mention it, Jubert – what's been achieved over the last couple of days is to be

wholly credited to you.”

That is, if one were to disregard the Prosecutor, who did not accept bribes and looked after the Head of Guard’s every movement. Officially, the Fichter Guards weren’t subordinate to Petersen, but it was their duty to enforce the Imperial law in full, and an unfavorable report sent by the Prosecutor could have grave consequences, up to the very revocation of the free town’s liberties. So far Jubert has been successful in bribing his way through, but bloody Petersen demanded results, not money, which meant the Guard had to put in some real work.

It’s okay, you bastard, you’ll stop being a pain in the arse very shortly.

“Now tell me about the young woman your men arrested near the Finger Mountains.”

Why the hell would you be interested in her? Why did I report the capture of that Adornian bitch in the first place, I wonder? We should have chucked her out across the river and forgotten about her!... which is exactly what would have happened a couple of months ago, but the tireless activities of the new Prosecutor yielded some tangible results: the guards were flustered because of Petersen’s constant nagging and started to perform their duties with real zeal, without leaving any matters unattended, no matter how minor.

“Nothing special.” Jubert made a dismissive gesture. “Smugglers failed to come to an agreement on the price of their wares, or how to divvy up their loot, perhaps, and had a fight...”

“A fight?” Petersen raised his eyebrows in surprise. “The report claims there were more than a dozen bodies.”

“One gang massacred the other.”

“Why?”

“Just like I told you – it must have been the wares or the money; those rascals have no other reasons to fight. We only found bodies at the Finger Mountains, so we couldn’t really interrogate anyone.”

They could really do without investigating criminal showdowns. A massacre is a good job under these circumstances – it gives one less to worry about later.

“Why didn’t your men follow the killers’ trail?”

“There were only five guards, and they...”

“Were too scared to venture into the woods.”

All zeal has a limit to it, after all.

“Have shown due caution, more like it,” said Jubert in defense of his people. “Also, the arrested Adornian will definitely tell why they fought and who took part in the fight.”

“You believe her to be a member of one of the gangs?”

“These things happen,” admitted Jubert. “Here at the border, our people and the Keepers have already started to regard each other as... As...”

The Head of Guard suddenly thought that the next phrase would be completely at odds with the official Imperial policy and bit back his tongue.

“As common neighbors?” suggested the Prosecutor.

Does he fear nothing at all? Or is he testing me?

“Yes, as common neighbors,” Jubert nodded. “If my understanding is correct, the Emperor won’t be too pleased by the news.”

The people and the ones in power have different perceptions of time. Ten years are next to nothing, a mere blink of the eye, to the leader of the Dokhts, as seen in the context of strategic objectives for the Imperium’s development. To him, the war was yesterday, and

it may happen again tomorrow. For the common people, ten years are a long time, a substantial part of their lives that encompasses a great deal of events. Common people don't remember the war very well, Dokhts and Keepers alike; it has been painted over many times by mundane activities, and they really hate the thought that it might break out once again.

"An Adornian, eh? Hmm... that's interesting. I'll interrogate her tomorrow." Petersen put the report on the smugglers away. "Let's discuss the most important item – Carlos Gryd. How did you manage to catch him?"

"Carlos was identified by Ulle Hoarfrost, Lady Cobryn's Hero, who..."

"Who's been to Grydwald, I remember. Did they just run into each other in the street?"

"You could say so," Jubert allowed himself a short chuckle. "After the death of Invariat Convivial we had a state-of-the-art Prime alarm system installed because we didn't want the thieves and vagabonds to turn the great man's dwelling into a cesspit. It was triggered today – the guards came, set up roadblocks on Brainy Street, and Ulle noticed Carlos Gryd in the crowd."

"Was he in the house?"

"No. The criminal who had broken in managed to escape."

"I see." Petersen tapped his fingers on the desk. "Is there any reason to believe that whoever broke into Invariat's dwelling was an accomplice of Carlos Gryd?"

"How could we have any such reason if Gryd hasn't been interrogated yet?" Jubert looked surprised.

"You're quite right," the Prosecutor rose to his feet. "Order that they bring Carlos to the interrogation room immediately."

"The prison is located in the city citadel."

"Damn!" Shahmana let out a sharp breath. "In the citadel!"

"It's only *called* a citadel," Acacius made a dismissive gesture. "The merchants are well aware that Fichter won't hold out a day if a war breaks out, but they had to comply with the Emperor's orders, so they built some construction that was subsequently called a citadel."

"What's it really like?" asked Fidget in a somewhat more cheerful voice.

"It's a drab three-storey rectangle that occupies one of the blocks in the central part of Fichter." Benefit produced a sheet of parchment and sketched a simple diagram. "The gate wing faces the Street of Imperial Victories and houses the headquarters of the City Guard, the kitchen and other inconsequential facilities. The opposite part of the Citadel faces Brainy Street and houses the stables, the kennels, the arsenal and the warehouses. We find the barracks in the right wing, which faces Commerce Street, and the prison is in the left wing, the one that faces Profit Street. The "lobby", if you will, and the interrogation chambers are on the ground floor; the rest of the building is all cells."

"So Carlos must be on the ground floor?"

"Quite right."

"That makes everything easier."

The savant nodded and continued:

"The only problem is that the citadel has absolutely no windows facing the street."

Acacius chuckled. "They did it on purpose, so that it would bear some semblance to a real fortress."

“Are the gates guarded?”

“Don’t you start thinking that they’re all idiots in Fichter – of course they’re guarded. And there are guards playing scarecrow on the roofs, too.”

“How shall we get in?”

“We’ll blow up a wall.”

“A citadel wall?”

“Let me reiterate – the citadel of Fichter is a fortress in nothing but name. Two thirds of the money for the construction was given by the Emperor; half of it was stolen – that’s the free town for you! The third that was supposed to be contributed by the local merchants has never been seen by anyone; that means they spent less than one half of the sum required for proper construction. If we had a Warlord with us, he’d send the wall tumbling down with a single kick.”

“Really?”

“Have you got any money?”

“Why are you asking?” The sudden change of the subject made Fidget weary.

“You and I are a far cry from a Warlord, which means we’ll have to blow the wall up,” explained Benefit. “I know people who could sell us some Prime bombs.”

“Expensive?”

“Acceptable. Do you want to save your lord?”

“Of course!”

“Then don’t be stingy. Got cash?”

“Yeah.”

“Much better,” Acacius cheered up visibly. “We’ll have no problems with bombs.”

“Says who?” squinted the Hero Maiden suspiciously.

“Says me.”

“And how many citadels have you conquered to date?”

Shahmana realized perfectly well that she wouldn’t be able to plan the operation properly. All the thinking was usually done for her by the old Lord Dathos, and then Carlos earned her trust and inherited his responsibilities, but to have to obey Benefit was just too much for her.

“We don’t need to conquer the citadel.” Acacius realized what the matter was, and started to explain his plan to the Hero Maiden, slowly and gently, as though he were talking to a child. “We need to organize an escape, which means a quick raid: we get in quickly, and we get out even quicker than that. And what do we need to accomplish that?”

“Uhh...”

“That’s right – divert the attention of the main force of the enemy elsewhere! Well done, Fidget!”

Shahmana didn’t feel like arguing with what was being said.

“I know some lads who can organize a righteous fracas at the corner of Victories and Commerce.” A thick X was drawn on the diagram. “The guards run to where the noise is, their swords and halberds a-clanging...” The savant drew arrows to indicate where the guards would run to. “We blow up the Profit Street wall and break into the prison.”

Benefit looked at Fidget. However, she didn’t look impressed at all – all he heard was a dismissive:

“That’s that?”

“That’s that.”

The Hero Maiden winced.

"I'd hate to disappoint you, Acacius, but we don't want to break in – we want to break Carlos out."

"Aaaaaah..."

"Does your plan account for that?"

"What are you for, then?" said the savant after a moment's hesitation. "You'll break in, find Carlos..."

"Kill all the guards," continued Fidget and shook her head. "Acacius, don't make me laugh. Your plan's a load of crap."

Acacius looked embarrassed for a moment, staring at the diagram of the citadel in confusion, then shrugged his agreement, fixed his gaze on the Hero Maiden, and replied timidly:

"We haven't got a better one, have we?"

* * *

The interrogation took place right there, on the ground floor of the prison, but in a room, not in a cage – a large room, diligently whitewashed, with double doors that didn't let a single sound through. The furniture inside the room was coarse, and the wood had darkened with age and dampness... At any rate, Carlos was trying to convince himself that the suspicious spots on the tabletop bore no relation to blood. However, he wasn't very successful. The decorations on the walls were no paintings – they were torture devices in varying stages of wear and tear. The young man's attention was captivated by such items as three types of fetters, four different whips, a garrotte, an iron gag, a large prayer cross and a handsaw. In the corner was a spiked torture chair of the most gruesome variety, with a skull press close nearby. The instruments looked so horrible that the young man didn't realize he was being asked a question in a gentle voice:

"Carlos, Lord of Gryd, I presume?"

"What?"

"Are you Carlos Gryd?"

"I am."

"Do sit down. Would you please sit on the bench... for the time being, that is."

Carlos wanted to answer with impertinence or decline the invitation, saying he'd done more than enough sitting over the last couple of hours, but upon some consideration, he decided to refrain from irritating someone who could transform his final hours into a hideously long nightmare and obediently sat in front of the interrogator.

"My name is Richard Bayle Petersen; I am the Imperial Prosecutor of the Free Town of Fichter."

"Pleased to meet you."

"The pleasure's all mine, I'm sure."

The Imperial Prosecutor may have had many merits, but his appearance clearly didn't rank among them. He was tall and thin, like a heron stuffed into an expensive black doublet by some practical joker. His extremely long nose and pointy spearhead chin only confirmed the impression. However, Petersen's grey eyes had a hard look in them that proclaimed their owner wasn't to be trifled with. The Prosecutor's stare gave one goose bumps, just like the torture device collection.

"I'm from the capital myself," said Petersen in a genial manner. "Graduated from the

University and have been serving the Crown for eighteen years now... You've been to the capital, Carlos Gryd, haven't you?"

"I studied at the Academy of Lords."

"Is that it?"

"What else is there to do?"

As a matter of fact, a young idler can find plenty of things to do in the capital, but his father had told him to return to the Forest, and Carlos obeyed.

"Thought as much... How about Fichter?"

"My first visit."

"Coburg?"

"Never been there."

"Adornia? Although I don't think I need to ask..."

"No, I've never been to Adornia."

"A simple provincial lad... Why does Lady Cobryn want to kill you so much, Carlos Gryd?"

The unexpected question confused the young man momentarily, but he didn't take long to answer:

"She killed my father."

"So what?" asked Petersen indifferently.

Indifferently enough to make Carlos want to swear.

"So now she's trying to get me."

Everything seemed straightforward, but the Prosecutor seemed skeptical about the young man's explanations.

"Your explanations are ridiculous, Carlos Gryd. You're already an outlaw. You'll be taken straight to the gallows in any town, and the Cobrians have no need to chase you, yet they do... Why?"

Pointed questions at the end of relaxed drawled-out phrases were confusing, but the young man didn't give in.

"Trying to see the matter through, perhaps?"

"Nobody likes to do any more work than they absolutely have to." Petersen suddenly rose and walked around the table slowly. "I was appointed an Imperial Prosecutor to Fichter a month ago, and believe you me, Carlos Gryd, it was no wish of mine to end up here. I felt just fine in the capital, everything was perfect. Everybody hates my guts there, except for the Emperor, of course, may he reign forever, and everybody's afraid of me. I'm honest... Ever heard of the word 'honest?' From your nanny, perhaps? I make sure people obey the law, which is why I'm hated by the thieves and appreciated by the Emperor. He was the one who'd sent me to Fichter. My predecessor had lost the Emperor's trust – or, rather, His Imperial Majesty expressed his dissatisfaction with how the investigation of Invariat Convivial's murder was being handled, by sending me. I'm a good Prosecutor, Carlos Gryd."

"I surely hope so."

"But I have nothing resembling my full powers here. His Imperial Majesty granted Fichter a number of liberties, which is why I have to consider the local authorities in my actions. In turn, they cannot ignore the Crown's representative... Do you understand me, Carlos Gryd?"

"No."

Petersen suddenly bent over the young man, so that his long nose nearly got into Carlos' eye, and said emphatically:

"I am the only thing that stands between you and the gallows pole right now."

"What prevents you from stepping aside?"

His communication with Marida lent Carlos strength, and he withstood Petersen's onslaught with dignity.

"I'm a good Prosecutor," repeated Richard Bayle. "And I cannot for the life of me understand the link between a provincial oaf like you and Invariat Convivial... Have you ever met the man?"

"No."

"Done business together?"

"No."

"How about your father?"

"They didn't know each other."

"Whereas I have plenty of eyewitness reports, according to which you paid for the assassination of Invariat, and then personally got rid of the perpetrator, one Jan Glassblower."

They watched each other for a few seconds. Then the young man licked his lips and said in a low but firm voice:

"If you believe those eyewitnesses, you'll make your life much easier, Your Imperial Eminence."

Petersen smiled.

"So you've kept your spirit, haven't you, Carlos Gryd? I like that."

"I've lost everything else."

"Not everything." Richard Bayle returned to his armchair, rummaged in a drawer of his desk, produced a suede pouch and carefully shook the catalysts out. "Are these yours?"

A clay whistle, the ace of spades, a golden crest and a cheap hairpin. Bric-a-brac... Bric-a-brac that was so important – and so useless right now.

"The catalysts of my Heroes."

"Who followed you to Fichter," said the Prosecutor. "This indirectly confirms that you didn't kill your father."

"Well, I did not kill him."

"Let's assume that much." Petersen examined Archibald's clay whistle. "Invariat Convivial was a genius – one of the brightest minds of the Dokht Imperium, no less, and his inventions have helped us win the War for the Misty Grove; he was well respected at the court of His Imperial Majesty. But Invariat was an eccentric – a few years ago he left the capital all of a sudden, and moved to Fichter. Said it was better for his thinking."

"Why was he let go?"

"The Emperor can't chase after every inventor who's got more toys in his attic than an Imperial kindergarten. He gave orders to look after Invariat, but, if I understand it correctly, the persons responsible were bribed. They are all dead or missing at the moment, and we know nothing of Convivial's activities over the last couple of years... This is rather suspicious, don't you think so?"

"It is," muttered the young man, realizing that the Prosecutor wasn't really interested in his answer.

"Then Invariat got killed, and your name comes up in the course of investigation –

Carlos Gryd, a boy from the Forest of Idmar, who allegedly sponsored the murder of a genius... My opinion is that you were framed."

"You're a good Prosecutor."

"And you have got to trust me, Carlos Gryd, because that's the only way I can help you... Why did you come to Fichter?"

"I was on my way to Coburg – I thought I'd visit Fichter on my way there to find out what really happened to Invariat."

"To find out! Ridiculous." The Prosecutor was actually amused by the young man's overconfidence. "The Imperium's very best investigators are baffled by the case, and he 'thought he'd visit Fichter on his way to find out what really happened', no less. In passing, as it were. En route to Coburg."

"Could it be that the best investigators were looking in the wrong places?"

"Could be," agreed Petersen with surprising ease. "But we try our best, Carlos Gryd; we do not remain complacent. I don't, at any rate." He looked at the parchment. "It says here that you killed Jan Glassblower personally."

"Now I realize it was a mistake."

"A mistake?" The Prosecutor raised his eyebrows.

This gesture was obviously a demand for more details, and Carlos had to explain:

"The knight Lachard came to Grydwald bearing official documents signed by your 'very best investigators' that accused Jan Glassblower of the murder of Invariat Convivial, and my father had no right to interfere in Lachard's investigation. I took part in the hunt quite by accident, and ended up killing Jan. I'm truly sorry about that. The next day Lachard asked for another audience..." Carlos swallowed. "He came to the castle with his Heroes and... And killed my father."

"Were you present at the audience?"

"I was."

"Did Lachard try to convert Lord Dathos to Lady Cobryn's cause?"

"He did not."

"Did he make any hints that it would have been in the best interest of all parties involved to heed Lady Cobryn's wishes?"

"No, he didn't."

"In that case, Carlos Gryd, your father wasn't killed because of the Grydian domain. Or it wasn't the main issue involved in his murder." A pause, a fixed stare, and another hard question: "What were the Cobrians afraid of? Why are they chasing you all across the Imperium?"

Should I trust him or not?

Glassblower's last words were the last trump in Carlos' deck, and he had to decide on how and when to play it best. Now? Why not? What would he lose, anyway? He was in prison and his executioners wouldn't stop even if they believed he knew nothing. His fate was sealed, and the best moment to use the trump card would be right now.

Carlos looked Petersen in the eye and said in a low voice:

"Glassblower told me something before he died..."

* * *

"I didn't tell them anything," Acacius snapped back.

"You just suggested that they make a commotion near the citadel without giving any

explanations?" Fidget stared at the savant fixedly. "Pull the other one."

"I gave them some of your money."

"Money alone wouldn't be enough."

"All right, o Shrewd One." Benefit gave up and started to explain: "The guards caught Cardin the Runt last night, a favorite of the local footpads, and seeing as how it's the second time they'd caught him, he'll lose a hand tomorrow. The boys commiserate with Cardin, and I advised some of the more reckless ones to express their displeasure with the harsh laws of the Imperium at the citadel. So they do have a reason, and they'll raise quite a fracas."

"You know the local criminals that well?"

"I can get my point across to people, Shahмана... I listen to them and take their problems to heart. Consider your own case, for example..."

"Shut up."

"I get it, I get it."

The respectable Profit Street that was adjacent to the prison wing of the Imperial citadel was full of expensive tenement buildings; it was two in the morning on the Rathaus tower clock, and all the locals were fast asleep – they were reputable people who found things like nocturnal shenanigans with open-minded wenches beneath their dignity. There were no passersby, and nobody got in the conspirators' way.

"Let's hope the criminals don't let us down." Fidget checked their equipment one last time, then turned to the savant again: "Is everything ready?"

"To the very last bolt," confirmed Acacius. "I chose the Prime bombs myself, they'll make a bang loud enough to make all of Fichter shudder. Then it's all up to you."

"I'm not talking about my part. Do you remember what you need to do?"

"I'm in charge of our retreat," replied Benefit with pomp. "Nothing's going to work out without me."

Shahмана's three mounts and the savant's cart stood in a tiny dark cul-de-sac between two three-storey buildings, and could not be seen from the street. Acacius was responsible for their safety.

"If we have to separate for whatever reason, remember: there are bombs in the saddlebags, and they're powerful enough to blast out the city gates."

"We won't separate," snorted Fidget. "Looks like we're stuck with you for a while."

"True enough." Benefit smiled in reply and raised his index finger. "Did you hear that? It begins, by the sound of it."

* * *

"What are they waiting for?" asked Marcus grimly.

"They're indecisive," grunted Stutton. "I'd be indecisive, too, if I were in their shoes – an attack on the citadel is... very brave. And reckless."

"Of course, of course," muttered Lachard. "The citadel is serious business."

"That's right."

They took up a station at the Fisherman & Fishwife Inn, about a block away from the Fire Fox and her companion; they got news about what was happening at the citadel from scouts. The group was rather small, only five of them altogether – apart from Marcus and the mayor, there were three Heroes next to the inn, looking impatient – Tom Scowl, Ulle Hoarfrost and Maximilian Smasher, reunited after a brief separation. There were no

Fichterers among the conspirators, with the exception of Stutton. Even the scouts were all Cobrians, and this was just fine with the mayor – the less people, the less talk.

“Did you run a check on the runt who helps the Fire Fox?”

“Jubert was in charge of it.”

“Did you or did you not?”

Stutton sighed darkly – he was infuriated by Lachard’s arrogance, but gave his reply nonetheless:

“Acacius Benefit, an itinerant inventor. I think he and the Grydians got to know each other on their way to Fichter.”

“And so he instantly decided to participate in the assault on the citadel? Don’t make me laugh, Stutton.”

Marcus was well aware that the information came to the mayor from the Head of Guard, but Jubert wasn’t around, so the pressure was on the unfortunate Stutton.

“Instantly?” The mayor looked surprised.

“Well, how do you think it happened? An itinerant savant meets a lord and his Heroes in the Forest, they get to Fichter together, separate briefly, and then meet at the inn in the evening and the Fire Fox says, ‘Hey runt, the Warlord’s been offed and Carlos got arrested by the guards, help me get him out of the clink.’ Sure thing,’ replies the itinerant savant. ‘Why not?’”

They stood in the shadow, at a good distance from the nearest lamp, and nobody saw how red the mayor’s face got.

That idiot Jubert! Why didn’t he find out any details?

“You didn’t run a check on the runt, and that’s bad.” Lachard looked at the Heroes.

“Tom – the baldy has to be killed. Kill him by all means. That’s an order.”

“I’ll start with him,” promised Scowl.

“But why?” asked Jubert bravely. “What did that beggar do to require such attention?”

Tom’s eyes reflected surprise as well, and so Marcus had to answer:

“I don’t understand his motivation; that makes him unpredictable and dangerous.”

The Fichterer wanted to object, but that very moment there was a flash of blinding light and a deafening blast on the corner of Commerce and Imperial Victories.

“Free Cardin!”

“Down with tyranny!”

“He’s innocent!”

“All hail civil liberties!”

“Free Cardin!!!”

The criminals (all of them small fry, obviously enough) made quite a ruckus. Even though many of them failed to understand why they had gathered at the citadel in the first place, they participated in the riot with gusto.

Actually, none of the lads planned anything to that effect.

It started in the Lawman’s Pub, which was rather popular among the thieves, whose clientele was drinking at Acacius’ expense for two straight hours with a great deal of enthusiasm. They started to talk about the unfortunate Runt, loudly admitting that “anyone could have been in his place” and getting fired up at the thought of the inadequacy of the laws. The more wine the criminals drank, the more cheated they felt, and at some point somebody voiced the idea that they should express to the city authorities their displeasure with the unfortunate turn of events. The idea was met with

approval, and this was all done by the talkative Benefit, who managed to get a simple plan of action into the thick skulls of the Fichter footpads. He was active, but circumspect, controlling the events but not seen anywhere near the front, and eventually brought the mob to the citadel. He proceeded to blow up a Prime bomb nearby, which was mistaken for fireworks by the plastered thieves.

“Free Cardin!”

Ka-boom!

“Hey, lads, will ya look at that!”

“A celebration!”

“Get more wine!”

But the guards who ran out of the citadel didn’t share their fascination, and a fight broke out at the crossroads.

* * *

“What’s that noise?” Carlos looked at Petersen in alarm.

“I believe there’s going to be a bit of a commotion in the citadel shortly,” replied the Prosecutor nonchalantly, handing the bag to the young man. “Gather up the catalysts and don’t lose them.”

“Has Shahmana come to save me?”

“Either her or the Cobrians. My presence here prevents them from acting as boldly as they normally might.”

Carlos hastily swept the Hero amulets from the table and put the bag in his pocket. He saw that Petersen believed him, but he wasn’t sure just how far the Prosecutor would go.

“You must take advantage of the situation and escape.”

“Are you serious?”

“I cannot let you go, Carlos Gryd, but I’m not going to execute you,” replied Richard Bayle quickly, casting nervous glances at the door. “And I see no reason to draw this thing out by keeping you imprisoned. You’re ready to get to the bottom of the matter and you scare the Cobrians, which means you must be free.”

“Is that the only reason why you’re letting me go?”

The young man couldn’t believe what was happening.

“Another reason is that you believe in the Empire, Carlos Gryd, I gathered as much from our conversation.” The Prosecutor bent forward to the youth. “No matter how great a wimp our current ruler is, central rule is the only thing that stands between the Dokhts and slavery. The Prime deposits of the Foggy Grove are about to peter out, the Obelisk of Truce is destroyed and we have another war ahead – we realise as much, and so do the Adornians. The only way for us to win this war is to unite around the crown. I don’t know what Lady Cobryn’s agenda is, but I’m certain she is plotting something against the Emperor’s power, which means she has to be stopped. At any cost.”

Petersen spoke fast, but with great conviction, and Carlos realised he was facing a true patriot, a man just like his father.

“I...”

“You’re a lord, Carlos Gryd. It’s time for you to remember it. Do what you must – destroy the enemies of the Empire.”

“If anyone ever asks me, I’ll say I never met a man who’d be more loyal to the crown than you,” said the young man in a low voice.

The door of the cell flew open, and Eddie Thunder appeared in the doorway.

“The citadel is under attack. Somebody blew up the wall.”

The Prosecutor took a dagger out of a drawer in his desk and looked at the Lightning Master fixedly:

“You must help Carlos escape.”

“What?” The Hero looked at Petersen in astonishment. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

The guards’ dying screams could be heard from the corridor.

* * *

Acacius exploded the Prime bombs about five minutes after the criminals started their riot. By that time most of the guards were already outside the citadel, and so Shahmania didn’t have much work after she got into the citadel through the gap.

“Carlos!”

Her left hand was free, and her palm gave birth to fiery arrows which the Fire Fox sent flying at the guards. In the right hand was the “censer” full of coals, which flew into her left hand each time she wanted to start a magical fire.

“Carlos!”

The furious Hero Maiden cut through the Fichter guards who got in her way in a whirlwind of blood and death. Hard blows, the hissing of fiery arrows, screams, clumsy attempts to fight back... The guards didn’t have a chance. The more clever ones scattered, making everything much easier for Fidget.

“Carlos!” She ran into the “lobby” and quickly eyed the cages over – an Adornian woman and a vaguely familiar Dokht, and ran down the corridor, kicking out every locked door: “Carlos!”

“Come on, come on, come on!” muttered Acacius, bobbing up and down impatiently and watching the horses.

The animals were frightened by the explosion, and the savant barely managed to calm them down, but now Acacius’ attention was focused on the citadel and the hole in the wall from whence he could hear the clang of steel against steel and the screams of the dying guards. Acacius gathered that Fidget was doing all right, but the attack’s objective was to free Carlos and not to defeat the Fichters, which is why the savant kept on whispering:

“Come on, come on, come on!”

He never noticed the Hero.

Scowl sneaked up on him – Erasers did it better than anyone else. Silent movements, black clothes, deep dark night... Benefit felt something wasn’t right at the very last moment; he turned around, but it was too late – the dagger already entered his side.

“Uh...” the savant eyed Tom in surprise. “Uh...”

The shirt was rapidly soaking up blood.

“Everything’s fine,” chuckled the Eraser, wiping his blade on Acacius’ sleeve. “Don’t make any noise, okay?”

And he quickly headed for the gap in the wall. He knew that the bald runt wouldn’t last longer than a minute.

* * *

“Where are you going?!”

“I made a promise!”

“What?!” But it was too late – Carlos already disappeared behind the door of the “lobby”, and Petersen followed, cursing. “Idiot!”

“I’ve given my promise!” The young man grabbed a bunch of keys from the wall and opened the cage. “Marida, you’re coming with me!”

“Where to?”

“Let’s find a certain bitch and cut her head off!”

Flames of rage flared up in the Adornian woman’s jet black eyes.

“I’m coming with you!”

“Hey, handsome, what about me?” Cardin started to fret. “Let me out! Open the cage!”

“Screw you!”

“Eh?”

“I despise thieves.” Carlos threw the keys into a dark corner of the “lobby” and pulled Marida after him. “Quick!”

“Let me go, you piece of shit!” screamed the thief.

“What do you need the girl for?”

“We...”

“Carlos!”

“Shahmana!”

The redhead Fire Fox stood in the doorway. Tense, ready to fight, with a flame fluttering in her left hand, about to turn into a deadly fiery arrow any second.

Thunder turned around sharply.

“Eddie, stop!”

“Shahmana, they’re all friends!”

A second’s pause. Fidget quickly assessed the situation and realised Carlos was telling the truth.

“We have to get away.”

“What about the horses?”

“They’re in the street.”

That’s it! That’s it!

It was all so easy. The loyal Shahmana, whose help he didn’t count on at all, did the impossible. The fears of the last few hours dissolved as morning mist, Carlos smiled, and...

Fidget screamed that very second.

Nothing is faster, more powerful or more terrifying than a Hero who feels a fresh blood scent. An unstoppable warrior charged with the power of Prime and launching a direct attack. Nothing could hold it back – nothing under the moon.

Smasher’s mace destroyed a fragment of the wall with the efficiency of a Prime bomb. A sharp shard cut Carlos’ cheek open, but the young man felt no pain.

“Get back!”

Shahmana flew sideways, pierced by Hoarfrost’s sword, and the only one who remained between the people and the Heroes was Eddie Thunder, their last defender, who rushed into battle without thinking twice about it. He deflected Ulle’s thrust, dodged a mighty blow of the Warlord, raised his hammer, preventing the Faceless One from outflanking him, and instantly sent a lightning bolt into Smasher, making the Warlord raise his shield. Eddie hovered above the ground on his Primeboard and moved like greased lightning, holding the Cobrians back. However, Petersen and Carlos both realised the Lightning Master wouldn’t hold out for too long...

“Is there another exit?”

“None!”

In the meantime, Eddie managed to do the impossible – having dodged another blow of the Warlord, whose heavy mace whistled through the air and smashed the nearest cage, Thunder managed to get Ulle, who got distracted for a moment. The lightning charge hit the Faceless One in the stomach and tore him in two. Ulle’s last scream mixed with Carlos’ cry of victory.

The next moment Eddie was attacked by Scowl.

“No!”

Petersen rushed to help and struck Tom in the side. He hit home, but forgot about Smasher, and the Warlord’s mace crushed the Prosecutor’s body into the floor.

“Is this the end?”

Eddie was wheezing hoarsely by the wall, trying to hold the edges of the wound together with his hand. Scowl wrested Petersen’s dagger away and threw it onto the floor. Smasher raised his mace. Carlos clenched Marida’s hand in his. He felt no fear – only disappointment and a sad realisation that only a miracle could save them now.

The miracle was called Shahmana.

The Cobrians wrote the young woman off, having made the correct assumption that Ulle’s blow was lethal, but the dying Fidget fought on.

“Run!”

Fidget struck with the last of her might, as hard as she could. She might have paid attention to the wound, but instead she struck, and struck true. The Fire Fox’s nine tails tore the whole room apart. There were flames everywhere, running across the walls, and the bars grew hotter. The singed Cardin screamed, but it was the Cobrians who felt the full force of the attack. Each of the Fire Fox’s tails sent fireballs flying into them, scorching their flesh and causing unbearable pain. The Cobrians screamed inside the fiery tornado, and Carlos got his chance.

“Run!”

The young man pulled Marida by the hand, and they escaped the fiery furnace of the interrogation room, past Thunder, who was sliding onto the floor, and past the dead Prosecutor, and the howling Cobrians.

“To the break in the wall!”

“I know!”

Carlos picked up a sword from the floor, but there was no one to fight – the guards had scattered and the street lay empty.

“Where are the horses?”

They heard a feeble voice from a dark cul-de-sac: “This way...” They saw the stooped figure of Benefit in the box seat. “Where are the others?”

“There’s no one else left.”

Acacius whipped the horse and the cart flew down the street.

“A bomb! There’s a Prime bomb in the bag! Blow up the gate!”

Carlos took the heavy sphere from the bag, charged it with a twisted smile. Marida bit her lip...

* * *

“How did it happen?”

“I...”

The luckless Stutton was about to bleat out some gibberish, but Lachard wasn’t listening. He didn’t care for the Mayor’s explanations, especially since Stutton had no explanations to give.

“How did they manage to escape? Why are we over here and not over there?”

Why? Because nobody expected the Grydians to get out of the citadel, which is why Lachard and Stutton are closer to Imperial Victories, which is where the fight ended a few minutes ago, and not Brainy Street, where the prisoners were headed for. They made a mistake and failed to put up a roadblock. There was a noise and the sound of hooves... Who was it? Where did they go? By the time it became obvious that the birds had flown away and they finished bickering and spurring their horses on, the fugitives were far away.

Too late.

And Marcus started swearing profusely.

* * *

Carlos and Marida realised that Acacius was wounded only after they got out of the city. They got past the gate without any difficulties – the young man threw his Prime bomb, and the obstacle turned into a pile of rubble, the guards prudently remained in their shack, and the runaways were chased by nothing but curses as they left Fichter. They followed the road for a while, then turned into the woods (Carlos recollected their escape from Grydwald with sorrow), and it was only then that Benefit whispered:

“Take over, somebody.”

And nearly falls off his seat.

“He’s all covered in blood,” says a grim Marida.

“The Eraser paid me a visit,” Acacius smiles faintly. “But he didn’t finish me off...”

He erupts in a coughing fit. The fugitives realise the savant is dying.

“Will you pull through?”

“No.”

“You need a doctor.”

“No use for one...” Another coughing fit. “Go. Don’t stop... Or you’ll be needing a doctor, too...”

Marida replaced Acacius in the box seat and directed the cart deeper into the forest; Carlos remained in back, holding Benefit.

“You’ve got a nasty wound there.”

“I know...”

Only now, after examining the savant’s ragaved side and realising how much blood he’d lost, did Carlos come to the conclusion that Acacius should have died a long time ago.

“I think...”

“Don’t think. Listen... We have a common enemy, so listen...” Benefit grabs the young man by the collar and pulls him near. “Follow this trail... Go northeast... You shall reach the rocks soon... The Raised Fingers...”

“We have to go east,” hissed Marida without turning around. “Through the woods. They won’t find us there.”

What’s the difference between going east or northeast? thought Carlos morosely, amazed at the optimism of his companions. *The Heroes are dead, the Cobrians are after us, and we’ll stay alive for as long as it takes them to catch us.*

“Got the Catalysts?” asked Acacius.

“What good are they now?” The young man grinned ironically.

“I’ll help you if you help me... Common enemy... Go to the Fingers... There’s a secret lab there... Never told anyone about it...” wheezed the savant, the last of his strength evaporating rapidly. “The mask in the bag is the key... Once you ride into the Fingers, take it out, it will lead you...”

“What laboratory? What are you talking about?”

“It’s got everything...”

“To hide away?”

“It’s got everything...” There were bubbles of blood on Benefit’s lips. “You’ll see... for yourself...” With his last move the dying man pointed to his medallion, a brass cogwheel hanging on his neck, and whispered: “The inductor... You’re a smart boy, you’ll understand...”

And Carlos understood. He looked at the cogwheel and understood everything.

There was so little information that one could barely draw any conclusions at all, but a few disjointed phrases were all Carlos needed to see what was going on.

The veil dropped before his eyes.

Gently he closed the eyes of the famed savant, the most esteemed Professor of the Dokhtish University, and the Honorary President of the Imperial Learned Council, a man known as a genius even by his enemies – the great Invariat Convivial.

¹The approximate translation from the Fichter thieves’ cant is as follows: “A provincial chumpette, doesn’t look like a plant, no tail noticed.”

Part 3. THE THREE PEAKS



The Raised Fingers were tall, uniformly grey and smooth as if they were polished, without any shelves or ledges, but their height was their most prominent feature – these mysterious rocks that stood near Fichter nearly touched the clouds. They were different at the bottom – some were ten or eleven feet in diameter, others truly massive, resembling mighty castle towers; they resembled a grey forest, perfectly vertical and utterly void of life. A forest of stone trunks whose grim and unnatural immobility seemed intimidating.

“We shouldn’t have come here,” said Marida through her teeth, eyeing the rocks lugubriously as their cart rolled past them.

“Cobrians are everywhere,” replied Carlos. “Patrols, border guards, roadblocks...”

“They’ll be looking for us here, too. They’ll come here as soon as they realise we’re not in the forest.”

“But not right away.”

“But they’ll come in the end.”

“But not immediately.”

The young woman looked at the widely grinning Carlos and fell silent, frowned, and then suddenly laughed out loud:

“Stop it.”

And playfully slapped the young man’s shoulder with her hands.

“I had to cheer you up somehow.”

“Why?”

The young man cocked his head, squinted and replied, looking right into the Adornian woman’s black eyes:

“To see you smile. I don’t like to see beautiful women frowning.”

A long time ago such frankness would have made Marida blush in embarrassment, and a few years... or even a few months ago she would have taken the compliment for granted. Right now all she could do was ask softly:

“You think I’m beautiful?”

And heard a warm reply:

“Very.”

Warm and very sincere.

He wanted to touch her, her slender arm, her shoulder, cover the southern woman’s delicate fingers with his broad palm, feel the smoothness of her velvety skin and possibly hear her heartbeat, but... The young man realised it was too early and didn’t hurry, afraid to shatter the fragile beauty of the moment.

“You’re a good boy, Carlos. So young, and still so kind. Why are you trying to get close to me?”

Marida liked the young Dokht more and more, which is why she was doing everything she could to keep her distance.

“Not quite the time for clumsy compliments,” said Marida, turning away to face the hated rocks, huge monoliths of grey whose only redeeming quality was that they didn’t look at her with fondness.

“I disagree,” responded Carlos instantly. “We are journeying through some of the Empire’s most romantic places – this is almost a picnic...”

“With the entire Cobryan army around us.”

“Consider our pursuit an escort of honour,” the young man easily suggested. “They are an escort, in a way – the more soldiers they send into these woods, the farther off they chase the Touched.”

Is he showing off again, the way he did in prison? It would certainly seem so...

However, this behaviour of Carlos, his ability to lighten the mood with easygoing chitchat, was appealing. Marida was tired of thinking grim thoughts and could do with some unwinding.

“An escort?”

“Yeah.”

“You talk like a lord.”

“I am a lord, Marida, didn’t I tell you so?”

The girl replied teasingly, which came as some surprise to her:

“I didn’t listen – imprisoned criminals can say all sorts of things!”

“I was arrested for high treason!”

“Judging by your outfit, you were trying to purloin a donkey from a peasant who was looking the other way.”

“While you were picking his pockets!”

“I didn’t pretend to be a noble!”

“Neither did I! Your interlocutor, milady, is none other but Lord Carlos, heir to the throne of Grydia.” The young man gave a clownish bow. “My pedigree can be traced to the days of the Old Empire, by the way.”

“Grydia?” Marida wrinkled her nose. “Where’s that?”

“In the Forest of Idmar,” replied the young man automatically.

“Far away from here?”

“A long, long way.”

“What’s the correct word...” The girl fell silent, casting about for a fitting term.

“Backwater?”

“Yeah, a hellhole.” Carlos decided that two could play that game.

“You’re rather well behaved for a provincial.”

"I didn't know Adornians knew what a province was," the young man was quick to retaliate. "I heard you didn't leave your trees all that often."

"We only descend to eat some scatterbrained Dokht."

"Have you already learnt to use fire?"

"The brightest of us have."

"Do you really believe in their existence?"

This is where Marida broke down – she pulled on the reins, making the horses stop abruptly, and burst out laughing loudly. Carlos followed suit, and unfamiliar sounds reverberated in the grey rocks for a few minutes.

"You're really a piece of work!" said the girl, wiping away the tears.

"You started it."

"You could have backed down."

"I wanted to, but I changed my mind."

"Did you feel insulted on behalf of the Dokhts, then?"

"I just wanted to show you what a piece of work I was."

"You succeeded."

"I tried my hardest."

Oddly enough, Marida didn't feel the least bit irritated by the exchange – she didn't perceive the Dokht's arrogant words about the Adornians as insulting, and the fact that she responded in kind had nothing to do with it whatsoever. It's just that coming from the young lord, these words didn't feel like an affront from a hated enemy – more like friendly tomfoolery.

Careful! You know nothing about him!

No, Marida – it is Carlos who knows nothing about you, and nobody knows how he will behave once the truth comes out.

If the truth comes out.

When, Marida, when. Don't lie to yourself...

She didn't know how he would behave, how he would react, how he would treat her upon learning the truth. How he would treat her... oddly enough, that's the "how" that worried the Adornian woman the most. She didn't want to see Carlos' dark eyes, which lit up when he looked at her, be tainted by anger and hatred.

When the truth comes out...

The unpleasant truth made the Adornian change the subject.

"Let's go back to our more immediate objectives, shall we?"

"Such as?" Carlos became serious as well.

"I want to get away from these rocks."

The lugubrious grey bulks produced a pressure that was almost physical in nature, like an invisible grip on the chest.

"Right now this is the safest place in the environs of Fichter. The Cobrians will get here in about half a day – they'll be searching us in the forest before they come here."

"We're fugitives, and fugitives use their time to run, not to hide."

"We aren't hiding."

"What are we doing, then?"

Carlos didn't answer, but Marida kept on pestering him:

"What do we need this time for?"

She didn't say it directly, but it was audible in her voice: we're in the same boat, and we have got to trust one another in order to make any headway.

"Acacius said we'd find everything we need once we get to the Raised Fingers."

"What exactly do we need?"

"A good question..."

Carlos found the beautiful Southerner incredibly exciting – he could flirt with Marida for hours, and not only flirt... He felt a rush each time he looked the delicate features of her face, the gentle line of her lips and the slender neck that led to her exquisite shoulders. He trembled each time Marida's skirt revealed her knees. He was full of longing when he heard her magic voice, delightfully husky, but... It wasn't until this moment that he thought of whether he could really trust his accidental companion. Was she really who she said she was? And even if she was, did they really have a common goal?

But there was no way of checking it, so he had to look into the girl's dark eyes for answers and listen to his heart.

"I would really like to find a Prime inductor somewhere among the Fingers," said Carlos honestly. "But I fear there is none."

"A Prime inductor?" Marida's eyes went wide. "What do you need it for?"

The young man's heart suggested an answer – the truthful answer:

"I have my Heroes' catalysts with me."

"Your Heroes?"

To say that the Adornian woman was astonished was to say nothing.

"Hell's bells, Marida, I wasn't joking when I said I was a lord! I really am the heir to the Grydian throne, really had to run when they accused me of patricide, and am really going to fight the Cobrians. We were headed for the Three Peaks to take our revenge on Lady Cobryn – myself and the Heroes. You didn't think I was planning to handle her on my own, did you? What do I have to do for you to believe me?"

"You need me to believe you?" asked the girl in a low voice.

"We are walking side by side, and I want us to walk together," replied Carlos in just as low a voice.

"Shoulder to shoulder?"

"Hand in hand."

Maybe now?

The Dokht's sincerity was appealing and tortuous at the same time – it filled Marida's soul with unease, reminding her that she wasn't too keen on sharing her own secrets...

"I don't think that the Primachine is anywhere in the vicinity of the rocks," said the Adornian after a pause. "Your friend must have prepared a secret hideaway somewhere in this area. How do we find it?"

"Acacius said this was the key," Carlos took the mask out of his backpack and twiddled it in his hands. "But I haven't got the foggiest as to how one is supposed to use it."

The mask was simple – to the extent that it could be called primitive by some, and didn't remotely resemble a powerful artefact capable of taking the fugitives to a secret hideout. Four pieces of glass trying to look like gems and failing miserably, grooves for attaching feathers and two small eyeholes... Who needs those eyeholes? The mask is small, the size of a wide palm – who could possibly wear it? A child?

"Do you know anything about magic?" asked Carlos.

"A little."

It was pointless to say no – the bodies of the Adornians were imbued with Prime, unlike the Dokhtish bodies, and every Southerner could be called a mage to some extent.

“Could the mask require Prime?”

Marida touched the wood, closed her eyes for a second and then shook her head.

“It is charged with Prime, I can feel it.”

That meant the mask was ready for use.

“Do I need a spell of some sort? How are your artefacts activated?”

“If the mask required a spell, your friend would have told you about it,” said the girl reasonably. “As for artefacts in general, some of them can be used without any preparation and do not need to be activated in any way.”

“How do we make the mask work, then?” asked a baffled Carlos.

“Put it on your face,” advised Marida.

“Are you serious?”

“My experience is telling me that the simplest solution often turns out to be the correct one,” shrugged the girl. “We have a mask, they’re worn on faces, so get on with it.”

“Well, if you really think so...”

“I really do.”

“All right,” Carlos sighed (he appeared to be distrustful of magic) and gingerly pressed the mask to his face. “Like this?”

“Open your eyes,” the girl laughed.

“Wowee!”

“Did it work!”

“Didn’t it half!”

The world seemed a great deal less unpleasant through the narrow eyeholes of the wooden mask. Everything suddenly became much brighter, as though the tacky piece of wood concealed a powerful Prime lamp, the images of rocks and stones suddenly came into focus in an odd way, but most importantly, a green arrow lit up in the air, jittery like a hound that was forced to stay put for too long.

So you sorted it out at last. Took you a while, didn’t it?

“We must go that way!” Carlos stretched out his hand.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

The Raised Fingers were rather close to each other, especially the smaller rocks – the “little fingers”, as it were, but there was enough space between them to drive the cart through, and Marida turned the horses in the direction specified by Carlos.

“Is it a long way off?”

“No idea... Turn right...” The cart gave a jolt over a stone, and Carlos nearly fell off.
“Careful!”

“You should have warned me earlier.”

The young man wanted to express his outrage, but realised that Marida was having him on and smiled.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“I’m gonna warn you now.”

“Carlos!”

“Marida!”

“What is it?”

“Turn left.”

“Your wish is my command.”

This time the cart turned much more smoothly, but Carlos leaned sideways anyway, touching the girl’s shoulder – he enjoyed the sensation of her warmth. The young man was somewhat surprised when she didn’t move away.

“Now?”

“Straight ahead... until the next rock...”

The road meandered as though the mask was choosing the most convenient route for the cart, and eventually led the wanderers into the very heart of the Raised Fingers, where the rocks no longer stood on their own, the way they did closer to the periphery, but formed all sorts of clusters or bushes – bunches of Fingers sticking out of a single massive foundation.

“There are caves here,” Marida pointed out.

“Small ones – grottoes, more likely.”

“Are we looking for a large one?”

“I haven’t got the foggiest.”

“Or is it an abandoned mine that we’re looking for?”

“Dunno...” Carlos squinted. “Looks like we’ve found it already.”

The arrow stopped at the bottom of one of the bushes with a huge foundation well over a hundred feet in height supporting nine Fingers. The enormous bush looked different from the rest of the rocks and attracted their attention, so the young man wasn’t surprised that it was where the mask had brought them. The arrow wobbled, providing ample opportunity to identify the necessary spot with precision, and transformed into a green circle.

“What next?”

“I think I know.”

Carlos understood how the mask functioned, and it was easy enough to see what he should do next. He jumped off the cart, slowly approached the rock, used his left hand to mark the location of the green circle, took the mask off his face with his right and pressed it to the rock. For a few seconds there were no visible signs of activity, and the young man even thought he must have made some mistake, but then the rock started to produce a barely noticeable vibration, there was a low hum, and suddenly a passage started to open slowly on Carlos’ right.

“Gag me with a cogwheel!”

“Buckets of Prime,” muttered an astonished Marida. “Who could have thought it possible...”

An enormous piece of the foundation moved forward, revealing itself to be a massive arm-thick panel, smooth on the inside and emulating the texture of the rock on the outside – extremely slowly and producing a horrible creaking sound.

“Is it a cave?”

“It must have been a cave once,” shouted Carlos, still pressing the mask to the stone.

“And then someone must have done one hell of a job on it.”

The creaking resembled the screeches of the Touched being smothered alive. The mechanism that raised the panel must have gone a long time without lubrication, and the hideous sounds made by the unoiled gears penetrated one’s ears relentlessly and their

peircing resonance was as painful as a toothache.

“When will it end?”

“When it opens!” shouted the young man in response.

“Dokhtish...”

The last word was drowned out by the creaking of the opening gates, so Carlos didn’t hear her last insult.

The Adornian woman, who was more accustomed to the elegant magical devices of the Southerners that worked silently and accurately, stopped up her ears with her palms.

“This has got to end!”

“It has already!”

“What?!”

“It has already ended!”

Marida didn’t instantly realise that the long-awaited silence was finally there. The panel that rested on two enormous metal runner slides froze about fifteen feet above the ground, revealing a tunnel that led into the very heart of the rock. There were large tiles on the floor, the walls were polished very smoothly, one might even say perfectly, and the Prime lamps mounted on the ceiling provided illumination.

“We appear to have found it,” muttered Carlos. The sheer construction scale of the hideout, which the young man expected to be a slightly modified mine, made a strong impression on the young lord.

“You need a lot of workers to construct a hideout like this.” Marida made a pause and continued: “And you need even more money and enormous amounts of Prime.”

“You’re probably right,” said Carlos and looked at the horse that drew the cart – as expected, the animal’s reaction to the sudden opening of the rock was perfectly calm, and that meant the horse wasn’t seeing it for the first time. “But I’m not so sure about Prime.”

“Why?”

The young man carefully pulled the mask away from the stone and waited. Upon realising that the panel wasn’t about to drop all of a sudden, he came inside and pointed at one of the walls.

“Because I’ve seen this symbol before.” It was a semi-obliterated but still recognizable three-headed dragon. “This is the crest of the Old Empire.” Carlos raised his head and eyed the tunnel’s high ceilings with respect. “This hideout was built before the advent of Prime.”

* * *

The mighty Cobryan Mountains, which crowned the east of the eponymous peninsula, were never quite asleep. The thick forests that began from Fichter, or, rather, from the Ylva, gently covered a part of their majestic slopes – the green wave would sometimes even reach the summits. There was a lot of activity under the green forest canopy. Deers and roes, bears and lynxes, hares, foxes, squirrels and a multitude of birds all lived here – the mountains were the natural habitat of a great many species, and were filled with the ceaseless noise they produced. The chirping gave way to vespertine warbles, and they, in turn, were replaced by the whooping of the owls, which gave way to the warbles that celebrated the dawn. Only in the easternmost part, where the stony head of the peninsula plunged into the great ocean, did the mountains lose their green cover, manifest as a world of lifeless rocks, and the odd occasional sickly tree or shrub only emphasised this

emptiness.

And silence, because no beast wandered near the easternmost part of the Cobryan Peninsula.

However, Edward Gutscher, the Captain of the Black Eagles, Lady Agatha's Life Guard, didn't mind the silence in the least. Gutscher was an experienced warrior who tried to stay alert at all times, and so he hated noise. He was perfectly capable of distinguishing sounds that portended danger from the rest of the forest noises, but didn't like to strain his attention too often, and so he found the silence of the Cobryan Rocks relaxing. Here, even the sound of a falling pebble carried across hundreds of feet.

"Two more turns."

"I know."

"We're very unlikely to be attacked here."

"I know."

Lieutenant Malino, who rode alongside his superior officer, nodded and turned his face away. He noticed Gutscher's hand was clenching the hilt of his sword and made the false assumption that the Captain was wary of an attack by the Touched, the way he would be in a forest. He blurted out something that he could identify as total inanity only in retrospect.

And yet he's very clearly nervous!

Malino believed that they had carried out their orders perfectly, and so he didn't realise that Gutscher's unease wasn't caused by the Touched, which the Cobryan military kept well at bay, but the necessity to report to Lady Agatha.

"The castle's in sight!" reported the scout riding in front.

"The castle," repeated Malino, looking at the Captain again. "We're home."

The Captain sighed heavily.

The convoy entered the Three Peaks late in the evening – so late that they had to lower the main portcullis, but they were expected nonetheless. The first and largest courtyard of the castle was brightly lit by powerful Prime lamps, and Lady Agatha was there to welcome them back as well as the two dozen soldiers. Gutscher approached her first, tossing the reins to the groom who'd come running towards the Captain.

"Lady Cobryn," the Captain bowed respectfully. "Your orders have been carried out."

"All of them?"

"Not quite."

Agatha raised her left eyebrow a little, but the rest of her face remained calm.

"Did you run into problems?"

"Unfortunately, we haven't managed to avoid them, Your Ladyship."

"Report."

Gutscher sighed in a barely audible way and reported in a low voice:

"The Adornian smugglers lost one of the boxes in the Nine Woodpecker Forest. They said they were attacked by the Touched."

None of it was his fault, and yet Gutscher looked glum.

"That's bad," drawled Agatha.

"The Dokhtish smugglers used this as a pretext to break our initial agreement and let the Adornians go, ostensibly to search for the box."

"That's even worse."

"Taking all of the above into account, I intended to change the plan and leave the

Dokhtish smugglers alone.”

“This decision would have made sense.”

“However, their leader managed to identify me as a Black Eagle,” finished the Captain in a lugubrious voice. “And he was stupid enough to tell me about it.”

Gutscher expected a storm. He realised perfectly well that the first two pieces of news would anger Lady Cobryn, and the last one would make her livid, and prepared for the worst. The main danger was that the Lady never lost her calm, no matter how furious she was – she never let her anger engulf her completely, and that usually made the punishment a lot worse than one’s ugliest expectations.

The Captain hung his head low, but, to his profound astonishment, the storm did not follow.

“Did the leader share his observation with anyone but you?” asked Agatha slowly.

“I’m certain he did not,” said Gutscher in a hollow voice. “He thought himself clever.”

“Thought?”

“Our trade partner met a sudden demise.”

“I understand,” said Agatha in a singsong voice, smiling. “A loose tongue and an observant eye make poor companions.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Your Ladyship.”

“I hope the bad news part is over,” said Agatha as she observed the soldiers take the boxes down into the cellars of the Coast Tower.

“Our negotiations with the Dokhtish smugglers were a success,” confirmed the Life Guard. “Ulle Hoarfrost had a field day – he didn’t let anyone escape.”

“That’s great.”

Agatha didn’t feel like scolding Gutscher – it wasn’t his fault that the smugglers turned out to be smart, after all, and it was her own order to him that he find the best representatives of that profession Fichter could offer. Agatha didn’t think the smuggler would have mentioned his clients to anyone – one keeps one’s mouth shut in this line of work. So there were two loose ends left: the lost box and the Adornian smugglers, but the latter could be handled by Elario.

“I am pleased with you, Captain. You may rest.”

“I live to serve, Your Ladyship.”

Gutscher bowed again.

Agatha passed one of the wagons by, one that wasn’t unloaded yet, looked inside and squinted at the boxes.

“Are all of them intact?”

“Aye aye, Your Ladyship. Without a scratch.”

“Slaughter and cremate the horses. Burn the wagons as well.”

“Aye aye, Your Ladyship.”

The Lady of Cobria was certain that the Primachine would start functioning very shortly, but her habit of not leaving any traces got the better of her. Or maybe it wasn’t just her habit. It could have been the words of old Yolanda, who could not see who would emerge victorious from the clash with Carlos.

His possible future is as grand as yours...

Her future depended on the scientists who tried to revive the Primachine.

As for Carlos Gryd, he is sitting in Fichter prison and will be killed tonight, according to the message that came with a pigeon.

Will be killed. Will be. Not “already killed” – will be killed. If Lachard manages it. Thus, she should take the strictest precautions until she gets the news that Carlos Gryd has been relegated to “already killed” status.

“Gutscher!”

“Yes, Your Ladyship.” The Captain of the Eagles stood to attention.

He realised he wouldn’t be given an opportunity to rest – since he was back already, it was time for him to get to his actual duties, namely, the defence of the castle.

“Give orders to double the patrols and put out auxiliary outposts in the mountains.”

“Are we expecting visitors?” asked Gutscher audaciously.

According to the report, Lachard was certain of his success, but Carlos Gryd already had managed to escape Marcus once, and so Lady Cobryn answered in the affirmative:

“A few might turn up, Captain. So stay alert.”

“Aye aye, Your Ladyship.”

* * *

“Are you certain about the Empire?” asked Marida cautiously.

“Absolutely,” confirmed Carlos without taking his eyes off the symbol. “A three-headed dragon... I saw this symbol in an old book once and asked my father about its meaning.” The corridor led them to a tunnel – not a very long one, around thirty steps in length, and ending with a gate that was barely visible in subterranean darkness. They could be reached very quickly, but Marida and Carlos took their time, carefully examining the smoothly-polished walls for booby traps. They exchanged a few phrases, and then slowly proceeded towards the inner sanctum.

“What was his reply?” asked the Adornian, irritated by the long pause.

“It’s the crest of the Old Empire.”

“So what about it?”

“Nothing,” said Carlos. “Do you know anything about the Old Empire?”

“We are very serious about our lore in Adornia,” replied the Southerner with dignity.

The topic of the conversation was serious, and the girl replied in dead earnest, implying that jokes were inappropriate in the context. However, Carlos decided to ignore the implication.

“Is any of it true?”

“All of it.”

“Then why didn’t you recognise the symbol?”

“Because...” It took Marida a while to answer that question. “Because we have renounced the Old Empire.”

“That wasn’t very wise.”

“Why?”

“Because the past affects the future.”

“How do you know?”

“From books,” replied the young lord, and instantly asked a wry question: “Do they know about books in Adornia?”

“Of course,” snorted the girl.

“I’ve read some, you know.”

“Very funny.”

They left the cart at the gate, where there was a tethering post, but they were too busy to

unbridle the horse. They found place for the mask – there was a prominent spot painted red where it made the panel that hid the entrance slide back – then lit the Prime torches they found near the entrance and went to explore the mysterious hiding place.

“What do you think they constructed it for?” asked Marida after a silence.

“The three-headed dragon speaks for itself – the Imperial savants worked here.”

“But why in such a remote location?”

The young lord shrugged.

“Maybe they conducted secret experiments that were so dangerous you had to conduct them as far away from human habitation as possible. The Old Empire had accumulated a vast body of knowledge – their science was well-evolved.”

“You mean, better than now?”

Marida simply wanted to have another go at Carlos by implying that the arrogant Dokhts still haven’t caught up with their ancestors, but now it was the young man’s turn to reply in earnest:

“Their science was completely different from ours. There was no Prime back then, and the scientists of the Old Empire used methods that differed from everything the savants of today do in their laboratories quite radically.”

“All right, I’ll give you as much.” The Adornian didn’t feel like arguing this point.

“However, it’s right next to Fichter, so your guess about dangerous experiments must be wrong.”

“Back in the days of the Old Empire, Fichter was a tiny village that no one cared about much. If something blew up here, no one would lift a finger.”

“What could possibly blow up here?”

“I have no idea...” Carlos looked at the heavily barred alcoves carved in the rock.

“Could they have bred the Touched here?”

The sudden assumption made in conjunction with the thickness of the bars surprised the young woman:

“Are you joking?”

“They had to come from somewhere.”

“From the old Empire, you mean? I don’t believe it.” Marida was thoroughly convinced about it. “The Touched came into existence as a result of the Cataclysm...”

“That’s just one of the theories.”

“You Dokhts believe in nothing but what you can study. You have forgotten about the existence of gods...”

“But we’re intelligent.”

“Of course you are.”

“Which is why we don’t believe the gods made a suicide pact,” concluded the young lord, speaking quickly but firmly.

“Meaning what exactly?” Marida was confused.

“Why would the gods bring about the Cataclysm if they didn’t survive it themselves?”

“Uhh...”

“Tell me whenever you come up with an answer,” Carlos smiled. The next moment the light of the torch fell on a massive switch, and the young man cried out triumphantly:

“Hey, we shall have light!”

And there was light.

The subterranean facility may have been built in the days of the Old Empire, but the

new owners spared no effort at reconstructing it, which included installing Prime circuitry throughout the place.

“This is better,” grumbled Marida as she turned off the torch.

“I agree.”

The tunnel ended with a wall of grey stone with a metal gate in it; the light switch was on the right of the gate. The gate was locked from the inside, but a smaller door was open, and the travellers used it to get into a large hall that turned out to be an enormous workshop equipped with absolutely everything a mechanic might require – a hydraulic press, a smithy, a number of machines whose purpose Carlos could only guess at, workbenches and toolboxes...

“No animals whatsoever,” Marida snorted. “Not a whiff of the Touched here.”

There was, however, a strong aroma of lubricant and alchemical reagents.

“Seeing as how all the machines are Prime-powered, the workshop was set up a few years ago, and it has got absolutely nothing to do with the Old Empire.”

“You should know.”

Adornians knew nothing of technology, and Marida could easily mistake a milling device for a sewing machine.

“And I do indeed.”

“Can you tell what the workshop was used for?”

“I cannot, unfortunately.” Carlos examined the workshop carefully, taking in the tools and a number of unfinished parts scattered here and there, but he had to concede that his knowledge was insufficient to make any conclusions. “The only thing I know is that this place was used for making different parts for some very complex mechanism.”

A Primachine?

I would answer if I knew what it was...

“Let us go on, then,” suggested the Adornian as she opened another door.

The next room was a study – or, rather, a cross between a study and an alchemist’s laboratory. It occupied a hall that was as large as the one that housed the workshop, and you couldn’t see the walls for the bookcases that reached up to the very ceiling. Carlos noticed the main desk with a luxurious carved armchair nearby; it was buried under a pile of parchment scrolls, and the entire central part of the hall was occupied by a plethora of alchemical devices, and one could only guess at their purpose.

The study had a businesslike air about it and was perfectly utilitarian – the only aesthetically pleasant piece of furniture was the armchair at the desk. The rest was made very coarsely, which gave Marida a reason to scowl disdainfully:

“This is downright sordid, even for the Dokhts.”

“A connoisseur of interior design, are you?”

“I’ve seen the studies of Adornian scientists.”

“You have them over there?”

“Studies or scientists?”

“Both.”

“Don’t think of us in such terms, we’re no savages,” said the girl in a low voice. Their friendly sparring notwithstanding, there were lines that should not be crossed. “We have a different approach, but we’re entitled to it, aren’t we?”

“Of course.” Carlos didn’t argue.

The achievements of the Adornian mages were hardly inferior to the developments

made by Dokhtish savants, and the Southerners' experiments with Prime could be called scientific, even if you had to stretch the term a bit.

"And it's much nicer in the studies of the Adornian scientists than it is over here. Our culture makes an emphasis on perfection, and no Adornian would be capable of thinking coherently surrounded by..."

"Books," suggested Carlos.

"This interior," said the girl. "It's too gloomy here."

"Don't forget we're inside an enormous rock."

"Precisely! Why would anyone want to settle underground?" Only now did Marida realise just how depressing this subterraneous journey had been for her. "If anyone wishes to construct a hideout, why don't they do it in the forest, in the centre of some inaccessible thicket but still on the surface – do you get it, Carlos? On the surface! To breathe fresh air, enjoy the sunrise, to have the tree branches knock into your window. How can anybody live underground?"

The young lord wanted to crack a joke about "forest dwellers", but decided to hold his peace. He realised that the girl was perfectly frank with him, and said what she was thinking, like a friend, and so he gave a perfectly serious reply:

"I don't know why the Old Empire folks had to hide underground, but the last owner of this laboratory had a good reason to be furtive."

"Oh, indeed – he was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

A friend? An interesting assumption. He did entrust me with something vital, but I wouldn't call him a close friend. He needs me – however, I need him, too.

"More of a close associate," corrected Carlos.

"Who's he?"

"Invariat Convivial."

The young man expected some sort of an exclamation of surprise, but was met with an interrogative glance, and then realised that the name meant nothing to Adornians. He had to explain.

"Invariat Convivial is the greatest savant of the Dokhtish Empire – you might say he could be credited for our victory in the War for the Foggy Grove."

Such an introduction roused interest in the Southerner, with a substantial deal of surprise:

"Are you referring to the bald runt that brought us here and died before we could get here?"

"That's him all right."

Carlos could barely believe what he was saying himself, but he was sure he wasn't wrong.

"In that case, I should hate him," said Marida pensively.

"In theory, you should hate every Dokht," corrected the young man in a low voice. Their eyes met for a few seconds, and then the Adornian shook her head:

"No, not every Dokht."

She turned away.

What am I doing? What?!

This must be how one's habitual world begins to fall apart, with its distinct divisions into black and white, friends and enemies – suddenly you meet someone from the other camp and get to know them... and then realise that nothing in the whole world could ever

make you kill this person.

Why does it happen?

Could it be because we're all human beings, Dokhts and Adornians alike, and that hatred is not a natural state for us? We're ready to be friends, after all, and make fun of each other. We're ready to be neighbours...

"Invariat spent his last years in Fichter," said Carlos to end an awkward pause. "A couple of months ago there was a rumour of his death."

"I thought it happened a little bit later," Marida smiled. "More like a couple of hours ago."

"One must assume that Invariat somehow managed to deceive Lady Cobryn," answered the young man slowly, his fingers reaching for the medallion in his pocket.

"What reason could this Connivial have to..."

"Convivial." The young lord looked at the girl searchingly. "You remember the name, Marida, don't garble it deliberately. Whether or not he was an enemy of Adornia, Invariat is worthy of respect. He's a genius."

"Okay, all right." *Why did I agree?* "What reason could be important enough for Convivial to need a hideout like this?"

Marida didn't expect an answer – after all, she'd already managed to fish a lot more out of Carlos than she'd told him herself, but the young man said evenly:

"You remember I said I knew a part of Lady Cobryn's secret, don't you?"

He trusts me! Buckets of Prime, he trusts me!

"Of course."

"This part is the name. Primachine."

"Primachine?"

"Yes," said Carlos. "I am of the opinion that Invariat was constructing some sort of a device for Lady Cobryn. I don't know anything about its intended usage, but we're talking about a genius here, so the Primachine is very likely to be something quite out of the ordinary."

"A weapon?" suggested the Adornian.

The young man shook his head doubtfully.

"Might be."

"You're not sure?"

"A weapon would have a flashier name – 'Supercannon', 'Primesword', or something like that. A Primachine, though... A machine that uses Prime... I believe this thing to be something a whole lot more original than a mere weapon – and, possibly, a whole lot more terrifying as well."

"What could be more terrifying than a weapon?"

"Something that will render weapons useless."

A thought crossed Marida's mind: *I can surely use this! If the Dokhtish genius really had some great plan, the Adornians must learn of it!*

It was an ugly and backhanded kind of thought, but... it felt right. Very right indeed, because neither Carlos' sincerity, nor the emotions he evoked in the young woman's heart, could make her forget her duty.

All I see is a Dokht, while he sees me as a fellow human being.

Don't lie to yourself! You'll always be a despicable Adornian bitch to him!

No!

Yes!

Shut up!

Nothing in the whole world is harder than waging war against oneself – the collision of heart and mind – standing at the crossroads where every road is right and wrong at the same time...

“Do you suppose Invariat built the machine here?” asked Marida in a slightly hoarse voice, just to hear the sound of it and chase away all those damned thoughts.

“Of course not.” The young man became distracted by the documents scattered across the table, and paid no attention to the change in the tone of the Adornian’s voice. “This is where Convivial kept his own secrets, including the ones he kept from Lady Cobryn.”

“Why do you think so?

“Because I have a hunch about what we’re going to find behind the next door.”

“Will you tell me?”

“Let’s enter it together.”

“You scare me,” giggled Marida playfully.

“It’s not scary at all, and you’ll like it, because...” Carlos opened the door and stopped in the doorway, smiling. “Because it’s perfect.”

The Prime inductor.

It stood at the centre of a small hall and was a very far cry from the machine kept in the dungeons of the Grydwald Castle and in the castles of all the other Dokhtish lords – the young man got the impression that Invariat constructed the inductor out of whatever materials he had at hand. But the identity of the device left no doubts – there were four tanks with different Prime concoctions, a feed arrangement, a control panel, and a square bunker where the resurrection of the Hero took place.

“Is this what I think it is?” asked the Adornian in a low voice.

“Yes, Marida, it’s a Prime inductor.”

“So ugly.” The girl couldn’t help herself.

“Its beauty is concealed within, but is manifest in its purpose – the restoration of life.”

Carlos didn’t expect such words of himself, and yet they were uttered because they were said in absolute certainty, out of deep respect to the mysterious process based on Prime.

And yet the Prime Spring, which resurrect the Adornian Heroes, have a beautiful exterior, too...

However, Marida said something else aloud:

“I’ll probably agree with you.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

The Prime inductor didn’t look like much – the tanks were of different types, the finish on the case was very coarse and bore the marks of a hammer... But Carlos wasn’t seeing a machine before him – he saw Fidget, Hurricane, Rusty Moustache and Crossbow, his loyal Heroes whom he’d missed a lot. He didn’t care about the looks of the machine that would revive them; the revival was the important part.

“I thought only the lords had inductors.”

“This must be why Invariat needed a secret hiding place.”

“But how did he manage to lay his hands on an inductor?”

“He built one,” Carlos shrugged. “Invariat participated in their design and development

– there was nothing he didn't know about these machines, he knew them better than any lord, so it is little wonder that he managed to make one of his very own.”

“Can you handle it?”

“I'm a lord,” replied the young man proudly. “I shall revive my Heroes, we'll go to the Three Peaks, save your friends and twist Lady Cobryn's head off. So it shall be.”

“Yes,” Marida nodded her agreement. “So it shall be.”

I'm such a total bitch!

“Let's inspect the rest of the hideout,” suggested Carlos. “Just in case.”

“All right.”

They returned to the study and went to another door, which brought them to a large kitchen where they found a bag of flour, an open barrel of salted pork, and dried vegetables. They were happy to find the food, but not exuberantly so as there had been fresh loaves and juicy ham in Acacius' bag which the travellers had managed to snack on while on their way here. Convinced that they wouldn't starve, Carlos and Marida walked on and discovered Invariat's bedroom – an average-sized room whose only furniture consisted of a trunk filled with linen and a wide bed.

“We'll probably find the storage room behind the third door,” muttered Carlos.

“Most likely...” Marida drew her eyes down and asked softly: “How much time did you say we had?”

“Half a day.” The young lord was turning around to go back into the kitchen, but froze, realising that the question about time wasn't asked wantonly. He turned around and continued: “Considering that the Cobrians will only reach the Fingers by the evening, they'll most probably postpone the search until tomorrow morning.”

Half a day and a whole night to boot...

“We've got lots of time,” said Marida after a pause, looking away from Carlos. “Lots and lots.”

“Isn't that great?”

He took half a step and softly touched the girl's hand. Marida didn't back away or shudder, but she didn't reciprocate, either.

She whispered:

“I am no whore. I just need a little...”

“Warmth.”

His voice sounded like a soft echo.

“For someone to...”

“Be close by.”

He was reading her thoughts. Or feeling the same way as her.

“Because I'm tired of being...”

“Alone.”

“Yes...”

“But we're together now.”

I'll tell him everything, Marida promised to herself, closing her eyes. *Everything, every single thing, all of it... Later, though... Not right now.*

And she answered Carlos' voracious kiss with passion.

“Not right now...”

The young man was silent – no trite compliments or any other words, but it was only better this way. Nothing but action – only kisses and hands.

Not right now...

The dress slid down and fell onto the floor, the heart beat like a frenzied pendulum. There was a rush that went straight to the head... The warmth of Carlos' breath, his body heat felt through his palms, his fingers... his chest... The heat... He picked Marida up and carried her in his arms. She embraced him... She knew what would happen next...

Not right now!

But she found the strength to stop.

Right now!

Marida looked at the fired-up Carlos, smiled timidly and whispered:
“We’re not getting anywhere.”

* * *

“This is where we part,” said a jolly Lachard, looking at Eddie, bound hand and foot. “I’ll search for the Grydian cur, and you’ll undertake a journey to the Three Peaks. You’ll like it there. It’s a promise.”

“So you have no time to torture me all by yourself, and you delegate it to your mistress? That’s funny.” Thunder couldn’t hit the knight (Lachard had enough foresight to stop a few feet away from Eddie, so he could not be reached) and had to content himself with spitting on the ground with gusto. “Does she enjoy watching the tortured captives suffer? Or does she participate...”

“Lady Agatha never stooped to torture,” said Marcus cold-bloodedly. “And it’s a wholly different type of adventure that awaits you at Three Peaks, Hero, more exciting than you could ever imagine.”

“When the Emperor finds out what you did in Fichter, you’ll think my adventure was a picnic,” promised Thunder. “Paul’s rage is something to be feared.”

“What did we do?” Lachard looked surprised. “The person responsible for the prison raid is Shahmana Fidget, the Hero Maiden of Carlos Gryd, a notorious criminal. She was the one who killed the Prosecutor, too.”

“And Lady Cobryn’s Fichter lackeys will confirm every word,” the Lightning Master snorted.

“They’ll confirm it, sign it, and swear that version is true until they are blue in the face,” promised Marcus.

“All I have to do for the truth to come out is to die; it’s as simple as that.”

“Why do you think we’ll let you do something ‘as simple as that’, Hero?”

“Because you won’t be able to prevent it,” said Eddie scornfully.

“We’ll do our best,” Marcus fell silent for a moment. “Don’t start getting any ideas about me requiring an answer, Hero, but I can’t help asking it – why did Petersen help the Grydian? I’m just curious.”

Thunder didn’t know any details concerning the conversation between Carlos and the Prosecutor, and he was rather surprised by Petersen’s behaviour, but the Hero was reluctant to admit as much to the Cobrian.

“Carlos Gryd is an enemy of your mistress; this much is enough to consider him an honest man.”

Marcus snorted:

“I was right – you don’t know anything.”

Eddie’s face went red.

“I told the truth! You shall soon realise as much.”

“I will, when I catch the brat. Farewell, Hero.”

Two of the Black Eagles gagged Thunder and threw him across the saddle of a mighty steed to take him to the Three Peaks as promised. Lachard went to Jubert, who waited for him under a tree.

“Report!”

“They managed to shake off the pursuit.”

“Which was wholly fictional.”

“No it wasn’t!”

The Heroes, scorched badly by the Fire Fox, needed time to recuperate, so the first ones to run in pursuit of Carlos were the Fichter guards, scum of the highest order who had got fat taking bribes and didn’t wish to risk their precious hides. The pursuit became a total sham instantly – the Grydian got away, and now Lachard had to comb all the woods in the area to find him.

“Captain Falcon, what do you have to say?” Marcus turned to the Captain of the Cobryan Border Guards, who joined the search.

“We’ve managed to get a lot done today...” Falcon dismounted and unfolded his map. “The fugitives left Fichter through the Northern Gate, and, according to eyewitness reports, turned into the woods here,” Falcon pointed to the spot in question with a thick finger. “It took me a quarter of an hour to deploy the pursuit, and so I had to cordon off a very large area. First and foremost, I put roadblocks on every road, including the lesser-known paths...”

“I think the actual pursuit of the fugitives is our number-one priority,” Lachard interrupted the border guard. “Did they dump their cart anywhere?”

“No, they didn’t.”

“This gives us a perfect trail.”

“Which is being followed by my scouts.” Falcon stared at the knight grimly. “I decided to omit the obvious, Lachard – I’d thought you, of all people, wouldn’t need me to point it out.”

“Sorry, Captain.”

“Quite all right.”

Jubert suddenly thought that nothing in the world would ever make Marcus apologise to him – nothing, not even a death threat. But it wasn’t an issue before a Cobrian, one of his own ilk. The thought was followed by a silent curse.

“Don’t worry, Lachard – the Grydian won’t get away.”

“So far getting away is all he’s been doing.”

“The scouts may have tied him up already – they could be taking him to us in shackles as we speak.”

“Or maybe they haven’t managed to shackle him yet.” Marcus studied the map carefully. “Carlos has demonstrated his intelligence to us already, and he’s well aware that we’ll put up roadblocks, so he has to choose between running as fast as he can and hiding.”

“He has the Adornian woman with him,” reminded Jubert. “Southerners are experts at hiding in the woods.”

“And border guards are experts at finding them,” said Marcus before the outraged Falcon could utter a word in defence of his men, and there was an edge to his voice.

"Carlos knows that the presence of the Adornian will make us focus on the forest, and he'll have an excellent opportunity for a surprise manoeuvre..." Lachard pointed at a grey spot on the map that lay to the northeast of Fichter. "Are those the Raised Fingers?"

"They are."

"We shall be combing the woods and pass the rocks by, so the fugitives may end up behind our backs."

"Possibly," intoned Jubert.

He was extremely reluctant to cross Marcus – it was better to follow the Cobrian's idiotic orders than to listen to his insults.

However, Falcon was cut of a different mettle.

"That's rubbish," replied the Border Guard gruffly. "They'll run, and they'll run fast."

But Lachard had already arrived at a decision.

"I'm not saying we shouldn't comb the woods, Falcon, but the pursuit must converge here, near the rocks. Jubert!"

"Yes?"

"You take your guards and cordon off the southern side to make sure the fugitives don't run back to Fichter."

"Got it."

"Falcon, you take care of the combing."

"Aye aye."

"I'll take the Heroes and head for the Fingers." Lachard gave the Captain of the Border Guards a hard look. "The tracks will disappear among the rocks, so I'll need an experienced tracker and two dozen soldiers."

"The soldiers are ready, but the tracker will join you in about four hours at the very earliest."

* * *

"I knew you'd wake me up first."

The naked Acacius – or, rather, Invariat Convivial – came out of the Prime inductor and stretched without any signs of being bashful, demonstrating a well-preserved body to Carlos.

He's a Hero now, the young man reminded himself. *So flab is a thing of the past for him.*

Likewise muscle cramps and aching joints, rheumatism and the beginnings of gout. He didn't get any younger, but he did get much healthier, and he'd be spending the rest of his life full of energy.

But did he remain what he was – Convivial? A genius who could create a device of any degree of sophistication? This was the question that interested Carlos the most, because all the Heroes he'd encountered previously weren't too bright.

"Got many questions?"

"Quite a few," the young lord nodded towards the chair. "Your clothes."

"Thanks." Invariat gave another stretch, obviously showing off before the young man, before he put on his shirt. "Oh, it feels so good to be alive again."

"Does Lady Cobryn know that you've accepted Prime?"

"Of course not – she's convinced that I'm dead."

"That's good."

"I agree," Invariat pulled on his smallclothes. "But Agatha's intelligent enough, so she'll

realise what's going on before too long."

"You should know. Now how about..."

Carlos did in fact have a multitude of questions he wanted to ask. Hard and direct questions – questions that demanded honest answers – but Invariat's behaviour was a far cry from Acacius'. He showed no natural deference before the young lord and took command of the conversation himself.

"Did you head for the Fingers immediately?"

"Yes."

"Good." Convivial pulled on his trousers and started to put on his shoes. "Let's hope the Cobrians won't bother us before the morning comes and spend enough time in the woods before they realise we're hiding in the rocks..."

Apparently, Carlos' guess concerning the plan of retreat from Fichter as conceived by the savant was correct. But there were a few things that required clarification. They could resurrect the Heroes, but what would they do next? Face the Cobrians in open battle? They tried it in Grydwald and barely managed to escape with their lives.

"Does Lady Cobryn know of this laboratory?"

"Obviously not!"

"Thought as much."

"Then why did you have to ask?"

A completely different person – this one was much tougher and colder. Carlos wanted to point out Invariat's inappropriate behaviour to him, but the savant wasn't through yet:

"But we won't manage to sit it out here. Lachard is bright enough to find us eventually. He'll need some time, of course, and he'll probably waste half a day, but find us he will, make no mistake about that."

"How shall we escape, then?"

"I have a few ideas."

And I'm not sharing them, Invariat appeared to be saying. This aggravated Carlos even more:

"Show some respect, Invariat, I'm no servant of yours."

"Let's explain my manners away by my Heroic nature," Convivial snorted. "I'm making an effort to hold it back, Carlos, but I'm not always successful... Trust me – it isn't deliberate... And don't forget we need each other. I need you just as much as you need me."

"What for?"

"For revenge. And to set things right again..." The savant ran his hand over the metallic side of the Prime inductor. "Have you got my catalyst?"

"Would you like to have it back?"

"Oh, you can keep it for the meantime," Invariat smiled. "Anything may happen, after all." However, Convivial didn't say a single word about the oath that was mandatory for all Heroes who were about to hand their main amulets over to their new liege. He went right back to talking business: "I've seen some girl with you."

There, now he's started it!

Carlos resented both the fact that Invariat mentioned the Adornian woman and the tone of the savant's voice, but he had to answer nevertheless, soothing his wounded pride with reminders of the savant's "Heroic" nature.

"Her name is Marida, we met in prison."

“Have you shaken her off?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Now that's definitely crossing a line!

“Because we have Lady Cobryn as a common enemy.”

“Now, things are pretty clear about you and me, but how could an Adornian kid become an enemy of the Cobrians?” Invariatus sat down and gave the young lord a scorching look. “What did she tell you?”

“She was kidnapped...” Carlos was instantly interrupted by an interested Convivial in a perfectly unceremonious manner.

“Kidnapped? As in, abducted from her own village?”

“Yes.”

Now that's the limit! He may be a Hero, but it's high time to put him in place!

However, interrupting the savant has proved an impossibility so far.

“She was kidnapped and taken to the Three Peaks? Alone?”

“Marida and some friends of hers,” said Carlos.

“That's good...” said Convivial, lost in thought. “It changes quite a few things...”

“What exactly?”

“The girl didn't tell you, did she? Okay, whatever...” Suddenly, the savant giggled. “I don't mind her being here, Carlos, Marida may be of use to us... Will you see to the Heroes now? We have time, but we shouldn't be wasting it.”

Okay, Invariatus, if you want to give orders, so be it, I'm in your castle now...

However, the young man didn't hurry to comply with the savant's orders. He leaned against the wall, assuming an independent posture, and asked:

“When did you become a Hero?”

Under the circumstances, it was an important question, and one that Convivial had to answer to demonstrate his sincerity. And yet he tried to be evasive.

“We are losing time.”

“When?” asked the young man in a louder voice.

Invariatus chuckled.

“I heard the Call of Prime a few years ago, but I've been ignoring it so far – I was afraid I'd become as limited as the rest of the Heroes.” He reclined on the back of the chair, scratched his nose and continued: “The most interesting thing is that the Call helped me with my work. It didn't try to wear me down like I'd expected – no, it was egging me on, as if meaning to say ‘Accept Prime, and it will be better still.’”

“But you didn't trust the Call.”

“I worked like a thing possessed, I succeeded in everything I did and I had no need to accept Prime.” The savant held a pause. “However, Lady Cobryn left me no other option. Agatha isn't an evil woman, but she goes for her goal like three-headed dragon, and she was trying to trample me down. So I had to acquiesce.” Another pause. “I accepted Prime, and that was the only way I managed to escape from Agatha. Nobody knew I was a Hero except for Glassblower.”

“What is this goal of Lady Cobryn's?”

Convivial pretended he didn't hear the question.

“I killed myself before Agatha's very eyes; I'd sent Glassblower to Fichter before, or, rather, to this place. Jan was supposed to resurrect me, but Agatha caught a whiff of

something untoward and sent her Heroes in pursuit. They almost caught up with Jan, prevented him from taking the mask from my place, and he ran to the Forest, hoping to revive me in some lord's Prime inductor..."

"So he used our inductor!" It finally dawned on Carlos.

"That was why Glassblower had to linger in Grydwald, letting Lachard catch up with him," nodded Invariat. "He needed time to prepare for the break-in."

Jan sneaked past the guards, got into the dungeon, revived his mentor, and took him out of the castle. Then they parted ways, because Glassblower was still hunted and he didn't want to expose Invariat to danger unnecessarily. Later on, Glassblower was killed, and Convivial headed south.

To take his revenge upon Lady Cobryn.

"Back at the hamlet..." Carlos coughed. "You're a Hero – why did you let the fanatics take you prisoner?"

"They fed me and my horse, gave me an opportunity to spend a night under a roof and stood guard against the Touched all night long to boot," laughed Invariat.

"Very pragmatic."

"Well, that's how it happened," said Invariat in a self-congratulatory manner. "I was about to chop those idiots to bits, but then they dragged you along, and I decided to watch how it plays out."

A Hero, a true Hero – confident, strong and cynical. Prime changes people a lot more than one could have thought.

"I'm truly sorry about Jan," said the young lord gruffly after a pause. "I was no longer proud of the victory the very same morning."

"You're a good man, Carlos."

"That's what I'd like to believe." The young man stared at the savant fixedly. "And now tell me what the Primachine is all about."

"It's a very complex device that we shall have to destroy."

"Could you be more specific?"

"I will be, later on," Invariat gave a chuckle. He spoke of his Heroic nature in slow narrative tones, and his voice sounded saddened as he mentioned Glassblower, but now he was once again businesslike and somewhat patronising. "Don't worry, Carlos, you won't remain ignorant, but we have important business to attend to."

"Allow me to estimate the importance of my business myself."

"Estimate all you like," suggested Convivial, rising from his chair. "And resurrect your Heroes while you're at it. I'll take care of our retreat."

* * *

"They won't be able to escape from here," said a glum Smasher, catching up with Lachard. "The Fingers cover a small area – even the Fichter Guard could cordon them off."

"The Fichter Guard won't have anything left to do after we get there," added Scowl, who was riding behind them. "We'll catch the Grydian cur and tear him up to shreds."

"I don't doubt that in the least," said Marcus through his teeth.

The Heroes' faces were still covered in burns, which gave them a very grim countenance indeed, but Lachard couldn't help smiling each time he looked at the battle-scarred Heroes. He chased the smile away, but it perfidiously returned to his face when he least

expected it.

“I’ll tear Gryd’s heart out personally!”

“No, I will!”

“We have to find the brat first.”

The Heroes exchanged glances and shut up.

As Marcus expected, the cart’s trail led the Cobrians to the Raised Fingers. The trail wasn’t visible on the rocky surface, but the trackers managed, confidently leading the party into the rocks.

“They could have found shelter in some abandoned mine,” said Smasher after a cough.

The Warlord realised that Lachard wouldn’t respond to the oaths sworn by himself and Scowl, and tried a different approach – he really wanted to draw Marcus into conversation in order to assess just how bad an impression he and Tom had made and try to predict Lady Cobryn’s reaction.

“There are lots of caves here, too,” said the observant Eraser.

“The caves are too small,” replied a nonchalant Marcus, who was perfectly aware of the reasons for the Heroes’ unease.

“Mines,” reminded Maximilian.

“We’ll check them if we come across them,” promised the knight.

“What if the cur deceived us by sending the cart ahead? What if he...”

“Sir Lachard! Over here!” One of the scouts headed for the enormous “bush” comprising nine Fingers, and the second one turned around and started to wave his hands in the air. “Quick!”

“The lads seem to have found something,” grinned Marcus, directing his horse towards the scout. “I do hope the news is good.”

“It depends on what you call good...” The second scout already came back from the foot of the “bush” and stood next to his partner. “The tracks lead there.”

He pointed to the bush’s solid foundation – there was no cave or mine entrance to be seen anywhere near it.

“Into the rock?” Marcus was surprised.

“Aye aye sir.”

“Have you found a passage?”

“No.”

“What have you found, then?”

“We have found some tracks,” the Border Guard smiled. “They lead straight into the rock...”

There seems to be a conspiracy whose sole purpose is to test my patience, and it’s really busy today...

However, the trackers have done their duty, and it would be pointless to demand more of them.

“You have to go around the ‘bush’ and check whether there are any other tracks...”

“You think the fugitives decided to take a shortcut across the rock?” one of the scouts giggled.

And instantly regretted what was clearly perceived as inappropriate frivolity.

“I think some of my subordinates have tongues in need of taming,” said Lachard gruffly.

“Get to it!”

“Aye aye, sir!”

The trackers headed off, and Marcus dismounted and approached Smasher, who was standing near the rock.

“What do you say?”

“I sense Prime.”

Since the Hero couldn’t be wrong, the implication was obvious:

“There is a mechanism inside,” Marcus squinted.

“Which activates the hidden gate,” concluded the Warlord.

“This is no mine – it’s a veritable hideout,” Lachard scratched his chin. “But how did the cur find out about it? And what is it, anyway?”

“We’ll find out once we enter.”

“I agree,” Marcus took a few more steps alongside the perimeter of the rock, raised his head, looked at the Fingers stretching into the sky, clucked his tongue and sighed: “We’ll need experienced blasting technicians and lots and lots of bombs.”

* * *

“Just look at yourself!”

“I won’t take this scrap metal!”

“There are no other swords.”

“I need Prime to charge my pronged gun.”

“You look like a clown!”

“I’ll kick your bum seven ways to Sunday!”

“So funny!”

“Another word and it’s on!”

They had to use Convivial’s arsenal to equip themselves, but the swords they found, finely forged though they may have been, were completely unfitting for the mighty fighters, well-accustomed to the special heavy weapons made especially for the Heroes. Hurricane was the luckiest of all – his equipment remained in the cart, and so he donned his favourite armour and armed himself with his heavy mace. Crossbow found a pronged gun in the arsenal – he handled it like a true virtuoso. Shahmana’s primary strike force was fire, so she found something that looked like a censer and already had glowing embers inside it. However, Archibald ended up wielding an ordinary two-handed sword that had bore only passing resemblance to his usual weapon. Clothes and armour turned out to be subpar as well – the garments were old, darned and too small for the mighty Heroes, ditto the armour and the cuirasses. The spaulders and greaves did fit, but they didn’t offer any real protection.

However, their equipment troubles notwithstanding, the Heroes were well aware of the fact that they were once again alive and together. Despite the precariousness of their position and the ambiguity of their prospects, the Grydians were in an excellent mood.

“Who wore these trousers before? Why didn’t they patch up this hole?”

“If you haven’t noticed, I had to content myself with a man’s shirt.”

“It reveals your lovely legs, though.”

“Where can I get some Prime? I need to charge my pronged gun.”

“This shield is rubbish.”

“You’ve got a two-handed sword.”

“It’s two-handed for mortals – it’s nowhere near heavy enough for me!”

The events of the last couple of days were related to Crossbow and Rusty Moustache by

Hurricane. The Warlord explicitly asked Carlos not to be present at the conversation, and told the fighters everything that happened since his flight from Grydwald, emphasising Carlos' bravery and his lordly behaviour. The young man never found out much about the details of the conversation, but having seen the faces of Jacob and Archibald and heard their oath, which they addressed to him as their lord, realised that Heinrich managed to find the right words. The next time there was no one else around, he thanked the Warlord for his support profusely, and heard the reply: "I didn't exaggerate anything, Carlos – I just told it like it was, and the boys called you lord of their own accord."

This made Carlos feel even warmer inside.

"Anyone seen Scowl? He owes me one."

"He owes everybody."

"I'll take out the Faceless scum first," said Heinrich in a dreamy voice. "Can't stand the bastards."

"Write him a letter so that he knows where to go."

"He'll turn up all right."

"True, that."

"Shahmana, how about you? Got a favourite Cobrian yet?"

"Their lady."

"Never realised you swung both ways."

"Shut it."

Fidget tried to cuff Crossbow at the nape in jest, but he jumped away laughing.

"Just like kittens, aren't they?" said Invariat, who managed to approach without making a sound, in a low voice.

Carlos, who was observing the Heroes from the doorway of the armoury, nodded curtly:
"They surely are."

"You'd never guess each one was a cold-blooded murderer."

"They're warriors."

"You might say that."

"You should know."

Invariat shuddered.

Now!realised the young man.

He had been itching to discuss the savant's new condition for a while now, but things had been hectic enough, and, most importantly, Convivial's behaviour did not warrant anything in the way of a frank discussion. But right now, having noticed Invariat's reaction to a mention of his "Heroic" nature, Carlos realised the moment was just right.

"You talk too much, you fuss too much, and you can get rude from time to time, but I don't sense anything in the way of aggression coming from you – that half-conscious desire to use force found in all the other Heroes. Why's that?"

The savant gave the young man an ugly look, but replied calmly:

"Why would that interest you?"

"Because we have a hard battle before us, and I'd like to know what to expect of you."

"Makes sense." Convivial held a pause, and answered a few seconds later: "You don't feel my aggression because I constantly have it under control, every single second. I forbid myself any thought of hitting someone, and whenever I feel a surge of fury, I start talking."

"Is it hard?"

“It gets easier every day.”

“Really?”

Invariat sighed, signalled to the young man to follow him, stepped into the corridor, closing the door behind him, and continued passionately:

“I don’t deny it – I have changed indeed. I try to see things in the same way as before, but this overflowing feeling of power demands a release, tries to give me cues, tries to control me, and so I end up using this power against itself. That’s what it boils down to. It’s silly to some extent, of course, but I chose this path out of reluctance to change in accordance with Prime’s wishes.”

“Prime’s wishes?” Carlos looked surprised.

“It was Prime that changed me, after all,” Invariat sighed. “Apparently, its power awakens certain features of my character, the ones that I once suppressed – it may be my own passions that are trying to break free, but it was Prime that had stirred them up, understand?”

“I’m trying to.”

“Very good.” Convivial cracked his fingers. “I’ve seen what becomes of people who transform into Heroes, and I don’t want to follow their example. When I decided to accept Prime, I sensed that there would be changes and got ready to withstand them. I accepted the challenge. I realised I wouldn’t remain the same, but I don’t want to accept any road chosen for me blindly – I make my own path. I struggle. And I can see that I am winning.”

“You are strong.”

“I am human, first and foremost. I was born to a woman, I had free will, and Prime... well, Prime came later. And it cannot deny me my human essence. It cannot break my will.”

“Your will of iron,” said Carlos.

“Yes.” Invariat held a pause. “Thank you.”

He wouldn’t have minded ending the conversation, but the young lord wouldn’t back off:

“So you reckon you can be a genius and a Hero at the same time?”

“I believe it is possible.”

“Any successes?”

“I see what you’re getting at...” drawled Convivial. “I had no opportunity to get to work, but I know that I wouldn’t have managed anything in the first couple of days. I’m absolutely certain nothing would have come of it – I could only reproduce but wasn’t able to invent anything new. But now...” The savant smiled a dreamy smile. “I’m finally getting ideas again.”

That moment he looked like a sweet tooth who finally got his hands on a jar of honey.

“You ridiculed the Primobile and the carriages, but they can be built! That will make a journey from Fichter to the capital take two days and not a month – imagine that!”

Invariat switched to his favourite topic – he could discuss science for hours, and that made Carlos interrupt the savant.

“So you’re saying you can stay who you are even once you’re a Hero?”

“Yes,” nodded Convivial. “But you’ve got to be strong.”

The men fell silent for a moment, listening to the bursts of laughter audible from the armoury. Then Invariat said in a low voice:

“The Cobrians will be here soon.”

“Will they be able to get inside?”

“They will – if they have experienced blast engineers along and a decent supply of powerful Prime bombs on them.”

“They’ll take a while getting here from Fichter...”

“Lachard is intelligent. The instant he realises we have a hideaway in the Fingers, he’ll give orders about the blast engineers and the bombs. He’ll have everything necessary by the time the trackers find the entrance.”

“How are we going to escape?”

“I have a plan.”

Convivial invited Carlos to follow him with a nod, reached the end of the corridor and took the spiral staircase that led upstairs.

“There’s a cargo lift here, too, but it’s easier to take the stairs.”

“You have a second exit?”

“You could call it that,” Invariat opened a creaky door, flattening himself against the wall to let the young man through across the narrow landing, and smiled. “Behold.”

“Knock me senseless with a ten-pound cogwheel!”

“Like it, do you?”

While the downstairs part of the laboratory simply had high ceilings, this place was nothing short of Brobdingnagian. The enormous hall occupied the entire rock, and was about one hundred and thirty feet high.

However, even the enormous size of the place was dwarfed once the young lord’s attention was drawn to what he saw at the very centre of the hall.

“What... what is this?”

“Impressive?” inquired Invariat, greatly pleased with the young man’s reaction.

“What is it?” The young man licked his lips. “What is this thing, Invariat?”

“Our chance for victory, Carlos!” The savant stood on the small balcony that protruded from the wall at the height of thirty feet. “This is the Čapek – my main invention after the Primachine. And it will help us win.”

* * *

“Are you certain?” inquired a suspicious Lachard.

“Absolutely,” the blasting engineer nodded. “Everything will be carried off without the slightest hitch.”

Even though the bombs and experts who knew how to use them correctly arrived from Fichter in the middle of the night, the preparations for the blasting of the gate took longer than Marcus expected. Once the sky went grey, the experts were all over the rock, examining every tiny crack and barely visible scratch that allowed an estimate of the true size of the passage. Then, once the panel that was in their way was densely covered in red marks, the blasting engineers had a conference using an enormous number of scientific terms unfamiliar to Lachard and performing lightning-fast calculations using nothing but pen and paper. This conference had eaten up the most time – almost four hours. Then everything went into motion again – the experts came to a consensus, told the warriors to retreat to a safer distance, gingerly placed the bombs and...

“Mind your head, Sir Lachard.”

“Are you sure this will work?”

"I blew up the walls of the Maladarbian castle," grunted the expert as he lit the fuse. "I know what I'm doing."

Whatever he said next was drowned out by the sound of an enormous explosion.

Two cartloads of extremely powerful Prime bombs and a group of experts succeeded in a task that had seemed impossible to Marcus – they blew up a huge piece of the rock, which turned out to be an incredibly thick panel, and uncovered the entrance into a tunnel.

"Forward!"

"Where are we going?!"

Lachard originally intended to send the Warlord alone and leave the Eraser in reserve, but once the dust from the explosion settled down, Scowl dashed forward, to be followed by Smasher and the soldiers. The Eraser may have been unable to resist the smell of blood, or, perhaps, had wanted to wash off his shame as soon as possible.

"Idiot," grumbled Marcus.

"A Hero," corrected the blasting engineer.

And snorted derisively.

* * *

A hideous howling sound announced the destruction of the gate to the fugitives by filling the upstairs hall, making them exchange glances – pursuit was close at hand.

"It is time!" decided Invariat, and loudly barked: "Crossbow, now!"

Jacob threw a lever, and the ceiling, which turned out to be an enormous hatchway, slowly started to break in two halves, revealing the sky at false dawn to the group.

"Buckets of Prime," whispered Marida, astonished by how the massive rock above them turned out to be a mere panel, too. "Is this your emergency exit?"

"Impressive, isn't it?"

"You could say that again."

"Dokhtish science," Carlos erupted in a sharp staccato of laughter. "Don't you agree our mechanics are every bit as astonishing as your Adornian mages?"

"I'd like to object to that, but I cannot, really," admitted the girl.

The colossal underground hideout struck the Adornian woman as gloomy and oppressive, but she admitted the fact that its builders have done something quite extraordinary. She found the secret panels that hid the entrance and the exit, or the roof of the laboratory, very impressive, too, but the ship that was supposed to take them away from the Cobrians was the most impressive thing of all. This invention of Convivial had an extremely profound effect on Marida.

"Crossbow!" shouted Invariat when the ceiling panels got more than halfway open.

"The second switch!"

He expected the Cobrians to have filled the downstairs rooms and found the staircase leading upstairs by that time.

"And hurry here!" added Carlos.

He could have held his peace – the Hero knew his duties perfectly well.

Jacob quickly threw the second switch, and ran for dear life to the ship.

"Cast off!"

Hurricane and Crossbow cut the ropes.

"Five!" yelled Convivial, standing at the wheel.

The ship gave a lurch and started to rise rapidly.

“Four!”

Crossbow gripped a rope and started climbing to where his friends were. Fidget helped him get aboard.

“Three!”

Marida liked to say “buckets of prime”, and there were indeed bucketloads of the magical substance involved – it filled the Prime bomb set by Convivial throughout the laboratory.

“Two!”

“In a second,” Carlos smiled.

“One!”

And there was a loud blast down below the ship.

Dust. Clouds of dust that came out of the blasted gate was the first thing Marcus saw. Then he heard the sound of the explosion and felt the blow – an invisible hand pushed him hard in the chest, and as he fell, Lachard saw that the rock was imploding on itself... The sight would have struck anyone as surreal, particularly a confused and shell-shocked knight who was about to celebrate victory. The centre of the “bush’s” enormous foundation fell in, three of the nine Fingers broke and fell, adding to the noise and the dust, and irretrievably burying the warriors sent inside.

The valiant group of fighters was dead, and Lachard’s forces were now down to four mortal warriors who were slowly rising from the ground, but Marcus didn’t think of the vanquished Heroes or the fact that the fugitives could easily wipe out the remainder of the Cobrians. His attention was drawn to another incredible sight – an enormous machine that rose majestically over the clouds of dust and the blasted rock.

A ship?

The bottom part of the machine did in fact resemble one of the flat-bottomed barges that carried timber and ore up and down the rivers and canals of the Dokhtish Empire. The flowing lines of the steel broadsides, a squat bulkhead in the aft, and an anchor hanging from the prow... Lachard thought his eyes played a trick on him for a moment – barges cannot fly, after all! But the very next moment he realised that the amazing ship bears no relation to water – the “barge” had no oars or sails, but sported two extra rudders attached to the sides like wings. The bulkhead concealed powerful Prime engines, and there was what looked like sticks rotating around long poles to Marcus.

But the most amazing part wasn’t the barge itself, but rather the enormous and tightly filled bag of air that resembled a goatskin some thirty feet above it. It was attached to the “barge” by a multitude of ropes, and appeared to be the force that was lifting it into the air.

“The Touched gobble me up,” moaned a nearby soldier. “What is this thing?”

Lachard didn’t have any answer to that.

* * *

“I can see the Cobrians!”

“They’re so tiny!”

“Runts!”

Carlos and his Heroes gathered near the low side and peered with great curiosity at the figures of soldiers, which looked like toys.

"Buckets of Prime, I can't believe this is really happening," muttered Marida.

"So you thought you had us, did you?" Much to everyone's surprise, this came from Rusty Moustache, who was completely flabbergasted by the journey on Invariat's ship. "You thought you could catch us? Bite it, you scum!"

And Archibald gave the Cobrians an obscene gesture.

Hurricane, Fidget and Crossbow burst out laughing.

"I can't see Lachard anywhere," said Carlos. "Is he there?"

"He's sitting on the ground," replied Shahmana immediately. "Must have been thrown there by the explosion."

"He has to be killed," said the young lord coldly. "Can you do it?"

"It's a bit far from here."

"Invariat!" Carlos turned to Convivial, who stood at the wheel, and yelled, trying to be heard over the noise made by the Prime engine. "Get the ship lower!"

"What for?"

"We have to get Lachard!"

The scientist nodded and started pulling on levers, and Carlos looked at the Heroes once again. It wasn't an honest battle that he demanded of them this time, but rather the cold-blooded murder of a foe who couldn't fight back, and the young man wanted to know how his best warriors would react to his order.

They weren't overjoyed, but they understood.

"That's right," sighed Hurricane. "You can't have it any other way."

But the Warlord wouldn't have to get involved in this dirty business – he and Rusty Moustache were more useful at close quarters, and it would take someone with a ranged weapon to get Lachard.

"This is revenge," said Shahmana grimly.

Revenge is of secondary importance – Lachard is too intelligent to be left alive, thought the young man to himself.

"The scum has got to pay for the death of Lord Dathos," said Crossbow resolutely, cocking his pronged gun.

The ship was descending, the distance to the Cobrians was some forty yards, and they started to scatter, having assessed the danger. Lachard jumped to his feet and started running to the rocks, so there was very little time left to get him.

"Now!"

The arrow sent by Fidget struck the earth right in front of Marcus. One might have thought that the Hero Maiden missed, but she knew what she was doing. Lachard stopped and froze for a few seconds – enough for Jacob to put a pronged gun charge through his head.

"Done."

Neither Shahmana, nor Crossbow felt any joy. They had simply done their job – it was easy and necessary, but rather unpleasant. They killed a man without giving him a chance to fight back, which is why Carlos thought he had to say:

"Thank you."

He didn't expect any answer.

Invariat turned the wheel, pulled at a couple of levers again, setting the rudders into motion, and the Čapek started to rise above the rocks slowly, soon to be lost among the

white clouds.

* * *

"Why haven't you taken care of Marcus?" inquired Lady Cobryn, so slowly she may as well have been clipping every syllable, her jaw muscles contorted in fury.

"We..."

"There were two of you. Two!"

"Lachard ordered for us to go into the cave, and stayed outside himself..."

"What do I need heroes for, if you cannot save a single man? Who the hell would need the likes of you, anyway?"

Scowl and Smasher cast down their eyes. They acknowledged the Lady's right to be furious and even rabid; all they wanted was for the unpleasant conversation to end as soon as possible. Lachard was dead, after all, and nothing could be changed about that.

"Twice... No! Three times you fell on your faces in front of some brat! A provincial nonentity from the Forest, who never even took part in real battle!"

Her famous composure cracked, and Agatha was no longer expressing her displeasure with the Heroes who failed to do their task – she was balancing on the verge of hysterics, automatically finding the most stinging insults.

"We..."

Maximilian Smasher wanted to point out that nobody had expected the collapse of the cave that housed the secret laboratory, that the trap was set perfectly and that the Heroes had to die a most unpleasant death – both he and the Eraser suffocated slowly... but he was cut short.

"You aren't worth the Prime I spend to resurrect you! You are absolutely worthless!"

The heroes hung their heads as low as they could, their faces red with shame.

They were ashamed of being given a thrashing by the lady and insulted by her words, but the least pleasant thing of all was the presence of Hoarfrost – the fortunate Faceless One had gotten his own in prison fighting the Imperial Hero, and was therefore spared the humiliating reprimand. But Scowl and Smasher weren't only uneasy about the fact that Ulle would relish sharing the details of this disgusting scene with the rest of the Cobryan Heroes – both the Warlord and the Eraser realised that the rabid Agatha could react in any way at all, and the Faceless One didn't care much about the identity of his victims – they could be the Touched, Adornians or fellow Heroes, it was the process that mattered to him...

"Idiots!" hissed Lady Cobryn, and by her tone Tom and Maximilian realised that the worst was over. "What dungeon were you talking about, anyway?"

"At the very centre of Raised Fingers," replied Smasher hastily.

"A whole 'bush' that is hollow," added Scowl and instantly corrected himself: "Was hollow, that is, everything's fallen in. There were corridors and halls..."

"And a panel for a gate, looking just like the surface of the rock, so that you can't really tell what it is."

"A Prime mechanism raises it."

"We reached the study..."

"We saw a workshop on our way. Mechanisms, machines..."

"And then the blast got us."

"The walls and the ceiling fell..."

“A workshop, mechanisms, machinery and a study...” said Agatha in a barely audible voice. “Underground...”

Who could have built a hideout like that right next to Fichter? Right in Cobria, for that matter! In my Cobria, where there are lots of patrolmen and border guards, where even the smugglers find it hard to stay out of sight! The answer is no one. Or, rather, a hideout like that could have been built, but construction works on this scale could never have stayed a secret. Therefore, someone used a prebuilt hideout for his own purposes.

Who could it be?

The answer seemed obvious, but Agatha refused to believe it. She could feel the damn answer close at hand, but refused to accept it for the time being.

“You mentioned a tramp that accompanied the Grydian Fire Fox in Fichter. Tell be about him.”

“Short and wimpy,” jabbered Scowl.

“A runt, you could kill him by sneezing too loud,” rumbled Smasher.

“Bald as an egg.”

“Jubert mentioned his name – Acacius.”

“Benefit.”

“He said he was an itinerant savant.”

“This Acacius is supposed to have come to town along with Carlos.”

His future is as grand as yours...

Could the reason for its grandness be that the boy was being assisted by...

No! No! That is impossible!

But facts are hard to ignore. Lachard found burglar’s equipment of the highest class among Glassblower’s personal effects, the likes of which are used only for robbing the treasuries of lords. Glassblower himself lingered in Grydwald, even though the pursuit was already snapping at his heels, and spent three precious days with an unknown agenda. No, the agenda was no longer unknown. Now everything fell into place.

Well done, Invari! Well done indeed! Nobody has managed to outwit me with such ease and elegance so far!

“Prepare for battle,” Agatha told the Heroes in a hard voice. “You’ll be shortly given an excellent opportunity to wash away your shame and to show what you are really worth.”

Because now that Lady Cobryn finally started believing in what was going on, she realised what kind of battle it was that Yolanda warned her about: the Three Peaks would be attacked, and the attack was imminent. The young Grydian lord and his Heroes would be led by Invari, who knew every stone of the castle – small wonder that the old clairvoyant could not predict the outcome of the battle. Small wonder indeed...

* * *

“You know, the first time I met a Dokht and got to know you, heard your views, I wasn’t even surprised – I was in deep shock. I couldn’t get it into my head how anyone can live right next to Prime and not become imbued with it. I couldn’t understand what could possibly have made you treat Prime as... wood, or coal, some sort of mineral that can be unashamedly used in those strange and ugly constructions that you call mechanisms. But what amazed me even more is that even the advent of the Heroes didn’t make you change your point of view.”

“We are the way we are,” smiled Agatha.

“Yes,” agreed Elario. “You are the way you are, quite unlike us.”

“But we’re all people.”

“Once again you’re right.”

Having finished with the Heroes, Lady Cobryn retired to her inner sanctum, where Hirawa awaited her. In reality, Agatha yearned to spend some time on her own in order to calm down and put her thoughts in order, but she had to go all the same to avoid insulting the proud Adornian. She thought she’d have to feign unearthly joy, but Elario caught the mood of his beloved and set her down into an armchair to start a leisurely discussion.

“Our races have both made considerable advances in the usage of Prime, each in their own way, of course. But I still find the Adornian principles more appealing – please pardon me for saying so.”

“Who could have thought it?” Agatha cracked a reluctant joke.

“And yet it’s true,” Hirawa smiled in response. “I don’t know what it is that your Heroes feel, but I really enjoy being in control of Prime. When I create something, when I use its power to bring something new to life, what I feel is no mere pleasure, it’s the exaltation of a child.” Elario took a seed out of his garish doublet’s pocket, placed it on his open palm and fixed his gaze upon it intently. “The very thought that I am capable of changing the world in accordance with my wishes, like the gods of old, fills me with emotion that’s quite unlike anything else...” The seed awoke – a thin green shoot slipped out across Hirawa’s palm, and then began to rise, obeying the mage’s command. “Some silly Dokhts opine that the power that Adornians have over Prime comes naturally because our bodies are imbued with it, but this is far from the truth. Prime listens to us most intently, and only responds to those capable of strong emotion. Those who have a rich fantasy and a will of iron. Just wishing for it isn’t enough, you have to struggle for it...” The green shoot became a stalk crowned by a breathtakingly beautiful flower – a pale pink chryndalix. “You must leave Prime with no choice – you let it know that your wish is a given, an absolute, that you will not turn back. That is the only path to success.”

Elario handed the flower to Agatha.

“Thank you.”

“I thought you could do with something lovely right now.”

Nobody has ever heard the arrogant and selfish Hirawa utter words like that. Nobody. Never. Lady Cobryn was the only exception.

“I’ve got you,” said Agatha softly, delighted by the flower’s aroma.

“Lovely, me?” Elario was surprised.

“You are exceptional. And you’re quite unlike any Dokht. That must be what I found attractive in the first place.”

“What you found attractive in the first place was the fact that I’m a mage.”

“The best one in the world.”

“Quite so.”

“This is another thing that makes you unlike any Dokht,” Agatha reclined on a pillow, giving the Adornian a sight of her round breasts squeezed tight by the corset, and asked: “What did you find attractive about me?”

Her pose was playful, but there was no hint of playfulness in the lady’s voice.

“We’re going to conquer the world – what could be more beautiful?”

“Is that it?”

"You know it isn't," said Hirawa softly.

He approached the couch and sat down on the floor without thinking twice about it, right on the shaggy carpet, ending up right next to Agatha. "I'm an Adornian, so I've spent my whole life striving for perfection – it is our burden, an urge we cannot help. I seek perfection everywhere, in everything, and my heart was conquered when I met a perfect woman. We have a goal, we want to conquer the world by restoring the great Empire, you suggested it and I agreed. But let me tell you the truth, Agatha – you could just as easily have ordered me to create new shoes, or dresses, or accessories for you every day, it doesn't matter. And I would do it, because I'm smitten; I have submitted."

The lady stroked the Southerner's rainbow hair with her hand.

"It's called love, Elario, not submission. We love each other."

"We are very different."

Hirawa brought Agatha's hand to his lips and gently kissed her palm.

"This is why we have found what we had lacked in one another. You and I are the perfect proof that the Adornians and Dokhts can live in peace. We are the proof – our plan can succeed."

"But it requires a great deal of work to succeed."

"Yes..." Lady Cobryn inhaled the chryndalix aroma once again. "Isn't it amazing?"

"It's all for you, Agatha. It's all for you."

She felt Hirawa's excitement, and barely managed to fight back the temptation.

She had to get back to business. Right now.

"Our dim savants report that they're all but ready to begin the experiment. They claim to have deciphered Invariat's writings and brought the Primachine into a working condition."

"Shall we go to the basement?"

"They need another couple of hours." Agatha fell silent. "Are you feeling confident?"

"Absolutely, my love. I won't let you down."

* * *

Clouds...

Clouds underneath, with the forest's green fur below, lined with blue curves of the rivers. And the sun seems to be close enough to touch.

Clouds...

Carlos had never seen anything more beautiful or amazing in his whole life. He never felt such rapture from beholding a sight, complemented by the presence of Marida right next to him. The delicate raven-haired Marida, trustingly clinging to the young lord's shoulder.

"I have noticed that you didn't share your number-one secret with your friends," said the girl softly.

"I love surprises," said Carlos in just as low a voice.

They stood on the very prow of the Čapek, all alone, and so the young lord didn't feel embarrassed to hold Marida in his arms and touch her hair with his lips from time to time, covering them in kisses, light as the clouds that flew by. The kisses of a man in love.

"You've managed to surprise them once already."

"That much is true. The crew was surprised to say the least."

"But they held their tongues."

“What else could they do?”

Gryd’s Heroes weren’t too wild about the news that their lord had a new female companion. But if Shahmana, Crossbow and Rusty Moustache were merely surprised, believing Carlos’ choice to be nothing but a young man’s whim, Hurricane, who had fought in the great war, was outright hostile to Marida. Heinrich was well aware that the young lord had a soft spot for southern women, but concubines were one thing, and a fellow team member quite another. The Warlord’s face contorted in disgust whenever he saw Marida, and you could tell that Hurricane had to make a considerable effort to keep quiet.

“He is my Hero, and so he’s got to respect my decisions.”

“Am I your decision?”

“You’re a whole lot more than that.”

“We shouldn’t delude ourselves,” whispered the Southerner. “Fate won’t let us be together.”

“It depends on no one but ourselves.”

“It should depend on no one but ourselves,” sighed Marida. “But things are way too complicated. The Dokhts and Adornians will keep looking at each other with hostility for a long time.”

“We are the ones who must decide our own destiny,” repeated the young man.

“Nothing else makes sense.” He pulled the girl even closer to him and continued: “I heard that if you sail east from the estuary of the Ylva, you can reach beautiful woody islands. They weren’t scarred by the Cataclysm and haven’t been sullied by the Touched; they’re also completely uninhabited...”

“Dream Isles,” Marida sighed.

“Their hills are covered in thick woods, there are creeks and rivers hidden in the trees, and it stays bright and sunny almost all year long.”

“A fairy tale.”

“We could check. I’m sure Invariat won’t mind a journey East after we sort Lady Cobryn out. We’ll fly, though, instead of sailing...”

“Are you prepared to live the rest of your life on an island?”

“I am. With you.”

Marida smiled.

“A fairy tale...”

“Did I interrupt anything?”

The noise of the wind and the humming of the Prime engines made his steps inaudible, which is why Invariat asked his question from the distance of some ten feet, and still had to shout.

Carlos turned his head and responded gruffly:

“No, you didn’t.”

The Heroes towered behind the short Convivial – Hurricane was sombre, because the Adornian stood right next to his lord, the nonchalant Shahmana and the smiling Jacob. Crossbow, just as Carlos had expected, was perfectly fine with Marida – the jolly duellist adored women, and he could relate to the young man’s feelings perfectly well.

“We have to come up with some sort of a plan,” said Invariat.

Rusty Moustache, the last team member, stood at the wheel. Normally nonchalant as a lamppost, he fell head over heels in love with the ship, asked Convivial to give him a few

lessons, and was now proudly steering the Čapek, taking it carefully through the clouds.

"We need to come up with some plan for storming the Three Peaks," boomed Hurricane, eying Marida darkly.

"We have taken a good supply of Prime bombs from the laboratory," grunted Carlos. "We'll give Lady Cobryn the entertainment of her life."

"We won't be able to destroy the Primachine with bombs," Invariad sighed. "We won't destroy the Castle, either. Nor shall we slaughter all the warriors, let alone the Heroes. Like it or not, we'll have to descend."

"So descend we shall," said the young man in an imperturbable voice. "Let's surprise Lady Cobryn with our courage and the presence of the Heroes."

"Agatha is no fool – she knows it perfectly well that a bunch of Heroes are coming," noted Convivial.

"Whatever would give her the idea?" asked Hurricane, surprised.

"Some Heroes definitely participated in the attack on the laboratory and got buried. Correspondingly, they reported to Agatha that an enormous underground hideaway was found in the Raised Fingers. And Agatha, whose alacrity I've just commended, realised it belonged to me."

"You said Lady Cobryn thought you dead."

"We live in the age of Heroes, my friend, and Agatha is doubtlessly aware of that," said Invariad harshly. "I won't be able to take her in the second time, and so we must assume that Agatha knows everything about us."

"Not everything," Carlos objected. "She doesn't know how many catalysts I've managed to save."

"All of them, or none," Invariad made a dismissive gesture. "It is so obvious that you don't even have to say anything."

The Grydian Heroes smiled, Carlos blushed, and Marida gave the diminutive savant, who had the audacity to be impudent with her man, a cold look.

"I don't think that it is as obvious as you say it is," said the young lord gruffly. "Lady Cobryn does not know the exact number of Heroes, and we must use it to our advantage."

"How?"

"You tell me," Carlos was fully in command of himself again. "You have a plan, or you wouldn't have come to me."

The Heroes started smiling again, but this time it was Invariad's chastisement that struck them as funny. The young lord needed but a single phrase to transform Invariad into the chief of staff who came to the commander-in-chief for approval.

"I have a very complex plan," confirmed Invariad. "You're going to like it."

"Is it dangerous?"

"About as much as teasing a three-head."

"I like it already," Hurricane laughed.

"Really?"

"I am angry."

"I see."

"Why don't we head for the capital?" asked the Crossbow cautiously. "We could report everything the way it happened, and let the Emperor handle Lady Cobryn. Why should we have to take the risk?"

"Because I am Lord Gryd," said Carlos with pride, eyeing his Heroes over slowly. "I am

not going to hide behind the Emperor's back. Lady Cobryn has caused me a grievance, and she's going to pay for it." He turned to Convivial and commanded: "Tell me about your plan."

* * *

"Say it again!"

"Pigeon post," obediently reported the Guard who came running to Lady Cobryn. "A top priority report from the Overturned Mountain: a flying ship is approaching the castle."

"Overturned Mountain?"

"The westernmost outpost," explained the captain of the Black Eagles. "At the foothill, near the boundary of the forest."

"What's a flying ship?"

"I have no way of knowing," Gutscher turned to the guard. "Are there any details in the report?"

"None, sir!"

"No details," confirmed the lady, browsing through the letter. "A flying ship. That's it." She crumpled up the piece of paper in her hand.

Someday, dear Agatha, I'll take you for a ride high up in the sky, among the clouds, where the birds reign supreme. And on that day you will have every right to say that you have the whole world at your feet...

This is what Invariat Convivial told her once. Back when they still were friends – and even more than friends. This was how he replied to the question about his frequent journeys to Fichter. He also smiled and promised her a surprise.

A bird's-eye view... So that's what your secret was – you were building a flying ship, my dear friend, you wanted to conquer the skies... No, you have conquered the skies. And now I'll have to wage war against a ship floating among the clouds.

"Your Ladyship?" asked the Captain meekly.

"Yes?"

"Your orders?"

How fast was the pigeon? Was it faster than the ship? Or not? How much time have I got?

"Sound an alarm, Gutscher."

"Aye aye, Your Ladyship."

The Captain of the Eagles was about to leave the study, but he was stopped.

"I haven't finished!"

"I beg your pardon."

Agatha bit her lip, pondering what she was about to say one last time, and continued in a confident voice:

"Split our best marksmen in three groups and place them on the tallest towers. That's the first order. The second: explain it to them in no uncertain terms that we shall be attacked by an airborne enemy."

"Airborne enemy?"

"You've heard the term 'flying ship', haven't you, Captain? An extraordinary machine is approaching the Three Peaks, but! It's nothing but a machine – a human creation. Soldiers may gape in amazement all they want, but there's nothing to fear; it's a mere machine. Anyone who panics must instantly be hanged."

“I understand, Your Ladyship,” muttered Gutscher.

“And make sure the groups have a decent means of communication – the instant we discover the flying ship’s weak spots, we’ll have to start hitting them with all we have.”

“Aye aye, Your Ladyship!”

The Captain rushed out of the study; general alarm was sounded, and, five minutes later, the sound of the guards’ boots filled the corridors and the staircases of the castle.

* * *

Things were hectic and tense in the underground hall. The savants and their assistants, artificers and their apprentices – everyone involved in the construction of the Primachine and thus taking Lady Cobryn’s threats personally, shuttled between the mechanisms for the final time, testing their readiness. They regulated the Prime feed pressure and controlled the purity of the alchemical ingredients, lubricated all the moving parts and checked the strength of the joints, whispered prayers and curses under their voices and casting endless glances at the large clock counting down the minutes before the beginning of the experiment, dreading the arrival of Lady Cobryn. The artificers and the savants were of the opinion that they had managed to solve Convivial’s riddle and repair the machine, but a definitive answer could be obtained only experimentally, and that’s what the savants and artificers feared above all else.

Because Invariat was a genius and they were not. And the difference could cost them their lives now.

“Poor sods,” said Elario with a chuckle, observing the Dokhts scuttling around. “They’re fully dependent on their levers and cogwheels, and yet they fancy themselves as free people capable of controlling Prime. They are convinced in their power over Prime, but any machine they build can fall apart because of one measly arithmetical error. Is that power? Is that freedom?”

“You tell me,” suggested Eddie Thunder grimly.

The Imperial Hero looked like death warmed up. He was completely naked and chained to the pentagram that stood at the centre of the Primachine, and there were fresh bruises on his face and body – the Cobrians missed no opportunity to torture their prisoner. And yet the Lightning Master’s behaviour stayed firm – he wished to give the Adornian no reason to be sly.

“It is the intellectual slavery that your science brought to you Dokhts,” replied Hirawa arrogantly. “Your naïve attempts to explain everything in the whole world are ridiculous and pitiful.”

“Just like your taste in clothes, in other words,” Eddiechuckled.

“The notion of taste is another thing you lack.”

“This didn’t hold us back from kicking your arses in the War for the Foggy Grove.”

“Hmmm...” Elario’s countenance darkened.

Lord Hirawa fought for Adornia honestly in that war, got wounded twice, and still felt very uneasy about the defeat. Even his close friendship with Lady Cobryn could not make Elario forget the past. And the past spelled bloodshed.

“We shall kick your arses again if we have to,” promised Thunder. “And harder than before, too.”

“Even though I love and respect Lady Cobryn, it will be my pleasure to kill a Dokhtish Hero,” said Hirawa in a soft voice. “In particular, a blabbermouth like you.”

"Did Agatha sell out?" Eddie inquired. "Fell in love with you and sided with the Adornians, did she?"

"Treason? You're so limited, Eddie Thunder..." said Hirawa with pity. "What treason could you be possibly talking about? What could Agatha do? Give Cobria away to Adornia?"

"And use your army to attack other provinces."

"Is that what Petersen had thought?"

Eddie held his peace.

"I am ready for a frank conversation," Elario chuckled. "We have time, and I'll be glad to talk to you. But I'm no fan of monologues, so you should say something, too. Did Petersen believe that Agatha sided with the Adornians?"

"He suspected it," admitted Eddie.

"And he was considered one of the most intelligent Prosecutors in the Empire," said Hirawa with mock sadness. "You're doing much worse than I could hope."

"But you're here," frowned Thunder. "And you admitted to being her friend yourself."

"Friend? Oh Prime-imbued interlocutor, I am far more than that: I am the love of her life. And she is mine. I despise my fellow countrymen just as much as Agatha despises hers. The Lords are pompous and arrogant cretins, and your Imperial couple are miserable bastards who don't deserve their titles."

"I get it, I get it," Eddie interrupted the Adornian, who was all fired up. "Everybody around you is an idiot, and you alone are the only one who's intelligent and high-minded, your lonely genius understood by no one..."

"Alone?" Elario looked surprised. "I have Agatha."

"Congratulations. So you're a couple and you can have a family."

"So we shall. But it will be no mere family – it shall be a ruling dynasty started by Agatha and myself." The Adornian fell silent for a while. "Most importantly – we have power, we have the ability to lead our unfortunate countrymen to happiness and prosperity." Hirawa's voice sounded firmer – now he was talking about something he believed in wholeheartedly. "We are the only ones with this kind of power, Hero – the only ones. Only myself and Agatha can bring our countries to eternal peace. Truly eternal! We can render all wars unnecessary!"

"No wars?" Thunder looked surprised. "It doesn't work like that."

"You don't think struggle for power bears any relation to real war, do you? Got enough brains to understand that? Intrigue and internecine conflicts are eternal – that's what human nature is like. The lords won't stop squabbling among themselves. I'm speaking about real wars – long, cruel, bloody and capable of sucking out the lifeblood of a country, they're what we intend to leave far behind, me and Agatha. Our reign..."

"Your reign?"

"Our dynasty will unite the Dokhts and the Adornians," explained Hirawa grandly.

"Didn't you say something about my brain?" asked Eddie. "How about you?"

"I'm fine," Elario calmed the Hero down. "Lady Cobryn has webs spanning your entire Empire – lords and Prosecutors alike obey her every whim. I have done the same in Adornia. We need to take but a step, a single step, that will demonstrate our power to everyone. As soon as we take it, the undecided ones will take our side, and the rest will be destroyed. So it shall be! The Dokhts and the Adornians shall live under a single crown again! We shall establish peace..."

“Having chopped your enemies’ heads off? I’m not surprised.”

“We shall kill off our enemies,” Hirawa nodded. “But they will all be lords and not commoners.”

“You care a lot about the commoners, don’t you?”

“A lot more than I do about the aristocracy,” Elario was perfectly frank. “You see, Hero, we need someone to rule over, me and Agatha. We need subjects. It is easy enough to find new lords – just call, and multitudes will queue up, but the people, the salt of the earth, as it were – well, it’s more difficult with those. The people are the basis for the existence of any country, and wise rulers take care of the people first and foremost. We shall give people peace and prosperity, and get the loyalty of the majority in return – no Lord would dare to challenge central power under such conditions.”

“Did the two of you come up with all this?” enquired Thunder sceptically.

“That’s where we’re headed together,” corrected the Adornian.

“What about the final step you were talking about... What is it?”

“Interested?”

“If I understand you correctly, I’m about to die, and so you risk nothing.”

“You are indeed about to die,” confirmed Hirawa. “You will die a final death – no Hero can survive the Primachine, and your catalyst shall soon turn into a meaningless piece of bric-a-brac. But you won’t die in vain – you will facilitate the first step for me and Agatha.”

“I am condemned to death, so I have the right to know.” Eddie cocked his head in the direction of the humming mechanisms. “What’s all this? What ungodly abomination did you bring into existence?”

“This is the Primachine, and it...” Eddie made a pause, raised his eyes to the ceiling, with thick ventilation shafts sticking out, and inquired: “Did you hear the noise?”

* * *

“Aim better!” cried Invari, clenching the wheel. “Blow up the towers!”

“We’re trying!” cried back Carlos.

“Try harder!”

“Kiss a three-head, idiot!” Marida scowled back, dodging the crossbow shots fired over the tall broadside.”

“What was that?”

“Don’t get in my way!”

The Adornian tested the fireshooter that she picked up from the deck, stood up and shot; judging by the screams of the Cobrians, she didn’t miss.

“Two down!”

“Not enough!”

There were only two Prime crossbows aboard – they had a long range, but took too long to recharge, so Carlos and Marida had to use Prime bombs during the intervals.

“How many are left!?”

“About three dozen!”

“Four!” cried Invari. “Four!!!”

The Čapekhovered between the three peaks of the Cobryan Castle, or, rather, between its three main towers, which made it possible to attack them all. However, the very first minutes of the battle proved the tactics in question left much to be desired.

“Don’t waste your bombs! Aim better!”

But how would you aim? The roofs are sloping, there are no open landings, and the marksmen are all trying to hit the hovering Čapek from the narrow lancet-shaped windows; the Prime bombs hurled in response by Carlos and Marida flew right past them for the most part, bouncing off the walls and falling, to explode far below, in the courtyard of the castle. Had there been a cannon aboard, even the most primitive kind, things would have been completely different; the way things stood, you could rely on nothing but good aim and a firm hand, as well as two crossbows that seemed to recharge with all the haste of drunken tortoises.

“Aim better!”

“Got it!!!”

Marida managed to get a bomb into the window of one of the towers, and the resulting explosion was a victory march to Carlos’ ears. The fire relentlessly incinerated every marksman in the room, but no rest came – after each successful hit, the dead were replaced by fresh reserves, and the castle defenders kept shooting away at the Čapek just as before.

“Descend a little!”

“It’s dangerous!”

“Let’s get away, then!”

“May a lever squash you,” muttered Invariat and started the descent of Čapek, following Carlos’ order.

* * *

“Not bad, not bad at all...”

Notwithstanding the strict instructions given to the marksmen by Gutscher and her usual confidence in her men, Lady Cobryn feared that the encounter with the miracle device might make them waver and reel, and even if they don’t reel, they might start making mistakes and won’t be able to fight the way they’re accustomed to. But in reality, everything went off without a hitch.

The Black Eagles were somewhat shaken by the sight of a flying ship, but they kept their cool. They started shooting the strange machine with everything they had, namely, crossbows and whatever small cannons they managed to mount on the towers, and got bombed in return – one of the first blasts destroyed all the defenders of the Coast Tower, but they didn’t let confusion dampen their spirit and fought on, disregarding the falling bombs, the fact that the fireshooter bullets ricocheted from the steel hull of the ship, and the incapacity of the small cannons to deal any ostensible damage.

The Guards were given their order to fight and didn’t intend to break it. The sky over the Three Peaks flashed with fireshooter shots, the booming of Prime cannons and the blasts of falling bombs. The inhabitants of the castle fled the inner yard, which had become rather dangerous, but their curiosity was stronger than their fear and they observed what was going on from the external walls. The Lady of the castle stood on the roof of the Academy of Heroes, located outside the inner line of defences, and observed the explosions of Prime bomb disfigure the elegant castle with a frown.

“An idiotic situation, Your Ladyship,” observed Gutscher, who stood next to Agatha. “They throw bombs that cannot do us any serious harm, and we scratch the hull of their ship with similar results.”

The Captain didn't say anything new – everything's been obvious enough to Lady Cobryn, which is why her counter-question sounded extremely chilly:

"Your conclusions?"

"They'll run out of ammo soon and fly away," Gutscher chewed on his moustache. "The flying ship turned out to be a flop – it's useless."

"They'll replenish their supply of bombs and come back."

"Now that we know what we're dealing with, we can mount real Prime cannons on the towers and deal irreparable damage to the hull of the ship..." "

"The hull!" It dawned upon Agatha all of a sudden. "We are shooting at the steel hull!"

"Quite right, my lady," confirmed Gutscher.

"We must hit the sheepskin above it!"

"What?"

"Why didn't I think of it earlier?" Lady Cobryn looked at the Captain with a smile. "Order the marksmen to concentrate their fire on the sheepskin that hangs above the ship. That's what keeps it airborne – as soon as we puncture the skin, the ship will fall onto the ground."

* * *

"They got it at last!"

"I see!" Invariad responded with a yell. "I see!"

"Get away!"

"How?"

The fireshooter bullets stopped ringing on the ship's hull, hitting it and leaving tiny dents. The Cobrians concentrated their fire on the enormous "sheepskin" pumped full of lighter-than-air gas by Invariad, and the assailants instantly lost their advantage.

"Get away to the mountains!"

"To the sea!" Carlos waved his arms. "To the sea!"

"Too late!"

The three main towers formed an almost regular triangle, with the ship hovering at its centre, a little higher than the line of windows. For as long as the Cobrians kept firing pointlessly at the hull, the Čapek was safe, and Carlos and Marida had the choice of their targets. But things have changed now...

"Ascend!"

"Too late..."

The "sheepskin" could handle the bolts to some extent – Invariad used his reserve tank to compensate for the leaks, but a well-aimed hit from a Prime cannon proved fatal. The powerful charge made a huge tear in the "sheepskin", and the ship gave a hard heel.

"Hold on!"

"Are we falling?"

"Almost!"

The Čapek gave a lurch and started to descend prow-first, rotating slowly and accelerating as it fell into the courtyard of the Three Peaks. The Cobrian marksmen celebrated their victory with a loud roar.

"We're going to crash-land!"

Convivial was clenching the wheel in his hands; he could barely stay on his feet.

"Marida!"

“Carlos!”

The Adornian wrapped a rope around her hand, and the young lord grabbed some chain.

“Watch out!”

The gas was evaporating, the falling ship kept accelerating, and the loud crash that heralded their collision with the stone paving of the courtyard actually brought relief to Carlos.

I'm alive!

But he was concussed. The young man hit his head hard on the wooden deck, and there were rainbow circles in his eyes.

“I'm alive!

He managed to notice Marida, who lay on the ground unconscious, and Invariat, who jumped overboard swiftly, and had just about enough time to think:

Bastard...

Then he lost consciousness again, as a Cobrian who'd jumped aboard hit him over the head.

* * *

“Your friend Convivial managed to sneak past us into one of the secret corridors – he appears to have studied them well... One gets the impression he'd planned the betrayal a long, long time ago, and was only waiting for a fitting occasion to strike me in the back. But he won't succeed. My people will find him, it's only a question of time...” Lady Cobryn eased into the armchair regally. “Invariat the old fox... Where's his catalyst?”

“He has it.”

“Let's assume as much.” Agatha eyed Carlos, who was standing in the middle of her study, coldly. “Although I am of the opinion that the cogwheel on a string found by the Guards in your pocket may well belong to a Hero savant... Doesn't it sound outlandish – a Hero savant?” The Lady's lips were touched by a disdainful smile. “You have no use for a cogwheel – but Invariat used to have a pendant like that, if memory serves...” Agatha examined the cogwheel, twiddling it around in her fingers, and then dropped it into one of the drawers of her desk. “I'll keep it for a while, if you don't mind.”

“Oh, but I do!”

“I didn't require any answer from you.” The Lady's next glance nearly froze the young man in place. “Where are the other Heroes?”

“Dead,” replied the young lord simply, and made a chiming sound with the shackles that the efficient Cobrians had put on him first thing. “Haven't you received any reports?”

“Convivial died during your escape, but he's alive now, which means there was a Prime inductor in his secret laboratory.”

“Why ‘was’? It's still there, you only need to rake out the rubble a bit...”

“You are in no position to get smart with me.”

“Want me to shut up?”

“I want you to answer my questions coherently. In that case, your death will be swift and painless.” Agatha raised her voice a little. “Where are the other Heroes?”

The young man had no doubts about her ability to keep her promise, so he had to answer:

“Their catalysts remained in Grydwald,” replied the young man reluctantly. “Don't you

know I left in a hurry?"

"Mentor Hans, the new Lord of Grydia, sent me a message via pigeon post." Lady Cobryn reclined against the back of her chair. "Apart from assurances of his loyalty, which are perfectly natural for someone in his position, he writes that he hasn't been successful in locating the catalysts of the Grydian Heroes so far."

"If you let me go to Grydwald, I'll show you the hiding place."

This time Agatha couldn't help smiling.

Is he really that brave?

She eyed the shackled captive over thoughtfully.

A pretty boy? More likely, a handsome young man. His features weren't yet rough, they still belied his youth, but it was plainly visible that if Carlos managed to live long enough for his face to mature, women would start falling to his feet like autumn leaves, and the same was true about his build – it was still angular and frail in a boyish sort of way, but the young lord would obviously evolve into a true athlete. Not enough experience, but his actions demonstrate his courage, and experience is merely a matter of time...

But time is what you don't have.

"So that's what you're like..." drawled Agatha, realising that the pause was becoming indecently long. "When I received reports about a scion of a provincial lord, I imagined you differently. More oafish, as it were, mentally and appearance-wise."

In that case, I'm happy to have disappointed you.

"Are you sure your mother hadn't slept with some wayward dandy?" inquired Agatha, intending to anger the captive and see what he was like irate. "If someone took the trouble of polishing you a little, you'd start looking pretty dandified yourself."

"So you have a soft spot for dandies, then?" Carlos ignored the remark about his mother. He already realised that Lady Cobryn liked his unrestrained and somewhat cheeky answers, and reined his anger in.

"I'm a woman – I like eye-catching men."

"Even the brainless ones?"

"Is that what you think you are?"

"Uh..."

Carlos already painted his picture of Lady Cobryn a while ago – imperious, hard-edged, strong-willed and ambitious. Straightforward as well. Therefore, her impromptu joke floored the young man – he didn't expect it of Agatha.

"You're too young to spar with me, Carlos," said the lady softly. She held a pause and said: "That goes for waging war against Cobria, too."

"Actually, I didn't intend to." The young man made a helpless gesture.

The chains clinked, as if meaning to confirm: *Didn't intend to. That's how it played out.*

"Why did you provoke an attack from Marcus, then? Why didn't you tell him everything he wanted to know?"

"Would anything have changed if I told him? Lachard had his orders and he'd feel obliged to shut me up."

"Possibly..."

"Which makes it rather pointless to discuss."

Carlos was perfectly at ease now. His memory of the events that followed the crash of the ship were rather vague – he was dragged somewhere, shackled and dragged again, up the stairs this time, into the study of the lady located in one of the towers. When he first

saw Agatha, the young man was abashed – abashed, not afraid or anything... he'd never seen a woman as beautiful, or, rather, a Dokhtish woman as beautiful as her. Even during his studies in the capital the young Carlos saw no women who could be compared to the inimitable Lady Cobryn – there were many beautiful Dokhtish women, but none of them had anything remotely resembling her innate grace and elegance. She was tall and slender, with a narrow face and a well-turned figure, and seemed like a goddess from the legends of olden days – as beautiful and as... inaccessible. She struck Carlos as the ideal embodiment of the Dokhtish aristocracy – a paragon of elegance and style. She made his heart shrink in sweet longing...

But all of that happened a few minutes ago, before the beginning of the conversation, and then Carlos relaxed. He remembered that the fair lady, paragon of style and elegance though she may be, planned to execute him, and became as unselfconscious as he'd been in prison. This time, though, his audience was different – not a pretty prisoner from a nearby cage, but a dazzling beauty about to become his executioner.

“What drove you east, anyway?”

“Lachard killed my father,” Lord Gryd shrugged. “Someone had to pay.”

“You should have run to the Emperor – to defend your case in the capital.”

“I don't need babysitters in matters of honour.”

“Are you all such idiots in the Forest, or have you read one tale of chivalry too many?”

“I thought things over and decided you were guilty.”

His future is just as grand as yours...

Why am I wasting my time talking to him? I should have him executed!

But Yolanda, oh, Yolanda... Her prediction made Lady Cobryn search for signs of grandeur in Carlos. Out of curiosity, firstly. And secondly...

The future where the two of you are together is the grandest of all...

“It's ridiculous,” Agatha cracked her fingers. “Without support, without friends, even without the Emperor's assistance... What did you count on?”

“I'm still alive,” reminded Carlos.

“Are you going to stay that way long?”

“I'm still alive. And you're still to blame for all my troubles. And you haven't paid yet.”

Is he stubborn? Is he stupid? Or is it greatness? Who am I seeing here – a brainless youth or a true daredevil?

Carlos' last words, especially the tone he used for the phrase “You haven't paid yet”, felt rather abrasive to Agatha. She winced and asked in a low voice:

“Aren't you afraid of saying it to my face?”

“Haven't you decided everything about my fate yet?”

His future is just as grand as yours... I cried tears of joy when I saw you together...

The most sensible thing to do would be to kill Carlos right now, while he was fully in her hands. Hoarfrost was getting impatient outside the door – he'd be delighted to gut the boy, or throw him out of the window, relishing in the last scream of a man falling to his death. Or...

However, Agatha felt reluctant to think of what the faceless sadist could do.

When I saw your future... The future that has both of you in it... The future...

Damn that crone Yolanda! The old witch had sown the seed of doubt, and doubt leads directly to errors – and errors spell defeat in a game that's been on for many years. This little cur was her only obstacle, but she still found it extremely hard to kill him.

Should she call Ulle?

Should she talk?

Call Ulle?

“I didn’t want to kill your father,” said Lady Cobryn softly. “And I didn’t want to kill Invariat, either... Actually, I didn’t kill him – he jumped out of the window.” Agatha paused for a second. “People tell the most hideous things about me, but even my worst enemies admit that I’m always ready to negotiate.”

“Ready to dictate your conditions, you mean.”

“To look for a compromise,” corrected Lady Cobryn.

“What if you don’t succeed?” Carlos shook his shackles with an eloquent clangour. “Shackles, bags, bottom of the sea?”

“If every peaceful method fails, I have my own way using other means,” admitted Agatha. “But I always leave a chance, even to my worst enemies.”

Carlos realised the lady was being sincere with him. She wasn’t mocking a shackled prisoner, but trying to make him see things her way and demonstrate that blood-curdling tales of her cruelty were nothing but rumours.

Lord Gryd coughed:

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because I’m not all that certain I want to kill you.”

Sincerity once again. Notwithstanding his youth, Carlos knew that every intelligent woman could be an excellent actress capable of manipulating the feelings of men with great skill and precision, but he couldn’t resist playing along, so he gladly joined in the discussion of his fate:

“You have no choice. I’m implicated in too many things,” he said with a sad smile.

“Everything can be set right still.”

“Oh, really?”

“All it takes is willingness to act,” drawled the Cobryan lady pensively. “Lachard is dead, so there’s nothing that prevents us from sullyng his name. We could suggest he was in cahoots with Hans...”

“What for?” Carlos erupted. “Why do you want to save me?”

“I am guilty before you,” replied the lady simply. “We’ve never met, you’ve never done me any harm, whereas I destroyed your entire life as a side effect of a single order that I’d given. Why shouldn’t I be eager to compensate your losses?”

“Are you serious?”

“Plus, I like you much more than I do that scoundrel Hans.”

A quick glance, a barely visible smile on her lips, a promise... A great actress indeed.

“I can’t resurrect your father, Carlos, but I could change your destiny again.” Lady Cobryn’s voice was like a babbling vernal brook – its very sound was sheer delight, and even the words were secondary to that. “What did Invariat tell you? Did he paint me as a monster?”

“No, he didn’t...”

“Oh? I’m almost surprised.”

“I believe that Invariat is still in love with you, Agatha.”

“Really?” An elegant eyebrow was raised a little bit to express Lady Cobryn’s amazement.

“And I understand him perfectly well.”

“Don’t resort to flattery.”

“You have intelligence as well as beauty. You’re almost ideal.”

He saw a smile. A soft and gentle smile meant for him alone. And he finally understood why any mention of Lady Cobryn brought sadness to Convivial’s eye.

“Are you ready to fall in love as well?” asked Agatha softly.

The chains clinked, but the sound wasn’t glum – it was as if the chains knew they could come off any minute, as if they tried to hint that his destiny was about to change, and quite enticingly so.

“It is a wish that I am doing my best to resist.”

“At least you’re honest...”

Beware of this woman!

“So I’ll be honest with you, too.” (“Why don’t I give it a try, after all? Yolanda was right – you can feel that the lad has potential, and he’d be a lot more useful as a living ally than a dead enemy.”)

“Did Invariat tell you what the Primachine was for?”

“No,” replied Carlos after a brief hesitation.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“I remain alive while you talk, don’t I?”

“Makes sense,” Agatha held a pause and pointed to a soft fauteuil in front of her. “You can sit down, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

The fauteuil stood a little to the side, and Carlos could see all of Lady Cobryn now, relishing in how the diaphanous fabric of her fashionable dress hinted at the lines of an impeccable body.

“My father, Friedrich of Cobryn, was a great warrior, and one of those who forged our victory in the War for the Foggy Grove. He was the one responsible for the suicidal breakthrough that brought reinforcements to the troops that were dying near the Squaremount... Your father was one of those saved, Carlos, if memory serves.”

“It does,” confirmed the young man. “But Father’s praises have always been to Ferraut.”

“Politics. Filthy, backhanded, and yet so very, very needful. The Dokhts have to trust in the central power, they need the certainty that their Emperor will protect them, and so the greatest feats were attributed to Ferraut.” Agatha held a pause. “My father laid out the plan of the Battle for the Foggy Grove; he invented, and, most importantly, implemented the ploy that gave us the opportunity to put the Adornians to complete rout, but the Emperor appropriated all the glory, because...”

“The Dokhts must have faith in the central power.”

“Yes,” Lady Cobryn nodded. “So my father wasn’t resentful. Friedrich realised that the Emperor needed authority, and that stolen authority was just as good, but Ferraut was afraid that the truth would surface, and father started to get pushed aside, so he had to leave the political arena... However, by that time Friedrich found that it was to his benefit to stay in the shadows – because of what he had discovered here in the Mountains of Cobria...”

“Prime?” guessed Carlos.

“Prime,” nodded Agatha. “There are all sorts of ores in these mountains, and father built numerous mines here, but the dowsers found a subterranean Prime lake once. Its capacity is less than that of the Foggy Grove, but there’s still a lot more Prime here than in

the sources used by the lords.”

“So that’s why Friedrich built the Three Peaks,” Carlos squinted.

“The castle stands above the lake.”

“And since your father had a bit of a bone to pick with Ferraut, he told him nothing about the lake...”

“Because the Emperor wouldn’t have let the lord keep a deposit that rich for himself, so father would have lost power.”

Power! It’s the root of all evil. Nobody wants to lose power...

“And all of this brought me to the realisation that Prime was the reason for all our problems.”

“What?” Carlos stared at the lady in surprise. “Are you joking?”

“The first war was fought because of Prime – the Dokhts needed a reliable source, and so we made a move on the Foggy Grove. It is being depleted now, but Prime is at the root of our very civilisation, so the Second War will be fought for the same reason. More bloodshed, burning cities, and battlefields instead of fields of grain... Prime is the reason we fight wars. And so I realised how the wars could be stopped,” concluded Agatha proudly. “How to render them all unnecessary.”

The reason for the wars was Prime and not the differences between the Adornians and the Dokhts! Carlos managed to keep a level head, but he admitted that Lady Cobryn saw much deeper into the root of the conflict than he did.

“So how do you reckon it can happen?” inquired Gryd.

“We need enough Prime for everyone. And not just enough – there has to be an overabundance. Once Prime ceases to be a scarce commodity, it will no longer lead to wars, and there will be peace throughout the land. Eternal peace, Carlos, with no reason to fight another war, ever.” There was a bright fire burning in Lady Cobryn’s eyes. She wasn’t merely relating ideas – she believed in her words wholeheartedly and would do anything to make her dream come true. “My father was a great warrior and he raised me to live among warriors, taught me to be their liege, but peaceful life appeals to me a whole lot more. So I have found a way to put all those endless wars to an end.”

“I don’t understand,” admitted Carlos. “What did you come up with?”

Agatha took a chalice of water from the table, brought it to her lips and took a few small sips. She realised that the young man was watching her every movement, and so she put on a small show just for him, giving him a chance to observe her chest rising and falling with every sip.

“The Adornians believe that Prime is the true power of the world, which was revealed to us during the great cataclysm,” continued the lady, placing the chalice back on the table.

“At the same time, we research Prime and use it in our mechanisms as something ordinary, even if it does have extraordinary properties. And alchemy teaches us that any substance can be synthesised in a laboratory.”

“Prime? In a laboratory?” The young man shook his head in disbelief. “I read that no experiments in this field were successful, and even Invariat...”

“Invariat believed in success, whereas Paul, who lacks his brother’s firmness, lost his faith at some point,” Agatha chuckled. “Invariat lost the Emperor’s protection, all the work had stopped, and Convivial got angry...”

“And went straight to you.”

“Actually, I went to visit him in Fichter,” the lady remained sincere. “Invariat couldn’t

even imagine that somebody else but the Emperor may have enough Prime. I talked to him..." Agatha floundered for a second, but Carlos didn't pay any attention to this demonstration of weakness. "So we came to an agreement. Our views turned out to be amazingly similar – Convivial agreed that Prime was the reason for all wars and would do anything to be able to synthesise the substance in a laboratory."

"But your agreement remained a secret."

"Of course," Lady Cobryn nodded. "The Emperor wasn't supposed to find out about my lake. Or my plans for changing the world, for that matter."

Plans weren't the half of it – she did everything to reach her goal. Negotiated with a genius who had fallen from grace, putting her own life in peril by revealing her secret to him, spent an enormous amount of resources... The scale of the work impressed Carlos as much as Agatha's amazing beauty – the woman in front of him was truly great, truly ideal, and capable of ruling anyone. A woman who wished to rule the world.

"Invariat really got into it, worked the nights away, conducted numerous experiments of every kind, spent enormous amounts of money and Prime, but he did manage to get to know Prime, he learnt to disassemble it the way children disassemble dollhouses, and yet he could not reproduce any part of it." Lady Cobryn sighed. "Some things were beyond even a genius like Convivial."

"Unusual things?"

Agatha raised her index finger to tell Carlos that he would have to listen to the rest of her story, and continued:

"After two years of experimentation Invariat learned to synthesise a substance that could penetrate every metal and every liquid, just like Prime, but it lacked Prime's main distinctive quality – it had no power. I was angry at first, we had countless arguments with Invariat, accusing each other of our failures, and then we thought of the Adornians, nearly simultaneously, and the fact that they believe Prime to be a manifestation of the true power of the world." Lady Cobryn made a brief pause. "You were right, Carlos – we could not reproduce anything unusual, and so we had to ask for the help of those whose very science is built on all things unusual. I got to know Elario, who was recommended to me as an intelligent and inquisitive man and a very strong mage. The idea to create artificial Prime and thus become the equals of the ancient gods fascinated Hirawa, as well as the prospect of bringing all wars to an end..." Agatha held another pause, and a shadow of a smile crossed her lips. "So the three of us continued the work. You have no idea how hard it was to get the two of them to work together, Carlos – Dokht and Adornian, savant and mage. At first they failed to understand each other completely, but eventually managed to establish a common ground, realising they needed each other to succeed, and plunged into work headfirst. Elario put forth the theory that Prime, being a manifestation of the True Power, has to contain something unusual, something which cannot be recreated in a laboratory, a certain component that imbues it with power. But where would one get it?" Lady Cobryn chuckled. "That's when we thought of the Heroes. If they are Prime's children, the component in question must be contained in their bodies, too..."

"A part of the 'unusual' that gives them power," Carlos whispered.

"We spent about a year trying to extract the necessary substance from a Hero," said Agatha evenly. "Sacrifice is what makes artificial Prime real. The sacrifice of a Hero, a child of Prime; a sacrifice of someone whose very essence is Prime."

"And?" asked Lord Gryd in a barely audible voice.

"We're ready for our last experiment," declared Lady Cobryn solemnly. "If it succeeds, the death of a single Hero will allow us to charge enough artificial Prime with power to match the daily output of the Foggy Grove. We have found a source of Prime. We have rendered all wars unnecessary."

* * *

The ceiling was low and pressed down on the head; the distance between the walls was well under two feet, and it was immersed in absolute darkness, but that's the way secret passages go. This one was built in this fortress by Friedrich Cobryn, and it had all the necessary features, being low, narrow and dark. It made running extremely inconvenient, but Convivial didn't grumble – he was glad to be alive, having escaped from under the very noses of the Guards, glad to have been spared a broken leg when he'd slipped on one of the stair cases, glad to be...

"Damn! Where is it?"

Invariat knew the underground passages of the Three Peaks perfectly well – back in the day, Lady Cobryn asked the savant to bring some order into the maze of twisted passages and to repair the mechanisms of the secret doors. Convivial did not refuse and spent a whole month of his life fulfilling his beloved woman's wish, and now Agatha was reaping the results of her own lack of foresight.

"At last!"

Invariat thrust his hand into the wrong niche, which is why he didn't instantly find the lever he needed. After a few flowery curses, the savant managed to find the second niche, and a few seconds later the panel that stood in his way slid aside. The guards knew the castle's labyrinths a whole lot worse than Convivial – the passages were called secret for a good reason, and so Invariat wasn't afraid of pursuit. He'd be expected where he was going, but he may as well relax for the time being.

"I did recommend you to set a few traps here, Agatha," chuckled the savant as he proceeded onward. "You must be regretting it now."

The slippery staircase led down, to the very lowest level of the castle, and then one had to ascend again, after walking about a hundred feet down a damp passage... To find oneself in the main underground hall of the Three Peaks.

Right next to the Primachine.

* * *

The Cobryan prison was worse than the Fichter clink. Or better, depending on how you looked at it.

The cell where they put Marida was on the second level of the dungeons, as Invariat had promised – right under the Coast Tower. It had no windows; the door was sturdy, made of iron, and extremely creaky. The cell itself could be mistaken for a large trunk – it was small and dark, and also damp and very, very cold. They didn't pamper prisoners at the Three Peaks.

"You like it, do you?" One of the two guards pushed the girl in the back, right into the "trunk", and grinned widely: "We call this cell 'Short Memory' – we sometimes forget criminals here, and they slowly die of hunger and thirst."

And the screams of the wretches reverberate in the indifferent stone walls in a meaningless echo.

"We might forget you, too, Adornian bitch – we don't like Southerners here."

What else would you expect from the Cobrians? They've been dealt with cruelly during the War for the Foggy Grove, and hatred was a thorn driven deep into the souls of these Dokhts. However, Marida's memories of what the Black Eagles did in the South also made her feel nothing but fury.

What about Carlos?

Carlos is different, completely different...

"Would you like to cry?" asked the guard mockingly. "Or beg for something? Nearly everyone begs." He paused for a second. "Or cries."

Marida decided not to vouchsafe a response.

"Suit yourself."

The guard was about to pull the door's handle, but his companion stopped him.

"Wait."

"What's the matter?

"This bitch." The other Cobrian stepped forward and gave Marida an ugly look. "My brother Jacob..."

"What about him?"

"He died in the tower. This bitch threw a Prime bomb into a window and incinerated everybody who was on that landing."

The first guard frowned.

"Don't."

He realised what his partner was about to do, and he didn't like the idea. It was dangerous to touch the prisoner before Lady Cobryn decided what to do with her.

"I want the bitch to pay."

"Damn... Fritz, stop it. We may get punished."

"Hold her." The second guard started to take off his belt. "I want to humiliate this sow. And when the lady sentences her to death, I'll be the one to put the noose on her neck."

"Damn!"

Now, Marida realised. Other Cobrians were far away – they stayed at the main entrance, and the three of them were alone in the dungeons, if you disregarded the prisoners, of course. Now!

And she waved her hand, releasing the beast.

* * *

"So you found a source of Prime and decided to keep it for yourself?"

"Yes," confirmed Lady Cobryn proudly. "Finders keepers."

"You want to use this enormous deposit of Prime to seize power?"

Carlos sensed disappointment. This woman was no longer a great woman capable of ruling the world – she was an incorrigible schemer bidding for absolute power. Beautiful and intelligent, but cruel and nefarious at the same time. She thought of no one but herself. Not the Dokhts, not the Empire – herself.

Carlos saw the woman who had murdered his father.

"Yes, I need power!" Lady Cobryn slowly rose from the chair and stared at Lord Gryd fixedly. "Paul is an indecisive weakling, his cousin and heir apparent is a cretin, and the second prince is even worse than the first! The Dokhts barely managed to survive the Cataclysm; they've only just recovered from the War for the Foggy Grove, and they need a rest. They need a real leader!"

"Your mate Hirawa?" asked the young man scornfully.

He expected an angry outburst, but Agatha didn't seem insulted.

"My 'mate Hirawa', as you put it, guarantees a lasting peace between the Adornians and the Dokhts," she said emphatically. "A common dynasty could show both our nations that we can coexist in peace!"

Me and Marida. Agatha and Elario... Can I believe in a fairy tale? No. Because I remember Hurricane's grimace of disgust, the giggles of the serving maids who saw me with Naphana, the look of scorn on Invariat's face when he spoke of Marida. Thousands and thousands of Dokhts see the Southerners as sworn enemies; there are as many Southerners eager to show any Dokht of insufficient agility the colour of his guts... This is reality. This state of affairs isn't going to change for a great many years. Me and Marida, Agatha and Elario – we cannot set an example.

Cold words to describe a cold reality. Peace wouldn't come for many years, alas.

"We're going to have a war," said Carlos grimly. "Whether or not you like it, we have a war in front of us."

"I'm beginning to get the impression you're not really all that bright," sighed Lady Cobryn. "I told you that the Primachine would render the main reason for the war unnecessary – namely, the shortage of Prime. There'll be enough for everyone, and there will be peace."

The beautiful, or, rather, fable-like prospect that did seem appealing to Lord Gryd for a moment. For just a moment he believed that peace was possible – that the overabundance of Prime would change human nature. For a moment... But Carlos found the weakest place in Agatha's edifice:

"You are going to sacrifice Heroes."

"So what?" shrugged Agatha. "They constantly die in battles."

"But they resurrect," parried the young man.

"Yes, but what do they have to experience to resurrect?"

Carlos fell silent and thought that it was indeed too early for him to spar with Agatha.

"We both know that the Heroes' deaths are as traumatic to them as they are to a regular person," continued Lady Cobryn, slowly walking alongside the table. Carlos rose, too, since his manners didn't allow him to sit while a lady was standing. "As Heroes resurrect, they feel a surge of power and emotion, they feel joy, but they don't forget what they had to experience. They are under constant pressure from the memory of all those deaths – maybe that's why some of them become blood-crazed maniacs like the Faceless Ones..."

The tone of her voice left no doubt about it.

"You despise them," sighed the young man. "All Heroes. Without exceptions."

"They have changed," replied Agatha calmly. "They are the children of Prime."

"Heroes are people!"

"They resurrect, Carlos, they can be revived. Do you think people can do that? Can you be revived? No, and neither can I. Our deaths will be final – there won't be a second chance, and as for Heroes... They are merely walking lumps of Prime... Dim golems obsessed with murder. Useless..."

"No!"

Shahmana, useless? Hurricane? Rusty Moustache?

"Have you ever seen a Hero do something constructive? Ploughing a field, perhaps? Operating machinery? Sowing or building bridges? Have you seen any Heroes do

anything truly useful?"

"Heroes help us hold the Touched at bay!"

"People used to manage on their own before the Heroes came, and new Prime-powered weapons make it even easier to deal with the Touched. We'll manage, Carlos – we can manage without these strange creatures... Why do you defend them?"

There was truth in every word. Distorted and lopsided truth, but truth nonetheless. Heroes and war go hand in hand, always.

"I'm not defending them," replied Carlos in a tired voice. "It's just that I can see what's going to happen next."

"You do?" Lady Cobryn looked surprised.

"How long can you keep your method of Prime production secret? A month? A year? Ten years? You're an intelligent woman, Agatha, you know perfectly well that very soon people will find out the truth behind the Heroes' disappearance. It'll be rumour first, and then certainty, and the Heroes will declare war on you. Not just on you – on mankind in general."

"What will they be able to do?"

"You have enough enemies, Agatha – there'll definitely be a lord with a Prime inductor among them, and all the Heroes, Dokhts and Adornians alike, will swear fealty to him. Do you realise what's going to happen next? Your dream of peace will shatter, and the new war, the war between the people and the Heroes, will be even bloodier than the upcoming war for Prime?"

"I've thought it all through. I'll keep the Heroes under control."

"They're not as stupid as you think."

"We'll see." Apparently, Agatha hadn't thought of that danger before, but wasn't going to back down, anyway. She stopped a step away from Carlos and loudly said: "This is the last time I'm going to ask you – are you on my side?"

The court is tired of arguing the case. The judge is about to pronounce a verdict.

Lord Gryd took a deep sigh, and, looking Lady Cobryn right in the eye, replied firmly: "No."

And once again he saw a smile that was for him alone.

"I'm so sorry we couldn't do it together."

"You won't believe it, but so am I."

"Oh, but I will."

The lady stood on her tiptoes and gave Carlos a gentle kiss on the cheek, driving a small, but incredibly sharp "lady's dagger" into his flank. She didn't want to call Ulle – didn't want this boy to fall victim to the Faceless One.

"Forgive me."

The dirty blade fell on the carpet.

"It isn't... your fault... that you became... like this..." said Carlos with an effort.

Power and hypocrisy turned you into this, Agatha. You say you care for people, but you don't see them. You are prepared to kill anyone... anyone...

The pain was like a conflagration inside his body, demanding that he shout, scream, hold the sides of the wound together with his hand, writhe in a desperate attempt to make it hurt less, but the young man just stood there, looking at his killer. The madwoman? The idealist? Or was she simply the ideal woman?

"I must have fallen in love with you, after all," whispered Carlos. "I didn't even resist."

“I know,” said Agatha in just as low a voice.

There were tears in her beautiful eyes.

The shirt was slowly soaking up the young man’s blood. Another minute or two – three at the most... His powers were fading, and Lord Gryd dropped to one knee, as though he swore fealty to the great lady.

The chains clinked softly.

“I don’t want to see you die,” sighed Agatha. She heard a noise from the outside. “Let me check what’s going on.”

* * *

Even though the fight ended in a victory, nobody called off the alarm that sounded when the flying ship appeared – the runaway Invariat still had to be caught.

The majority of the Black Eagles spread through the castle, blocking off every hall, corridor and passage where the savant could end up; the only ones who stayed in the courtyard were Gutscher, Scowl and Smasher. The limp “sheepskin” was gone – the guards cut the ropes that tied it to the hull, and carried it to the nearest storage room, and the Cobrians got their first opportunity to take a close look at the metallic body of the unusual vehicle – the elegant lines that converged at the prow, the metal broadsides with marks of crossbow bolts and Prime cannon fire, and two enormous propellers mounted in the aft. The engines were concealed by the bulkhead, but the Cobrians were reluctant to inspect the ship just yet.

“Excellent,” Gutscher couldn’t restrain himself. “It had its drawbacks, of course, but everything was done excellently just the same.”

“What exactly?” asked Smasher.

“The plan and its implementation.”

“Pah!” The Warlord stamped his foot to emphasise his disdain and said: “The fight was won in less than thirty minutes. The castle didn’t suffer, the casualties were minor, and the ship became a pile of scrap metal. The plan sucked!”

“They did manage to ruffle our feathers,” objected the captain of the Eagles. “Had they acted more intelligently, there would have been a whole lot more damage.”

“Now we know that the ‘sheepskin’ is the weakness of such ships – the next time it will take us three times less time to destroy them,” promised Scowl.

Tom realised that the Warlord intended to put the impudent human in place and decided to support his associate:

“We have indeed solved the ‘sheepskin’ problem,” said Gutscher after some consideration. “But ships of this sort may have some other use than aerial attack on castles.”

“Such as?” inquired Maximilian ironically.

“Aerial surveillance,” replied the captain instantly. “If we had ten ships like this, we could hold the entire Adornian border under control, quickly spot smugglers or enemy troops, and take timely countermeasures. They could also drop bombs on the enemy if need be. When the troops are on the march, they have nothing they could use to fight back.”

“A few shots from a pronged gun, and your ship will fall down.”

“Might take more than a few...”

“Oh, come on, Maximilian, it’s an interesting contraption, whatever you say.” Scowl

was already standing on the deck of the ship, and now he was playing with the wheel mindlessly, watching the remnants of the rudder turn left and right, creaking. "It might be useful."

"Some strategist you are..." drawled Smasher.

"Not any worse than some, what."

The Warlord was interrupted by a loud screeching sound that filled the courtyard.

"Stop horsing around, Tom!"

"It's not me!"

"Bullshit!"

The screeching sound repeated. It was coming from the iron belly of the ship, and Smasher got the impression that the metal bulk gave a slight lurch.

"What's happening?" Gutscher stepped back in surprise. "Did it just jerk?"

Maximilian realised that he was right – the smashed-up ship was moving again.

"There's still some Prime in it!"

"Tom, get the hell out of there!"

"There's a humming sound coming from the inside!"

"Scram!"

"What the hell is this shit?" The Eraser jumped off the deck and unsheathed his sword.

Cobryan ears were tortured by another loud screech, and the aft of the ship slowly started to rise.

* * *

They were called the Queens of the Night – Hero Maidens who could summon enormous panthers, deadly and relentless in battle. Petite girls whose internal strength was manifest in the shape of a hideous Prime-born beast.

"Where are they?"

"I don't know!"

"Where?"

Marida's appearance was terrifying – unkempt hair, a twisted mouth, burning eyes... They didn't merely burn – they promised a horrible death. The beast that stood over the Cobrian who lay on the floor was the worst of all, though. The thing put its heavy paws on the guard's chest, albeit having retracted its claws, but its hideous maw was right next to the Eagle's face. He had to entertain himself with the sight of the yellow fangs as well as the drops of saliva and the stench of the panther's breath.

"This is the last time that I'm asking you..." Having killed the first Guards, Marida took their keys and broke into the nearest guard post, where she found three more. Two of them were ripped to shreds by the beast – there was blood all over the floor of the small room – and the last one had an important question to answer:

"Where are the Adornians?"

"Third level," the unfortunate gave up. "Down the stairs... The Adornians are held separately."

"Who's guarding them? Heroes?"

"No, Eagles."

"Good."

Marida plunged her dagger into the Guard's heart, imbibing his Prime and getting some extra strength. She squared her shoulders and grinned: soon, very soon, her friends would

be free.

This grin didn't portend anything good for the Cobrians.

"Shit!"

"Get it from the left flank!"

"We need marksmen!!!"

The iron beast into which the fallen ship had transformed in the courtyard worked the Cobrians into a stupor, and quite understandably so.

The screeching and the rising aft were just the beginning of it. The broadsides started to fall off next... No, they weren't falling off – they were unfolding! The metal panels that seemed monolithic (the gap between them was perfectly invisible, since they fit together with incredible precision) started to open, revealing the enormous limbs of a mechanical giant, and instantly falling back into place to form a shield over the joints. The clangour, the booming and the screeching were overwhelming, and the confused Cobrians froze, unable to take their eyes off the incredible sight and therefore paying no attention to the large metal box that disengaged from the aft in the very beginning of the transformation. There was too much going on elsewhere. They didn't see it open, either. The Cobrians realised there were enemies inside the castle only when the Grydians jumped out of the box and attacked them.

"Heroes!"

"Gryd and glory!" Hurricane, Crossbow, Rusty Moustache and Fidget roared in unison.

"Cobryn and victory!" Scowl and Smasher realised they were outnumbered, but it was contrary to their habits to retreat, and the furious warriors joined the fray:

"Cobryn and victory!"

Shahmana's fiery arrow missed, Maximilian raised his shield to deflect a shot from the pronged gun, and a fierce battle engulfed the courtyard. Scowl shuttled back and forth, taking turns attacking Fidget and the Crossbow, while the huge Smasher fought Hurricane and Rusty Moustache, dodging the Warlord's whistling mace and parrying the thrusts of the two-handed sword.

"Gryd and glory!"

Carlos' heroes fought desperately. They were well aware that they wouldn't be able to win, and that the experienced Cobryan warriors would be able to hold out until the arrival of reinforcements, but they didn't fight to win. They were keeping the ship covered during the transformation, and now Čapek assumed the shape of an enormous metal figure, puffing, screeching and destroying everything that lay before it. By the time the Eagles and the Cobryan Heroes arrived, the Grydians no longer fought alone – they were aided by the enormous mechanical fighter capable of trampling even the mightiest of Heroes under its feet.

"Legs! Chop its legs off!"

"But how?!"

The Eagles fired a multitude of crossbow bolts, but the Grydians managed to fall back. Now Čapek was covering them, and the Cobrians had no idea how to handle the colossus.

"We've got to tip it over somehow!"

An irate Maximilian fearlessly dashed towards the mechanical monster and hit a knee, covered by a metal shield, with his mace. He barely managed to jump back and avoid being stepped on by the giant's second foot. Gutscher ran to the towers in order to turn the Prime cannons around, when the Čapek broke off a piece of the castle wall in passing

and threw it into the group of Eagles that gathered in the yard.

"What is this thing?" whispered Agatha, observing from the tower's topmost balcony.

"I have no idea," said Ulle in a hollow voice. "But I don't like it. I don't like it at all, milady."

At that moment, any Cobrian would have sworn fealty to Hoarfrost .

The rising clouds of dust concealed parts of the monster's colossal bulk as it smashed the castle, but the parts still visible to the lady were enough to impress. The enormous golem must have been some fifty feet tall, and nearly all of its bulk was protected by metal shields. Crossbow bolts ricocheted away, and the pronged gun shots left only deep indentations in the steel, likewise the fiery arrows of two Fire Foxes. They irritated the monster, too. After every shot the monster started to lash out at the magnificent castle's walls with greater fury, and even the main towers of the Three Peaks shuddered under its onslaught. The courtyard appeared to have been destroyed completely – there were breaks in the walls, and the bodies of the Eagles who got in the way of the shower of stones were scattered everywhere. Only the Heroes tried to fight the hideous creature.

"Invariat," Agatha sighed. "It's all Invariat's doing."

A genius, damn and blast him. One of the greatest minds of the century. The mechanical monster was destroying the castle, leaving nothing but rubble in its wake, and nothing could stop it.

"I agree," Ulle roared. "Damn Convivial bastard!"

The support of the Faceless One didn't bring much relief.

"The thing has to be shot to smithereens from Prime cannons," said Lady Cobryn coldly. "Apparently, Gutscher hasn't thought of it yet, so I'm going downstairs. And you..."

Hoarfrost looked at his lady in surprise – he'd got accustomed to his bodyguard's role, and thought he would accompany Agatha into battle.

"Check my study to confirm Carlos is really dead, then catch up."

"Aye aye, Your Ladyship."

* * *

Hoarfrost entered the study the moment the lift's doors slammed shut behind Lady Cobryn. His arrival was impetuous – he didn't want to waste time on the bloody Grydian cur that he'd got sick of already. He pulled out his sword as he entered, and...

He stopped when he saw Carlos standing on one knee. There was a pool of blood around the young man, and the exquisite Ychtirborr carpet was completely ruined, but the young lord was still alive, much to Ulle's surprise.

Pleasant, pleasant surprise.

"So much the better!"

The Faceless One was in no hurry to get downstairs – bodyguard or no bodyguard, the metal monster made an impression on Ulle, and he was extremely reluctant to engage the thing in battle. An opportunity to torture a defenceless Grydian... now that was something more to his liking.

"You have no idea just how sick we are of you," drawled Ulle, approaching Carlos slowly. His sword was back in the sheath, and the Faceless One was holding a curved knife that was wondrously convenient for inflicting tortuous wounds. "When they caught you at last, I begged Her Ladyship to give you to me, and I was truly saddened when she didn't

allow it. But now..."

"Now your dream has come true," said Carlos hoarsely, looking at the approaching Hero with a scowl.

"Yes, Grydian brat," confirmed Ulle. "I don't know how much time you've got left, but these minutes will be the most terrifying thing in your life. I'll cut your eye out... The left one, I like to start with the left... You'll feel blood run down our face, try to stop the bleeding, to hold the wound shut with your hand, but the very next moment I'll be flaying your... Argkh!"

The young man straightened up in a single sweeping motion and ran the Faceless One right through the stomach. The blade of Agatha's "lady's dagger" entered the faceless sadist's body to the very hilt, which was the very reason he uttered the sound:

"Argkh!"

The second thrust came from the bottom up, right under the chin, near the edge of the mask. The blade went through the Hero's unprotected neck, and Ulle fell on his back, having made a clumsy helpless gesture with his hands.

"You wanted to get me, you freak? Come, come and get me!"

The head, the crotch, the flank, and the head again. Carlos kicked the fallen Hero fiercely, but this attack was no mere outburst of fury – it was a cold-blooded and well thought-out beating. Every blow, every thrust hit the mark perfectly; their speed and the sheer power behind them told the dying Ulle that he had no cur before him – no mere young man.

And not a human being, either.

The speed and the power of the blows told Hoarfrost that he was fighting against a Hero. No, that he was being killed by a Hero.

The Faceless One tried to gather the last of his power together. He wanted to jump up, to hit back, to tear the brat apart, but... Too late, too late, too late...

Lord Gryd tore the mask off Hoarfrost's face, stared at the Hero's contorted face in fury, spat and thrust his dagger into Ulle's eye. His left eye.

* * *

"I'll smash you!"

"Whack!"

"Smash you!"

"Bang!"

The Warlord was in a horrible frenzy that had nothing in common with your run-of-the-mill battle rage and fury. Maximilian had been accustomed to dealing substantial damage to the enemy with every blow, and he was enraged that he was unable penetrate the enormous monster's defences. The Warlord's heavy mace made dents in the sheets of metal that covered the thing's legs, but its "bones" and "joints" stayed intact, and the giant mocked Smasher by holding him and the rest of the Heroes at bay doing nothing but swinging a single fist, remembering to hit the castle walls and hurl stones while the monster was at it.

How long is it going to last?!

Gutscher finally turned the heavy Prime cannons around to face the courtyard, but the clouds of dust raised by the monster made it impossible to take aim properly, and the shots flew past the giant, hitting the walls and towers of the Three Peaks, which had

already taken their fair share of abuse. Reinforcements arrived from the castle at last – now the mechanical monster was under a volley of fire from an Highlander and two Quarriers, dwarfed by the Gargantuan proportions of the golem, but the latter fought back and carried on destroying the castle.

“I’ll smash you!”

“He surely takes his time smashing,” Agatha winced and turned to Gutscher, who had just come back from the artillery positions. “Where are the Grydian Heroes?”

“They tried to get through to the Coast Tower, but were blocked off downstairs, in the large ballroom. There’s a battle going on right now.”

“Why would they go for the Coast Tower? Is it the Primachine they’re trying to get? Could be, but didn’t they realise they would be stopped very easily indoors? The doors in the Three Peaks may have looked like works of art, but they were sturdy enough, built to withstand a siege, and even Heroes would be hard put to smash through them...”

“I think what we see here is a diversion,” said Lady Cobryn all of a sudden, watching the battle in the courtyard nonchalantly.

“A diversion?” Gutscher didn’t get it at once.

“They need the Primachine, but you can’t get at it from above. Invariat alone won’t be able to accomplish anything, we have three Heroes underground...” It dawned on Agatha the next moment. “The Adornian!” Her fine fingers started shaking. “Why didn’t I think of her earlier...”

How did the Adornian bitch end up on the flying ship? Did she come from Fichter prison as it was claimed? But why did Invariat and Carlos take her along? The answer was obvious – that mangy cat wanted to revenge herself on Lady Cobryn as well. For being kidnapped, no less!

“Gutscher! There are Adornian Heroes in the castle!”

“What?!?”

“Send our Heroes to the Primachine at once! This very moment!!!”

* * *

The mighty pumps were humming as multicoloured Prime solutions coursed through the pipes. The mixers hummed, too, as they mixed the solutions into a single concoction. More humming came from the heaters, and the mechanisms whirred, with the odd occasional clang in their metal bowels. Everything was humming, but the ugly sounds of the Dokhtish machinery did not always drown out other sounds coming from above...

“What do you think is happening upstairs?” inquired Hieronymus Vick timidly.

“They’re fighting,” replied Hirawa indifferently.

“Who?”

“What do you care?” The Adornian patted the Dokht on the shoulder patronisingly. “Your responsibility is making sure the contraption runs and works as it should.”

The time was right, but Agatha was nowhere to be seen – she must have run into problems of some sort. First Elario thought he’d go upstairs and check personally, but then he stopped and decided not to get distracted by trifles. He decided to proceed with the experiment that he meant to conduct for so many years.

“But Lady Cobryn...”

“The Lady must be otherwise engaged, so we’ll get on with the experiment without her.”

“But the orders...”

“I give your orders, Vick! I and I alone!”

The Adornian’s fury made Hieronymus retract his head. The unfortunate savant realised that Elario could decapitate him with a single gesture any time he so desired, and immediately stopped arguing.

“As you wish, Your Lordship.”

“Go!”

The hideous humming was irritating; the ventilators were overloaded, and the enormous hall was hot and incredibly stuffy, but Hirawa made himself shut all the distracting factors out. The heat, the humming and the stench of the Dokhtish mechanisms – all of it faded into the background. The great mage took his place and concentrated, gazing at the shackled Crossbow fixedly.

“Today I will succeed. I’ve got to succeed!”

* * *

“Follow me! Faster!!”

Contrary to her fears, no Heroes were guarding the Adornian captives. The Cobrians decided to trust the Prime-powered shackles, which were strong enough to do the job, and only left four Eagles in the dungeon. Marida and her panther made an easy job of them.

“Freedom, brothers!” The girl kicked out the cell doors, tossed the shackle keys inside and ran on: “Freedom!”

She was answered by cries of joy.

Nine cells, nine Adornians, nine Heroes. Arrigo, Umchizan, Nawhel, Takeshi, Alessya... Brothers and sisters. Emaciated, haggard, but still alive. Grim only a minute ago, and overjoyed now.

“Freedom!”

But the happy Adornians decided to waste no time on idle chitchat. Born warriors, they realised that they were still surrounded, that Marida alone could not have killed all the Dokhts, and that there were enemies everywhere, so they demanded explanations:

“What do we do next?”

“We fight.”

“Fight whom?”

“What’s the difference?” Arrigo waved the sword he took from a dead guard.

“Everybody!”

“The Dokhtish bitch that had abducted us!” corrected Marida. “Lady Cobryn!”

“Great!”

“Death to the bloody Dokhts!”

“We’ll have our revenge!”

“We’ll tear them apart!”

The Adornians armed themselves with whatever weapons they could find and rushed upstairs.

“Left... Right... Another staircase, right again...”

Marida got her directions from Invariat, who’d promised they would come directly to the Primachine in order to provide reinforcements to himself and Carlos, but the next turn brought the Adornians to the enormous throne hall that was beginning to fill up with the Cobryan Heroes.

“Cobryn and victory!”

“Death to the Dokhts!”

“How come?” whispered Marida. “How come?”

Only now, summoning the beast, did the young woman realise that Convivial had decided against letting the unpredictable Adornians approach the Primachine and had sent them upstairs in a roundabout way in hopes that they would run into the Cobrians on their way.

His hopes came true.

* * *

“Gryd and glory!”

The clang of blades, the hissing whispers of the fiery arrows, the whooping shots from the pronged gun, the heavy blows of the mace...

“Gryd and glory!”

“Cobryn and victory!”

They knew they had no chance. From the very first moment that Convivial had told them about his plan, and Carlos pronounced it sound upon serious consideration, they knew they would die. In the best-case scenario, they would be revived. In the worst-case scenario, they would be gone forever. However, they'd have to die in the Three Peaks, anyway. And yet they agreed, for as Heroes and as heroes they could not go back anymore.

“Watch out!”

A blow.

“On your left!”

The sword rang as it hit a raised shield.

“Gryd and glory!”

“Cobryn and victory!”

They were supposed to draw as many Cobrians as possible, and they did all they could. They crashed through obstacles and swept away the Guards as they broke through enemy lines and entered the nearest tower, ending up in a large and lavishly decorated hall. They wanted to make a barricade, but the Cobrians on their tail wouldn't let them; they followed the Grydians inside, and four Heroes came out of the other door.

“The odds are even at last!” roared Hurricane, and a fierce battle started in the hall. Fidget held the left flank, sending fiery arrows one moment and twisting her nine tails the next. Heinrich was in the centre, the way he was supposed to be, waving his mace and blocking enemy blows with his shield, terrifying and fast. On his right was Rusty Moustache, whose two-handed sword flickered like a knitting needle, weaving bloody patterns out of the Cobrians' wounds. Their backs were covered by the jolly Duelist with his favourite pronged gun.

“Gryd and glory!” Their desperate situation makes the Heroes ten times stronger. “Gryd and glory!”

* * *

“You surely took your time,” muttered Invariat without so much as looking at Carlos. He heard the young man emerge from the secret door and started muttering. All the while, he was staring at the humming, puffing, whistling, and bubbling machine whose various parts occupied the entire space of the enormous dungeon.

“I came as soon as I could.”
“There are three Heroes here.”
“I can see them.”
“But there’ll be more of them shortly.”
“So I had imagined.”

Convivial didn’t merely improve the Three Peaks’ underground passages – he added a couple of new corridors that he had “forgotten” to tell Lady Cobryn about. Actually, he did forget initially, and as their relationship deteriorated, he withheld the knowledge deliberately. This foresight of his gave him and Carlos an opportunity to approach the Primachine unnoticed and emerge from a place where nobody expected them to appear, but the savant’s surprises came to an end, and they had a real battle ahead of them.

“How’s Agatha?” asked Invariad after a silence.

Once again, without turning around.

“I decided to leave her be,” replied Lord Gryd calmly.

“Got under the influence of her charm, did you?”

“I did.”

“Thanks for telling me the truth.”

“You wouldn’t have believed me if I had lied.”

“Fair enough.” Both of them knew that notwithstanding the charm of Agatha was simply a non-option. “How did she behave?”

“She killed me,” said Carlos. “Or tried to, rather.”

“A good woman, but she’s such a hothead at times,” said the savant in an apologetic voice.

“I noticed,” the young man made a pause. “I’m glad I became a Hero. It was... uh... a huge help.”

“I still can’t believe you were encouraged to do it by the Adornian girl,” the Convivial chuckled. “Love, eh?”

“The last straw,” admitted Carlos after a short pause. “I felt the Call of Prime almost two years ago, but I resisted, because I didn’t want to become...”

“A brainless pugilist.”

“Quite,” admitted the young man. “But then, when I realised you had become a Hero, and remembered your behaviour... It was perfectly reasonable, although you did talk a lot...”

“Well, yeah, there’s no denying that.”

“Suddenly I thought that you can remain yourself even after you become a Hero. Moreover, by becoming a Hero, I raised my chances to revenge myself upon Agatha. And Marida... Marida was the last straw. She refused to sleep with me because she feared I wouldn’t be able to keep up.”

“And so you drained your cup in front of the Adornian.”

“And stood before her as a true Hero.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Invariad’s bald head twisted left and right, and he looked at Carlos the first time since the beginning of their conversation.

“I gave Marida the wrong directions. According to my calculations, she must bring her Heroes right to the Cobrians.”

“You’ve done the correct thing,” replied Lord Gryd evenly, looking Convivial straight in the eye. “Adornians have no business here.” He nodded in the direction of the hall. “Shall

we begin? I think we've been chatting for too long."

"I'd like to wait for the experiment to conclude," asked the savant in a pleading voice. "If you don't mind, of course."

A fierce battle raged upstairs; people and Heroes were dying, the trapped Adornians were fighting their enemy, and the bloodshed continued. All these sacrifices were needed for Carlos and Invariat to reach the main dungeon unhindered and destroy the accursed device. But the experiment had started, and Convivial wished to know its result.

"The Primachine is your brainchild," sighed Carlos. "Let's wait."

* * *

Gutscher didn't descend into the dungeon himself. He went back to the guard tower, and, having given the artillerymen a good piece of his mind, started to aim the Prime cannon all by himself, patiently waiting for the clouds of dust and the smoke from the fires that started in the castle settle down. He was hearing shouts and screams, the clangour of swords and the cannonade of pronged guns, the curses of the fighters and the groans of the wounded, and realised that the Heroes – Heroes! – were fighting without success, but he made himself calm down.

He chased the artillerymen away, locked himself up in the tower, aimed the Prime cannon at the cloud of dust and relaxed completely, waiting for the right moment with infinite patience. Gutscher knew that this moment would definitely come, that a gap in the clouds of dust would definitely appear to let the charge through. For the meantime, he would just have to be patient, paying no attention to what was happening around him, not reacting to the screams or the pleas of the fighters to lend them some firepower, to indifferently observe his men die...

And Gutscher's patience paid off. He discharged the Prime cannon the moment when a gust of wind cleared the view a little, revealing the head and chest of the metal monster to the Captain.

"Gotcha!!!"

The giant reeled, its head was torn open and there was oily smoke coming out. The next shot taken from the second guard tower brought the monster down to the ground.

"I did it," whispered Gutscher and smiled broadly, watching the irate Cobrians finish the prostrate monster off.

* * *

"Cobryn and victory!"

"Adornia! Adornia!!!"

"Death to the southern scum!"

"Death to the Dokhts!"

The battle in the throne hall was degenerating into a massacre. Ten Adornians fought against six Dokhts. The escaped prisoners were angry and craved revenge; they faced well-equipped warriors. The first onslaught of the Southerners was very powerful – they were in the majority, they were exhilarated and dreamed of paying the ones who imprisoned them back for every humiliation. Armed with whatever they could lay their hands on, the Adornians attacked all together, wounded [Cryo](#), who never got any of her icy arrows out, cut off the hand of a Fang who looked the wrong way, finished off Nag, pincushioning him with their blades, howled in triumph and tried to take their success one step further, but... they encountered a [Jaeger](#) with a pack of wolves. They pressed onward again, tearing

a few beasts apart and making them fall back, but then the Quarrier and the Soul Reaper joined the fray...

“Everyone! To the windows!” Marida kept screaming. “To the windows!”

But no one was listening to her.

The wild rage of the Heroes did wonders. The Quarrier backed away and retreated under the relentless onslaught of the Adornians. The Soul Reaper tore into them, intending to clear a path with his scythe, but he was too slow to get the Heroes, was surrounded, and fell to the Adornians’ ceaseless blows.

Retreat? Not for us! The Adornians yearned for blood and revenge, they wanted to attack over and over again, and kill their enemies.

The Quarrier could barely fight them back; the Jaeger bled profusely, the remnant of his wolves hugged the walls, the mage lost his power, but... But it was a Dokhtish castle, and only the Dokhts could receive reinforcements.

The guards rushed in, followed by Heroes in Cobryan livery, and the Dokhts got back to their senses and started to press the Adornians back.

The Jaeger died and the wolves disappeared, but they were replaced by two [Brawlers](#) and a Lightning Master. Marksmen shot from every landing, the relentless mage kept firing his bolts, supported by Cryo, wounded, but still full of fighting spirit.

Mighty blows, ice bolts, electric charges... A Healer arrived and took care of the roughed-up Dokhtish heroes. This changed the situation drastically. Agatha’s warriors drove the Adornians to retreat.

“Cobryn and victory!”

Nawhel was the first to fall, unable to dodge the arrow hurled by Cryo. Jolly and the mischievous Nawhel, who should have become an artist, got an ice bolt through his eye, which killed him instantly. He was followed by Arrigo, who fell under the blows of the Lightning Master’s hammer. Umchizan died immediately afterwards, unable to fight back the Quarrier... Takeshi got the mage, dodged the Brawler and decapitated one of the Cobrians, but got shot by Cryo a second later...

“To the windows! We must leave!!!”

But how would they escape the deadly blades and dodge the blows and the arrows? How? Her brothers and sisters kept falling, one after another. They died, having barely tasted their first breath of freedom.

“Carlos! Carlos...” whispered Marida. The very next second, she screamed loudly – the black beast who savaged the Cobrians with impunity up to that point jumped into the air, writhing, as if it were trying to shake off the ice bolt that ran through the animal’s body, fell down and died. The Quarrier stepped on its head, turning it into a bloody mess.
“No!!!”

The floor was slippery with blood. Her brothers were dying... But dying free, in battle, with weapons in their hands.

“This is all I could do for you... All I could do... All...”

More guards rush in, followed by more Heroes, a circular projectile hits her in the shoulder, and blood splashes out. Marida sways.

“Carlos...”

Two crossbow bolts in the chest.

“Carlos...”

She was still standing, the last one of the Southerners, when one of the Stormtroopers

smashed Marida's skull with a mighty blow.

"Carlos... You betrayed me, after all..."

The girl fell lifeless, with a bitter smile frozen on her lips...

They met in battle. Two mighty warriors, two strong fighters, each yearning for victory, two titans – Hurricane and Smasher. Their duel was preordained. There were too many outstanding debts – their fight, which started in faraway Grydwald, was being put off for too long. Each of them wanted victory in a duel.

"Make way!" sounded a bellowing voice, and the fierce battle that raged in the ballroom stopped in an instant.

The Highlanders fell back, the Duelists put down their pronged guns, the Fire Foxes froze, breathing heavily, and the two Warlords faced each other in the centre of the ballroom.

"Let's finish this today!" proclaimed Smasher.

"Gladly!" Heinrich supported his enemy's initiative and waved his mace. "Now!"

"Just you and me!"

"And may the best man win."

They had a score to settle, and the rest of the Heroes treated the wish of the Warlords with respect.

"A duel!" proclaimed Crossbow, and Fidget shot a fiery arrow into the ceiling.

"Die!"

Maximilian attacked first. He lunged forward like an armoured ram, ostensibly trying to use his mace, but at the very last moment he changed his mind and hit Heinrich with his shield, throwing the Grydian back a few steps. The attempt to knock Hurricane down was futile – he remained on his feet, and even counterattacked. The Grydian's mace grazed Smasher's hip, making him step back.

"Not bad!"

"It's just the beginning!"

"I agree."

And the spectators saw what the Warlords were really capable of.

The next moment Maximilian and Heinrich went full contact, force against force, fury against fury, hatred against hatred. None of the "dancing" motions or dodges, manoeuvres or shameful retreats. Two armoured rocks appeared to have grown in the centre of the hall, and started to hammer at each other furiously with enormous maces. Blow, shield, blow, shield, blow, shield... The clangour of armour, shouts, sounds of exhalation... Fencing, the art of combat – everything was forgotten. Force and force alone defined the course of this battle.

"Cobryn and victory!" cried Scowl, wishing to support Smasher, but he instantly fell silent to the irritated hisses of his own companions.

The time of battle cries was suddenly over; the Heroes calmed down a little and stood observing the battle, feeding equal respect for both combatants – Maximilian, who fought in Cobryan colours, and Hurricane, who represented Grydia. Because they were Heroes. Because everybody present was a Hero.

A blow, a blow, another blow...

The shields crumpled like tin foil, the armour was torn, blood mixed with sweat, but they still had enough stamina to continue for a long time.

A blow...

One of Heinrich's movements was too slow – he missed a lunge and got hit in the shoulder. Maximilian's spiked mace tore through the armour and the flesh of the mighty Hurricane. This wasn't too dangerous – the Heroes' wounds heal quickly, but that still requires time. And time was what Heinrich didn't have. Smasher felt that victory was near, and Heinrich wavered, stepped back, dodged, unable to use his shield.

A blow...

Once again, his damaged left arm was struck. The deformed shield crashed down on the stone paving. Shahmana exhaled sharply, Archibald bit his moustache, and Crossbow smiled sadly.

"This is it..."

The next blow smashed Hurricane's arm into his torso. There was no shield, and the armour no longer had any effect. The bones were broken and sticking out from the wound. It was as though the bones tore through the armour into the outside world. Heinrich went down on one knee.

Was it over?

The triumphant Maximilian raised his weapon high, but Hurricane managed a counterattack. His mace crashed into Smasher's knee, and the hideous crunch reverberated through the throne room like cannonade. It was a mess of Cobrian armor and flesh, with blood gushing from the wound. Maximilian's horrible scream filled the air, rising to the very ceiling. Heinrich gathered the last of his powers, and jumped up to deal Smasher a mighty blow to the skull.

His scream was cut short.

Smasher fell heavily to the ground, like a broken doll. It was as if there were no body inside the heavy armour, as if Hurricane had been fighting an incorporeal Touched... But the pools of blood on the floor proved well enough that the enemy was no mere phantom...

"I won," says Heinrich in a hollow voice, staring at the Cobrians.

His arm hung limp and lifeless, his armour badly damaged, the useless shield laying on the ground. He swayed from side to side, and yet Hurricane gripped his mace tightly – ever ready for battle.

"I won."

The Cobrians remained silent. Even Scowl, who finally realised what happened, did not step forward. He had no wish to cut someone down who had just won a fair fight. He could kill him easily, but he had no wish to spill the hero's blood.

The Heroes looked upon each other, and they could not bring themselves to see enemies. Instead, they simply remained silent.

In a few seconds, Fidget's sonorous voice rang through the hall:

"Cobrians, do you know how the Primachine works?"

* * *

"The gas must glow again," said Invariat, looking at the transparent cube longingly.
"That will mean everything was a success..."

"You mean, the machine will generate Prime?" asked Carlos in a whisper.

He knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it from the savant.

"I mean I have solved the greatest mystery of our world," said Convivial with quiet pride.

The glass cube was slowly being filled with blue gas.

"What if you haven't?" asked Gryd in a low voice.

"What?" Invariat stared at Carlos furiously. Malice reflected in his eyes and was heard in his voice. Not anger – malice, the primordial malice of a Hero, coupled with the outrage of a great savant – how could anyone doubt his genius! "What did you say?"

The cube was almost filled up with gas. A few seconds ago it emitted a bright glow, but it was rapidly going dimmer, and now there were opaque clouds swirling behind the transparent walls.

"What if you made a mistake and are about to be given the greatest slap in the face in your entire life?"

Was this mockery? No. The young Hero offers a choice. What was more important – to be confident that you are right or to dare and learn the truth? Another thing the young Hero was asking is this: Will you stay great if the truth turns out bitter, Invariat? Won't you discover that the last years of your life were a mistake? Won't your confidence suffer a mortal blow? Will you recover, Convivial?

"Kontarbardar de khlop de riz!" Hirawa started the final part of the spell.

Soon, very soon, the final chord will sound. The face of Thunder, locked up in the cube, is contorted with pain, but the mask frozen on Convivial's face was scarier.

He wanted to know – and he didn't. He had to choose. He must decide...

"Badar zavey karr! Baday ousid ousilla!"

The cube was still murky, the clouds simply raged inside the cube and did not fill with the much-desired light, but Invariat could wait no longer. He raised his pronged gun and sent a powerful charge into Hirawa.

* * *

He started without me!

But her fury left Agatha almost instantly. The Primachine hummed, bubbled and made an incredible noise, but it could not drown out Elario's thunderous voice. The spell was almost finished, the gas was still murky, but about to fill with a bluish light. It has got to – because the Primachine works... It has got to work!

"Badar zavey karr! Baday ousid ousilla!"

A few more words!

Agatha bit her lips, waiting for the impossible to happen, and...

Lady Cobryn didn't hear the shot, so she didn't understand why Hirawa suddenly waved his hands right away. Only the next moment, when Elario tipped over the railing, bloodied, and fell down, did Agatha get it all:

"Invariat!"

And her maddened scream became the signal for battle.

* * *

Three Heroes were guarding the Primachine at the orders of Lady Cobryn, but they were outside, beyond two heavy doors – Agatha did not intend to show her warriors the source of artificial Prime. Three Heroes... but they could do nothing to help. The savants, artificers and journeymen inside the hall could do nothing against Carlos. The impetuous and merciless Carlos Gryd. Carlos the Hero.

The young lord lost control of himself in the thick of the battle. He let the reins of his mind go, submitting fully to the power that has been raging in him ever since his rebirth.

He went along with the torrent of Prime, smashing every obstacle in his way – thoughtlessly and without pity. Carlos wasn't seeing people before him – he saw enemies, not defenceless savants. Mortal enemies, as something kept telling him, some voice inside. Dangerous enemies that need to be dealt with. So Carlos dealt with them. His heavy sword never missed, and when the sword wasn't fast enough, the dagger in his left hand always was. Carlos swept through the hall in a deadly hurricane, splashing the tanks with Prime mixtures in blood, throwing corpses onto the puffing mechanisms. He was no longer Carlos; he was a Hero. Gryd the invincible, the Hero Lord.

“Everything's fine, my sweet... Everything's good...”

Invariat decided against helping Carlos – that would have been redundant. Gryd, who had shaken his shackles off, managed beautifully all by himself, reminding the savant of a wolf in a sheepfold. Convivial put his pronged gun away and headed towards the glass cube of the Primachine – the heart of his masterpiece, with murky clouds of gas churning inside it.

“I'll just alter a few things,” muttered the savant in an apologetic tone, quickly changing the settings on the control panel. “Nothing to be afraid of... nothing dangerous... you'll understand everything, my baby, you'll understand...”

Invariat wasn't seeing a machine – a puffing, rattling monster breathing fire and spreading its guts all across an enormous hall. No, he was talking to his beloved child. An amazing creature that had no rivals anywhere in the world.

“You know that I'll never do you any harm, my dear,” whispered Convivial, wiping away a tear. “You know you can trust me.”

The pumps were going full power, and the pressure inside the pipes and tanks started to rise. The mixers whirled like mad, the mechanisms clattered, and the pressure relief valves howled.

“You know I never do things for no reason, my lovely...” Invariat sighed and gently stroked a metal panel. “Forgive me.”

The next moment the first explosion sounded.

Steam, Prime mixtures, parts flying through the air, unchained pipes, deformed cogwheels, exploding tanks... All of it complemented by intense heat, screams and horrible noise.

This is what the ancient Cataclysm might have looked like – wild, senseless, and relentless destruction of absolutely everything. All that had been built came tumbling down, accompanied by a feeling of utter helplessness. Terror and despair.

Agatha was shellshocked by the very first explosion. The blast wave threw her into a wall; she blacked out for a few seconds, and her head filled with a painful noise, allowing her to perceive everything that was going on around her with a strange detachment.

An enormous tank was falling, and the lake of fluid underneath it flared up – the flame was blue, for some reason...

A transmission gear tumbled down, and a heavy lever crushed Vick, who had been hiding behind it...

The glass cube shattered into a million shards, and the great shimmering light that had engulfed the hall was quickly extinguished...

And death came.

It came in the shape of a bronze cogwheel flying directly into the lady's chest. It approached precipitously, but Agatha saw it in every detail – broken cogs, cracked disk,

oil stains... And out of the corner of her eye she saw Carlos run, and even managed to recognize him as Carlos, somehow alive and well. And then her attention was drawn to the approaching cogwheel – the huge thing cast of bronze that would soon kill her. And yet Agatha had no fear. It might have been the great rush of noise in her head, or simply her acceptance of the inevitable.

No fear... Death had come...

The cogwheel, Carlos, the blow... A mighty blow that splashed Lady Cobryn's body across the wall, tore her apart, killed her... A mighty blow...

Agatha was smiling.

* * *

"Well done," grumbled Invari, eyeing the destroyed hall. "We've managed it."

"We've done what we meant to do," confirmed Carlos softly, as he propped himself up with a long sword and wiped his forehead with a tired gesture, smearing the dirt and the other people's blood across his face. "Do you have any regrets?"

"No," replied Convivial with a sigh. "It had to be done."

The Primachine was gone. The pipes, the mechanisms, the tanks, the mixers and the pumps – everything turned into a pile of hot scrap metal imbued with various Prime mixtures. Something was burning, crackling, bubbling and hissing, some of the boxes scattered sparks around, but the Primachine was gone.

The books used to set it up had been burned, as were the drafts used in its construction. The people who built it were dead, too – the savants, the artificers, and the journeyman. Human genius had managed to prove that nothing was impossible, and yet instantly destroyed the result of the gruelling work of many years, as though ashamed of its own grandeur.

The Primachine was gone forever.

"The funniest thing is that no one will ever find out about it," Carlos smiled wanly. "You built the greatest machine in history and we have destroyed it, but we're never going to tell anyone anything about it."

"That much is certainly true," nodded Convivial.

Suddenly he gazed at the young lord with a fixed and unexpectedly heavy stare.

A second. Three seconds. Five. It was hard to withstand the Hero savant's pressure, but Carlos managed. He stared right back, with a slight squint, and stayed silent, showing it in his entire countenance that he'd said everything he wanted to and was now expecting a question.

Which followed in ten seconds.

"Why didn't you save her?"

The lord smiled sadly.

"You're still in love with her..."

"Why didn't you?"

"It happened too fast."

Another gesture, a twin of the one that preceded it – a tired palm wiping the forehead, to demonstrate the extent of Gryd's exhaustion.

"You're a Hero, you could have managed it." Convivial wasn't satisfied with the answer.

"You could have jumped on the cogwheel and pushed it aside."

"You're still in love with her..."

"How about you? Whom do you love?! Do you think of anyone but yourself? Agatha was right next to you, all you had to do was jump."

Whom do I love? Father's dead. I betrayed Marida. The Heroes? Probably. Funny but true. My Heroes. My family.

"Agatha wanted to kill me," said Carlos slowly. "And she wanted to kill you, too."

"You did change, after all," sighed Convivial.

"I couldn't avoid it, Invariatic, I couldn't," the young lord confirmed sadly. "You were different before you accepted Prime, too, or you wouldn't have sent Marida to her death."

"So it was revenge?"

"No," Carlos looked at the savant sadly. "Not revenge – common sense. Marida had to die. Agatha had to die. Common sense, we acted pragmatically. I have changed..." The young man's eyes glistened strangely, as if they filled with... Tears? He lost control of the conversation for a second, but managed to finish it: "I have become harder, but I keep a tight rein on myself."

"Really?" inquired Invariatic sarcastically.

"Agatha had to be killed," replied Carlos. "I simply stayed aside."

"That's so underhanded..."

"No – reasonable." The young lord's voice grew louder. "The Primachine must disappear completely. Elario, Agatha of Cobryn, everybody who was associated with it..."

Convivial understood everything. He was intelligent, after all – a genius, no less. He only made one mistake – he refused to believe that the boy would go all the way and murder him, and when he realised he was wrong, it was already too late.

He heard the quiet whisper of a sword cutting the air. A long sword, swung swiftly, pierced the great savant's chest.

The sword was drawn back, and another swing. Invariatic's head fell upon the stones.

"We're never going to tell anything to anyone," repeated Carlos, pensively looking at the body of Convivial, which was sliding down onto the floor. "Never. Not to anyone."

He threw aside the blade, which was useless already, stuck his hand into one of his pockets, where he had put the two small objects that he took from Agatha's study, and pulled one of them out. Then he approached a jar of acid that had survived by some miracle and, grinning an ugly grin, threw in the brass cogwheel on a simple thin chain that he took back from Agatha's study.

The Primachine was gone.

And now it was certainly gone forever.

Epilogue

“Tom Scowl!” proclaimed Hurricane in a booming voice.

The Eraser stepped forward in a dignified way, turned around and passed the formation with an immaculate military gait. He stopped at the throne and dropped to one knee.

“I came to you, my lord, to swear my oath of fealty...”

Scowl’s confident words weren’t addressed to the lord alone. They were heard by the entire formation of the Heroes – those who had already sworn this oath as well as those who were about to follow Tom’s example. They touched their hearts, confirming it: “You weren’t wrong – you’ve chosen the right ruler, the best one of them all. Look – even Scowl swears fealty, even he...”

“And I swear this oath in good faith...”

The Prosecutor and the Cobryan Mentor confessed that Lady Agatha ordered the murder of Lord Dathos Gryd and his son, in order to place her puppet upon the Grydian throne. Carlos’ name was cleared, but he would not return to his home in the Forest. All the Cobryan Heroes asked him to stay and look after the orphaned domain. The Emperor thought upon this for a while, but in the end decided he could not halt the inevitable, and by a special edict gave Carlos full power over the Empire’s richest province.

“I swear to follow you into battle and march ever forward; I give this oath to protect...”

Hurricane, who was in charge of the ceremony, looked fierce and focused; he was listening to every word of the oath, looking the Hero in the eye with a fixed gaze, as if trying to read some inveracity there, finding none, and yet remaining focused and fierce. Fidget’s smile was barely visible. She was happy – her faith in the inexperienced young man’s future wasn’t wrong, and she has every right to smile. Archibald was as nonchalant as usual. Crossbow stood frozen, impressed by the solemnity of the moment, and the enormous Quarrier known as the Tower did likewise. Behind him stood the Mage, the Highlander, the Lightning Master, Cryo and the Brawler... Nearly every Cobryan hero stood there in formation, their eyes fixed upon their lord. Their Hero.

The Hero Lord...

There’s a first time for anything, and Cobria seemed the perfect place for it. Glorious Cobria, famous for producing the finest warriors.

They were proud of this honour – to serve the first Hero Lord. They saw him as a true leader.

“And I ask you to accept the catalyst as a symbol of my loyalty and obedience.”

Scowl bowed his head and handed to his lord a small knife with a blade twisted and gnarled.

Carlos rose from the throne and accepted the amulet.

“Rise, Tom Scowl. Rise and stand among us as an equal. Stand beside me as my Hero.”

He looked at the warriors with pride.

They were all his Heroes now. They would follow him everywhere and commit many a brave deed in the coming war, writing his name into the Dokhtish history books in letters of gold.

The name of Carlos, Lord of Cobria.

Appendix 1. MAP OF PRAIA



Double tap on picture to enlarge map

Appendix 2. GLOSSARY

ACADEMY OF LORDS – the central institution of the Dokht Imperium, where potential lords receive their education: they master the harvesting of Prime and other official matters, most importantly, the revival of their heroes with the aid of special devices known as Prime Inductors. Not everyone who graduates from the Academy is destined to become a Lord. Students of the Academy may be younger members of the landed families, who grow weary of spending their days awaiting their inheritance, or just talented young people who may ultimately find themselves in the Institute of Mentors. Education at the Academy of Lords lasts five years.

ADORNIA (properly known as the Kingdom of Adornia) – the major state situated on the south-eastern part of the continent of Praia, located to the south of the Ilhwa River.



After the Cataclysm, the land was flooded with Prime, which entered the metabolism of the local residents. Many died, but those who survived came to master the art of transforming natural objects through the force of their emotions and desires. As the Adornians came to master their unique talents, they found themselves in opposition to their more traditional brethren, who came to be known as the Dokhts, and ultimately declared their own state, the Kingdom of Adornia, where freedom and creativity is valued above all else.

ADORNIAN – the subjects of the Kingdom of Adornia, also known as the Keepers of Adornia. Adornians have special attitude toward life, and fill their days with creative expression. The spirit of Adornians inspires them to breathe life even into the most mundane tasks, and transform every little thing into a perfect, unique treasure.

In a broad sense, anyone who practices “Prime magic” may be called an Adornian.

THE BATTLE OF MISTY GROVE - the decisive battle of the year 41, between the Dokht Imperium and the Kingdom of Adornia. It was the first major conflict to involve heroes.

The principle cause of the war was a rapid decline in Dokht Imperium’s Prime reserves. In rapidly developing its technology, it had consumed more and more of this quintessential resource. The Dokhts were determined to seize the largest known deposit, located in Misty Grove, a group of disputed islands along the border by the Ilhwa River.

At the time of this battle, the abilities of the heroes were still poorly understood, and were not always controlled even by the heroes themselves. However, the temptation to deploy them on the battlefield was too great to resist, for either side. The heroes who participated in the war carried new Prime-powered weapons, which led to such terrible destruction and chaos that all parties considered it best to conclude a ceasefire.

CATACLYSM – a global catastrophe that thrust all of Praia into chaos, and brought the world to the brink of destruction. It included all manner of frightening natural anomalies:

earthquakes, storms, tornadoes, and most importantly, a flood of surging Prime – a previously unknown substance, deadly in high concentrations. As Prime swept across the continent, it extinguished countless lives. Naturally, this event had as devastating an effect on Praian society as it did on the natural world. The Cataclysm, and the Prime it carried with it, radically transformed all life.

CATALYST – a token or totem which is essential to the revival of a fallen hero. The lord of each hero receives his or her catalyst as a pledge of the hero's loyalty. A catalyst bears the imprint of the hero, and is usually associated with the hero's former life. If needed, a hero may make a new catalyst, at which time the power of the former catalyst will expire. During the time between the death and rebirth of the hero, their catalyst remains the only thread linking the hero to the world.

DOKHT – the subjects of the Dokht Imperium. The Dokhts tirelessly and diligently advance their society on the basis of scientific and technological achievements through Prime. Science stands at the center of Dokht culture, and they place systematic scientific knowledge above all else. The principle topic of Dokht inquiry is Prime. In a mere seventy years, Dokht studies have advanced to make astonishing breakthroughs and completely change their way of life.

DOKHT IMPERIUM – a state situated in the north-western part of Praia, to the north of the Ilhwa River. The Dokhts inherited their basic governing principles from the Old Empire. The state is under the command of the Emperor, a hereditary position which is passed down to the Emperor's eldest child.



After the Cataclysm transformed the world, the Dokhts focused their studies on the properties Prime, the super-fuel of the new world, and dedicated themselves to the development of Prime-based technology. The Dokhts never waver from their straightforward reasoning; they preserve the traditions of the Old Empire, and use this as a springboard for their ambitious scientific and technological breakthroughs. The development of Prime technology requires the concerted efforts of many individual Dokhts working in unison, and cooperation between many groups involved in different areas of research. The constant need to coordinate the efforts of the Dokhts taught them to act as a cohesive unit, and it was this that led to their victory in the War of the Heroes, despite the great skill and daring tactics of their Adornian foes.

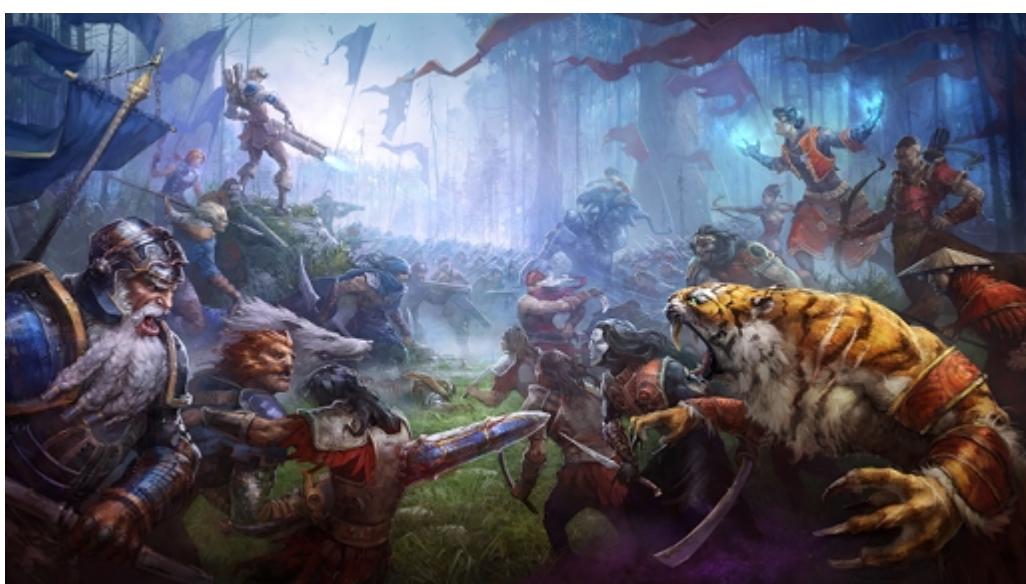
EMPIRE (THE OLD EMPIRE) – the state which preceded the Cataclysm, which occupied the entire continent of Praia, consisted of three major provinces: the Northern, the Southern and Southeastern. During Cataclysm, the Southern Province split off from the mainland, and many believe it was destroyed during the ensuing chaos. The remaining two provinces – the Northern and Southeastern – each declared themselves sovereign states within the first years of the new Prime era: the Dokht Imperium and the Kingdom of Adornia.

FERRAUT THE FIRST – the Dokht Emperor from the years 25 to 50 Prime Era. Well educated and highly talented, Ferraut the First brought many scientific, technological, and political developments to his people. The great crisis of his reign was the Dokht Prime Shortage, which in the year 41 led to war with the Kingdom of Adornia over the largest known deposit – Misty Grove. The Dokhts, under the command of their Emperor, were victorious and their state grew increasingly stronger.

FICHTER – a river city on the Ilhwa River, consisting of the Dokhts on the northern shore and the Adornians on the southern shore. Fichter enjoyed success as a center of trade, as it was historically the most convenient place to cross the Ilhwa, for an island in the middle of the channel allowed the construction of a major bridge. Its fortunate position always prospered from trade between the northerners and southerners, who eventually became known as Dokhts and Adornians. Emperor Ferraut demilitarized the northern, Dokht section of Fichter, and granted the municipality the right to collect its own taxes. Since then, even to the present day, Fichter is the only free city in all of the Dokht Imperium.

HEROES – unique creatures of a particular metabolism, caused by a special reaction to Prime. The path of a hero begins with a Call of Prime, which typically inspires heroes to rethink their life's purpose; the initiation usually involves taking a strong dose of Prime, which means death for ordinary people. Once heroes have embarked upon this path, their development deviates radically from that of their fellow man: their strength increases dramatically, and they begin to master new, often incredible talents. Their physical bodies can easily endure non-fatal injuries, and they are no longer subject to the external signs of aging. By accumulating Prime in their bodies, heroes are able to use and enhance their abilities, and can detect traces of Prime within other objects. During battle, when the field is saturated with Prime, heroes reach their maximum potential.

The most amazing and unique feature of heroes is their ability to revive. After falling in battle, heroes can be reborn in perfect health, with no signs of damage – provided the fallen hero's catalyst is properly preserved.



ILHWA – one of the rivers of the continent of Praia, which separates the border between the Dokht Imperium in the north-west and the Kingdom of Adornia in the south-east.

IMPERIAL PRIME COMPANY – the Dokht Imperium has a state monopoly on the extraction of Prime, but grants special licenses to lords, who may mine specific Prime fields. However, half of all Prime harvested must be sent to the Imperial Prime Company, and the income received from its sale is gathered into the imperial treasury. Many lands claimed as possessions of the Imperium are yet unclaimed by Lords, including vast deposits of Prime – in particular, Misty Grove.

LORD – a title of nobility in the Dokht Imperium and in the Kingdom of Adornia. In both states, the title of Lord is associated with those who possess devices for the revival of heroes, and who seek to mine Prime and expand their state's possession of Prime resources.

MENTOR – an official representative of the Dokht Imperium, and servant to a Lordship. At first sight, the mentor's tasks may seem to primarily concern economic issues: the monitoring of Prime extraction, the observance of the tax codes, and so on. However, their influence over the behavior of their Lord is often much deeper. The mentor has voice in the decision-making of the Lord, especially those decisions of particular importance, and the mentor embodies the will of the crown above all else. Another important function of the mentor is that he or she possesses all of the technical skills of a Lord: the management of Prime resources, and the revival of heroes. Thus he or she ensures the stability of a lordship in the event that a Lord becomes incapacitated.

MISTY GROVE – home to a massive deposit of Prime, located on an island on the border of the Ilhwa River, currently controlled by the Imperial Prime Company of the Dokht Imperium.

THE OLD GODS – before the Cataclysm and the era of Prime, much of the population of Praia professed a belief in a pantheon of sixteen gods, symbols and patrons of fundamental human aspirations, such as power, love, and curiosity. After the Cataclysm, faith in the old gods has become almost extinct in the Dokht Imperium, and those who maintain such unscientific beliefs are frowned upon, as members of a cult.

PAUL THE FIRST – the reigning Dokht emperor. In the 50th year of the Prime Era, Paul inherited the crown from his elder brother Ferraut the First, who died under mysterious circumstances. Unlike his brother, Paul has proven relatively weak as a political figure, which has significantly undercut the political and social determination of the Dokht people. Corruption, internecine intrigue, and a general weakening of discipline across the Imperium has cast Paul in an unfavorable light, and as he continues to lose credibility, the general respect traditionally enjoyed by the Emperor has been increasingly undermined.

PRAIA – the mainland, home to both the Dokht Imperium and the Kingdom of Adornia. The Dokhts and Adornians use the name of Praia to refer to the entire inhabited

world.

PRIME – a novel high-energy substance, which first appeared in the world during the Cataclysm. It radically changed the direction of Praian civilization, making possible new technologies as well as magic. The people's first exposure to Prime was no less dire than the Cataclysm itself, for contact with Prime most often leads to mutation, disease, and death. However, in the first years of the chaos that descended with the Cataclysm, two new groups formed. Some sought to understand how they might survive in their new environment, and how to protect themselves from its dangers. They gathered in areas where direct contact with Prime might be avoided, and dedicated themselves to a close study of this substance. Over time, they united in a sustainable society and became known as Dokhts, the founders of Prime technology. Others continued to live in areas rich in Prime, and every day, through normal environmental contact, absorbed more and more Prime into their bodies. Over time, they developed new and exciting capabilities to externalize their imagination and emotion. Through the magical properties of Prime, their inner lives became capable of manipulating reality. Thanks also to Prime, they have reached a new understanding of the inherent nature of things. They called themselves Adornians and they too formed their own state.

Thus Prime has been both a divisive and unifying force.

PRIME CRYSTAL – these solid fragments of pure Prime are widely used in Prime-based scientific and magical efforts. In the Dokht Imperium, the production and distribution of Prime Crystals is controlled by the Imperial Prime Company.

PRIME INDUCTOR – a machine for the revival of Dokht heroes, based on the principles of mathematical harmony. The Lord who maintains the Inductor inputs precise mathematical values into the machine, carefully calculated for the revival of the hero. Once the machine is prepared and calibrated, the hero's catalyst is inserted into the machine, and the process of regeneration begins.

PRIME SPRING – the place in which heroes of Adornia are revived. A Prime Spring possesses special acoustical properties, for the revival of Adornian heroes is based upon the principles of musical harmony. The overseer of the Spring creates ambient music appropriate to the hero's revival, which resonates throughout the carefully tuned spring, making the pool of Prime at its center resonate with power. The process of regeneration then begins as the hero's catalyst is immersed in the pool of Prime.

THE PRIME ZONE – a fertile but wild zone in the center of Praia, in which mutant beings known as the Touched freely roam the land. It was the epicenter of the Cataclysm, into which massive torrents of Prime flowed, twisting all organic life beyond recognition.

PROSECUTOR (IMPERIAL PROSECUTOR) – a public official of the Dokht Imperium. An Imperial prosecutor oversees the proper application and execution of the law. The Institute of Imperial Prosecutors was founded to establish a uniform understanding of Imperial law. While Imperial prosecutors do prosecute cases, they also investigate and challenge court decisions which they deem contrary to the law. In their prosecution of crime and preservation of law and order, they exercise an authority granted them by the

Emperor himself. An Imperial Prosecutor is accountable only to the Emperor, and is traditionally appointed for an extended term of service.

THE TOUCHED – a general term for those creatures transformed and mutated by extended, intense exposure to Prime. Typically, the Touched biology is based on various animal species, but sometimes the Touched include individuals who were transformed by Prime in some unusual way. Most Touched are lacking in the higher faculties, and are aggressive and hostile – and therefore quite dangerous. But occasionally one may be found which is capable of reason – even one capable of joining the ranks of heroes.



Appendix 3.
HEROES DESCRIPTION

FIRE FOX

Despite her poor defenses, the Fire Fox is fearsome opponent. With her talents in the ways of fire, she ignites her foes, shooting streams of flames across entire squadrons of enemy soldiers. Cunning and crafty as a fox, this hero easily slips away from her pursuers, even becoming invisible in the event of a threat. Although her usual tactics involve lighting enemies ablaze from a safe distance, this hero has been known to briefly turn into a nearly invincible fire demon, destroying any who draw near.



WARLORD

The Warlord confidently leads his troops to victory, cutting through his opponent's defenses and boldly hurling himself at even the most dangerous of adversaries. He scatters his enemy with heavy blows, and his enchanted armor guards not only the hero himself, but also any nearby allies. Nothing can break the morale of soldiers and heroes fighting under the sacred banner carried by this consummate warrior.



HIGHLANDER

Highlanders are well known for their indifference to pain and contempt for death. They wield their greatswords with astonishing skill, transforming themselves into a very whirlwind of steel, demolishing enemy soldiers and even stunning enemy heroes. With each hit, the Highlander accelerates his attack, and each enemy death increases his power. Even should the highlander be cut down in battle, his indomitable spirit summons back his fallen form, that he may rise again to fight on.



DUELIST

The swift and nimble Duelist is a dangerous opponent indeed, despite his relatively modest defenses. He blinds his enemy with smoke grenades, then unleashes a flurry of attacks with his devilishly sharp sword – not entirely fair, it is true, but very effective. In addition, the Duelist also brings good fortune to his allies, granting them additional Prime. When pressed, this hero can perform a fearsome attack against all nearby enemies.



ERASER

As he cuts through his enemies, the Eraser quickly masters his unique talents, with which he can become invisible, easily evading pursuit, then sneak up on his enemy. The hero, in shadow, calmly selects a target and sets it up for the kill. Should the enemy survive the first attack, it may easily be followed with lightning fury.



FACELESS

Faceless specializes in sudden attacks and finishing moves. In the open his attacks are poor and defenses are weak, but he makes up for these shortcomings with swift and sudden movements, ever mounting in deadly accuracy. Combine this with talents aimed at slowing and weakening his victims, and Faceless becomes the perfect assassin.



LIGHTNING MASTER

The Lightning Master has a special talent for calling down Lightning, which he can channel through whole groups of enemies. He can also direct powerful balls of electricity at enemy heroes, and charge his weapon with deadly force. His mastery over this awesome element enables the hero to escape chase, incinerating pursuers with powerful shocks. At need, he can call down fury from the angry sky, and deliver a decisive blow upon those who thought to escape his wrath.



CRYO

The primary skill of Cryo is her the ability to freeze the enemy. This hero can call forth the power of driving snowstorms to pummel whole groups of enemies, and summon magical shards of ice which can both protect allies and punish her enemies. Relentless cold may envelope her, biting any who draw near enough to attack. – And woe unto those who she imprisons in a block of ice, for such captivity can last to the end of time.



QUARRIER

This powerful giant, though slow, is tough enough to brush off most enemy attacks. The earth rumbles under the Quarrier's feet with each step, and none can escape his crushing blows, which are powerful enough to throw enemies into the air. When surrounded, the hero can call up impregnable rock to serve as his shield, and while invulnerable he may completely restore his strength.

Contrary to his seemingly ponderous pace, the Quarrier can leap suddenly and ram the enemy ranks, scattering them left and right. The true place of the Quarrier is the very heart of battle, where he may take the brunt of the enemy attacks, and thus shield his less resilient companions.



JAEGER

Jaegers are always accompanied by loyal wolves, ready to leap at anyone who would point a spear at their master. Jaegers are able to unify his allies into a pack, which strengthens each individual significantly. At the crucial moment the hero may invoke the Great Hunt, thus turning his wolves and allies into ruthless hunters, from which no enemy can escape.



BRAWLER

Brawlers are dangerous melee fighters, who always end their combos with powerful finishing blows. This hero bravely throws himself at the most dangerous enemy, inflicting bone-shattering blows. His precise throws and strikes can stun his enemies. When surrounded, the Brawler becomes like a runaway tornado, destroying everything in his path.



BLACK PANTHER

The main weapon of the Black Panther is her “alter ego,” the majestic cat which accompanies the hero wherever she goes. So long as the panther lives, nothing can harm the Black Panther, as she lashes out at her enemies with a fearsome throwing disc. Her talents enable her to heal and look after her faithful friend, and improve his hunting instincts. But the Black Panther is a predator herself, feared by anyone who has crossed this deadly duo.



PRIME WORLD



Step into the vibrant role-playing strategy game, Prime World, which pits two nations at war over a magical resource. Choose from dozens of heroes and lead them onto the battlefield to destroy your foes. Select from an array of unique talents to turn the tide in your favor. As you lead your hero through battle, you'll accumulate the magical substance, "Prime" to acquire talents and unlock special abilities.

Show your skills on various arenas - from the classic *Borderlands*, to the fast and fierce *Outpost*. The dark and moody *Dragonwald* to the strategic or zombie-ridden arenas of *Homeland* and *Apocalypse*.

Prime World steps beyond the battle arena with a new level of persistence and strategy - a castle-building game that makes it fun to craft new talents and prepare heroes for battle. Talents are permanent and offer you a chance to customize your hero to your own preferences. With a wide variety of heroes to play, there are plenty of opportunities to experiment.

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