

Prologue (Prehistory of the events)

Long before any living creature was born in the world, emotions were already surging in the universe. When life took place, all creatures obeyed the demands of feelings and lived in response to them. Then people came, with gifts of the soul, free will and creation, empowered by mind and logic. They could choose to live in response to these emotions, as any other living being did, or could discover even more, embracing and growing into something much greater, much freer, more intelligent, more everything that they could think of or even imagine.

And they did. They used the ability to respond. The ability to grow too. Just not in intended ways. With the power of creation similar to god's, enchanted with free will to use it in any way they want, people forged their own ways, entirely different to those that were prepared and available for them.

People reacted to every emotion, but created their own reactions, in ways alien to any other creature, and by doing so, created new emotions, new feelings that only humanity would embrace and carry within themselves. That's how fear, guilt and shame were born, followed by resentment and grudges. Also, superiority over others and craving for something, that was never intended to be shared, were born and flashed in multiple ways. Each person was given one life, and no matter how many other lives one would claim, they would still never be able to receive a second life for themselves. Each was given one body, and no matter the efforts, no matter how many bodies of living or dead one would subdue by using power, greed and control, they would still live and die just in the very same body that they were born into.

But people tried. They tried to take what belonged to others by exercising control, manipulation and power, calling it love and support, mingling it with an understanding of true feelings until nobody knew the truth any longer.

Twisted understandings created twisted realities, which implied their own rules and weakened humanity, as true strength came from the flow of life, which stayed in a real reality so freely given to everyone on the day of birth, and so brutally ignored by people submerging in the footsteps of those who had already gone astray.

Not all gifts of the creator were ignored entirely, and many managed to find a light even in this dimmed reality. But still not in a way it was offered, not up to the degree it could have been reached.

Some emotions were favoured more than others in some people, while different feelings were closer to the liking of others. Preferences and sorting were born, creating separations. Many different nations started to rise and drift apart from each other. In some cases, this difference was just in abilities, in some cases even in appearance. Sometimes it would influence even the surroundings, creating new speeches of animals and plants born from that particular feeling favoured so badly by humans around.

Despite this separation, people still managed to live together, if not in complete harmony, then at least in respect for each other. Some nations did manage to find ways back to the light, back to the truth, and by doing so, the true power of life could enter them more and more, providing their lives with something that no one had ever experienced before.

But still, preference to one emotion over another, to one ability over another, was already entrenched deep inside and with each generation would grow even bigger. Growing nations didn't realise that this empowered preferential world was bringing not only miracles but disasters too.

The same world shared the same likings, so the effects of it strengthened in everyone. Even in those who others would plead to reconsider, as their preferred feelings were bringing doom not only to those who have submerged themselves into it, but to anyone surrounding them too.

Cruelty was spreading rapidly, and new, much darker nations were brought into power. Instead of creating their own wonders, they were craving what others already had and taking it by force without consideration for others. Not much can be taken by force, as the world does not support such a force. Once you bring your own beliefs and likings into some place and replace them with what used to be there before, all the wonders that you were desiring will slowly, or rapidly disappear, and the place will turn into something that you brought, not what you wanted to take. So, at some point, people even stopped craving things for themselves and destroyed them for the sake of others not having them.

Violence was spreading rapidly, bringing despair to older and more advanced nations. Brute force was becoming more difficult to withstand, as it was so easy to fall for it under sorrow and suffering. Once you answer violence with violence, there is not much difference left between you and the attacking forces, and it doesn't take that long until your own heart starts to prefer those feelings that are seemingly unnecessary in such a world. Once it happens, the ways to true power start to shrink, making you weaker, and then using force seems to be the only option left.

In the midst of this madness, a sudden, unexpected glimpse of hope was born. It came from a man born of a nation drowned in greed. But still, his proposition was pure, his suggestion was firm, and it was eventually heard by many. Leaders of eighteen remaining nations gathered for a meeting, which ended up in lengthy discussions.

Hope turned into belief and belief into faith. When faith is born, there are no obstacles that cannot be overcome. Eighteen leaders found a way to seek help from the creator itself, who by then was already long forgotten and replaced with multiple myths and religions. By immense human will and personal strength, they managed to break through these never-ending beliefs that, for them, were as natural as breathing, as all they were born under the blankets of these false realities established long ago by reinforced misunderstandings.

And they succeeded. They managed to break through and sought help from the creator in a way that the creator could answer them and provide direct help. By accepting this help, all eighteen were gifted with some extraordinary powers and abilities that no one else ever had, and most likely will not ever have again, as it is very unlikely that the same or similar circumstances would ever repeat themselves.

By the combined power of eighteen, a new world was created, a very accurate replica of the one that everyone was living in then, and all nations that embraced feelings leading to cruelty and oppression were sent to this newly built world, where they could live their lives in the ways they had chosen, without bringing disaster to other nations who didn't want to drown in this violence. Eighteen Gifted (that's how they were called from that day, because of the direct gifts from the creator) had to pay a high price for the ability to create that world. All eighteen became immortals, as they were part of the power that created a new physical world, and all of them had to stay in a physical world, in their physical bodies, for those boundaries to hold.

Peace once again returned to the Old World. People were calling it the Old World now, as it was much older than the one that was created. Eighteen nations prevailed and were able to return to their own living. Since that day, no new nations were created, as if the power of the eighteen would forbid it to happen.

All seemed good for a long time. Generation passed generation, and many truths had been forgotten. Not by the eighteen, but by most people who were just living their ordinary lives. Signs of new troubles were rising, but they had been ignored for a long time, and a blind eye was kept by everyone, until the time came when it became so obvious that it could not be ignored any longer. One of the nations was stirring badly again. None of the eighteen could say anything and didn't even know what to say.

The problem was coming from the nation of humans. Well, it shouldn't be called "the nation of humans," as in reality, the most distinctive emotion for that nation was greed. But "nation of greed" didn't sound very appealing, and no one wanted to use this name. So they called them the nation of humans, defying any logic by it, as each and every nation up until then was bearing the name of humanity.

It was the nation of the very same person who initiated the plan to free this world from problems at the time of need. And the leader was doing his very best to keep his nation out of harm and educate it, showing ways to a life without greed in it. But despite his best efforts, all was getting out of hand, and after a few centuries, no one could ignore it any longer.

So-called humans, by now, were suppressing and exercising their power not only over their own people, but over people of other nations too.

New gatherings were assembled by the eighteen, and new arrangements were made. After not being able to cope with the uprising power of the humans, one by one, other nations started to leave the Old World, which they had been using together for so long. New worlds were created by the eighteen, using the power gifted to them, and nations left either on their own or in groups. Until one day, even a nation of magic, that prevailed alongside humans the longest, said goodbye to the Old World and left to live in their own place, taking with them every creature and plant carrying a drop of magic and leaving the Old World stripped of this wonderful ability that humans were abusing and exploiting so badly.

The Old World was left entirely to the human nation to live.

The headmaster stood on the roof of the tower overlooking the front gates, watching a rider in the distance slowly approach. She was thinking to herself about how many people had been coming to the School lately. After so many years of lethargy, new life was suddenly brought to this ancient place. Even when she started as a young apprentice, it was never as busy as it was now.

For the past decades, the School had been extremely empty with few random students or none at all. She remembered when a terrifying thought suddenly came to her head: "...School is dying..." Once this thought crept in, it never left but made a home in her head instead.

"School is dying"... after god knows how many millennia of work and service, suddenly it became unneeded, unwanted, and invisible... She fought this thought for some time, but in vain. It just became stronger with each day until one day she surrendered to it and took it for reality. After that, age started to creep up on her. She didn't feel ready for it, but if her services were no longer needed, there was nothing else she could offer to the world. The idea of leaving the School and looking for a new life never even crossed her mind. Even if it did, she would instantly dismiss it. She was a part of this School, and the School was a part of her – inseparable. If the School was dying, then she would die with it. And death started to inch towards her, bringing silver hair, wrinkled skin, and the lethargy of old age.

She had rarely seen people becoming old and dying – the School wasn't built for that. It was created to embrace life, to help people find what they want in life and become stronger in it, to embrace their dreams and desires, and bring them to reality. Once they learned all that the School could give at a time, they would leave, finding their way back to the outer world as unexpectedly as they found their way here. Probably the world outside has changed a lot if, for some reason, all the knowledge that the School could offer wasn't needed any more. And this lethargy lasted for so many years.

But a different breeze of change must have entered the world, as in the past months, people were piling in. Adults, youngsters, even children. At one point, she thought that it might end up in trouble as there wasn't enough space for such crowds. However, this fright confirmed itself to be feeble. By this day no one could remember who created this School, but the creators hadn't overseen any details, and overcrowding wasn't an unpredictable event for them. Before it became too cramped, new grounds started to open and blend in with the old premises. Not only new fields for crops, new forests, lakes, and hills, but new buildings were added to the village, transforming it into a town. The School's learning facilities, in the centre of the town, were enlarged in size multiple times, becoming rather impressive buildings with colonnades, towers, and pillars, streets, and squares. With it, the library enlarged, presenting multiple copies of old texts. Even a few new scrolls that she had never seen before appeared with the arrival of new teachers. As if the knowledge they came to share was pulled straight out from their heads and made into scrolls and books. Truly impressive and thoughtful confirmation of magic operating over this place.

While Aqila was engaged in her own thoughts, she never lowered her eyes from the newcomer rider, evaluating him. She could see by now that it was a young man. His riding style was rather peculiar – he was riding on a saddle that had a semi-high backrest and was supporting the rider's back, but his legs, instead of hanging at the sides, were comfortably crossed in front of him as if he would defy the laws of gravity and would not need to hold his balance at all. At first glance, one would think that the man was sitting in an armchair in his lounge, not on the back of a horse. On his lap snoozed a little shaggy puppy.

“Someone close to royalty” – thought the headmaster to herself after observing the newcomer’s riding style. Just a couple of weeks ago, she witnessed a similar approach. It was a young woman who, at first, with her spectacular entrance, brought a lot of confusion and chaos to her heart, but eventually turned out to be a very helpful ally at this busy time. However, she still didn’t fully recover from that entrance and was wondering if this approaching man was also bringing some surprises.

By this time, the man reached the front gates and dismounted his horse. His saddle was no less peculiar than his riding style. The saddle itself wouldn’t have been that strange, but it had no girth or other straps to be attached to the horse. It was simply resting on its back...

“Definitely from the royal quarters” – the headmaster thought after seeing this saddle, and turned to the stairs leading down from the tower to the entrance.

It had been a while since a young prince introduced this style of saddles, saying that it is much friendlier to horses as it doesn’t obstruct breathing and some other reasons she could not remember now. At the beginning, many tried this new riding style, but eventually had to return to old, ordinary saddles, as what good was to have this new innovation if everyone just kept falling down as they couldn’t keep their balance. Apparently, this saddle was supposed to be bonded to the horse via the rider and the horse’s energy fields and didn’t even touch the horse’s back when mounted, but not many understood what it meant. Eventually, only those who were trained at the Royal Palace managed to master it. She herself had never seen anyone riding like this until two weeks ago, when that young woman came.

When Aqila had reached the bottom of the stairs, the man had already taken the saddle from his horse. As expected, he didn’t have a bridle either. He stroked the horse few times and, to the headmaster’s surprise, turned it away from the School and told it to leave.

“Hello and welcome, traveller” – the headmaster said. – “There is no need to part with your horse, sir. We have plenty of room in the stables or paddocks if you prefer.”

“Thank you for your kind offer, but I have no need for it any more” – the man replied.

He was dressed in grey and dusty clothes. If his outfit had any colour to it before, then it was not recognisable by now. It was difficult to say what colour his hair was, either, as it was all dusty from travelling. He was smiling all the time since seeing her, but this smile, despite being warm and friendly, also somehow was cold and sarcastic, and didn’t match his face. Saying that, it was difficult to describe his face, as all features somehow blended together, and she couldn’t even be sure if he was a young man or middle-aged. Even when he was looking straight at her, she had a feeling that he was looking not at her but to the distance through her, as if he didn’t see or didn’t even bother to see what was in front of him. But not only that, she felt that she also had difficulty to look at him directly, no matter how much she tried to concentrate her attention to examine the newcomer closer, her glance somehow was sliding past him, and she was losing concentration every time she looked at his face. Even the little puppy, which he was holding under his arm, was grey and unnoticeable. Somehow, both of them were blending into the surroundings, no matter how much attention she tried to muster.

“Never mind” – she thought to herself – “It is probably my age finally playing tricks on me. For some reason, I even thought that he was from the royal quarters...”. But what was the reason that she thought that way? Aqila tried very hard but couldn’t remember. Then her eyes landed on the

saddle in his hand, and memories came back at once. She was dumbfounded for a moment. How could she forget? It happened just now. How is it even possible to forget in such a short time?

“I see time wasn’t very kind to you, my teacher” – the man interrupted her inner conversation. He turned around and walked through the doors without waiting for an invitation.

“... ” he called her a teacher, so he must be a past student, and also from times when there were no other teachers at School, and she was assuming teachers’ duties by herself. But why then could she not recognise him? “I must be really becoming senile...” Not so long ago, she could remember every single student that she encountered on these grounds, and now, no matter how hard she tried, for her life she couldn’t remember ever seeing this man. Alas, never mind past memories – she had already forgotten how this man looked as soon as he turned away... What a disgrace.

“Shouldn’t some doors be opening for me to enter?” – a voice asked from inside.

Headmaster snapped out of her confusion and rushed inside. Honestly, what was she doing behaving like this? She was supposed to greet newcomers, not drag herself behind them. If she would miss the entrance, she would never forgive herself. That would be the first time in history that a student entered the School while the headmaster aimlessly wandered outside...

“Yes, yes” – she replied while rushing in – “you can enter the School through any doors that let you in. If more than one door opens, please choose any passage you like. It will determine where you will.....” – She didn’t finish her sentence and fell silent again.

“That’s what I thought” – the newcomer said – “but as you can see, all doors are closed. Is there a problem? Have they been broken?” To find a way to this School, one had to meet one of the few requirements. He either had to exercise a wish to learn something, or to share some knowledge with others. Or there could be people wanting to offer their services for those who learn and teach. It was difficult to understand the School’s location – it was a part of this world but somehow not in it. Like a pocket with no entrance, with no permanent connection. It would open itself only for those who need it, either to gain or to share, and for no other reason. A man would walk a regular path and would end up at the entrance gates of the School if that was what his heart desired. And another could look all his lifetime for it and never find it if all that he wants is just in the mind but not in the heart. Fear or need also wouldn’t open the passage, only wish and desire. Can you distinguish wish from need? Not many can – not many come. But with so many people piling in lately, something must have changed in the world that people started to wish instead of being needy.

For those who found a way, many doors were waiting in the front hall – all different in design and colour and shape and size. School could be entered only through one of these doors. As soon as a new person entered the hall, some ancient magic would “read” the newcomer and the door matching his or her need would open automatically in greeting, and a path that opened would lead to an assigned home and occupation. Once the path had been walked and the door closed behind, the passage would disappear, and when the person who walked that path would open the door again, it would be just a regular front door of the house or apartment.

Sometimes more than one door would open. That would indicate that the School could help the newcomer in more than one way (or the newcomer could help a School). For example, whenever master John (mainly known to people as Old John) comes, every door inviting teachers would open. When this happens, no matter what door a person chooses to enter, the School would still remember every other proposition offered, but the chosen one would be his main occupation.

Just two weeks ago, she witnessed a phenomenal incident. That day, a young lady, hardly over her teens, came riding in a similar manner to this newcomer. As soon as she entered the hall, all doors started to open one by one – cling, clang, all locks got unlocked, and every single door welcomed her. A truly unheard-of event. School welcomed her as a student of any kind, as a teacher of every subject, as a helper to support the School’s daily needs, even as an apprentice of the headmaster or a new headmaster herself. That was some spectacular entrance. Even the old-looking, crackly, narrow door in the corner of the hall opened to her its narrow passage. The door of the “teller”. There was no living memory or record known of anyone invited by the door of “teller”. No one even remembered when it appeared (a new door would appear if a newcomer brought a position that no one needed or could offer before. Once a new door was created, it would stay forever, even if no one used it ever again).

But the scene she was witnessing now was even more dumbfounding. Not a single door was opening as if the School would be completely ignorant of the fact that a new person had arrived. Not a single door made a crack of welcome, and there were no signs of transformation for the new door either.

One may say: “Well, that means he is not welcome to the School, what’s to be dumbstruck about? Things happen.” The thing is, while in the rest of the world it could be the absolute truth, here it was simply an impossibility – when you are not welcomed, you will never reach the front gates, as you will never find a path to it. School was like a separate world in the world – it didn’t occupy any space in the world, as it had its own space, and one could find that space in a space only if it would open itself to them. Even if you would be walking with someone together, side by side, and one was invited to School while another wasn’t, only one of you would enter. One would stay on the same path in one space, and another would walk into a different space. And turning around would not bring you back, as not a distance or wall would be separating you, but you simply came to a different place altogether. In other words, what was happening now was simply impossible. Nevertheless, she was witnessing it with her own eyes.

The man was looking at her, waiting for a reply or an explanation, and she was just standing there speechless, looking back at him with a single question in her head that she couldn’t force herself to bring to voice – “What the heck are you?”.

The man didn’t seem to be a time-waster – as there was no reply, he turned away, walked to the corner, put his saddle there, then chose a random door and pulled the handle. She knew it was in vain – you could not open or break these doors. The single purpose of them was that you could enter only through the entrance that suited your inner self, and not what you think you would like. But what do you know – the door didn’t resist that pull and opened easily. The man turned back to her and asked:

“So is it OK if I walk through there?”

“No, you cannot!” – The words came out of her mouth before she could think, but she had had enough of it. Swiftly Aqila walked to the door and closed it with a slam, then grabbed that man by the hand and pulled him away. Before she could recover from this sudden impulse, she finally spit out the question that was sitting on her mind – “Who are you? How did you come here? And who are you?”.

He didn’t say anything, just watched her with a puzzled face, his eyebrows slightly raised and a shade of smile playing on his lips. He didn’t look offended by her actions or questions; more likely, he looked amused. But he also didn’t reply. Instead, he was just standing there with this

slightly sarcastic smile as if offering her little time to recover and put herself together. Or maybe it was just her own thinking, but nevertheless, Aqila took this chance.

“Please just wait here and don’t do anything. I need a minute for myself, if you wouldn’t mind” – it sounded more like a command than polite asking, but he replied.

“Very well.”

She turned away to calm down and gather her thoughts together as they were all over the place, not just all over her head. Aqila closed her eyes, breathed in deeply a few times, and cleared her mind, counted to ten, then opened her eyes slowly.

“OK” – she thought to herself – “let’s think about it with a clear mind...” – but about what? She was in a greeting hall, but why was she here? Befuddled, she swiped her eyes around and saw the saddle in a corner... Struck by shock, she turned around and here he was – standing, patiently waiting. How could she forget? She turned quickly away again. Honestly, there is nothing so bad with her mind, and with all fairness, there is nothing wrong with it at all, as she could perfectly remember every little thing to the smallest bits except what was connected to this strange traveller that entered her School just a few minutes ago (by now it felt like ages ago). She turned back again and tried very hard to concentrate on the man’s face.

“Can I go now? Or do you need more time?” – The man asked.

He certainly was enjoying her struggles, but it didn’t bother Aqila any more. No, actually she found it a bit amusing herself. By now she was all calm and reserved as per her usual self. Aqila understood that what was happening had little to do with her. Most likely, it was some spell. People didn’t believe in spells these days, but it didn’t mean they ceased to be as effective as always just because of fewer believers. By her education, she knew that the best way to fight spells is simplicity, personal logic, and personal will. The spell was with this man, not with her, so it shouldn’t be affecting her own actions too much as long as they don’t try to fight against this spell.

Aqila reached into her pocket and pulled out a notebook.

“Sorry about before” – she smiled – “you brought a bit of variation that I didn’t encounter before, so it brought some turmoil to my head. But please let me introduce myself – my name is Aqila and I am the headmaster of this place. May I kindly ask you to introduce yourself so I could stop calling you a stranger?”

“Anthony” – he replied with a smile. – “You can call me Anthony.”

“I presume it isn’t a real name?”

While asking questions at the same time, she was working hard on her notepad. First, she tried to draw his picture, but soon realised it wasn’t going very well – most likely it was going against the spell, so she gave up on it. Then she started to write down how he came and what was happening after his arrival. Soon she realised that, as long as what she writes is not concentrated on the man personally, she was free to keep any notes she wanted to make.

“It is as real as any other name is real” – the man replied.

“Very well, Anthony, may I ask about the purpose of your arrival? Usually, I don’t have to ask these questions, but in your case, the circumstances are a bit different, so I would like to gather information by myself. Did you come here to learn something?”

“No, I do not want to learn” – he replied.

“OK, but may it be that recently you were struggling with something that you didn’t know how to do, and in a corner of your heart, it left a desire to improve in something? To find knowledge or even someone to guide you?”

“No, I don’t have any open or hidden desire to improve my knowledge” – he replied calmly.

“Then maybe you know some things that would be useful for others to progress, and you feel that it is time to share your knowledge with others, even if you already tried to teach but people wouldn’t listen, or understand, or be willing to learn it in any other way? This place is very good at matching people who want to share and want to receive.”

“I know things that are useful to many, but I don’t have a wish or a desire to share them with anyone. If someone wants to learn, they can watch from the side and try to figure it out by themselves. I have no interest in teaching them unless instructed. No, Aqila, I am not a teacher, and even if I know something that others would want to know, it is not one of my worries.”

“OK, that’s a straightforward answer. So not a student and not a teacher. Then you probably have a desire to express your skills, but didn’t have a chance to do it in your surroundings. What would you like to do if you could live with no other worries but to do what you like? Do you like painting, building, playing music, gardening, cooking, or something else?” – She enquired again while making quick notes in her notebook.

“No, I don’t have any need to express myself more than I am expressing myself in my everyday life. What I want, I do; what I want, I take; and what I want, I achieve at the time I want it.”

“I see, sorry for all these questions, but I am trying to figure out the reason why you have come here.”

“But wouldn’t it be much easier just to simply ask me, as I am right here?”

“Very rarely do people know the true reason why they have come. Rather, they discover it in here, and it surprises them and benefits them more than one could plan. But please go ahead and tell me your thoughts. Why do you think destiny has brought you here?”

“I am just going to stay here for the time being” – was the reply.

“Yes, that is true – everyone who comes stays here for a while. But I meant what you will do while staying?”

Now the man became a bit confused.

“I was under the impression that this place is free to use for anyone who comes. I never thought you had to give something in return?”

“What a straightforward answer” – she thought to herself – “and also truthful.”

“But School is not a respite and not a place for refuge. None of the reasons, like being too tired or too scared or nowhere else to go, open an entrance to this place. School accepts only those with a purpose either to grow or help others to grow” – she said aloud.

“I am not tired nor scared, and I know exactly where to go, that’s why I am here, and what helps me to grow is in this School. Isn’t that why I am here now? And as long as I can enter this School, I am accepted?”

His voice wasn’t annoyed or impatient, but she had a feeling that she was pulling some strings that shouldn’t be pulled, and this time not because of the spell.

“But what will you do when no door is open to you? As it seems that you don’t fit any criteria.” – She enquired, but even before he replied, she already knew the answer.

“That’s what I did just now. I go and open it myself” – he shrugged his shoulders.

“But what if you couldn’t open it?”

“If you want to go somewhere, there is always a way – there is no such thing as couldn’t, but just how, when, and where. There are only other people that can prevent you from going where you want to go, and only if you are willing to oblige. Isn’t it what is happening right now?”

Anthony replied while looking at her eyes, but this time without a smile. Even his shaggy pup lifted its head, and now there were four eyes intensely gazing at her. Aqila had to admit that it was pure truth, as it was only her slamming the door in his face that was delaying his entrance. She felt a little bit embarrassed as her duty was to help newcomers get in, not to prevent them from entering.

“By all means, you are right, but you see, this is not common for someone to open doors by themselves” – while talking, she walked to the same door that she slammed and pulled hard on it, but the door didn’t move even a fraction. She walked to the other door and pulled with the same result. – “I am the headmaster of this School, and I can enter it only through the headmaster's door. This represents what I would do at School” – she walked to the elegant but simple wooden door, and it opened in front of her even before she touched it. – “This place is run by old magic, and you can enter only through the entrance that suits your needs, and when it is fulfilled, you will find yourself leaving the School. I was really surprised that you were able to open that door without being invited. This door represents a martial arts teacher – if you walk through it, would you be able and willing to teach our students martial arts?”

“I might fit one criterion, but I don’t fit another. I know martial arts, but I am neither willing nor in a position to teach it” – he replied. – “Do you have any doors for guests? Or sightseeing? Or visiting? Or just staying?”

“No, no, no, and no. We don’t have any of these, and it wasn’t created for you personally either, so it is not suitable. What else can you do or are willing to do? Or maybe you could try to open other doors that would obey you and see if you would be happy to assume the position it offers?”

“OK, I can try” – Anthony replied and walked to another door. He pulled – it opened. He closed it and walked to another door, pulled, and it opened. Aqila was watching with disbelief.

“Try to feel then. Is any of the pathways feeling friendly to you? And I will tell its purpose” – she suggested.

“OK” – he said again and started to check every door.

Every single one would open, but he would close it again while shaking his head. He stopped for a second, looked at Aqila with a cheeky grin, and walked to the headmaster's door. “Wishful thinking” – she thought, but soon swallowed that thought down as even this door opened without resistance...

“No, it doesn’t feel very pleasant to be locked for a lifetime in one place” – Anthony said, winking at her and closing that door.

“Locked in one place for a lifetime...” During the years, such a thought had never ever crossed her mind. Is that what other people might think about this place? A lifetime prison? How strange. She never felt anything else but a blessing to be here. And this feeling was still present.

Anthony was trying the doors, Aqila was walking past him, looking over his shoulder. Strangely, none of the doors led to a house, or apartment, or room. Always to the outside, but always to the same place. That was again a new thing, but she didn't wonder any more, just put it in a "new things for this traveller" box. He even opened the "teller's" door... But slammed it down with a disgusted shiver as if there was a bad stench coming out of it. He tried all doors, all opened, but he was not called by any of them.

"I can cook" – he said, suddenly turning to her. – "That is, if you need a cook. But I can recall you mentioning cooking. Also, if it doesn't have to be an all-day work, but only when I have time to do it."

"Cook..." – she wasn't ready for this suggestion. – "You don't look much like a cook to me, but yes, there is a door for a cook." – And she pointed to the wooden door with a posh handle. – "But you already checked this door and didn't like it."

"I didn't like any of them, but if I am expected to perform some duties according to the entrance rules, then I might just walk through it."

He turned around and walked to pick up his saddle, came back, and without a second thought walked through that door.

"How twisted is this situation" – the headmaster thought to herself – "there are no duties to perform in this place because everyone who comes would be coming with a purpose in their heart, and it was a pleasure to do it, not a duty. But all this encounter was different from the beginning, so let it be."

They walked through the door right into a small meadow just outside the town, surrounded by trees on one side, spectacular views of the mountains on the left, and the town on the right. The headmaster closed the door behind them and it vanished without a trace, leaving both of them standing in a field.

Evening was warm and calm, the sun had already hidden itself behind the mountains, and stars could be seen in the sky.

Anthony looked around. His gaze was captivated a bit longer by the small house on top of the hill, right in front of them. The mountains also drew his attention. He finally smiled in content as a traveller who had finally reached his destination, placed the saddle and dog down, pulled out a big knife from his belt, and walked towards the trees.

"Where are you going?" – The headmaster asked.

"To cut down some branches for a fire and a bed" – Anthony replied.

"I hope you are not expecting to live here in this field?"

"Is there a problem?" – Anthony asked.

Aqila was taken aback by this naturally calm reply. Every time she thought she had seen and heard all, something new would happen.

"No, there is no problem, but honestly, don't you want to settle down for a night and then go camping after you have some rest and sleep?"

"But I am settling down for a rest... That's why I want to make a bed for myself" – now it was Anthony's time to look a bit puzzled.

“I mean, at home, not in a field” – the headmaster laughed – “let’s appoint you a house or accommodation. You cannot possibly reside in this field.”

“I thought this field was appointed to me as a home, as the door took me to it? No?”

The headmaster fell silent again. He was right to some point, as greeting doors would lead everyone directly to their future home, but a field is not a home. Even if for a newcomer it didn’t seem like any problem and he was prepared to settle down right here, she thought – “definitely not.” If nothing worked by the rules today, then there is no point in sticking to this one either.

“No, no, no” – she said firmly – “definitely not. You can claim this field as your place if you want, and spend as much time as you want in it. That is entirely up to you, but from my side, I am definitely appointing you a house where you can have a normal life when you are tired of camping. I would not be able to sleep at night knowing that one of my guests is left in a field. Please follow me this way” – she finished firmly and turned around towards the town. – “No, better don’t follow behind but walk next to me” – it wasn’t out of politeness but rather of necessity – as soon as she turned away from him, she started to forget where she was going... What a disastrous situation...

After a short walk, they approached a little cottage. She would be glad to assign him something better, but with so many residents, there weren’t many empty places. For some reason, this little cottage wasn’t accommodated yet. It used to be not too far away from the town centre, but when new accommodations and houses arose, this cottage was slowly pushed aside to the outskirts of the town.

“Sorry that I cannot offer anything much better, but I hope it will have all you need” – she said in a slightly apologetic voice, but fell silent after looking at him.

Anthony was looking at the cottage with a strange look, not in a bad way, more like enjoying the view of it. Maybe it reminded him of something nice? If so, then even better. On second thought, this cottage was really nice looking, just a little bit abandoned, but hopefully it can be fixed. Tomorrow she will have to send someone with building skills to help restore this cottage to its former glory. That is, if she even remembers that this stranger had come, as whenever he was out of her sight, he was also out of her mind. The thought crossed her mind, and she asked on impulse.

“You let go of your horse, so you don’t really need the saddle for now. Would you mind giving it to me for a while, and if you need it again, I will give it back.”

To herself she thought “I will put that damn thing in the middle of my room so every time I see it, I will remember the owner too.”

Anthony looked at her with that sarcastic smile of his. “Sure, take it. You can keep it as a gift.” – After a while, he added – “But can I ask one favour too?”

“What is it?”

“Would you mind if I move this cottage to that field? Then it would be all right – a cottage appointed by the headmaster in a field appointed by the School.”

“I would not mind, but I don’t know if I would find enough skilled workers to undertake this task. When the School itself chooses to move houses, it is done effortlessly, but I don’t have the power to command it at my will.”

“OK, thanks for your permission” – he answered – “but there is no need to bother others with such a minor task.”

Before she could say anything, he walked to the side of the cottage, lifted his right arm, made a hand movement towards the cottage, twisting his wrist like scooping something into the palm, and then letting it go and pushing towards the direction they had just come from. As soon as he finished, the ground shook slightly, lifting the cottage with all the fencing above the surface, like a wave lifts a ship. In the next second, the cottage was already moving away, carried by these waves of earth. Very gently and swiftly, it was carried out of sight. Some people who heard a rumble and came to the windows to see what was happening didn't see anything, as by the time they came, the cottage was already gone and the ground was settled nicely back without even a trace that something had happened. Just where the cottage stood, there was a large empty grassless patch like a black scar.

Both Anthony and Aqila stood there for a while looking at it. One was looking with disbelief, the other was looking with concern. Anthony lifted his arms, this time he used both arms, closed his eyes, and made a movement as if pulling something out of the ground. Not long after, grass started to form, and in a couple of minutes, instead of a cottage, there was nice green grass. One could see that the second performance was taking much more effort from Anthony than the first one. After he finished, he turned to the headmaster.

"This is where I would wish you good night, but to fulfil your request, we will have to walk back, as I left my saddle there."

On the way back, she couldn't hold back any longer.

"You are a magic wielder, aren't you? There are not many left these days. Are you in hiding?" – he didn't reply to either the statement nor the question. – "If you are a wizard and pretty powerful too, then how come you have this petite spell placed upon you? Why wouldn't you do something with it?" – again no reply...

She didn't question anymore, and they came back to the once-empty field in silence. As expected, the field was not empty any more – the little cottage was standing there and a little shaggy grey dog had taken his place next to the entrance.

Anthony walked to the saddle that was still lying on the ground, picked it up, and brought it to the headmaster. Finally, he spoke:

"I am not a wizard. I know a little bit of magic, that's all. To shuffle things around doesn't require much magic, if any at all. Magic comes in creation, not in moving and labouring. I can do little of it, but that little doesn't put me in the ranks of wizards." – He handed the saddle to the headmaster and spoke again – "However, I did put a little magic on this saddle to make it weightless for you to carry it, my dear teacher. As I said before, time wasn't very kind to you. For now, I will have to wish you good night and thank you for the warm hospitality I received this evening."

After saying that, he turned around and walked into the cottage, waited for his doggy to come in too, and closed the door.

As soon as he was out of sight, memories about tonight's events started to fade from the headmaster's head, but every time she would look at the saddle, it would come back. Honestly, she had to do something about it. Maybe she couldn't break this spell, it might not even be her business. However, her memory was her business, and she was determined to put some effort into remembering this somehow invisible man at all times, no matter how much effort or time it would require.

Anniel was making her way back to the town. She kept glancing at the sky from time to time. It wasn't promising anything good. It was such a lovely day, and she carelessly wandered way too far away from that little place she had been calling home since last night. Deep in the woodland, she didn't notice the change in the sky on time. Only when it suddenly became uncomfortably dark despite being just early evening did she realise that something was wrong. The lovely and sunny day disappeared, and a strong, icy wind greeted her when she left the shelter of the trees. Large, dark clouds seemed to be too heavy for the sky to hold any longer and were floating dangerously low, threatening to unleash a deluge of rain. Distant rumbles of the thunderstorm were approaching rapidly – the storm was going to break loose any moment, and she was still a long distance away from town.

She was lucky to some degree. Despite strong winds and lightning flashing just above her head, the rain hadn't started yet, and she could already see the lights of the town in the distance. That was a relief, and she picked up speed, investing the last portion of her strength to reach it in time. But her luck ran out. Before she could get anywhere near the town, the rain started. First, it was just a few big heavy drops, but in no time, the sky erupted and water poured out from it.

Anniel tried her best to move towards the direction where she saw the town, but navigating was basically impossible. The rain was so strong that even when lightning would strike and illuminate all around, she couldn't see much further than a few meters away. Anniel wasn't even sure she was heading in the right direction anymore – all under her feet was just water, and there was no possible way to distinguish if she was still on a path or had left it long ago. Desperately, she was trying to find some shelter, but there was none even under the trees.

At the moment of desperation, she saw a little lonely light not that far away. She turned towards it, hoping it was not her imagination. Lightning struck again, and her heart lifted up – there was a little cottage close by, and the light she saw was coming from its window.

Anniel wasn't the bravest person in the world, and knocking on people's houses at random wasn't something she would casually do. But the situation was dire. If she had not got lost and still knew the way home, she would not have stopped here despite the weather. But that wasn't the case – she wasn't sure where to go anymore. She didn't know if she was still moving towards the town or away from it. So Anniel gathered her courage and knocked on that door.

In no time, it was opened. There was a little roof above the door sheltering her from the rain from above. She quickly brushed the water and wet hair from her face to look at the person who opened this door. It was a young man, maybe just a few years older than her. He was dressed in black trousers and a black shirt that was tucked in at the front and loose at the back. A few top buttons of the shirt were undone, exposing part of his bare chest. Raven-black, middle-length hair was falling lightly on his shoulders, framing a very handsome face. Two black, curious eyes were looking directly at her, and it felt like they were not just looking at her face but piercing right to her heart or even deeper – straight to her soul. She could swear that she had seen him somewhere before, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember where.

They both stood there inspecting each other without saying a word. It took a strong gust of wind that splashed lots of rainwater on her back to wake Anniel up from her thoughts. That gust brought her back to reality.

"I am very sorry to bother you, but I am lost and cannot find my home. I was wondering if you could help me?" she asked quickly.

The man in the doorway didn't say anything, just stepped to the side, making way for her to enter. His eyes didn't move away from her even for a second. But it didn't make Anniet feel uneasy, all she could see in them was just extreme interest. No wonder, it probably wasn't very often that he saw a soaking wet passerby walking out of the storm. She swiftly walked in, and the door was closed, leaving all this dreadful weather behind.

The cottage was very simple – one large room had all that a person might need in it. There was a table with chairs at the side dedicated to the kitchen, there was a sofa, an armchair, a bed, and a wardrobe. That's it. A large fireplace with fire burning lively in it added to the room an enchanted cosiness. A shaggy small dog was lying next to the fireplace. Once she entered, he lifted his head and watched her too, with his bright, smart eyes.

After looking around, Anniet turned back to face her host, who was still looking at her with those black shiny eyes full of interest. She smiled at him, guilty, realising that water was dribbling from her wet clothes, blending into the carpet with mud she brought on her shoes.

"I am afraid I brought a lot of mess and turmoil to your house," she apologised again.

"Not at all," he finally spoke, smiling at her.

She thought that it was the warmest and most beautiful smile she had ever received in her life.

"The storm caught me off guard. I got lost in it and couldn't find my way home. I am not familiar with the surroundings yet, as I arrived here only yesterday." – She explained again, looking around once more. It was a nice, warm and homely place. She couldn't even hear the storm outside – if not for the water on her, she would think it was a bad dream. Anniet looked at the window just to realise it wasn't a dream after all as the lightning struck to light up the cataclysm outside... - "What should I do?"

It was a helpless question, but she really didn't know what to do...

"First, let's get you dry," - the man said.

He walked to the wardrobe to get a couple of large towels. After giving them to her, he pulled out of the wardrobe a white bathroom robe on one hanger and a spare set of similar clothes he was wearing on another. He looked at one, then at another, and seemingly none satisfied him.

"I am afraid these are the only clothes I have available," - he looked a bit indecisive about what to give her.

Annet badly wanted to take the black shirt he was holding and even stretched her hand towards it, but then laughed at herself and took the white robe. He didn't say anything, just gave it to her and put the suit back in the wardrobe. She looked around again, thinking where she could get changed, and he showed her to the door that led to the large bathroom.

"Don't rush," - he said, opening the door for her, - "take your time. It doesn't look like this storm is ending any time soon."

Annet took his advice. After peeling off her soaking wet clothes, she took a quick shower before getting into that white soft but slightly too big for her robe. Maybe not the best way to be dressed in a stranger's house, but her wet clothes were an even worse option. She squeezed as much water as she could out of them before leaving the bathroom.

The cottage was empty – that young handsome man could not be seen anywhere. Did he walk outside in the rain? He definitely could not be a phantom or ghost... Could he? Anniet laughed at

such thoughts. She pulled a chair closer to the fireplace and hung her clothes on it. Then bent down to stroke the dog that was still lying next to the fireplace. For some reason, she was surprised to find him so small. That thought didn't make much sense as he was a small dog, but somehow she thought it ought to be much bigger. In fact, a way much bigger. Thinking that she doesn't have any reason to think that way, she sat on a sofa to wait for her host to return. The dog walked over and lay down next to her.

Anniel waited for a little while before becoming worried. What happened to him? After some time, she couldn't sit still any more. Anniel walked to the front door and pulled it open. And here he was – standing in the middle of the storm with his hands in his trouser pockets and his face raised to the sky, allowing water to wash over it. He looked extremely relaxed and calm. His completely soaked shirt was stuck closely to his skin, revealing a perfectly shaped, muscular body. She could easily say that he was happy in the moment, enjoying himself, but for her, it was difficult to understand what there was so enjoyable in that rain that not so long ago exhausted her so much while trying to escape it. He must really love rain.

She didn't know what to do – leave him to stand there or call him? Walk to him? But then she would get all wet again... She would not dare to call him – she didn't even know his name... How should she call him? Hey, you!... That didn't sound right. But she didn't want to sit cosily inside his house on her own while he was standing outside in this storm. Why did he even walk outside? Maybe he doesn't like company? It may well be the case, as he was living in a remote place, not in a town. And she just barged in and disturbed his peace...

Before she could go anywhere down this track, he turned around and walked towards the door.

"Don't be worried," – he said with a smile, showing her back to the house and following behind, - "I simply like this rain."

"..... how strange! What to like there?" – she thought, but didn't say it aloud as it was not for her to judge what other people like. But now he was all wet, she laughed to herself. Her laugh stopped midway when she turned around just to find out that he was completely dry! And his clothes and his hair... He was just the same as at the moment when he opened the door! She stood speechless in the middle of the room, looking at him.

"You know magic!" – Finally, it dawned on her.

"A little bit,"- he admitted, - "but please sit down and make yourself comfortable."

"But then why didn't you make me dry?" – She couldn't understand.

"It wouldn't be appropriate,"- he laughed, - "we just met after all. Don't want to scare you away. Drink?"

She nodded her head, thinking again that he looked very familiar. - "Have we met before?" – She asked eventually.

"I am sure I would remember it,"- he said, smiling while making drinks.

"I could swear I have seen you somewhere before," – she insisted – "it is just that no matter how hard I try, I cannot remember where."

After she said it, he looked at her with lots of interest in his eyes again.

"I know it is the first time I have seen you," – he said eventually – "but I am sure it is not the last one."

It was said with so much confidence that she couldn't argue with it. Instead, she sat down at the table and took the cup with the hot drink offered. He didn't join her, instead, he stayed in the kitchen, pulled out some bread, salad, cheese, and some dressings, made a sandwich, and brought it to her. After doing that, he sat at the table too.

"Thank you," – she said, realising how hungry she was. – "You are not having one yourself?"

"I already had food today," – he replied.

It was so strange, he was looking at her all the time. And this look... One would look like this at a long-lost good friend that finally turned up out of nowhere. She nearly asked again if they had met before, but he already said that they hadn't. So instead she just sank her teeth into the sandwich. It tasted really nice. She even opened it up to check what was inside.

"This is very tasty," – she explained herself quickly, realising that it was a silly thing to do – "it is probably the best sandwich I have tasted. What did you put in it?"

"A little bit of love," – he said mysteriously, then seeing her confused look, added – "I am a cook in this place after all, I have to make food with love."

"Oh, I didn't know," – she said.

"How would you," – he smiled again – "you came only yesterday. How did you find your way here?"

"One day I thought I had had enough of my old place and old life," – she explained – "so yesterday morning I packed my things and left home for a different future. I walked for some time and then arrived at the large gates. The nice old lady greeted me and explained that this is a School for those who want to learn some new things."

"And what is it that you want to learn?" – he asked.

"I don't know what I want to learn – I never thought about it, I am not that good at learning anyway. I wasn't looking for a School of any kind, I just happened to walk into one. The lady headmaster said that there is no coincidence, that if I am here, that's where I have to be. She gave me a room to stay in and said I should find here what I am looking for."

"And what are you looking for?"

"I have no idea," – she admitted openly. After a short pause, she laughed at herself – "it's not going to be an easy task to find something that I have no idea about."

"Not necessarily," – he said – "it might be way easier than to find what you are looking for, as you will be less picky."

She thought it might make sense, so she didn't argue about it.

"And you?" – she asked – "how did you get in here?"

"I followed my friend," – he said.

"I never asked what your name is," – she remembered suddenly – "how rude of me!"

There was a little silence after this question before he answered.

"Anthony. You can call me Anthony," – he said. Then, after some consideration, he added – "It is not my real name. There have been some changes in circumstances that made me change it."

So, for the time being, my name is Anthony. You said you left home to build a different future. Do you have any plans? How different from the past do you want it to be?"

"I don't have any plans," – she admitted again. – "I just thought that there must be something more to life than I have experienced so far. So I thought I would try."

He looked at her for a while before saying,

"That is a very brave thing to do."

At first she thought he was making fun of her, but his voice was serious, and there were no traces of mockery on his face.

"I guess you must be right," – she admitted – "but I never thought of it that way. It was more like running away."

He didn't say anything about it. Annet finished her sandwich and drink.

"Aren't you going to ask what I was running away from?" – She smiled. Isn't that what people want to know most?

"It must be not very pleasant if you choose to leave it," – he said with a smile – "I don't know many people who would run away from happiness. It wouldn't be very kind of me to bring it up for you just to satisfy my pointless curiosity."

"That is a very unusual way of thinking," – she thought. But it was logical and might have a lot of truth in it.

"You must be right," – she said aloud – "Until now I grew up and lived in the same place where people think in a bit different way than you do. Now, when I left my old place, I will have to learn new ways and open up to accept that there are many different ways to think and understand."

"To widen your horizons," – he said to it – "it is a very good plan. If you ever think I can be of any use, feel free to involve me at any time."

He truly spoke and behaved in a way differently from anyone she knew. But she would hardly be brave enough to bother him ever again unless some new catastrophe would make it essential...

"I wouldn't dare to," – she said, smiling more to herself than to him.

"That is too bad," – he replied to it – "if you don't dare to meet new people and speak to them, it will not only be very difficult for you to learn new things, as you, on your own, can understand them only in a way you already know. But also, you would deny others' possibility of pleasure and delight they might have from meeting you and talking to you, or even helping. No matter how many times before someone has chased you away for any reason, the issue for doing so lies with them, not with you. Not everyone is the same. By placing old experiences over newly met people, you would take away the possibility for a new outcome both for yourself, and for them."

Seeing that she wasn't convinced at all by what was said, he continued.

"Let's take this evening as an example. You keep apologising to me for the disturbance, but that is just your way of thinking. My reality is that if you had not come, I would be sitting here all alone, bored to death. This interference is a treat and delight to me. In fact, to the degree that you would not be able even to understand. If you were to walk past this cottage, pushing yourself through the rain, wouldn't you punish not only yourself but me too? To see how others would react, you have at least to give them a chance to show and express themselves. Otherwise, it is just your thinking and knowing for others. No?"

When he said it this way... She sneaked a peek at him again just to meet his eyes that were looking at her straight and open as if he would have nothing to hide – like an open book inviting everyone to come and read what is inside. Anniet looked at these eyes for a few seconds, but that was too much, and she moved her gaze away. “He must be very confident in himself to be like this,” – she thought. To be so confident, one must be very strong and powerful too. She looked back at his face. He looked so young – couldn’t be that much over twenty. She turned twenty a couple of weeks ago, so she was nearly the same age as he was. Then how come that when he spoke, it seemed he knew much more than she did? He probably travelled a lot and was very educated, but even then, she never knew anyone so confident as he.

“You must be right. Again!” – She laughed – “I am not used to such a way of thinking, and it never even occurred to me to think that way. But what you are saying is absolutely right, it is just that it requires a lot of courage to be like this. But I will try,” – she said bravely.

She looked at the window just to see that the storm wasn’t coming down or fading away. It was so strange – here, inside, it was so peaceful and calm, she couldn’t hear any of that cataclysm that was going on outside. Not even the rain falling on the roof. And only a view through the window allowed a glimpse of that other world that seemed not related to here at all.

“What should I do?” – She said in a bit distressed voice, looking at the rain battered by the wind outside. A little shiver went over her. This place was warm, but her body could remember the cold rain pouring and the wind blowing through her wet clothes. Bare feet on a cold floor didn’t help to chase away this memory either.

“There is only one thing we can do,” – he said, standing up and inviting her to follow. – “Make ourselves comfy and cosy and wait till the storm passes.”

He led her back to the sofa, then walked towards the bed to bring a large blanket to place over her shoulders.

“Lift your feet up,” – he said in a voice that didn’t leave room for disagreement. After she obeyed, he wrapped her in the blanket, put a few cushions around, and finally, pleased with his work, sat himself in the armchair on the other side of the room.

“Thank you,” – she said, touched by so much attention.

“Pleasure,” – he said with a smile on his face.

His dog followed them too and lay down next to the sofa.

“By the way, my name is Anniet,” – she just remembered that she never introduced herself. He didn’t reply to it.

Annet bent down to stroke the dog and was surprised to find how small he was.

“I don’t know why, but when I don’t look at your dog, I think he is big, and every time I look at him, I am surprised to see him so small,” – she laughed at herself aloud.

“He should be a bit bigger,” – Anthony confirmed – “he is just suffering from a little spell. Hopefully, it will fade soon.”

Oh, right, she almost forgot that he was one of the magic carriers! She had seen only a couple of them and only for a very short time while they were visiting the village. The elderly in the village said that there are not that many of the magic carriers left these days! So he really must be something very special then.

“Where did you learn magic?” – she asked. She didn’t expect him to answer; in fact, she didn’t even know why she asked... It was known to everyone that magic was taught in some secret places. There were lots of books about how to learn magic in the King’s libraries, located in every town, but no one who tried learning from them had ever succeeded.

“I learned it in this School,” – he answered to her surprise.

“So this School is where they teach magic?” – now she was really surprised.

“This School can teach you many things,” – he replied – “you just have to choose what you want to learn. Magic is one of them. There are many books in the School library.”

“There are many books in any King’s library too, but there is something wrong with them. They must be false books.”

“There are no false books in the King’s library,” – he said softly – “and there is nothing wrong with these books. Your friends who tried to learn from them didn’t take into consideration the fact that magic is mainly about a person who is doing it and very little about the knowledge.”

“So you have to be special to learn magic then!” – she knew it! She always thought that way. It is not for everyone; that’s why no matter how much you read, it never works.

“And yes and no,” – he replied with a laugh – “you might say you have to become special – there is some truth in it. But no one is born this special – everyone has to become that way by personal choices and decisions. But each of us can become this special. Instead of going and reading books on how to wield magic, it would be good to read books on what person you have to become to be able to wield magic and how to achieve it. If you skip this step, then reading about how to wield magic will not be of any use to you. It is the same as reading a book about how to ride a horse. It will be of no use to you unless you have a horse that you can try riding. No horse – no riding, no matter how much you know.”

It made so much sense! How no one ever thought about it! There were so many books about how to become this or that in the King’s library too. But they were the least favoured as it required a lot of thinking, feeling, and working, and the results were difficult to understand – there was no clear line when you have succeeded. So they skipped them for sure. How could they be so blind?

“So you have become that special to wield magic! How does it feel to become one of them?”

“I guess it feels great,” – he laughed again at her statement and question – “but don’t you feel great about everything you know and have learned? There is no line drawn when you become this or that – it’s a never-ending process, and you don’t have to finish it to have the results. If that would be the case, we would never be able to see the results, as the learning process doesn’t have a finish – you can get only better, and no matter how good you become, you can always get better than you are. People like to compare, and if one is better than the rest around, they think he is the best, but that is very feeble because the same person who is the best among some people might be worse among others. If you live by this and you value yourself by what other people around you do, think, or are capable of, then it is a very sorry state, as it can lead only either to stagnation or disappointment.”

“I don’t understand it,” – Anniet said with confusion.

“I know what I know and I can do what I can,” – Anthony said – “how much I know and how much I can doesn’t depend on others. People like to devalue or glorify. If I value myself by what others think about me, then I am destined to think about myself either too little, if I live among

people who devalue, or think about myself too highly, if I live among people who like to glorify. Does it make sense?”

“Sort of,” – Anniet agreed.

“But no matter what others think about me, or in fact, it doesn’t even matter what I think about myself – I know what I know and I can do what I can do. I would not become any wiser if people think I am wiser than I am. Would I? Neither would my knowledge decrease because people think I am not smart enough.”

Annet was sitting and thinking that all this was so simple and so true, but also somehow so difficult to understand... How can it be that such a simple thing is so difficult to understand, and why has it evaded her until now?

“When you pay too much attention to what others think, it brings you an illusion, or rather delusion. You may start to believe that you know things that in reality you don’t know, and by doing so, you will stop seeking to learn. Why would you try to learn something you believe you already know? The other side is not much better – you become convinced that you don’t know things that you know and stop using them, or even worse, start to believe that others know better in areas where you know and can do a lot, and they know very little. You place doubt where there should be no doubt, and you not only stop believing in yourself and being what you are, but also restrict yourself from ever improving. I think the second part is much worse than the first, as in the first part you just stop learning, but at least keep using what you have, whereas in the second, you disappear completely.”

“So are you saying that I should not believe anyone? Wouldn’t it mean that I should not believe you either?”

“I am saying that you should not attach yourself too much to what others say – they might be right or might be wrong, same as you. And it doesn’t matter if ten people, or a hundred, say one thing, when you think it to be different, the odds are still the same – they might be right or they might be wrong. Or,” – he added with a wide smile on his face – “you can choose who to believe. If you feel that someone is somehow better, in a way you would like to become, then you trust them on it, no matter how strange what they say sounds.”

“But can it be that they might be wrong too?”

“They might, but areas where they would be wrong don’t concern you until you reach that level. In the areas that are important to you, they would not get it wrong.”

“I don’t even know such people,” – she answered.

“Surely you do,” – Anthony said – “King is always right.”

Annet laughed at this statement.

“He well might be, but I have seen him only in pictures that don’t talk.”

“It doesn’t mean that you cannot see him,” – he smiled back – “now, when you left your old life and are on a quest to find a new one, you can aim for anything. Why aim low?”

“Have you ever seen the King?” – Annet was interested.

“I have,” – he confirmed.

“Wow,” – Annet thought – “he really has seen a lot!”

“And how is he?” – she asked carefully.

“One day, when you see him, you tell me,” – Anthony avoided the answer.

After that they fell silent for a bit. Anniet snuggled herself in a warm blanket, thinking about what she just heard. All these distant magical places filled with kings, and knights, and dragons floated in her mind. Where people could be what they want and others would not tell them what to do, and would not expect anything from each other because all are strong enough to do things themselves. Riding on unicorns, flying on dragons, living the way they want to live... What a strange life it must be. He said anyone can become anything... What an idea. However, it didn't look real, but then again, why not?

She looked back at that mysterious handsome man sitting peacefully in the armchair across the room. He was still looking at her with these eyes full of curiosity. She knew she should be feeling uncomfortable from that. It always gives her creeps when someone looks at her for a bit longer than necessary. But strangely enough, it wasn't the case. If anything, she felt safe and secure, and this place felt more like home than any other place she had been yet in her short life. The fire was burning lively, the blanket was very warm and soft, and she felt so... cosy? That's what he said – make themselves cosy and wait till the storm goes by. She was so tired; she realised it just now. There was no reason for her to be tired. It probably was from all this stress. She could feel her eyes closing slowly and becoming more difficult to keep open. Hopefully he will not mind her snoozing a little bit. She looked at the window, and all she could see was just rain washing the glass. So the storm was not over yet, and there was no reason for her to go. That's good, she was glad about it, as at this moment she didn't want to go anywhere. Her eyes landed back on Anthony, who was sitting casually in the armchair with his chin resting on knitted hands. She saw only his silhouette but knew that he was still watching her. She smiled at him before finally losing the battle and falling asleep.

Annet woke up feeling completely refreshed. She lay for a bit enjoying herself – the pillow was soft, the blanket was warm, the bed was comfortable, and she felt well rested. It was very quiet around; all she could hear was the sound of birds in the distance. There was also a touch of fresh air around that smelled very nice – like a hot summer day after good rain. That triggered some memories, or was it a dream? Annet wide opened her eyes to realise that it wasn't a dream after all. She was in that little cottage, lying on a sofa, well tucked under the blanket with a large soft pillow under her head.

She lifted her head and looked at the armchair across the room to find out that the owner of this cottage was still sitting there watching her silently in the same relaxed pose, same as she saw him last night before falling asleep. She must have slept for a long time, as there was bright daylight outside. The window of the cottage was wide open, the storm was gone, and the bright sun was evaporating water from the meadows around, creating that nice fresh smell. She had slept all night until the late morning or whatever time it was now! She looked back at Anthony, who smiled at her. Was he sitting there all night? Hopefully not!

“Good morning,” – she said, sitting up – “I am afraid I overslept.”

He didn't say anything, just kept smiling.

“Thank you so much for your hospitality. I didn't intend to stay for so long... You should have woken me up much earlier.”

“Are you late for something?” – he asked.

“No, I am not. I just didn’t want to...” – she nearly said that she didn’t want to cause any inconvenience, but stopped in time not to say it aloud. She remembered what he told her last night about knowing in advance for others and not giving a chance for others to express what they really think...

Anthony seemed very pleased with it. In fact, he seemed very pleased and happy overall, so maybe she really didn’t cause any inconvenience. But she double-checked just in case.

“Did I disturb you in any way? Did you have any plans this morning?”

“No,” – he replied – “you didn’t disturb me in the slightest. If anything, you brought a little happiness to my dull and monotonous existence.”

That was a relief to hear. She looked at his bed and realised that after all, he must not have had any sleep as she was granted the pillows and a blanket from it. She gave him a questioning look.

“I don’t need sleep that much any more,” – he said with a calm smile on his face.

He must be right, as he didn’t look tired at all. If anything, he looked all fresh and rested... And also very handsome. For some reason, Anniet lowered her eyes at this thought. She looked to the chair where last night she had left her clothes to find out that they had been nicely folded and waiting for her.

“If you don’t mind, I will go and get changed,” – she said, standing up.

“By all means,” – he agreed.

She picked up her clothes and walked to the bathroom. To her deep surprise, the clothes were nice and fresh. After being soaked in rain and then dried up by the fireplace, she expected them to be rigid and to smell of smoke. Instead, she found them to be clean and soft as new, or even better, with a lovely fragrance on them. Even after a proper wash, they never looked as good! That reminded her about some extraordinary abilities her host had. He must have used some magic! Anniet was touched by this thoughtfulness.

She walked out of the bathroom to find out that Anthony was just finishing food for them. This time he made a meal for two and joined her at the table.

“You are spoiling me,” – she laughed at it – “I might get used to it and come more often.”

“Oh, but please do,” – he smiled back at her – “make this place a second home.”

While eating this lunch or brunch, it was difficult to say what time it was now, but it definitely wasn’t morning any more. Anniet tried to question Anthony about where he came from and what he was doing there and in general, but couldn’t get too many answers. Despite trying to be as open as possible, there were many times he had to say he could not talk about it. All she got was that he was not local there either, that he was a student in this place some time ago, and now he came there because of his friend, and instead of studying, he chose to be a cook for students. That’s all. Well, he must be a very good cook as the food he made was really delicious.

After the meal, she said she would be heading to her place. She wasn’t sure where this place was, but it couldn’t be that far away from the town. He didn’t argue but walked with her.

So all three of them, as the dog didn’t stay at home either, walked out of the cottage. The day was really glorious, and there were very little traces of yesterday’s storm left. Birds and squirrels were keeping themselves busy in the trees around. There were outstanding views of the mountains

from the front side of the cottage. In this direction there was only one more house that could be seen in the distance, on a hill, surrounded by trees and meadows.

When they walked through the cottage gates on the right-hand side, she saw a town not that far away. So she was heading in the right direction and would reach her home yesterday. But she was glad she didn't.

Walking next to Anthony, she realised that to knock on that cottage door was one of the best things she had done on this new adventure she had taken. Well, in reality this adventure wasn't even that long... Only two days... She was very fortunate! When leaving home she was prepared to take on some proper hardship and difficult times. Instead, she walked into this place where she was offered a new home to stay and even met this strange character who was so friendly. She had friends in the past, but now she started to realise that her friends weren't that friendly after all, in comparison to this person.

The house where she was given a room was very close, as it was on the same side of the town. After reaching it, she felt a little bit sad to part with her new friend, but didn't dare to invite him either. So she bade goodbye and walked inside.

After closing the door, she had a sneak peek through the window to find out that Anthony stayed on the street for a short while, deep in his thoughts, before turning around and slowly walking away. With his hands in his pockets, shirt loose at his back, and black raven hair falling lightly on his shoulders, he looked as relaxed and carefree as a person can be in this world.

CHAPTER

3

Lucky Encounter

The following morning, Anniet woke up early. She slept very well again. The sun was rapidly rising in a sky promising another glorious day. For a little while, Anniet contemplated what to do next. Upon arrival, she was informed that this was a School and that she had been accepted as a student. She had never been a student before, but according to her knowledge, students are supposed to attend classes and learn new things. She wasn't sure how her short adventure ended up in a School when she didn't even have any desire to learn anything.

Annet left the village she grew up in with a firm resolution to change her lifestyle. It was only two days ago, but somehow it was enough time for her to realise that she hadn't been happy at home. Ever. That was a discovery in itself, as up until now she hadn't given even a thought to it. If anything, she always thought she was lucky, as the people in the village were kind, patient, and forgiving to a very high degree, even when she herself was abrupt and rude many times, not very considerate of others' feelings. She always tried her best, but as soon as she would speak up without thinking, she would hurt and insult others without intending to do so. Her mother used to say that she was lucky that people were still talking to her after such behaviour. And she believed it. She tried to speak as little as possible, especially when sharing her thoughts. But it was difficult because as soon as she would stop controlling herself, the words she said would bring unhappiness to others. With time passing, unfortunate incidents were becoming rarer and rarer, and people were becoming less closed off around her. She was glad that she had finally learned how to communicate as normal people do, as before, in her childhood, it was a proper tragedy, as she had disheartened others so many times to the point that they would even beat her in distress. She could hardly remember these days, and she didn't want to. There used to be a time when people around her wished for her not to speak at all, and she could do nothing but agree with them. Her mum said that she was lucky to maintain her tongue in her mouth after making people angry so many times. Yes, she was lucky. People in her village didn't give up, but united and firmly educated her, finally breaking up that strange habit of hers to say unpleasant things at the most inconvenient times. And life started to get better.

And then the big disaster struck, followed by the mists that unexpectedly covered all lands and lasted for a good while. The order of the village was completely destroyed – many people had disappeared into the mists, and more than half of what was left were seriously ill from this unknown and unseen disease that attacked them so suddenly, contracting and crippling them from within for many days. The rest of the community were not in a better state. Despite not being affected by this illness, everyone was stressed and worried to death because of the lost or sick relatives and friends. When the mist moved away, they tried to seek help from nearby towns, just to find out that the same disaster had happened there too. From what they found out, the mist covered everything around for as far as the word could reach, and it was said that only with the power of the King it was chased away, but it took so much strength that even the King himself was knocked out.

The outbreak of the mist must have been related to the big battle that the King's Army fought at the very same time. It didn't go well – the King's son, Prince Angus, was seriously injured, and

many in the King's Army were killed, and the Rainbow general was cast away by some unknown force. Such a defeat was unheard of and put even more tension in everybody's hearts. The nation was in turmoil, not knowing what to do. But help came. Despite the great defeat, the King's Army wasn't disheartened and made steady but rapid progress in helping people: healing, consoling, rebuilding, even bringing back some who had been lost in the mist and somehow ended up in a different end of the world.

When things seemingly started settling down, a new disaster struck. This time it landed on Capital, right into the heart of the Royal Palace. The Rainbow general came back in a hurry, heading straight to the King to warn him about approaching danger, but she must have come too late, and no one was prepared for a new attack. Beloved Rainbow general was killed at the King's side, and even the King himself was deeply injured. Dark General had disappeared without a trace, never to be seen again. By now, it was believed him to be dead too. And Prince Angus dashed out of Capital at incredible speed minutes before calamity struck. There was division in people's stories about what happened to him. Some said that Pink General wasn't the bravest person and left the city in fear, as he didn't want to get injured again; some said that he chased enemies. On top of that, a horrible, unseen monster had risen above Capital, destroying and burning everything in its way, and only by the effort of the King's Army did none of the citizens of Capital lost their lives. But many houses were burned and demolished in a very short time. Luckily, despite his injuries, the King stood his ground and defeated that monster, ending this calamity and restoring peace and order to the world once more.

The peace in the world might have been restored, but not in people's hearts. Their beloved Rainbow general was gone, and her loyal servant, Dark General, was most likely gone too. The enemy had become so strong that it had destroyed what until then seemed indestructible. Many of the high-ranked officers had lost their lives in the great battle or left their ranks and scattered across the world in search of a new purpose, not seeing a point to continue their services after their generals were gone. People would meet these extraordinary personalities wandering around and mingling with common people as if in a search for a new purpose in life.

But order prevailed. The King stepped forward, took control over his army into his own hands, and with his two remaining generals, Prince Angus and Prince Ragnar, retained the order. Days were passing, but neither Rainbow general nor Dark General's divisions were disbanded, and it became obvious that the King was going to keep them in honour and memory of these two officers who, through their lives, had done so much for the kingdom. Such an act had woken up something brave and generous in people's hearts, and they had risen to join the King's Army in numbers no one had ever seen before. White colour was always popular among people, as it was attributed to the mixture of rainbow colours. Now, alongside white, a black colour had risen as never before. Not just in fashion, but as a symbol of strength, loyalty, and hope. Despite bringing despair, all these tragic events had woken strength in people. They didn't want to sit any longer and wait to be saved; they had risen to find a way to join the ranks of those who help instead of being helped.

Anniel didn't participate in any of this turmoil. She was pretty good with medicine, and after that unknown illness had taken over, she had been spending most of her days helping people, first in her village, then in the town. This illness was very strange, and despite its severity, it didn't claim anybody's life. It came suddenly but left very slowly and had a proper mental strain on people, changing their behaviour for good. Everybody needed so much help, and Anniel had her hands full.

She herself wasn't affected by this disease. Also, she didn't have anyone close enough and didn't feel the weight of loss. Her mother had passed away a few years ago, and her bond with the rest of the community wasn't that strong after all. So she remained untouched by all this catastrophe and was fully capable of providing the help needed. That's what she did. At first, she silently blamed herself for being cold-hearted for not suffering that much for the misfortune of others, but as time passed, she realised more and more how little in common she had with the rest of the villagers. Now, when under so much stress, people wouldn't react so harshly to her unnecessary remarks that would slip out of her mouth more often than ever before. Strangely enough, sometimes they would even find them to be helpful. But it didn't bring any closeness; on the contrary, it made more and more clear that she had nothing to do there and no one to miss in a place where she spent her entire life.

Days, weeks, and months were passing by, life finally returned to some sort of normality, and her help was needed less and less. So she felt that it was time to implement the idea that was slowly manifesting in her mind. This calamity might bring misfortune to many, but to her, it brought an understanding of how little connection to her own life she had. People now were more friendly with her than she could ever recall, but even now they were so distant. She realised that nothing was holding her in this place, so she might with ease leave and seek something more, something different. She didn't know herself what it was, but chose not to get burdened with these thoughts and take from life whatever it would bring. So the other morning, she packed her little belongings and silently left the village without even thinking if anyone would miss her or even notice that she had left.

Anniel was prepared to withstand some proper challenges of a homeless life, but instead fate led her to the gates of this school, where people were friendly and a new home was offered without putting any effort or even asking for it.

She wasn't very brave and tried not to speak too much, so history would not repeat itself and she would not become hated in a new place again. Thinking about yesterday's encounter, she was very pleased with herself – she had a good time and managed not to say anything inappropriate. The way Anthony spoke was so unusual that she spent the rest of the day reflecting on what he said and trying to understand it.

Now Anniel was wondering what she should do today. As a good student, she ought to go and find out where these classes are and what this place is teaching. According to Anthony, who was once a student here himself, this place can teach many things. So what does she want to learn? She thought very hard and could not think of anything. Well, OK, she will go and see what is available or maybe even ask for advice from that lovely lady who met her at the gates.

With that thought, Anniel left home with full intent to go and do some studying, but after a short walk found herself leaving the town and making her way towards the mountains that looked so lovely the other day.

Gosh, she really didn't want to spend all day in the library or class... What was she trying to fool? Obviously herself, as no one else was involved. So she sneaked out of the town as guilty as a thief, trying not to look directly at anyone she met on the streets, and by the way no one was even interested in where she was heading.

Once out of town, her heart and mind relaxed, and she finally breathed freely. "Well, it is still an early morning, and I can join classes after walking," she tried to reason with herself, silently knowing that it is not going to happen.

The further she walked from the town, the less her thoughts were occupied with what she should do. She looked fondly at the small cottage in the distance, secretly hoping to have a short glimpse at its owner if by chance he would be in the garden, but it didn't happen, so she strolled further into nature towards the mountains that were luring her as a fisherman would lure a fish. During her life, she had not seen such a thing. She had seen a few hills and a forest, but most of her time she spent surrounded by fields and pastures. Such mountains she had seen only in pictures in the King's library. Now there was a chance to explore it, and she could not resist such a chance.

The morning was sunny but not too hot, the birds were singing their songs all around in multiple voices, the flowers and grass smelled amazing. Soon, all thoughts about attending classes were left far behind, and Anniet was pushing herself forward, crossing fields and little woods, climbing hills and jumping over stones. After two hours of hard walking, she sat down to rest at the bank of the small river making its way down the hill. She was tired but happy. Trees and bushes surrounded this place, and under the cover of trees all around was a brilliant green colour, every part of the surface, all stones and trunks covered in moss and other tiny plants. She sat there for a few minutes listening to the sound of running water and singing birds. It sounded very nice and pleasant to the ear. Birds living here must be a different sort than those she knew, as it sounded somehow very similar to someone singing. With each passing minute, this impression became stronger and stronger until Anniet could not sit down any more and ventured to investigate.

After some walking, she became fully convinced that it was a person singing. It was difficult to determine the direction because the echo in the mountains and sounds of nature, which she had been admiring not so long ago, didn't help with this investigation. But the person who was singing must not be in a hurry, and Anniet had plenty of time to detour and get back on track again until she finally determined the direction singing was coming from and headed that way.

It was clear now that it was a woman who sang, and her voice was very nice and soothing.

Once on the right track, Anniet was making progress towards the singer very rapidly, but the closer she came, the slower she walked until finally she was creeping silently like a thief. For one, she didn't want to spook the singing person, and secondly, she wasn't sure anymore what to say when approaching. Her shyness and timidity had kicked back in, and soon she came to a complete halt, not daring to step into an opening in front of her and staying under the shade of trees.

In front, there was a very beautiful place: another small river was making its way down the mountains and was falling off the cliff in a rapid waterfall. Water was cascading down into a large pool at the bottom. There must be another waterfall on the other side of that pool, as the water was making its way in a narrow and rapid stream and suddenly disappearing out of view. The pool was surrounded by flat white rocks and a variety of blossoming shrubs. The water in it was a dark colour, indicating that this pool must be deep.

A young woman was sitting on a flat rock next to the pool with one leg bent in front of her and her arms hugging her knee. She seemed very relaxed, enjoying the beauty of the nature around her, and was singing a lyrical song about country life. Anniet had heard this song before, as it was one of the known folklore melodies, but never before had she heard it being sung so beautifully. So she stood quietly and admired it until the woman had finished. It sounded so nice that Anniet wanted to come out of her hideout and congratulate this young lady for singing it so well, but she did not.

First, she didn't know how to explain herself for sneaking up on her like this, and secondly, she didn't know if it was appropriate, as the woman she was looking at was naked. Well, of course it

would be appropriate as she was a woman herself, and it was obvious that this lady must have swum in the pool not so long ago, as her hair was still wet. She was sitting in the sunshine to dry herself and singing while waiting. There shouldn't be anything inappropriate about walking up to her and saying hello. But no matter how much Anniet tried and how much she encouraged herself, she wasn't able to do so. With each passing moment, the possibility of doing it was fading. What would she say now? "Hello, I was watching you from the shadows for the last quarter of an hour?" That would be very creepy. So she finally gave up on the idea of coming out and introducing herself. Now she was just hoping that this lady would not notice her hiding like this behind the trees. That would be really unpleasant.

Annet was desperately thinking about the way to sneak away quietly without being noticed when that lady stood up and picked up her clothes. But instead of putting them on, she made a tight ball out of them, walked towards the edge on the other side of the pool, and threw her clothes down. The next moment, before Anniet could understand what was going on, that woman lightly jumped and dived head down, disappearing from view.

In a moment Anniet forgot all about her hiding and rushed full speed to the spot where that lady disappeared, hoping that she was alright and didn't get hurt. She was right, there was a second waterfall in that place where the stream of water disappeared out of sight. This was the place where that woman dived down. After reaching that spot, Anniet stopped abruptly and quickly backed up. This waterfall was high, much higher than she expected. At a height of about ten meters, its descent was a long stream of falling water.

Annet gathered her courage and rapidly but carefully came to the very edge again and looked down. She was sincerely hoping that nothing bad had happened to that woman and was happy to see that all was good. At the bottom of this waterfall was another pool gathering fallen water and stretching to the sides. That young lady obviously was a good swimmer, as after diving from such a height, now she was leisurely swimming in that pool, obviously enjoying the water and this exercise. After swimming for a few minutes, she got out of the water and walked to the ball of cloth that she had thrown before jumping. Without bothering too much about her wet body, she put on a trousers and a shirt, put a jacket over her shoulder, and walked off.

"What a relief," Anniet thought to herself. She wasn't noticed after all. But for some reason, not known even to her, she was somehow sad that this lady had left, and she neither could watch her anymore nor had enough courage to speak to her.

Annet stood here for a minute or two, thinking how brave this woman must be to jump from such a height. She never dared to do something like this. And probably never will. So why was she still standing here and looking down like this? The thought that had gotten into her head was very scary, and she didn't know where it came from, but somehow it had taken hold of her. Why not? If someone can do it, she can do it too... She knows how to swim, and didn't she tell herself when leaving home that she would do things that she never did before? Maybe meeting this woman was a sign that she can do it too? On her own, she would never even think that jumping from such a height is possible or at least safe. But that lady jumped head-first and nothing happened to her, so the water must be deep there.

The longer Anniet was standing, the more certain she became that she wanted to do it. Slowly she took her clothes off, put them into a ball, just as that lady did before her, and, before changing her mind, threw them down, aiming for the land next to the pool. Dart!... Her aim wasn't as good as that of the lady, and her clothes landed in the water... Uhh! What a shame! They smelled so nice

after Anthony used some of his magic on them yesterday. Well, it cannot be helped now. At least they landed in still water, and the river will not take them away. That would be a proper shame, how would she come back home naked like this?! So she'd better jump quickly and fish them out.

So jump! No, it didn't happen. OK, now, jump! Well, why did it become so scary? Just a moment ago she wanted to jump, but now, no matter what, her legs would not obey! Now! No... Now! No...

Anniel tried and tried over and over again, but the longer she stayed, the more she delayed, the scarier such a proposition became until she couldn't understand any more what she was thinking at the very beginning. Where did she get such an idea about jumping at such a height in a foreign forest in waters she has never been in? What if something happens? No one even knows that she is here! Dart! And she was stupid enough to throw all of her clothes down... What was she thinking? Now she will have to find a way down walking like this... Fingers crossed she will not meet anyone. What a shame, she wanted to jump so badly!

Rainee came out of the water, put on her clothes, and walked away.

She was fully aware of the presence of the young girl watching her from the top of the waterfall. She had never looked at her a single time since she stopped at the edge of the woods, not daring to come out, but it didn't prevent Rainee from "seeing" her. People with their five senses, or even six if intuition is added to the count, were so limited. There was so much more that the human body was capable of and ready to offer for each and every one, but most of the people stubbornly refused to know more than they already knew, so they deliberately chose to stay blindfolded for all of their existence on earth. Despite all the King's efforts, despite the efforts of all his generals and appointed learning facilities, very few would choose to take a path that would lead to opening up and awakening. She called it awakening, as it is exactly how it felt – like someone was dozing in a slumber and started to wake up. It was so dull and numb in that shut-down state that most of humanity held themselves in, but still they would not come out of it, no matter how much effort those who have advanced would put into education.

Same as this girl who was standing now on the top of the waterfall with a growing desire in her heart to make this leap down. She was very persistent, and that desire to achieve what she wanted was building up in her heart slowly but steadily, and Rainee slowed her pace just in case the girl would go for what her heart wanted. The chance that she would do it was very small, basically non-existent. Not because it was too hard or too dangerous, but because of the fears surrounding her heart.

Fear was a very peculiar thing: always a lie, never the truth, but its illusion was so strong that truth usually faded away in its presence, and most of the people would turn away from the truth and follow the path that fear was illuminating as the best option. They call it careful, they call it common sense, they call it wise and steady, they call it reasonable, they call it anything fear wanted them to call it. Only people who openly call fear a fear were capable of untangling themselves from this seemingly never-ending influence. That was the major training that everyone had to go through in the King's Army. Before joining, people would think that battling and fighting were the main training that recruits do, but it wasn't. Recognising and realising inner and outer fears and lies that humanity was entangled in was the main training. That was the most efficient way to teach

anything. In fact, that was the only way to teach anything. Free someone from fears, and they grow rapidly and learn easily. She knew it too well after being a commanding officer in this organisation for some years.

She resumed her walking pace – the girl was not going to jump. It was obvious to Rainee way before it became obvious to the girl herself. If you postpone your desire while surrounded by so many fears, the chance of doing what you wanted diminishes with every second until it vanishes into nothingness, never to return. People believe that it can be revived when in reality it cannot. A new desire, very similar to one who has died, can be built, but the old cannot be revived. Every opportunity missed is final and not reversible. Some can be duplicated easily, some were unique, and nothing of this sort will ever be offered again.

Now the girl herself realised that she would not be able to do what she wanted. Actually, it is for the best. She wasn't ready to make this jump, neither physically nor mentally. Her thoughts about being able to swim were inadequate, as swimming and diving, or even jumping down, are not the same. Swimming comes in handy after diving, but not while doing so. It is the same as saying that I can fly because I can jump from a cliff. If this girl were to jump, most likely she would not hurt herself, unless some unforeseen accident were to occur, but she would get a proper fright and her confidence in her abilities would be shattered to pieces. Not because it is too difficult for her, but because she was not prepared to experience how it feels. That's why Rainee was ready to go back and help as much as she could. But her assistance wasn't needed, and for such a shy creature as this girl was, it was best if she would not be disturbed now. That was a primary reason why Rainee had chosen to leave the way she did, as the girl, who was watching her from the woods, became so agitated about being seen that Rainee chose to leave the place and allow her to calm down. If she had chosen to leave any other way, it might have spooked the girl even more.

Shame... The other catastrophe of humanity. People were taught to think so little about themselves. There was a belief that you first have to become great to think of yourself big. What nonsense. It couldn't be further from the truth. One can become only what one believes one can be. How can anyone become great when they allow themselves to be only small? Only as much as society would allow and would approve? Maybe, if you are a very strong personality, under such circumstances, you can grow a tad higher than society, but that's it. If you believe that it is shameful what you want to do, what your intentions are, then no one would be able to help you. Like this girl Rainee just left behind, she had such a lovely personality, she was such a warm and kind person, but somehow she had convinced herself that she is not, that it is not important what she is, and all that was important was what others would think of her. One day she will have a hard time breaking through from this cage of lies she put herself into, or accepting the opinions of others over her own happiness. But this time will hardly come any time soon. Most likely in an afterlife, as it was very rare for someone to rise from such a suppression of fear, shame, and guilt. If she would join the King's Army, she would have a chance, but inside of her was nothing that usually motivated people to join the ranks. And also Rainee herself has to stop thinking this way. She was not in the King's Army any longer. She has chosen, or rather life has chosen for her, a different path, and she couldn't see the way back. Neither had a reason nor motivation to do so.

It wasn't her intention to lure this girl to herself. Rainee was extremely sensitive to her surroundings within a large radius and knew where this girl was walking. At such a distance, she was not supposed to hear her, but the girl must have had very acute hearing. She heard her song and liked it so much that Rainee didn't want to take away from her that little pleasure and allowed herself to be found because this girl wanted to see who was singing so badly. Her motives were nice

and sweet, and Rainee didn't see any reason why not to let the girl achieve what she wanted. But then things changed. Fear to disturb was bigger than the wish to come out and talk, so it took control over the girl's actions, and from that point all good motives were gone, and all her actions and wishes were fear-based. There was little Rainee could do from that point, especially when the girl herself didn't have any desire to go over these silly fears. On the contrary, all she wanted was to stay unnoticed, so Rainee granted her wish and moved away.

That girl really was a very caring person. The moment Rainee dived, all fears were swept away, and she was worried only about the safety and well-being of Rainee. She couldn't be bothered any more about being seen or about hiding away and rushed forward to see what happened there. That's why at first she had so much courage that she nearly jumped down the waterfall herself. But it faded into the past.

Only one thought that was still bothering Rainee while she was moving away: where had she seen this girl before? She was absolutely sure they had met, but at the same time somehow she was a completely new person to Rainee. So they must have met a very long time ago, and the girl must have changed a lot since she last saw her. But even then, why could she not remember it? Some time ago it would bother her a lot, but now, in the past few months, so many things have changed, Rainee herself has changed a great deal too, and maybe not being able to remember all she wanted will be her new reality... Not a very pleasant thought, but it would be just one more thing among many others that she has lost. If it happens, it happens, it cannot be helped. She will have to learn to live with what she has now.

And that was where her thoughts were abruptly cut off, and in a flash Rainee turned around and dashed back at lightning speed. She jumped! That girl, instead of walking away as all her thoughts and intentions were directing, actually made a jump instead! That was unexpected. Impressive and brave but unexpected. There was no mystery to Rainee about what would follow after this jump.

Even before she hit the water, Annet was already regretting her action. God knows what has taken over her. She was already prepared to walk away to find a path down to get her clothes when some small, very silent voice within whispered how sad she was to miss such an opportunity. Without a second thought, she agreed that yes, it was really sad, no matter that she was telling herself about jumping another day, she, same as that small voice, knew that it was not going to happen. With that thought, all fears and reasoning suddenly drifted away, creating some sort of opening for her freely to do what she truly wanted, and without hesitation she took that chance and slipped through that opening. All happened within a split moment without even leaving a chance for a thought – one second she was turning to walk away, and the next second she was already falling down.

She wanted to scream, but the feeling of falling took her breath away, and she couldn't make a sound. Then her feet hit something hard, and she was engulfed by freezing cold water. Water got everywhere – in her nose, in her mouth, in her eyes. All disoriented, she tried to move her arms and legs, reminding herself “swim, swim...” . But it was not possible to swim because no matter how hard she tried, she was rapidly sinking down.

She was splashing her arms and legs in all directions with a single thought – never again. How could she be so stupid? She was told many times that she is not allowed to dive because she is not fit for it. There wasn't anywhere to dive in the village where she grew up, as there was only a large pond where people would go for a swim on hot summer days. A few times she was taken to the river where other children would dive from a trunk of a broken tree, but she was told that she cannot, as she doesn't know how to do it, and nobody would be happy to risk their lives to pull her out of the water if she would be drowning. That was fair enough. Nobody was close enough to her to do such a thing. She herself didn't want to drown or cause someone else to drown by saving her. So she listened and never jumped. What has taken over her today? Did she believe that something had changed just because she left home? If she survives, never ever will she come even close to the falling water, never mind jumping. She will know her place from now on.

But she wasn't that sure that she will survive. When she was watching others diving, they would go underwater for a few seconds and come out. Now she was underwater for god knows how long, and all she could feel around herself was just water, water, water, dark. It was not clear anymore if she was still sinking or rising. She could feel panic taking over, and with it the need to breathe becoming stronger. But there was nothing breathable around. How lucky it was that she came here on her own, and no one else will have to risk their lives just for the sake of trying to save her.

With that thought, her head popped out of the water, and she finally could catch a fresh breath. All disoriented, she tried her best to stay at the surface, splashing the water loudly around herself. Never again....

"Well done. You are very brave." – A soft and gentle voice sounded next to her.

Anniel got startled by it so badly that she lost that little control she was regaining and dipped under the water again, this time getting some of it in her throat. Panic took over her, and any thought related to sanity left in an instant, leaving her kicking and splashing until she realised that someone was holding her above the water. The next thing she knew, she was clinging badly to that person without a second thought about their safety. Instantly, she released her grip, hoping that she hadn't done any damage, or if she had, it wasn't too bad.

"Sorry for startling you off" – the same voice said next to her ear without any stress or strain in it – "it wasn't my intention."

Anniel's wet hair was brushed off her face by a gentle hand, and she was finally able to see again. The same lady she was watching from under the trees just a short time ago was with her in the water, holding her by the arm. She was providing just a very little support, but the water somehow wasn't pulling down so badly any more, and Anniel was able to stay afloat easily, even without this support. Regaining control brought her confidence back, and with it returned her ability to swim. She was a good swimmer after all, why was she splashing so violently just a moment ago... Seeing that she had steadied herself up, that lady let her go.

"You must be a very good swimmer to regain control so quickly," she said while smiling at Anniel.

"Who... who are you?" Anniel asked, looking at these two bright green eyes shining at her from an extremely beautiful face. "Why are you here?"

That woman didn't say anything, just pushed herself on her back, floating effortlessly while watching Anniel with laughing eyes.

“Why are you in the water with your clothes?” Anniet kept asking. She remembered clearly how this woman made sure to throw her clothes on the ground before diving, so to swim all dressed wasn’t her habit. “You came to save me!” It finally dawned on her.

This thought squeezed her chest, tightening around her heart.

“Did I put your life in danger?” she asked, remembering how strongly she was clinging to this woman just a moment ago.

“On the contrary,” Rainee smiled at her, “I believe it was I who put your life in danger by scaring you like this. I did come in case you would need my help, but so far no help was needed, apart from the part where I myself caused turmoil. So I guess it doesn’t count.”

Anniет submerged herself in the water with only her eyes and the top of her head popping out, like a little hippo from a book about foreign lands, and watched this woman with wide open eyes, forgetting even to breathe. She really came to save her... She didn’t even know her or had met her before, but she returned and even jumped into the water just in case something bad would happen, and now spoke about it as if it were something natural and fully understandable. It wasn’t uncommon for people to help each other, but usually they helped those they liked, and to jump into water like this, at least they would wait until help was really needed. And they would surely be very unhappy if forced to do so, and would tell how unthoughtful it was to put oneself and others in danger in the first place.

“Was that your first jump?” Rainee asked.

Anniет nodded her head in reply.

“And? How was it?”

“Horrible,” Anniet said honestly.

Rainee’s smile widened at such a reply.

“Why?”

“I almost drowned.”

“No, you didn’t.” Rainee disagreed with her. “I was here most of the time, and there wasn’t any sign of you drowning. What else was horrible about it?”

It was a strange question, but Anniet tried to be as honest as she could and replayed that experience in her mind.

“It was scary to fall down like this, and also I went down under the water much deeper than I thought it was possible. It took a very long time until I came up again, and water got into my nose and mouth, and I couldn’t understand where I was and what to do while under the water.”

“Yes,” Rainee agreed this time, “I believe all that you said now must be true. You didn’t know how diving would feel, and probably no one even explained it to you, so it was something completely new. New things usually are scary unless you are prepared to receive the unexpected.”

“How can you be prepared to receive the unexpected?” Anniet didn’t understand. “Shouldn’t you at least know what will happen to be prepared?”

“Maybe,” Rainee didn’t argue with this statement, just slowly directed herself towards the bank, and Anniet followed closely. “Or you can simply believe that anything new will bring something even better than you would get if you prepare for it. In that way, you would always be

prepared to receive new experiences as you would be looking forward to receiving them. Now, when you know what to expect, what would you feel if diving when knowing what will happen?"

"I doubt I would dive," Anniet replied.

"I didn't mean that," Rainee corrected, "my question is how your jumping experience would feel to you now, when you already know what to expect, when you know how it feels to fall, and when you know how it feels to be deep under the water?"

Anniet didn't fully understand the meaning of this question, but chose not to argue and thought about her jump again, trying to do her best to answer. She thought again about her jump, trying to imagine that at that moment she would already know how free fall feels and how being deep under water, under pressure and with no orientation, feels. Unexpectedly, a big smile appeared on her face. Somehow, she could retrieve that moment and the fall that was so scary before, now, knowing how it would feel added a new touch to it, a proper excitement of falling at such a speed with wind passing by her ears and her heart beating faster and faster until she reached the water and submerged into this cold but refreshing liquid. Somehow the water didn't seem so scary and dark, and instead of panic she felt curiosity and more excitement right to the moment when her head popped out of the water. Then she felt truly victorious for overcoming such a challenge.

"Who are you?" Anniet asked again, looking at that woman who was very pleased to see this smile. Anniet even forgot that she was asked a question.

"Who am I? That's a question with many possible answers. May I presume that you want to know my name?"

Anniet nodded her head again. By now they had nearly reached the bank.

"My name is Rainee," the woman answered, pushing herself up from the water on a steep, rocky edge.

"Do you live here?" Anniet asked, following her.

"In a forest on the mountain? No." Rainee smiled, picking up her jacket from the ground and putting it over Anniet's shoulders.

Anniet was so fascinated with this new encounter that she completely forgot that she was naked as a newly born baby in the presence of a stranger and quickly looked around, trying to locate where her clothes had landed. She didn't feel too uncomfortable with this strange woman, but still she'd better get dressed. Rainee was faster and walked to fish out the ball of clothes from the water and handed it to Anniet.

"We'd better find a spot where we could dry ourselves," she said, turning around.

Just now Anniet fully understood the true irony of the situation; by her action she made them both dripping wet.

"Sorry, I was a bit silly and caused us both problems," she said.

"Silly?" Rainee smiled over her shoulder. "I think you were very brave to go for new experiences. I don't know if you have caused any problems to yourself, but I don't call a wet shirt a problem, especially on a nice, sunny day. Come!"

While talking, she reached a wide flat rock in the sunlight, surrounded by stones. She took her clothes off, placed them on these hot from the sunlight stones, and laid down on the rock, her belly down, exposing her back to the rays of the sun. With her eyes closed and a little smile on her face, she looked completely content.

Anniet hesitated for a bit, then untangled the wet ball of clothes in her hands and hung them next to Rainee's. She then sat down on an empty stone, pulling tighter the corners of the jacket that Rainee had given to her, thinking that it was very well made and very soft to the touch. She was watching Rainee for a while, not daring either to disturb nor to lie down next to her. After a bit, the situation became somewhat uncomfortably familiar, and Anniet couldn't cope with it any longer.

"I have to tell you something," she said. "I heard you singing before, while you were sitting by the waterfall. I watched and listened to you for a while, but was not brave enough to come out and talk. Now, when I say it, it sounds a little bit... not nice," she wanted to say creepy, but changed it at the last second. If someone were staring at her from the woods, she would really think that it was creepy.

"I don't mind," Rainee said. She seemed completely untouched by this confession. "Did you like my singing?"

"I did!" Anniet confirmed, enthusiastically relieved that Rainee didn't seem offended by such behaviour. Then a thought came to her mind, and she voiced it aloud. "You knew I was there... didn't you?"

Rainee didn't reply to this question, but even without her speaking, Anniet was sure that it was the case. But how? She was really quiet and didn't come very close.

"Are you a student here?" Rainee asked, interrupting Anniet's thoughts.

"I am," Anniet confirmed. "But not a very good one. Instead of studying, I sneaked out of town to these mountains."

Rainee's shoulders shook from laughter, and she turned her head to face Anniet.

"I guess we are both the same. I come to hide here too," she said with a smile, looking at Anniet with her warm eyes. She really didn't look offended for being stalked. What a relief.

"So you too were accepted to this School?"

"I was," Rainee confirmed.

"You come through the gates that lead to many doors?"

"Yup."

"And what doors opened for you?"

"All of them."

"All of them?" Anniet could not believe what she heard. Only one door had opened for her... This woman must really be very smart. "What do you do when so many doors have opened? You cannot walk through all of them."

"I had to choose one."

"And what door did you choose?"

"Teachers."

"Teachers? Then what are you hiding from?"

"From my students. They can be very persistent."

"Isn't it the teacher's duty to teach?" Anniet could not understand. She had heard stories about students not wanting to study. But she never heard about teachers who didn't want to teach.

"Isn't it the students' duty to study?" Rainee asked back.

“When you say it like this...”

All she heard was so strange that she completely lost any guard against this stranger and even slid down from the stone to sit on a rock closer to Raine.

“So if I were to come to your class to study, I would find it empty?”

“Pretty much.”

“What if I want to learn?”

“Then you would have to find me,” Raine kept smiling at her while answering these questions.

“But I found you...”

“Yes, you did.”

“So you can teach me now?”

“I guess so. What would you want to learn?”

“What subject can you teach?”

“According to the headmaster – any, as I was invited through all doors.”

“Wow!! You really are not just very pretty but very smart too!” Anniet exclaimed in disbelief.

Raine opened her eyes, which she had closed for some time now, and looked again at Anniet. This look reminded Anniet that she had to be more careful about what she is saying.

“I am sorry if I offended you,” she said quickly, shrinking back to herself and hoping that whatever she had just said didn’t insult to much, as she really, really didn’t want to be chased away from this super interesting person.

“You are a very strange girl,” Raine said in a soft voice. “How can someone be offended by being called pretty and smart?”

Annet exhaled with relief. She was sure that it had happened more than once in the past when her compliment was taken for an offence, but luckily not this time. She relaxed a little bit and returned to the conversation.

“So, what can you teach me?”

“What do you want to learn?”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“And I will learn it today?”

Raine laughed at such a question.

“You can start learning today. You will learn a little bit, or at least hear about it. So I presume you could say you will learn it today. If you want to deepen your knowledge, then you will have to put more effort into it later too.”

“How many days?”

“As many as you want to learn something extra. There is no limit when learning any subject. Some are more expansive than others, but any true subject will bring new openings every time you want to learn more, no matter how well you know it.”

“What do you mean by true subjects? What subjects are not true?”

“Those that people come up with not to help others to improve, but to teach others what they know and how they know, and only that. It is not even worth being called subjects, as they are not. It is just something that one person wants to teach another in a way they know, without any detour or expansion. If someone ever tells you it is how it is and that’s the end, then they are not worthy of even listening to, as they are not teaching, they are just imposing their opinion and are feeling superior over others.”

To herself, Anniet thought that pretty much every single person she met through her life would answer her questions with an answer – “That’s how it is,” but she didn’t bring this up in case this woman would think she doubted her. Somehow, no matter how many people told her the opposite before, she was sure that Rainee was right, but just in case of misunderstanding, she didn’t take the risk to explore that direction any further.

What could she ask? What does she want to learn? Nothing came to her mind. Was she really so uninterested in anything? Maybe that’s why she managed to find Rainee in these mountains? Because Rainee didn’t want to teach, and she didn’t want to learn. So they really matched each other perfectly... Seeing her trying so hard, Rainee laughed silently.

“Can you teach me to dive?” Anniet asked carefully.

“You have learned enough today for what can be sensibly learned in one day. If you want to improve, then we can meet at the waterfall another day.”

“But shouldn’t we start somewhere not as high?”

“What for?”

“I don’t know... I thought people were supposed to learn little by little.”

“Often it is wise to do so, but not always. Anyway, there is no point in doing it in your case, as you have chosen to start your lessons from a much higher standard than little by little. To start now from baby steps, it would be to dishonour the experiences that you had. It is the same as teaching the alphabet to someone who can write. Pretty useless, I would say.”

“Yeah, it was silly of me to do such a reckless thing. All could have ended badly. I could have...”

“If you want to follow that road, then there is very little I would be able to teach you,” Rainee interrupted.

Her voice didn’t change, it was still nice and friendly, but somehow Anniet realised at once that if she carried on, then that would be the end of this encounter and quickly returned from wherever that thought was taking her. Instead, she was looking at Rainee with wide open eyes, hoping for an explanation but not daring to ask for one.

“Would have, should have, could have, have nothing to do with what has happened,” Rainee explained anyway. “I cannot forbid your thoughts to venture that way, but you must understand that it has nothing to do with reality, and if I were to follow you there, we both would end up in a very strange place, far away from reality, but also far away from dreamland. When a person is dreaming and fantasising, it is all about the future and usually about a good future. How truly good depends on how much of this fantasy a person can bring into reality. For those who manage to do so, fantasy is a very powerful tool. For those who cannot do it, fantasy is just a nice place to escape. But when you start fantasising about the past, you are locking yourself away from all that life can bring and offer to you. Even if the fantasy about the past is nice, it still becomes a prison as it is nicer than

reality was, with no projection to the future but only about a different outcome of the past that didn't become reality, it means reality doesn't satisfy you and future doesn't call you, so you are left in a bubble of strange imagination watching life go by. Nothing can be learned in this place, as all learning happens in real time. Learning involves analysing what happened in the past, not fantasising, but analysing, that's a major difference, and also it involves planning for the future, here some fantasy doesn't hurt much as long as it is included later into the learning process when it comes. But all learning without exception is happening in real time, in a "now" moment. If you are left in the past, locked into a fantasy that never became reality, nothing can be done for you until you catch up with what is going on. That's how even nice dreaming about the past cuts possibilities that might be available for you now. You didn't even go that path. You go to a path where you scare yourself with imaginary things that had, or had not, the possibility to happen, even if it could happen, it didn't. So instead of learning from your experience, instead of being proud of what you have done and what you have achieved, you scare yourself to death from ever doing the same thing again, or if you do, then it will be surrounded by countless restrictions and will never be as successful as it would be without them. Again, not much can be taught under such circumstances, as no matter how much you would want to do it again, you will not dare. Even if you dare, it would be at a much smaller scale than the previous time. Every time you try, you would be not progressing but regressing from your first experience that happened maybe without any knowledge, but also without a shade of fear. It is not easy to help someone who has had a bad experience to go over it, but it is much more difficult to help someone who didn't have a bad experience but fantasised about it by "should have," "could have" and moved to the place where not just others but even themselves don't distinguish any more what happened from what could have happened.

Anniel was listening very carefully to this long talk, trying to apply what she just heard to her experiences today. She remembered that while in the water, she was promising herself never to do it again and scolding herself for behaving so recklessly. But now all these fears were gone. If Rainee hadn't been there, she probably wouldn't ever dare to make a similar jump again, because what she experienced at first wasn't very nice. Rainee was right – she was not prepared for it as she didn't know how it should feel...

"You did come back to help me!" She suddenly said, astonished by her own discovery. "You came back not to save me from drowning but to help me to go over bad experiences so I wouldn't be afraid to do it again!"

Rainee lifted her head to have a better look at Anniel.

"And who is a clever one now?" she smiled fondly before adding, "Did it work?"

Anniel nodded her head eagerly. Yes, it definitely worked. She didn't know how, but it did, and she wasn't afraid to experience it again if the opportunity was given.

"You are so kind!" Anniel couldn't go over this.

To jump into the water after someone to save their life is one thing, and many brave people would do it. But to do something like this just to help someone to go over fear... She has never seen or heard about anyone doing so.

Deeply touched, she completely forgot about being cautious. Anniel shifted a little bit closer to Rainee again, but that wasn't enough, and she was drawn so badly to this strange and mysterious person. Not knowing what to do, Anniel lay down next to Rainee in the same position she was lying. Not too close, in case her presence wouldn't be very pleasant to this newly found friend. For

the life of her, she would not dare to call Rainee a friend aloud, but this was exactly how she felt. And not just because she saved her, but just it was so pleasant to be in her company, and Anniet had never before had such a feeling.

"I am glad you finally decided to enjoy the sunbathe – it is really lovely," Rainee said, watching Anniet with a corner of her eye. "But that jacket isn't helping to get the most of it."

Anniet quickly took the jacket off, folded it, and put it neatly next to the rest of Rainee's clothes before lying back in the sun. Rainee was right, the sun was really lovely. Not very often Anniet was able to relax like this, not caring about a single worry in the world. Soon her mind let go of the constant worries when around others, and she could again listen to the sounds of nature surrounding them. The falling water of the waterfall behind them added an extra enchantment to the sound of birds and wind in the trees. To be able to stay relaxed like this in someone's company was a completely new experience.

"What if your students find you now?" she asked aloud, thinking that it would be most unfortunate.

"I guess we would have to teach them," Rainee giggled at this question.

"I hope they will not."

"Why?"

"I want you to have a nice day without doing something that you don't want to do," Anniet said, closing her eyes.

The smile finally came to her face, and all worries were completely gone. Somehow she knew that Rainee was watching her, but for some reason it didn't bother her in the slightest, and that in itself was a new experience.

"How come you know so much?" Anniet asked again after some time had passed, thinking that this woman was more or less the same age as her, maybe a year or two older, or maybe even younger. "How come I know so little when you know so much?"

"I guess I had very good teachers and was willing to learn," Rainee answered.

"I see," Anniet sighed. "I didn't learn a lot, only essentials at grammar school. I did read some books from the King's library when in town, but that's it."

"And what did you like to read about?"

"Travelling! All these distant places on a globe and in pictures look so amazing! I often dreamt of leaving home and go, go, go. I don't even know where..."

"Why didn't you?"

"I don't know," Anniet confessed. "I am not a very good person, and people don't like me that much, and I was afraid that if I went, no one would want to spend time with me, and then when I came back, no one might want me back either."

"Who told you that you are not a very good person?"

"Everyone," Anniet smiled softly. "I make everyone angry, and I make everyone upset. If I make you angry and upset, I do apologise for it now. It is not what I would ever want to do."

Rainee didn't reply to it, and Anniet was thinking how strange it was that she was able to say such things to a newly met person. She wouldn't dare to say anything like this to anyone at home.

People would get upset with her for accusing them, but Rainee didn't seem upset. Probably it didn't bother her much as she didn't know all these people and didn't have a reason to defend anyone.

"Did you go to the school?" Anniet asked.

"I did," Rainee confirmed.

"Did you like it?"

"Not really."

"No? Why not? Were they mean to you?"

"A little bit," Rainee agreed.

"I see. Well, you have become a very good person despite people being mean to you. That's nice."

"Why do you think I am a good person?" Rainee was curious.

"Because you are. I haven't met anyone like you before. I didn't even think people could be like this. Or what I say is (is) upsetting you?" Last sentence Anniet said in a troubled voice, wide opening her closed eyes to see if she had caused trouble again.

"Compliments don't upset me," Rainee replied.

She did look happy and content, and Anniet relaxed, closing her eyes again. She has to learn not to be so jumpy. Maybe people here are different from the people she is used to. The lady who met her at the gates was very nice, and so was Anthony. Now Rainee is very nice too. So maybe life here is really different...

"How did you find this School if you never left home?" Rainee asked. "This school usually accepts only those who seek something new, which is difficult to do while staying at home."

"Oh, I didn't know that these are the rules," Anniet was surprised to hear such conditions. "But you are right, I did leave home. After a big catastrophe, I realised that nothing was holding me there, and I sought something different. Do you think that was why I was accepted to this place? I keep thinking that this is a mistake because I don't even want to learn anything..."

"Really?"

"No, not really," Anniet admitted, thinking that Rainee somehow must know her better than she does herself, "I just don't know what to learn, and also I don't want to spend time locked in a classroom when everything around is so nice. I do want to learn many things, probably too many to even understand what I want. But you said all doors opened for you, so you were invited as a student too. What do you want to learn then?"

"I never thought that way," Rainee said after a short pause. "But you are right, if the students' door opened for me, it would mean that there is something that this place can offer for me from a student's perspective. I will have to think about it."

"What was your favourite subject at your previous school?"

"Mine? Never thought about it either. I guess sword fighting always used to bring me joy."

Hearing that, Anniet's eyes opened wide again, locking her gaze on Rainee. She slowly lifted her head, and all laziness was gone with the winds. She didn't even imagine that such an opportunity was possible.

"Can you teach me sword fighting?" she asked eagerly.

Rainee didn't say anything to that request, just smiled slightly, but was still lying down without even opening her eyes. Anniet waited for a little bit before trying again.

"I know that I am not fit for sword fighting, and my posture and body structure are not up to it, but hopefully it wouldn't be too much of a waste of time, as nobody else wants to learn it at this time, and you said you like it."

Dammit, how could she miss such an opportunity? What came over her thinking that she doesn't want to learn anything? Honestly, she must have had some concoction from that fall. Oh god, please, please, please, might this opportunity not be gone yet! May Rainee's offer still be open. Please! She will never again say that she doesn't want anything!

"When at home, what was your occupation?" Rainee asked without showing any intent to gratify her pleas.

"I was a healer, but I promise it would not interfere. I would not become someone who harms people just because you teach me how to use a sword. I promise I will not even fight with it. I just want to learn. I just want to know..." Anniet was at the brink of losing all hope.

"What is the point of learning something and not daring to use it?" Rainee interrupted. "If I teach you something, I expect you to use it any time you can. Otherwise it would be a waste of time."

"So, will you teach me sword fighting?" A glimpse of hope returned to Anniet's heart.

"There is a very big problem with this request that prevents me from fulfilling your wish," Rainee said, and hearing it Anniet's heart plunged down again. "For sword fighting we would need swords. I don't see you carrying any. Surely I am not that blind to miss it."

Hearing that, Anniet opened her mouth to say something, but didn't know what to say. By now she was already sitting with excitement, but after Rainee spoke, she slowly lay back, just this time without any joy or satisfaction in it. Sunshine didn't feel that nice anymore. Of course, she couldn't teach her... She is right, how can one teach sword fighting without a sword? And she was right again, Anniet didn't carry a sword as she never even had one. Rainee obviously didn't have any either... What was she thinking...

"All I can offer instead is a session of stick fighting, that is, if we manage to find any suitable," Rainee continued. "It is not the same, as a stick is not even a wooden sword, but you would be able to learn at least some stances and a few basic moves."

That was it! Now she has done it! Anniet was already up to her feet, rapidly putting on her nearly dry clothes.

"So eager, eh?" Rainee laughed, seeing it. "Had enough of sunbathing?"

"I will just wait here like this," Anniet said, sitting down again, just fully dressed. "You don't get up yet, as the clothes are not dry yet."

She definitely didn't want Rainee to be uncomfortable just to satisfy her whim. But she herself couldn't wait any longer without doing anything. She gently touched Rainee's clothes to confirm her words, but to her surprise, they were all dry.

"So I guess there is no excuse to laze around anymore," Rainee said in return to this surprise before standing up and getting dressed too.

“Can you teach me sword fighting?”

Rainee didn't move or open her eyes, just her smile widened. Rainee really enjoyed this company even more than she enjoyed the sun. This girl was so... so many things but not ordinary. She had all the traits that common people do, but still she managed to be so open and honest. Like a little child in an adult's body. Just so spooky... Little breeze of wind, and she shrinks back to herself. But also so brave at the same time. Compliments, she says, are so simple yet so honest and sincere that they hit right on the target. No wonder she is afraid to tell them. Anything said with such a weight of heartfelt belief added to it will hit spot on and cannot be ignored. The problem is that people are not open to so much truth. As genuine as the compliment may be, when stated in this way, it reveals all related aspects of a person that really don't fit the compliment. "Not just pretty, but also wise," said in such a way would make a person feel pretty but also would remind them every little part where one doesn't feel that pretty. Same with "wise". Persons' spirits would be uplifted by feeling smart, but only in places where they agree. And every part that they just played wise, or didn't feel that way, would be disclosed to them.

The more unwanted places are disclosed, the more likely it is that such a compliment will be taken as an offence. As it would feel like the whole world has just been reminded of all that doesn't fit the compliment, when in reality, it has been reminded only to the person themselves, and everyone else has the same knowledge as before. And the person who is capable of giving compliments in such a way definitely either doesn't know about hidden secrets, or thinks they are insignificant. Otherwise, the compliments would be fake and wouldn't have such weight.

In addition to that, not many people manage to ask Rainee questions that would lead her to discover something new about herself that she didn't know before. Or rather to say, she knew, but never gave it any thought, so it was equal to not knowing. And this girl has already done it more than once. Honestly, what does she want to learn? It's been a while since she asked herself this question, if ever at all. No, she doesn't remember ever even thinking about it. When she wanted something, she would look for possibilities to do it. She never had to think about what she wanted, as life was bringing more than anyone might need. She never had to think in advance. Well, life is slowing down now or taking a different direction. Perhaps, in this part of her life, she will have to think of what she wants, and just then it will be presented to her. Will see.

“I know that I am not fit for sword fighting, and my posture and body structure are not up to it, but hopefully it wouldn't be too much of a time-wasting as nobody else wants to learn it at this time, and you said you like it.”

"Here it comes again," Rainee thought, sighing inwardly. Useless beliefs ingrained in a person so badly that the person themselves believes them to be true and circles their life around it without even realising that there is nothing to circle around. It is just a castle of sand, or rather of the air, as once it is demolished, there is not even any sand left. These beliefs are built on nothing from nothing. However, these weightless beliefs become a cornerstone of people's lives, and to knock them out becomes a mission that requires many days and considerable effort. If people would just realise the importance of the impact of words, they would not use them so lightly in such nasty ways. The easiest way to control someone is to make them believe that you are bigger and brighter, while they are small and unimportant. Or, as in this case, the conception of the abuser and the abused is completely twisted around. Indoctrinating that the abused was the abuser and actual abusers were just good people trying to make life better, and were forced into taking actions that

supposedly were out of their control. That's how the one who got abused and hammered becomes at fault for whatever happened. That's how good becomes bad and bad becomes good. Truth, as always, was much simpler and not complicated: the one who hurts another, for any reason, seemingly good or bad, is the abuser, and one who was hurt, deservingly or not, is abused. Then everything becomes clear and understandable with no corners to hide behind. But people don't want to accept this truth, just as many others. They like to believe that bad and faulty are on the other side, and they themselves are always right or at least trying to do good. And it is just circumstances that are bringing out the badness in them.

There was nothing wrong with the girl's posture or body structure. The posture would be perfect if she could manage to shake off this uncertainty about herself that was surrounding her. The body structure didn't have many flaws that would require any extra work apart from regular strengthening. Her bones were straight, her joints were flexible, her heart was willing, she wasn't hunched, she wasn't twisted, she wasn't rigid. She would make a perfect swordmaster in a very short time. However, she would never use her mastery on a battlefield. She would never use it in a real battle. She would never use it to hurt someone. The girl just didn't have it in herself. That wasn't a bad thing either. In fact, it is a very rare quality. But despite all these perfectly aligned qualities, she would never excel in the King's Army. She didn't have the obedience required for it. One would laugh at such a statement after this girl listened to everything she was told and obeyed without any resistance or questioning. But it is not the same. She has been trained to obey, and it is clear that she has learned this for survival in a life that, for some reason, was very unkind to her. She was also a very kind person, willing to be at the service of others. But there was a spark of resistance inside that wouldn't be broken at any cost. If the order she received would go against what she holds dear, no matter the outcome, she would not relent. She would stand her ground, and there would be no force on earth, apart from the one within herself, to shift her from that position. That's an excellent quality too, possessed by just a few, and it reminded Rainee of someone she knew very well, but couldn't remember or connect to who it was. In any way, a person like this would make a perfect commanding officer but a very poor subordinate. As an officer under command, she could never be trusted one hundred percent, as anything that would go against her morals would stop her like a wall. As a commanding officer, she would excel. A commanding officer should never go against upheld morals or against what they think is right, and should be able to stand their ground regardless of the pressure. But she will never be a commanding officer. There just was no conception of "commanding" in her. A person like this was helping others, not commanding others. Teacher or healer were the best positions for anyone with such a personality. Maybe a cook, but highly unlikely, unless influenced by others. Production? Possible, but only in the direction where it would help others, and not where one would express oneself. Definitely not a painter or any other craft-maker that would bring up one's personality. It was obvious that she could not be a teacher, as she herself had already admitted that she knew very little, and the thirst for new knowledge was overflowing in her. That's why she thought she didn't want to learn anything. The reality was that she wanted to know everything so badly that it was overwhelming her and closing her down. A harsh upbringing, which obviously didn't permit her much, didn't help there either. So, let's make a guess – healer.

"When at home, what was your occupation?" Rainee asked aloud.

"I was a healer, but I promise it would not interfere, I would not become someone who harms people just because you teach me how to use a sword."

Yup, healer. No surprise here. Well, not a surprise about the occupation, but a surprise about the way people think. They would not allow this girl much, they would not trust her, teach her, or befriend her. But they would happily entrust her with their health, in other words, with their lives, fully confident that she will not do any harm and gladly take the benefits of her work...

"I promise I will not even fight with it. I just want to learn. I just want to know..." that's where Rainee had to interrupt.

"What is the point of learning something and not daring to use it?" she asked.

What a strange way of thinking. If you are given something, then make sure you use it! If the giver thinks you would use it for the bad, then there is no reason to give. But once given, there can be no restrictions placed on how it is used. What is given is given. A giver's, or rather a teacher's dilemma is what to give, what to teach, and how to do it. However, once it is done, it is entirely up to the user to decide how to use it. The responsibility of the teacher lies in what they have taught and how they did it, but not in how it was used later. And teaching doesn't consist only of passing on knowledge. It involves much more.

"If I teach you something, I expect you to use it any time you can. Otherwise it would be a waste of time," Rainee said.

She could feel how badly this girl wanted to learn this skill that didn't suit her at all. There must be some underlying story. And it is definitely not one of loss, or revenge, or the desire to protect that follows these kinds of stories.

Rainee delayed the reply not to tease the girl, nor was she going to reject this request. It is entirely up to every person what they want to learn, and not for others to say whether it is suitable for them or not, or whether it fits them or not. She didn't respond straight away on purpose. And it was to let this girl sit with herself for a bit, to realise that what she said before was not true. In fact, she was so eager for new knowledge that she was absorbing every little drop available. And it worked. She learned this lesson very well and got the most out of it. Now it was time to move forward before eagerness could be replaced with despair.

"So, will you teach me sword fighting?" Annet double-checked with a heart full of hope again.

"There is a very big problem with this request that prevents me from fulfilling your wish – for sword fighting, we would need swords. I don't see you carrying any. Surely I am not that blind to miss it."

That was true. Rainee couldn't teach sword fighting without a sword, and the girl didn't have any. Rainee, on the other hand, had a sword with her all the time, but not in a form others could see, at least not everyone. But she didn't have a second one to give to this girl, so to do anything with swords today was out of the question. But again, for the first day, the sword wasn't even needed that much, mainly to get accustomed to the weight of it.

The reaction this girl had after hearing it was truly heartbreaking – her feelings were so sincere, and she didn't even try to pretend. Gosh, it was so nice to be around someone who is not trying to pretend all the time! That's what Rainee missed most after leaving the King's services. She was accustomed to people showing out of themselves something different to what they were. What she was not used to was staying among them all the time without any rest-by. When she was a kid, she used to travel a lot by herself, and it didn't bug her that much then. In those days, she thought that people simply didn't know or didn't understand, so she tried to teach them at any opportunity

given. Now she knows that people don't want to know. They say that they don't understand, but you can explain as much as you want, and they would still twist and turn vigorously anything you say, adopting and changing it to their own likings, so they don't have to understand. All they wanted was to present their own version of "truth". As soon as there is a "version," there is no truth left in it. This girl was so much more open. What's inside that's outside. And funny enough, she thought it was a bad thing... After joining the King's army, recruits would spend the first few years mainly trying to achieve this state. Only then does it become possible to work on anything inside that has to leave, for a person to start growing.

"All I can offer instead is a session of stick fighting, that is, if we manage to find any suitable," Rainee continued. "It is not the same, as a stick is not even a wooden sword, but you would be able to learn at least some stances and a few basic moves."

"Oh! That's lifted the spirits!" Rainee laughed inside. Seems that the rest is over. And here came a surprise again – no nagging, no rushing others. She is really prepared to sit there in wet clothes and wait patiently until Rainee's clothes get dry. And again, no pretence in this action – that was precisely what this girl meant. She was so eager to move forward with training that she could neither sit back and wait nor did she care about her own comfort, but she was full of care about Rainee's well-being, and a thought to rush her didn't even cross her mind. That's truly touching. Surely she would make a good addition to the King's Army, even if at first glance it seems impossible. Dammit, she has to stop thinking that way! This part of her life is in the past, and she has to let it go.

"So I guess there is no excuse to laze around any more," Rainee said, getting up and dressing herself.

CHAPTER

4

Teaching has begun

“How come my clothes are still damp when yours are all dry?” Anniet asked with wonder.

“Partly because mine are made from a material that dries faster, and partially because I wanted them to get dry,” Rainee replied.

“I wanted mine to get dry too,” Anniet disagreed.

“Really?” Rainee wondered. “And how much “wanting” about it have you done since you put it in the sun?”

“What do you mean by “wanting”?”

“Well, when you want something, you put some heart and effort into it, or at least a thought. Don't you? At least I do. If I do nothing, I get nothing, no matter how many times I say I want it. If I do nothing about it, I never get anything unless someone else does it for me. Wanting without any input is not even wanting; it's just a flicker of the thought or a spoken word. I didn't hear you mention wanting your clothes to dry quickly. Have you given it at least a thought?”

“No,” Anniet said. “I didn't think I needed to. But I put them in the sun to dry out. Didn't I?”

“Yes, you entrusted it to the sun, and the sun is drying it at a speed that the sun can dry it. As I said, what you get is equal to the effort you put in, or someone else puts in for you. If you leave your clothes in water, they would still be thoroughly wet. If you take them from water but leave them in a ball, they would be very wet. If you untie them but leave them on the ground, they would be slightly drier than in a ball. But you put them in the sun, so they are considerably drier. Knowledge and action are the moving power in a world.”

“But I didn't see you taking any more action than that either?”

“Because you were observing only the physical actions I did. Physical actions have the least power and are most time and effort consuming. The energy given to humans is much stronger. Human will is considerably stronger, and the human soul has the most power in the universe. That is if not to count The One himself.”

“And the King,” Anniet reminded.

“And the King,” Rainee agreed after thinking for a few seconds.

“So during this time, you were thinking about your clothes getting dry?” Anniet couldn't understand this logic.

“Alongside many other things – yes.”

“So, is thought stronger than a physical action?” Anniet asked again in amazement at the possibility that everything could be done by the power of thinking.

“Thought has its power, yes,” Rainee confirmed, “but only if it is activated by actions, not necessarily just physical. If thought is left at the level of thought, then it has no power at all, similar to the word. If I think or say that I am going to lift this stone but don't do it, then nothing happens.

The thought might be the beginning of something, the end of something, or nothing else but a thought.”

While talking, Rainee was making her way up the hill, and Anniet was trotting next to her without really paying any attention to where they were heading. While walking, she listened to Rainee and also tried to dry her clothes with her thoughts. As nothing changed, she finally confessed to Rainee.

“It doesn't work,” she said.

“Because now you instantly try to make something happen before knowing how it can be done. That is a trait of magic. However, since you are not a magic user, it doesn't work.”

“Did you use magic on your clothes?” Anniet asked, thinking that it would explain a lot.

“No,” Rainee denied. “I didn't use any magic. I used a basic power given to every human.”

“Like what?”

“Like your own energy body. But come, I will explain to you what we are looking for. As I say, a stick is nothing like a sword, even a wooden one. Therefore, fighting with sticks cannot be considered the same as fighting with swords. The sword is considerably heavier, it is balanced differently, and in your hand, it feels different. I presume you have played with sticks when you were a kid?”

To Rainee's surprise, Anniet shook her head in denial.

“No? Why not?” Rainee asked, reminding herself not to presume anything, as even such a simple presumption can be misleading. She had never met a child before who would not have played at fighting with sticks at least once. Now she has met one. Every day brings something new.

“There was a time when I didn't want to hurt anyone by accident,” Anniet confessed.

“That's a very good reason. I could hardly think of any better. And it makes no difference if you played before or not. All I want you to know is that no matter how good you are at fighting with a stick, you would not become an excellent swordmaster in the very first minute you take it in your hands, as it will feel very different. Swords come in various shapes and sizes, but a sword with a blade of roughly arm's length is a considerably good one. We are looking for two sticks that are slightly longer than an arm's length, evenly balanced on both sides, and with a diameter that is comfortable to hold in the hand. Too thick will tire your hand soon, and will be too heavy to hold. Too thin will be uncomfortable in the hand and will break easily. Understood? Let's search then.”

Annet nodded her head in response and put all her effort into searching for what Rainee asked. Rainee herself didn't look around but was evaluating what Anniet brought to her.

Annet found this task difficult because there were mainly large trees or small bushes around, and even if cut down, they wouldn't be suitable. Rainee, on the other hand, saw hundreds of potentially good sticks around but didn't point at any and didn't pick any up. Neither did she pretend to be looking for one. Her aim was for Anniet to recognise the right size and shape, and while Anniet was eager to look for one, it was the best way to learn.

After she approved a few, they came out from the woodland into the open space, where Rainee sat down on a stone and worked for some time on the sticks and branches that Anniet had collected, making them smoother and straighter. She was using just her hands, but somehow all the sticking bits were falling off, leaving the sticks nice and smooth. Anniet watched for some time with amazement, until she came closer and lifted Rainee's hand to look at her palm. Rainee's hand was

just a regular hand of a regular person – skin on her small and slender palms was soft and tender with no rigidity that usually comes from hard work.

“Are you using magic?” Anniet asked again.

“No,” Rainee smiled, “a magic wielder wouldn't work on it but would get what they want by a wave of their hand. That's the charm of magic – you don't have to work to get what you want, nor do you need to know how it works to get it done. I am simply using my own energy in addition to my own hand. It is the same as mixing up magic with the use of a knife. You want to try? Come, I will show you.”

Anniat sat next to Rainee, holding one of the sticks in her hand. Rainee put her palm over Anniet's hand, and she instantly felt something different. At first, it scared her away, and she nearly withdrew her hand, but managed to restrain herself in time. Rainee was holding her hand just above hers, but it felt like it was engulfed in some solid substance.

“We all have this energy surrounding us all the time, just most of us rarely use it. It might be around us, but to use it, we have to operate it from within, not from outside, as it is your own energy, not somebody else's, and not of the surroundings. It is the same if you want to use your own hand; you don't try to command it from outside, you don't have to influence yourself in any way, you just use it. If you want to use someone else's hand, then yes, you hold it and operate it from the outside. But if it's your own, then it would make no sense to do so. And also, with someone else's hand, you can do just very little, but with your own, you can do a lot. That's why people are meant to use only their own bodies. Same with energy. Everyone is meant to use their own energy, not somebody else's. We can use the energy of the surrounding world, but only through our own energy, not instead of it. You don't need to summon it, you don't need to command it. You simply use it. Same as your body. Once you know that it is there, once you know how it feels, it becomes available to you. Similar to your thoughts. To think you don't need to concentrate and say "now I am going to think" or "I command my thoughts to obey me," you just think, and you use thinking in many different ways without any effort. In fact, sometimes it is more difficult not to think.

While Rainee was talking, Anniet was experiencing very new and intense sensations. She really felt this energy that Rainee was talking about surrounding her like an invisible substance. And it came to her hand when Rainee somehow called it there and then left again, no matter how much Anniet tried to summon it or command it to come. Rainee said it wasn't magic, but it was the most magical thing Anniet had ever experienced in her life. Rainee summoned that energy to her hands multiple times before finally letting Anniet go. By that time, the stick Anniet was holding in her hands was straight and smooth without a single twig sticking out of it.

All excited, Anniet picked up another stick and tried to repeat what Rainee just did. But no matter how hard she tried, nothing happened.

“It doesn't work!” She complained. “I cannot do it by myself.”

“It takes time,” Rainee smiled.

“How long? Didn't you say it should be naturally mine?”

“I did,” Rainee laughed, looking at unhappy Anniet, who was trying to summon this mystical power that was supposed to surround her. “Look at it this way. A baby is born without the ability to control its movements consciously, but tell it to a six-month-old who is kicking and waving in all directions, not aimlessly, but knowing very well what he is doing and doing it without any effort. Also, a baby is born without the ability to think in a logical way, as we all understand thinking. But

tell a six-year-old child that just a short time ago, he was a thoughtless creature, unable to think. Do you believe that if that baby had decided then that he was unable to coordinate his movements or think logically, he would be able to do it later in life? Beliefs are very powerful; don't let them lock away your possibilities, let them open them up for you. You don't even need to believe, you just know that you can and strive for it until you get it. That's how it works. No logical decisions are needed there. They can only lock you away. Now, when you know that such thing exists and that others are using it and that you have it too, simply know that you too will be able to use it sooner or later, as long as you try to use it. The less thinking you put into it, the sooner it will come."

By the time Rainee finished her talk, the last stick was done, and instead of two sticks, they had five.

"Ready?" she asked, standing up.

Instantly, Anniet forgot all her dissatisfactions. She took the stick offered by Rainee with both hands, as she had seen others doing in training.

"How much of sword fighting do you know?" Rainee asked, looking curiously at her.

"I just watched lessons a few times," Anniet said, holding a stick as a sword and standing in a position she knew.

"Have you practised on your own to do what you have seen?"

"Yes..." Anniet said silently, wondering how Rainee would know.

"And what do you use for training?"

"A broom handle," Anniet said, in an even smaller voice.

"OK, that's an evenly balanced item," Rainee said, taking a stick from Anniet's hands, which she let go very unwillingly, and giving her one of the other sticks from the little pile they had made. "This one will be more similar in balance to the broom handle. Show me what you can do with it."

"Not much," Anniet looked a little bit shy after being asked to demonstrate her abilities. "I don't even know if there is anything to show. I don't think anything I can do really counts."

"Every little bit you have learned through your life counts. To doubt it means to discharge some of your life's experience, that means to dishonour and refuse part of your life, or in other words, part of yourself. Things that you consider unimportant to me as a teacher might be very important. It is a very bad habit to discharge all that someone knows and to teach from a so-called "empty page". No adult human is an empty page, as we all know something, and every new teaching should be a continuity of what is already known, either strengthening and expanding it or dismantling and helping to forget. What you know might help you in my teachings, or might be in disagreement with it. It is for me as a teacher to decide. Also, it will disclose to me your weaknesses and strong points. Don't make me repeat such simple commands; otherwise, training will be very hard and prolonged. If you trust me enough to teach you, then also trust me about how to do it."

Annet didn't have to be repeated twice. The way those words were spoken had so much meaning that there was no room left for argument, as there were only two options: take it or leave it. Nothing in between. Nothing partially.

Annet lifted her stick again, swung it a few times around her hand, thinking that it really felt very much like a handle of the broom, just shorter, and took a fighting stance she had memorised from a few lessons she had witnessed. She made a few steps and a few moves to the best of her knowledge, trying not to feel too embarrassed. With each move, Rainee was correcting her stance,

her hold, her turn, as if knowing in advance what she would do. And soon, this overwhelming embarrassment slowly dissipated as every little bit that she remembered and showed wasn't criticised, dismissed, or laughed at. It was just corrected and perfected until Raineer was content with how she did it. So, instead of hiding in embarrassment, Anniet now tried to pull out more and more from her memories, and Raineer would recognise moves she was trying to do, even from a small part, and would help her not just finish it, but finish it correctly. It turned out to be a really exciting game.

Time was passing, and soon Anniet ran out not only of moves but also of breath and stamina, and had to sit down to rest. Raineer, on the other hand, didn't get tired at all and stayed on her feet, swinging a fighting stick around her hand in a similar manner that Anniet did before, just with different variations.

"What do you think the sword is for?" Raineer asked.

"For fighting?" Anniet suggested, wondering what else a sword can be for.

"Not for me," Raineer replied.

"And what is it for you?"

"For me, it is a friend and a very good friend, a dear friend that is precious to me."

"Nice allegory," Anniet agreed.

"No, there is no allegory," Raineer disagreed. "I really think about my sword as a friend. A friend who cares for me. A friend who cares for people who are dear to me. You look after those you care about, don't you? Same, my sword looks after me and after those whom I treasure. And I care for it. Other people don't have to care in return for it, as my sword is my friend, not theirs, and it protects others because it cares for those I care for, even if it itself doesn't have any connection to them. I am that connection to my sword, and I am its best and only friend. Not because it is not allowed to have any more, but because it desires friendship only with me."

"Wow," Anniet was truly touched not only by words but by the way Raineer said these words. "But what if in a battle your sword breaks, or you lose it, or let's say it is taken by the enemy? Wouldn't you feel sad for losing it or having to fight against your friend?"

"Friendship with a sword is the same as any other friendship – if you really love your friend, you will never break it, and you will never allow anyone to break it. And you don't lose a friend, sometimes you can get separated, but it doesn't mean you've lost a friend just because you got separated. If it happens, you look for each other until you find each other. And if the enemy held my sword in their arms, it would not become their friend; it would still be my friend, and I wouldn't be fighting against it. I would fight alongside a friend who is taken into captivity and whose movements are controlled until it gets free. No matter whose hands my sword is in, it is my friend and only mine. That's why, if taken away, it would never stay away for long. That's why I would not fight with an enemy's sword, I might use it for fighting, but I would not fight with it. Because if it is my enemy's sword, then it is their friend, not mine."

"Never before have I thought this way," Anniet said as she really neither thought nor heard anyone else speaking like this.

"I believe the person you were observing doesn't feel this way, either, as his teachings are very aggressive and attacking. If he were in battle, his orientation would be focused on a foe, not on himself, and definitely not on his friends, whether they were in human form or in the form of a

sword. It is tough for the sword to have such a numb friend. It doesn't mean that I am criticising his style, for I am not, he has good stances, and his hand must be firm. I know many outstanding fighters with a similar fighting style. But I am saying that it is not the best, as there is so much more to it, and anyone taking that road cannot see it. When I was a kid, I was taught that the only proper way to hold a sword is with (by) a firm grip in a strong hold, that if my hold weakens and my grip is no longer as solid, I will be disarmed and will lose my sword. I must say it is very tiring to hold a firm grip on something all the time, and yes, my teacher was right, as soon as your grip loosens, whatever you are holding might slip out of your hands. But friendship is not about holding your friend in a tight grip, not allowing it to escape, or even move. Friends want to stay with each other no matter what. And if I love my friend, why would I need to hold it so tight? And why would I be afraid I might lose it? All I need to do is to know my friend very well, its strong points and its weak points, its behaviour, its likings, its abilities. To know and respect. To respect means to accept my friend as it is and to understand that it will not behave in a different manner under any circumstances, not even for me, because that's what it is. The better I know and understand my friend, the less grip I need on it. Why would I need it? I know its behaviour inside out, and I know when it needs support or when it needs freedom. The better we know each other, the better we work together. And we definitely don't expect from each other something that we don't have. Neither do we push each other beyond our limits, as we know these limits very well. But we work together to uplift these limits to new levels. That is my understanding of sword fighting, and that is my favourite way of teaching. But I respect other ways too and don't mind teaching these ways. So it is up to you what road you want me to lead you on.

While talking, Rainee was swinging and spinning the stick in her hand in different ways, sometimes letting it go completely, but it would stay in her hand by momentum. Sometimes it seemed that the stick was floating in the air, and Rainee's hand was spinning around it. All these movements created an illusion that the stick was really a completely different entity that is not obeying Rainee's movements but working, or rather playing, together with her.

Anniel was watching it, completely captivated by the lightness and creativity that Rainee was wielding this stick with.

"I want to learn your way!" She said firmly.

"Good girl," Rainee praised her with a smile. "But it will require extra work and input of your own effort than if you would choose a different path."

"I will," Anniel said firmly again. "I will do all precisely as you tell me."

"Well done," Rainee praised again. "Then here is the very first and utterly most important lesson that lays the foundation for swordsmen who choose this path. Without it, it is not possible to walk this path, and everything you do, no matter how much you try, will cast you back to the path most of the swordsmen have taken. It is very simple and fits in a few words, but it is very fundamental: you have to disobey your teachers, your masters, a lot – all the time."

"?...?????", Anniel was listening so attentively to each word leaving Rainee's mouth, that for a moment she thought that she had overheard and either misheard what was said or missed part of the speech. "I have to disobey you...??? But... but then how can I learn from you?"

"Very simply," Rainee smiled softly at her, "you listen to what I say, you pay attention to what I show. You learn all I teach and leave for yourself only what you find helpful. Everything else has to be discharged as only my opinion that, no matter how good and valid it is for me, might be

entirely useless for you. Disobeying and arguing is not the same. I don't encourage you to argue. Every little bit I or anyone else teaches, you learn, see a reason behind it, and use this teaching as a stepping stone to find how it can be used by you, how it can enlarge your abilities, and how it can make your life easier. All that makes your life more constrained and more complicated has to go immediately, all that can be used has to be modified to fit into your life, and all that you think is worth striving for can be held up as a criterion you want to reach. Not mimicking or learning the actions – no. Your goal is to get to that point by yourself, where you don't need to repeat somebody else's actions, somebody else's attitudes, and then what you have learned from others will automatically change to merge into your life without you needing to modify yourself to it. I can see that you find it hard to believe me, but think how logical it is – your relationship, your friendship with your sword, is between you and your sword, not between me and your sword, not between someone else and your sword. How would you be able to find what this relationship is if you would mimic others? How many times in your life could you make a friendship by acting like someone else? Even if you think you did, as soon as you stop pretending and show a part of yourself, this friendship is gone. Because there was none at the very beginning. Very difficult to retrain such a relationship, as one always has to think about how others want to see them and has completely forgotten who they truly are. That's how people disappear without a trace, leaving instead of themselves someone who doesn't even exist. A sword is not a human. Such a relationship is not possible with it. A sword doesn't need your apology, nor does it understand guilt. If you give it two seconds of your real self now and then two years of pretence, it will remember only these two seconds, as nothing else but what is real exists for it. And it doesn't get upset when you don't have time for it. It's just your own guilt that gives this impression. It doesn't feel resentment or abandonment, and it is always glad for every second or minute you find for it. But only time with the real you counts for it.

If you cannot do that, then you can learn to wield any sword, any weapon, and you can do it with excellence, and all the world will praise you, and many people will come to learn from you. In that case, you will be able to use any weapon with the same skill, and you will have no preference apart from how well it is made. But none of them will become your friend. They will be tools you use. And you can use them very well, even better than someone who has established a relationship with their sword. This connection is not necessary, and those who never made it will never miss it, nor are they capable of understanding what they are missing. But those who got it would never choose the other way, no matter what, even if the whole world would oppose, it is simply no going back, as without it life seems just not natural and possible any more. Throughout my life, I have taught the art of the sword to many people. Few understood what I have just told you, many didn't. From both sides, there are excellent swordsmen and ... let's say not that perfect. How good you become doesn't depend on which path you walk. The way you choose will determine only the footing under your feet, only the way you decide to travel. A person can excel to perfection and feel pleasure in what they are doing in any way they choose. What? You are not that brave any more? Did what I said put you aback a little?"

Annet was listening to what was said in some kind of daze. All that was said sounded absolutely logical and understandable. Then why could she not understand anything? As if all that was told would be behind the wall, or rather in a different world to hers. And all that was logical and understandable in that world didn't have any logic in her world. But still... What this strange lady said made her hear some irresistible call from that foreign, unknown world that caught her attention and was now pulling her towards it, and she didn't want to resist this call. On the contrary,

if anything, she wanted that call to become so strong that she would pick up the courage to answer it and follow it. Anniet shook her head in reply to Rainee's question.

"It didn't put me aback. I just realised how little I know. How little I understand about what you said. All that you told goes against all that I have been taught until now, and I don't know or understand how it is possible. But I want to go the way where I could make friends with swords and with people, without changing who I am. But I don't know how to do it. Until now, no, even now I don't see how it is possible. Because everyone wants to see me differently than I am. Will you teach me? Will you show me where that way is? Will you help me stay on that way if I find it?"

"We'll see what I can do." Rainee smiled again, looking at her with those mysterious eyes.

Suddenly some unexpected thought dawned on Anniet and hit her so hard that she even stepped aside.

"Are you... Are you real?"

Just now, she thought that nothing of what happened today resembles reality. People don't sing in the woods with such beautiful voices that even lure others to them, people don't jump down the highest waterfalls, especially not she herself, people don't come to rescue each other when there is no obvious reason for rescue, people don't teach each other these mysterious ways of thinking, mysterious ways of living. People don't know so much to teach others all and everything. People don't... Well, people don't do anything that happened today. With horror, she thought that she either had a high fever and was hallucinating or she was sleeping, and now that she realised that it was just a dream, all would disappear in a split of a second, and she would wake up at home to face her regular everyday life. Anniet closed her eyes, desperately clutching to the handle of a wooden stick, chanting to herself: "I don't want to wake up. I don't want to wake up. god, please, if it is a dream, please keep me in this dream. I don't want to wake up. I have nothing to wake up for." The more she pleaded, the more she realised that such pleading would not help. Until she firmly decided that after waking up, she would pack her things and leave home immediately. May it be that she will not encounter any magic school, but at least she will see new things and have new experiences. And she will definitely remember all that she heard from Rainee, may it be only a dream, and will try to live by what she said. "God, let me never forget what I have learned today!" Anthony was right – why strive for a little when all possibilities are open? A new sadness grasped her heart. Anthony! If this is a dream, then he is a dream too...

This new shock made her open her eyes just to meet Rainee's curious gaze. She was standing quietly, waiting for Anniet to come out of whatever had just happened to her.

Seeing that Rainee was still standing in front of her brought surprise but also relief to Anniet, and she exhaled deeply.

"You... You are real!" She said aloud. "Or are you not?"

"That you will have to determine by yourself," Rainee laughed at her. "Come, I think you've had enough lessons for one day. Let's go for a walk."

"No, no, no, no. I didn't have enough! You didn't even teach me anything yet! You just checked what I already know!"

"But didn't I?" Rainee asked, looking over her shoulder, but didn't stop and kept walking.

With this, Anniet again understood that what she just said wasn't the truth, that in just looking at what Anniet knows and correcting it, Rainee had taught her way more than she would be able to

learn in a day if accepted to training classes. What she is saying!... Not in a day, more likely in a week. But there was no time to ponder about it or even apologise. If she doesn't want this encounter to become a dream for sure, she'd better catch up now.

Anniel grabbed the sticks they had made together and ran after Rainee, catching up with her.

"These are only sticks, you know?" Rainee laughed at her. "There are many in a forest."

Anniel shook her head in refusal.

"No, they are not. You made them for me! I will keep them all the time!"

"That is a strange way of thinking. What will you do if I make you more? Keep them all? And what if I give you so many that you will not be able to keep all of them? How will you choose what to keep and what to leave? Or will you lock your life to some place just to keep a bunch of items to remind you about something? Experiences are all that count, not the items. Not even memories. If you are struggling to let go of items, how will you let go of memories?"

"I will never let go of memories. I don't want to forget anything that happened today."

"Keeping memories and forgetting about what happened are entirely different things. If you lock yourself too much on what has already happened, you will close yourself off to what is happening or will happen. You wouldn't be able to appreciate my company now to the same effect, while you strongly believe that the best I can offer you has already happened. Until you cling to past items, past memories, you cannot see clearly what is happening now. And what has happened in the past has already happened. You will not lose it, no matter if you keep these sticks or not, no matter if you treasure these memories or you release your grip on them and look forward instead of backward. The past doesn't leave us – it is already part of us. All, good and bad. The more we hold onto it, the less we are capable of seeing clearly what is happening now. My advice for you would be to leave it in the past, where it belongs. And to leave these sticks behind, not to burden yourself with them. That way, you would be able to enjoy what is happening now."

Anniel couldn't say anything for some time, so she kept quiet while walking next to Rainee. What Rainee said put her in a dilemma. She really, really didn't want to let go of these few sticks she was carrying. It felt like by letting go of them, she would let go of today's experience. Without proof, how is it different from a dream? But Rainee clearly expressed her opinion, and not to follow it would be the same as opposing her at the very same time when asking her to teach. How could she teach if Anniel doesn't want to listen to what she is telling? How could she let go of these precious things in her arms when they remind her of such an exciting day? Gosh! What a dilemma!!!

After being torn apart, Anniel finally turned to the side and dropped the sticks. After catching up with Rainee again, she did feel much lighter. And happier. What was she even thinking!? How could there even be a doubt about which was more important, a few items or Rainee's opinion? Now it was so clear that she couldn't even understand where that inner battle she just experienced came from. No item will ever be of the same importance as a person. And Rainee was right! She really could feel a difference between walking with her a minute ago and now, after she discharged these sticks. She really could feel Rainee's presence again now and was looking forward to seeing and hearing more of these incredible things she was showing and telling her. Why would she need proof of something that happened? She knew it happened, and no proof was required, no physical reminder.

“Are you keeping these two?” Rainee asked, pointing to two sticks Anniet was carrying, one in each hand.

“For now,” Anniet answered with a big smile. “I am going to beg you repeatedly to teach me a little bit more today, and will keep them for now just in case you agree.”

Rainee chuckled at such an answer and didn't question any longer.

They walked for some time in silence, slowly getting higher into the mountains. The views were very nice, and they stopped a few times to admire the panoramic sight, picturing the little School town in the far distance.

“Do you live in the same town?” Anniet asked.

“I do,” Rainee confirmed.

“Are there any other towns around?”

“I don't think there are any more towns in this School. Schools are not sanctuaries and are not built for people to live in them for any longer than it requires to serve the purpose of arrival.”

“What is your purpose of arrival?” Anniet asked, thinking that it definitely cannot be teaching, as Rainee already said that she doesn't like doing it.

“I don't know yet,” Rainee answered honestly. “What is your purpose of arrival?”

“I don't know yet,” Anniet said, thinking that she definitely didn't know why she had arrived here.

“So we are both the same. Maybe we were meant to meet each other then, and that was the purpose of our arrival here?” Rainee suggested.

Annet didn't know what to say in return. No one had ever spoken with her in such a way, and she wasn't sure how to react. She was touched by it but also cautious in case Rainee was just laughing at her. Before she could figure out what to say, Rainee stopped in the middle of a large, flat, open area surrounded by walls of stone on two sides. It led to the top of a steep crag, opening a very picturesque panoramic view for everyone brave enough to come close to the edge. But Rainee didn't stop there to admire the views.

“Come,” she said, “let's continue with your training to make sure that your effort of carrying these weapons is not wasted. This place is perfect. It is cool here, and also the energy is very clear and refreshing for those who are willing to appreciate it. I love this place. It has a very unique touch to it that I have never experienced anywhere else. And also, I hate begging,” she added with a smile while stretching her hand out to take one of the two sticks that Anniet carried. “So, my little pupil, how can I be at your service?”

Chapter 5

Seat of kings

Anniel quickly handed the stick to Rainee, thanking inwardly that despite her promises, she didn't have time to beg and nag. She will have to remember never to do it in Rainee's presence.

Rainee stood there waiting for an answer, and Anniel couldn't come up with any.

"Is attacking bad?" She finally asked. "If it is, what else can I do with a sword?"

"A very good question," Rainee approved, liberating Anniel from her fears of asking a silly question. "No, attacking is not bad. As long as it is not reckless and you know what you are doing. An attack is good if you are in a hurry and want to finish the fight quickly, and you are stronger than your opponent. In any other case, going straight to attack might be a bit suicidal. An attacking person is usually an angry person. Aggressiveness doesn't come from love. An angry person usually makes mistakes. On the other hand, a person on defence is usually in fear, anyone in fear is meant to lose before the battle even starts."

"Then what should I do?" Anniel found it difficult to understand if neither attack nor defence was good.

"Curiosity is the key, especially in friendly combat, but on any other occasion too."

"What should I be curious about?"

"Everything. About your opponent, about yourself, about your surroundings, about others who are close by. Curiosity is equal to paying attention. An attentive fighter is a winning fighter. Curious person wants to see more, wants to know more. The more you see in a fight, the more success will open for you. The more you want to know in a fight, the easier the fight will become to you. If you take a little time and pay attention to your opponent's moods, to your opponent's moves, to his goal, to his strength, and to his weakness, you will be able not just to win a battle but also to learn from it. Maybe your opponent is using moves you don't know – from the moment you observe them, you will know them, and it might become yours if you wish. Maybe your opponent is angry with you? It is good to find out why. Anything you notice about your opponent will be to your benefit. Anything you notice about yourself will be to your advantage. Anything you notice about the surroundings will be a huge benefit to you. And if you can see other people around, it will benefit you too no matter whether you want to protect them or defend yourself from them."

"So I just stand and watch? Wouldn't I lose straight away?"

"Surely you would." Rainee agreed. "So don't simply stand and watch. Learn some moves that could be called defensive, but I would call them observing. Learn it so well that when using them, you don't have to pay any attention to them, just as you don't have to pay any attention to the blink of your eye; it blinks when it needs to and closes when something is approaching it without your needing to think about it. Then you will not be standing defenceless in the middle of the battle, and you will not need to waste any energy thinking while using them."

"Can you teach me a few of these moves?" Anniel asked happily.

"Let's do it then," Rainee agreed.

She swung her stick, it spun rapidly and disappeared out of sight. Anniel thought, "Where did it go?" just to notice it at Rainee's side under her belt. She didn't have time to wonder any more as Rainee was already behind her, helping to assemble her body in the correct position, explaining

what moves should be made, when and how. When satisfied, Rainee stood in front of her and pulled out her stick, and so a little battle began.

After some time, Rainee called a pause to address the biggest issues she had seen.

“You are very angry. Very angry with yourself for not being able to do well enough. Very judgmental. Please understand the irony of it. You cannot do more than you can, that's why you are learning to do more. If you already knew well, I would not be teaching you, as you would not need it. Even if you were a teacher, to be so angry for not being able to do something you are not able to do would still make no sense. But now you are a pupil. You can legitimately not know. There is nothing even to forgive yourself for, even if you try.”

Anniel was listening to what was said with eyes full of tears. Not because Rainee's words were harsh, but because she really was angry with herself for repeatedly making the same mistakes over and over again. Rainee's words didn't make her feel any better. It would be much easier if Rainee called her stupid or at least silly, then they both would be on the same page. Instead, Rainee continued.

“Self-love is the most important ingredient in a good warrior. If you love yourself, your sword will love you. Remember, your sword is your friend. It will agree with you. When you love yourself, it will love you and protect you. If you hate yourself, it might start hating you too just to please you. In any case, it will definitely be in hatred with everyone else. Remember, everything you feel about yourself will be passed to your sword and reverted to your opponent. Think that way – if you hate yourself, then you are fighting me with hatred, as that is what you are sending my way. If you are angry with yourself, your anger comes at me through your sword. If you are curious and interested in what you learn and what you do, this curiosity and interest are coming my way. While hatred and anger make me want to stop the lesson, curiosity and interest make me want to teach you more. And no, you cannot hide what you feel, as it is just worse, you can only change it. And also, my way comes how you feel about yourself, not about me. You don't need to impress me – I am teaching you not to be impressed by what you can do or how quickly you can learn. I am teaching you because you don't know and want to learn. For someone who doesn't know, it is normal not to know. Let's continue. With a little bit less anger and disappointment. The point of this training is not to impress me or prove to me that you can. It is for you to learn as much as you can learn – no less and no more.

Now Anniel had a double task on her mind: to learn all that Rainee was teaching her and not to be angry with herself for making mistakes. No need to impress Rainee... How would this be even possible? She couldn't remember and do well that little bit that was shown. Rainee had to correct the same mistakes she was making over and over again. If she can impress with anything, then it would be how stubbornly her body kept refusing to do things the way she wanted. Why did Rainee even say that? Why would she want to impress her? All she wants is to do well. Oh god! She wants so much to do well, but nothing is happening! She does! She does want to impress her so badly!... She tried to show Rainee that she can do very well. That she can learn very well. But instead, Rainee was the one who impressed her. This woman must be a saint! By now, everyone Anniel knew from before, would be screaming and shouting in anger as they would firmly believe she was doing it on purpose. The more she tried, the worse things got. But Rainee didn't show any signs of annoyance or irritation. She was correcting the same mistakes over and over again as if it was done for the first time – ten times, fifteen, twenty, thirty, count lost...

"OK", Anniet thought to herself, "first part of her task failed, she cannot do anything well...." Then she decided to put all of her attention into the second task. Don't be angry and disappointed with yourself.

Rainee said all that she was feeling about herself was coming at her. If Anniet feels angry about herself, then this anger is directed at Rainee. How complicated! And why only now did she decide to pay attention to this part of her task despite Rainee directly asking her to concentrate on it? She asked for more self-love. Of course she did. Probably it is much nicer when love is coming your way, not just anger and rage. She was so disappointed with herself! If all this time, this disappointment was all that she was sending Rainee's way, then it is truly surprising that she still teaches her! She does so well, and all that she receives for it is disappointment. No! She wants Rainee to receive love and appreciation, she wants her to feel how much she is admired and that she has never met anyone as wonderful as Rainee is.

Gosh, it is difficult! It is easy to feel it towards Rainee, but she specifically said that through her sword, she is receiving not what Anniet feels about her, but what she feels about herself... To admire herself for being so clumsy was not an option. So Anniet concentrated on loving herself, no matter how stupidly she acts, and on appreciating herself for whatever she does. Why not? Things could get much worse. At least she was trying and not giving up...

By now, she could easily tell what Rainee would correct and how she would do it. Shoulder, wrist, twist, straighten, shoulder, stick straighter... If she knows it, then why can't she do it correctly? Well, never mind, at least she is capable of fixing it before Rainee does it, and she loves herself for that, and she appreciates that little progress, up to the moon.

Now her body was straightening up and putting itself in the correct order at a single movement from Rainee, or even before that. Why not even admire oneself for it? Rainee definitely deserves some admiration for being so awesome. And her own body too. It was by now so tired that this light stick felt like a massive axe, but her body obediently lifted it up every time she wanted and struck every time she asked. Well done.

"Well done!" Rainee praised, lowering her stick. "Or I should say beautifully done. I am happy with the result."

Annet was about to say "at least one of us is," but by now she was so much in self-love and self-respect mode that she couldn't address herself with such a phrase and instead said:

"I am happy too."

Strangely, she not only said it but also felt happy about herself. At least until in the back of her mind she heard her mum's voice saying that there is nothing to be happy about the way she performed. But even then, she ignored that voice for a considerably long time and was just standing here, panting heavily, with a big smile on her face and joy in her eyes.

"I think we both deserve a little rest," said Rainee, lightly throwing her stick across her shoulder. "Let's go, there is just a perfect spot for it."

She pointed at the towering rock on the right-hand side and waited until Anniet, who again had difficulty parting with the training stick, would join her.

At the base of this stone wall, a little stream of water was finding its way through the cracks, making it perfect for a refreshing drink. Then Rainee led the way towards the edge of the cliff.

Just now Anniet realised that the day was coming to an end, and the sun was not that far from setting down, casting its orange light over the town below and the fields behind it.

Rainee didn't stop there but took a little pathway carved right on the side of the rock looming over this open abyss. That's where Anniet stopped. She didn't dare to go any further.

This pathway hardly deserved a pathway's name as it was an extremely narrow ledge sticking from the vertical rock and looming over open space. And there was nothing to hold onto, nor anything that would prevent one from falling at any wrong movement. Maybe not even a wrong movement was needed, as even looking at Rainee walking it, the force of gravity was questionable. As if sensing her hesitation, Rainee stopped and turned around, giving Anniet a proper fright of what would happen if she would lose her balance.

"Don't be afraid," Rainee said. "This place is somehow special. The possibility of falling here is non-existent. I wouldn't take you anywhere where it is not safe. Trust me on that." After saying it, she turned away and disappeared behind a curve of the stone.

Anniet was like a little puppy who was too frightened to follow but also didn't want to be left behind. She did feel like running up and down in anxiety. The moment Rainee disappeared behind the rock was as if something precious had vanished out of her reach. Was her life really so dear to stay behind in safety? Yes, it was! She didn't want to die! Life in the past few days was becoming extremely interesting, and just now she realised how much she valued it. But the person who made it so interesting just invited her to walk this treacherous path and disappeared out of her sight, and she couldn't bear it!

Anniet dashed forward on that narrow ledge a few steps before stopping again. Somehow, the possibility of falling seemed very high here. The rock on her right was leaning outwards, pushing her towards the nothingness on the other side. There was nothing to hold onto and nothing to prevent her from falling. Luckily, there was no wind.

To stand here like this was not an option. To turn back was not an option either. So Anniet gathered all the courage she had and pushed forward. After reaching the curve in the stone, she saw Rainee, a few feet higher, peacefully sitting on a rock shaped or carved as a seat with her feet dangling over the abyss below. With her eyes closed and rays of the sun playing on her face, she looked like an image of tranquillity and happiness. She opened her eyes and waved for Anniet to join her. Anniet slowly reached the place Rainee was sitting and pushed herself onto that so-called seat. It was difficult to say if this seat was naturally made or specially carved, but it definitely was made as a two-seater.

"Glad you came," Rainee said, "This place is really worth the little nerve to reach it. It is so calm and also full of energy, like nowhere else in the world I have been so far. So uplifting. You have to feel it for yourself to understand. And so comfortable that it is hard to believe that you are sitting on stone. You can sit here unmoving all day, and not a single muscle will complain."

"I am not sure," Anniet couldn't agree wholeheartedly. "It seems like a pretty dangerous trip just to sit down on a stone."

"No, there is no danger in coming here," Rainee said again. "As I said, the possibility of falling is removed from this place, so it is non-existent."

"I don't understand what you mean by that."

"I mean that it is not possible to fall here, as such a possibility does not exist in this place."

“So if I try to jump now, I wouldn't be able to do so?” Anniel asked with disbelief, looking down to the ground many meters below.

“Oh, you will be able to jump, there are no restrictions on that,” Rainee laughed, “but jumping and falling are not the same, are they? I never said that the possibility of jumping is removed. But I hope you wouldn't do it, as life is too beautiful to risk it like this.”

Anniel looked down, thinking that the possibility of risking is not existing here, as it would be certain death. She smiled at herself at the way she adopted Rainee's words, and her mood lightened a little bit. The strong gust of wind blew, bringing back her fears.

“If the wind were to blow me away, would it be falling or jumping?”

“It would be falling,” Rainee smiled. “It is not possible for wind to blow you away in this place. You can relax and watch the sunset – it is beautiful this evening.”

Anniel tried to follow her advice, but not very successfully. “How can the possibility of something happening be removed?”

“The world is full of possibilities,” Rainee explained, “in fact, endless, unlimited possibilities. Every step you take has an unlimited number of next possible steps, and it is for you to choose what step you take – all is laid out in front of us. We don't see all of them, in fact, the more a person is afraid, the more he or she will be obliged by rules, dogmas, and doctrines, the fewer possible steps they will see to take. The more a person knows, the more they believe, the more possible steps they see. Knowledge is a huge opening of possibilities. Especially if it is not restrained by the rules set by those who teach. That's why I told you that the best way to learn is to disobey your teachers, casting aside any restrictions they might have set, intentionally or not. If the teacher was able to see only a certain number of possible outcomes and no more than that, he might pass this belief to others, together with the knowledge he passed. By doing so, closing down ways in which this knowledge could be used by those who were less closed or closed in different ways. But that is a different talk. Anyway, knowledge, truth, sincerity, opponents, belief, curiosity, faith, trust, bravery, audacity, eagerness, firmness, even fantasy – all these will help you to open new ways, open new possibilities that were unheard of and seemed impossible. On the other hand, fear, restriction, anger, abuse, rules, regulations, doctrines, lies, worries, responsibility, guilt, timidity – all these cut down the number of possible ways that a person can see in front of himself or even when they see them, it is reduced how many he would dare to take. Anything you don't take becomes non-existent, unimportant, or even impossible.

“So I can do anything at any point?” Anniel asked with her eyes wide open.

“Basically, yes,” Rainee smiled, “just as everywhere in the world, there are conditions.”

“What conditions?”

“Unlimited conditions that will vary in every circumstance. Let's say if you jump because you want to fly, but you don't know how to fly, then you will fall. So the condition for you to fly is either you know how to do it, or there is someone who carries you, or you know something extra that will prevent you from falling. If no additional conditions are present, you will fall. Let's say you can fly, then the condition for you to do so would be an open space for flying. You cannot fly if you are in a cage or your wings are tied up, or there is no room to fly; the condition would be to free yourself up before flying, or find someone who would be able to free you if you cannot do it yourself. For you to eat, there has to be food available, or you must have the ability to create it. For you to speak, you must know the language and words. All, from very basic to the most complex,

and even not yet known to anyone, have their own conditions that have to be met for it to happen the way you want. It is like a giant net with unlimited threads stretching in all directions in unlimited dimensions, or should I simplify and say colours. One colour for possibilities, another colour for conditions, a third colour for chances taken, a fourth colour for those who weren't taken but badly wanted. Good thing we don't see this net physically, as we wouldn't be able to see anything else and would miss such beautiful sights as a sunset in front of us."

"But if possibilities are unlimited, how can something possible in one place not be possible in another place? A cliff is a cliff. If I can fall in one place, how can I not be able to fall in another?"

"Same logic. If conditions have changed, the possibility either appears or disappears. In this place, there is no room left for the possibility of falling or even for the possibility of being pushed off. To do so, a certain number of conditions had to be established."

"By whom?"

"I don't know."

"Then why?"

"I don't know that either."

"But how have they done it?"

"I don't have this knowledge."

These words sounded so natural, but it was so strange to hear them from Rainee.

"So these people had more knowledge than you?"

"There are many people who have more knowledge than I do," Rainee smiled.

"Then this place doesn't have endless and unlimited possibilities any more?"

"Why?"

"Because some of them were taken away..."

"How much do you need to take away from unlimited for it to become limited?"

"I don't know... One?" Anniet guessed. "If one is taken from one hundred, then it is not one hundred any more. So if one is taken from unlimited, then it is not unlimited any more?"

"Very fine logic," Rainee praised her. "I like it. But different conditions apply to numbers and the unlimited. Unlimited is not a number, that is why this logic that is unbreakable with numbers will not work on the unlimited. Unlimited means there is no limit. The number is a limit. No matter how many numbers you take from or add to unlimited, it will not change, as it was already unlimited, and it will stay unlimited. Numbers don't affect it. Even if you take unlimited from unlimited, it will still not affect it. You can reject as many choices offered to you as you want, as many possibilities as you prefer. The amount of possibilities available to you will still be unlimited. The only limit would be how many you personally can see and are willing to see."

Anniet got all dizzy from that talk and held on firmly to the seat to steady herself in case her head would spin and she would fall down. Who knows how it would count, falling or jumping. So it's better to be safe. She tried to follow Rainee's advice and look at the sunset, which, by the way, was really beautiful, but an unlimited amount of thoughts were interfering, and she had a hard time paying any attention to the view in front of her.

Rainee was watching her with a corner of her eye, and seeing this struggle, stretched her hand. Anniet wasn't sure what for and gave her a puzzled look.

"Give me your hand," Rainee said. Anniet shyly placed her hand in the offered palm. Rainee placed her other hand on top, sandwiching it in a soft and gentle, but also very firm grip.

"Relax," she said, putting this sandwich of hands on her leg and again resuming a relaxed position.

Anniet sat still and frozen for some time, not knowing what to do. No one before was so gentle with her for as long as she could remember. And some strange calmness was overtaking her. Up until now, she firmly believed that she was already calm, but apparently not. A buzzing swarm of thoughts was leaving her slowly, becoming unimportant, and all she could feel now was friendliness and loving kindness coming from the person sitting next to her. Time and time again, thoughts suggesting that she had done nothing to deserve this treatment were surfacing, but before taking a firm grip, they were fading away. She knew that she had used more than an appropriate amount of this lady's time, but this knowledge seemed unimportant.

A new, strange, and unfamiliar thought that maybe this woman liked her company and that's why she spent so much time with her, was taking over Anniet. With minutes passing, this thought was becoming more and more natural, setting its roots deeper and deeper, bringing up another thought, not a question, but rather a statement of why wouldn't anyone love to spend time with her? As she wasn't such a bad person after all, the thought was saying "nice person", but Anniet didn't know how to accept such a suggestion, so she translated it into not that bad person. Yes, sometimes she does make mistakes, but not intentionally, and always tries to fix them, even though most of the time people would say that it's better if she didn't try to fix them, but still... Still what? This thought too slowly faded away. What was she thinking about? Oh, right, that she wasn't that bad a person after all, and it was a pleasure to be in her company. What a strange thought, but as it was very pleasant, Anniet chose to keep it and stay in it.

Why would she think about something bad? The sunset was really gorgeous, the seat was really comfy – Rainee was right, it was really extremely comfortable, no matter how strange it sounded when talking about rock. The company was delightful. She never had a sister or a very good friend, but if she had, it probably would feel like this to sit together and think about nothing and worry about nothing. She looked at Rainee with a smile. Why just a little ago did she think that Rainee was some sort of mystic being? Yes, she knew more, much more than Anniet, but what? After today, Anniet knew much more too. She didn't become some unnatural, unreachable person just because of that. When looking at her now, Rainee was just the same as her, just very smart, very beautiful, and very kind. It was good to have a friend like this, and at that spot Anniet told herself never ever again to believe anything else.

Anniet's attention went back to the splendid views in front of her. The sun was not that far from the land now, gilding everything around itself. The town below looked like a golden town from fairy tales. At this very moment, Anniet's heart was as free of worries as she could possibly imagine. All relaxed and happy, she put her head on Rainee's shoulder and watched this daily wonder of nature with entirely new eyes.

"Thank you for the day," she said aloud.

Rainee smiled and kissed the top of Anniet's head in return.

"Any time," she replied, returning her attention to the beauty of the sunset.

Rainee was watching the sunset, but her mind wasn't that much occupied with it. Why would it be? To appreciate the beauty of nature, the mind wasn't needed, or rather was incapable of performing such a task, so it could wander freely while the soul admired the view.

This small girl at her side was truly a proper worry generator. It wasn't that often that Rainee would help people directly with it. Not anymore. She used to do it a lot in her youth, but not that much lately. It was not because she couldn't do it or didn't want to help. It's just that people loved their worries. Somehow, it was widely believed that the things they worried about strengthened them, made them better and more considerate people. So after countless attempts, she stopped fighting this battle. At least not directly. Now she was educating instead of providing direct help, so people would know more and could help themselves. And it brought more success. Those who didn't want to change didn't learn anything and stayed the same. Those who wanted to change could apply what they had learned to their own lives and help themselves or seek help. A seeking person is open to reception, and only a person who is open to reception can accept help offered.

Since Rainee took the girl's hand, she had offered direct help. She could swipe all these worries away by clearing them instantly, leaving the girl worry-free and carefree. But it would feel very unnatural and could easily scare someone who is not used to knowing what this condition feels like. So she just allowed all of it to drain naturally. It worked as a little invisible draining channel that allowed all these worries and anxieties to flow from Annet to Rainee and from Rainee down into nothingness, where they actually belonged. By doing so, Rainee allowed every worry that rose in Annet's heart and mind to flow through her and then drain out, leaving nothing, not even a trail behind. It couldn't be happening any other way, as every fear, every worry, every anxiety was created from nothing but imagination. All fear is just future-based imagination that sometimes can become reality, and most of the time does not. As soon as a person has hit the point he was afraid of, in real time, all of the fear is gone, as there is no fear in real time – it is a physical impossibility. There is no fear in the past either, as things there have already happened, and there is nothing to be afraid of anymore. It can cast a new fear about the future by making a person afraid of something that might happen again, or might happen where it didn't even happen in the past, or where someone else might find out what happened in the past. So fears can be based on past events, but just based on them. Fear itself will always be only about the future. Even a person who says he is afraid at this very moment is not telling the truth, as he is not scared of this moment, he is afraid of the next moment, what is yet to come, maybe in a split second, but it is still about what will happen, not about what is happening right now or already happened. So fear is always based on nothingness, as it hasn't happened yet, and a future that didn't come to be reality has no weight. So when released, it truly feels like "puff" and nothing comes out of this inflated balloon, not even a smell.

And to think that this nothingness, or rather to say these fears have such a tremendous power over people, holding them in such a firm grip and influencing them so badly in every moment and decision of their lives... What a tragedy...

Same worries this girl has – all just a bunch of nonsense based on somebody's sayings, on false beliefs, and on a pile of lies. Still, it feels so real to her. Much more real than the reality happening around.

But she was a fighter! Such a strong character hidden deep inside. This strength can be a huge help to her or can bring proper doom depending on what direction it is used in. If it is used to break

out of a prison, it will be the strongest ally. If it is used as its own prison guard, it will be the strongest foe.

One worry after another got drained, and one worry after another was created anew. Like a never-ending game. Someone else can help to get rid of these worries, but nobody can forbid you from making new ones. Someone else can point out what incorrect beliefs are creating these worries, but no one else but the person themselves can choose to let go of these controlling beliefs and look for something new instead.

Luckily, this girl was willing to free herself of these false understandings, and after a while, she finally started to relax and notice her surroundings as it was in real time, not filtered through these beliefs that were ingrained in her.

People are so predictable but also so unique. It was proven to Rainee once more that no matter how accurate her presumptions can be most of the time, there will always be someone who will surprise her time after time. She was prepared to wait for a considerably long time until Anniet would finally relax, but just now, in an instant, she stopped all her worries, and surprisingly, the reason for it was Rainee herself. Not just the help she provided, it couldn't be expected that Anniet would even understand this sort of help. No, it was the girl's attitude towards her. As soon as Anniet's thoughts were transferred from Anniet to Rainee, all worries dispersed suddenly, completely surrendering to appreciation and trust. A really touching addition to today's events. Such trust, no matter how short-lived and temporary, wasn't easily or often obtained. To receive such trust from someone was the best reward possible for any effort, and to think she hardly did anything for this girl at all.

"Do you think we have met before?" – Rainee asked aloud. This feeling that she had already met this person kept lurking around.

Anniet immediately shook her head in response. She didn't have to think or have any doubts about it.

"No, I haven't met anyone like you before."

"Maybe I have travelled by? I used to do lots of travelling."

Anniet just shook her head again. She could remember every traveller she met; there weren't that many. Most of them were men, and just very few women. But none of them resembled Rainee.

"Have you ever been in the Capital?" – Rainee kept questioning.

"No, only to the nearby town. I don't know anyone from our village who would ever travel to the Capital. Have you?"

"Yes, I used to live there."

"Do you belong to the King's Army?" – Anniet asked.

"You are very smart," – Rainee smiled to herself. – "Why would you think so?"

"People say that everyone in the King's Army is very special and kind. That they fight better than any other swordsmen could ever do. And that they are also very smart and educated. And very helpful. I cannot think of anyone fitting this description better than you."

"It is good to know that people have such a good opinion about the King's Army," Rainee smiled again. "Yes, you are right. I used to belong to the King's Army."

"Used?"

“Yes. That part of life for me is over now.”

“I didn't know that it was possible to leave the King's services...” Anniet was surprised by what she heard.

“Why not? What? People in your village believe that the King keeps everyone for himself until death?”

“Yes,” Anniet nodded her head, “or at least until they are old and not useful for him anymore.”

“Hmmm. That's not entirely true, but I can see why such a belief was born. No, you can leave the King's services at any time you want, but by leaving it, you will lose all the support that is given to you. Sometimes, in exceptional cases, you will not even remember all the information that was available to you. So people don't want to leave the King's services until they die or, in some cases, until they become old and not interested in serving the King anymore, or for some other reasons.”

“But you are not old.”

“No, I am not,” Rainee laughed. “You could say I had other reasons to leave.”

“Have you seen the King?” Anniet asked.

“I have,” Rainee confirmed. “Have you?”

“No, I didn't. I haven't seen anyone in the King's services either.”

“Not even anyone from the King's Army?”

That would be a bit unusual, but Anniet just shook her head in reply.

“Not even on parade?” Rainee asked again.

“No. Nobody ever took me to town on the days when there was a parade.”

“Your parents must be very strict,” Rainee said.

“I never met my father, and my mum was strict,” Anniet agreed. She thought for a little bit and added. “Somehow I don't want to talk about her... Is it very bad?”

“No, it is not bad at all. If anything, it is good that you admitted it. And it is very good not to talk about those you don't want to talk about.”

“It is getting very dark,” Anniet said, “how will we find a way back?”

She was right. The sun was already gone, and darkness was rapidly falling upon all surroundings. Lights in a distant town were getting brighter, but it was too far to help them see any better.

“I will take you back, don't worry,” Rainee comforted her, “do you want to go now?”

“Can you see in the dark?” Anniet was curious.

“A little bit,” Rainee confirmed.

“Then maybe we could stay for a bit longer and look at the stars?” Anniet suggested, hoping that it was not too audacious.

“I love stargazing,” Rainee said. “Let's stay then for a little bit longer.”

So it did seem that after all, it was the first time they met. Anniet's replies were honest, and Rainee didn't have any reason to doubt her. Even if they had met at a very young age before memory could reach it, it wouldn't leave those feelings of recognition. The feeling she had towards

Anniel was one of knowing a person. There is not much to know about babies. They might be all different, but they still are not developed yet in who they are, so the feeling could only be about who they could become.

Now it really started to bother Rainee. She laughed inwardly at herself and pushed it aside. If she cannot remember, she cannot remember. There must be reasons why. And as she didn't know these reasons, there was no way to resolve it now, so there was no reason to linger and ponder over it.

The night was getting darker and darker, revealing more glittering stars in a clear sky. The lights in a town started to fade slowly, and soon there was pitch dark around. Darkness wasn't something that would bother Rainee. Sight was one of the dullest senses in the human body. For her, it wasn't easy to understand why people chose to rely on it so much. Surely being able to see has its own advantages, especially in seeing and exploring the beauty around. Like this sky full of stars. Without sight, she would never be able to see it. So no, she would never underappreciate the benefits of sight. But rely on it for survival... That's really something crazy.

She was still holding Anniel's hand, not because she needed her help anymore, no, that worry generator was off for the time being. Just the girl really liked it, so she left it as it was. Now she decided to take advantage of it and, slowly, little by little, shared with her what others used to call enchanted vision. The name didn't match the truth at all, but to some degree it allowed others to understand the effect of this sharing. The effect was that the person would see better, in more detail, even in more colours. But it wasn't enchanting anything. Every human, without exception, had the ability to see it that way. It was just... let's say clad, or a better description would be – refused. Refusing to see that, refusing to admit something, forbidding oneself to think that way, keeping a blind eye on other things. All the daily things of a regular person, considering that there is not too much harm in it, but reality was that you cannot refuse to see one thing and still be completely open to see another, you cannot keep a blind eye on one matter but not on another. That's how people were leaving themselves with basic physical eyesight, denying themselves the opportunity to see the true colours of the world available and freely given to them. Luckily, physical sight wasn't that dramatically or rapidly affected by the inner state, as otherwise the whole world would be full of blind people.

Sharing enchanted sight was a temporary thing, and it really wasn't sharing; it was just awakening these abilities in a person themselves, and dimming all that was opposing it. Like pulling on a scene an artist who spent all of his time behind curtains. The problem with doing so is that the reasons why this artist was hidden behind the curtains didn't disappear, and when external interference vanishes, the same actor that brought all these enchanted experiences is pushed back behind the curtain, and all returns to the place where it was before.

Rainee chose to do it very slowly and just a little bit, not to its fullest capacity, to prolong this effect. It was more like luring out that hidden actor, not pulling it out. When done this way, it will take a much longer time, but it will also last much longer. Hopefully, until the time they will leave these hills.

"Stars are so bright here," Anniel said. "I have never seen them like this before. It looks like if I stretch my arm I will reach them. I am so glad we could stay for a bit longer. You were right, this place is really special. Never before have I remembered feeling so peaceful and happy."

Rainee didn't say anything, just squeezed her hand in return. "You know so little yet about life if such a small drop brings you so much happiness," she thought to herself.

They stayed like this for a while until Anniet realised that if she would stay there any longer, she would simply fall asleep. She wouldn't mind it, but the place didn't seem very suitable for having a nap. Also, there was still a long way home. She looked at her companion, who was peacefully gazing at the stars, and with little regret asked if it wouldn't be time to make their way back.

"Good timing, as I was thinking the same," Rainee said, smiling at her and letting go of her hand.

It was so good to be held like this. Anniet wanted to say how much she appreciated it, but didn't know how to say it, so she just kept it to herself.

Deep in her thoughts, she easily walked that treacherous ledge that scared her so much on her way there. Now it didn't frighten her at all; in fact, she didn't even notice how she walked it. The night, after all, turned out to be pretty light despite there being no moon, and it was easy to see the road even in the parts where the path took them through the woodland. Anniet wanted to ask so many things, but at the same time, it was so good just to walk like this with her new friend in this silent night. This place at night smelled so different, and it was full of night sounds. She could even hear an owl flying by and even fish swimming in the river. This place was really enchanted. Or maybe it just seemed like this because she was really happy.

By the time they left the mountains and approached the town, Anniet was exhausted but very happy.

"Can I come to your class tomorrow?" she asked in a low voice while walking across the silent streets.

"Take it easy tomorrow," Rainee said. "It is nearly morning now, and you need good rest. If you want to join my class, then you can come the day after tomorrow."

"Will you be there?" Anniet asked, remembering that not so long ago Rainee said she was hiding from her students.

"I will be there," Rainee promised, stopping by the house where Anniet lived.

"How do you know where I live?"

"Until now, I didn't know," Rainee laughed silently. "But as you led us there, I presume this is where you live. Isn't it?"

"Yes, yes it is," Anniet confirmed, a little bit confused as she thought Rainee was leading the way. Apparently not. "Do you live close by?"

"Not too far away," Rainee said, "but the town isn't that big, so everything there is not that far away. Make sure you allow yourself to take a good rest, as it is needed after an exciting day. And if you want to see me again, come and join my classes or find me somewhere else, just as you did today. For now, I am going to wish you goodnight. It was a real pleasure meeting you."

Annet was trying to find the words to say how grateful she was for today, but she must be really tired as nothing came to her head, so instead she hugged Rainee tightly, putting into this hug all the gratitude she felt.

Rainee just laughed silently at it and hugged her back. Then, as soon as Anniet released her, she moved down the street, turning once around to wave back at her, and soon disappeared into the darkness.

Anniel was standing for some time looking in the direction Rainee walked away. Somehow, with Rainee gone, the night started to become not as light as it was before and was getting darker and darker with every minute she stood. How strange, Anniel thought to herself while getting inside, it was really nearly a dawn break, shouldn't it be lighter now than before? Maybe the tiredness was the cause, as she really was exhausted. She fell asleep as soon as she put her head on a pillow and had such light and vivid dreams as never before.

CHAPTER

6

Pupil without a teacher

Anniet slept so well that by the time she woke up, it was already late. She was hoping to do so much today, but by the time she left her room, it was already evening. Anniet still walked to the School's teaching premises, but as she already suspected, there wasn't much to do there, as all was empty, and she saw only a few people in the library. Great! The only day she wanted to go to classes, she had to sleep until all was finished....

Deep in her thoughts, she walked down the empty yard when an unexpected smell drew her attention. Food! It was really smelling like food! Just now Anniet remembered that she hadn't eaten anything for two days! When the stomach is empty, all senses probably get sharper. Never before could she remember herself tracking smells so easily. In no time, she was at the doors of the building, which must be some sort of refectory or dining hall, as it was surrounded by outdoor tables, and through slightly opened doors she could hear the sound of cutlery and plates.

Anniet pushed the door open and walked in. Unfortunately, she must be late there too. The place was empty, the lights dimmed, and the sound she could hear was coming from the kitchen. Someone was obviously tidying it up. Anniet sighed in disappointment and turned around to leave when a familiar voice sounded from behind.

"One late and hungry customer. Where do you think you are going with this empty stomach? Luckily, my hearing is good and I caught you in time before you ran away!"

Anniet turned around just to see Anthony, who was standing in a kitchen doorway, laughing at her. That's right! He did say that he works there as a cook! What a lucky meeting! She really was pleased to see him.

"Hi," Anniet said with a smile. She wanted to say that she was very happy to see him, as she was thinking about him a lot since their last encounter, but it would be very strange to say it to the man she hardly knew, so she didn't say anything, just looked at his eyes, as dark as the darkest night, thinking that never before she had seen a person with such beautiful eyes.

"Hi to you too." Anthony said. "I am very happy to see you again. I was thinking about you a lot since our last encounter."

"....." He said it so easily and in such a friendly voice... And it didn't sound strange at all. If anything, it sounded very nice.

"Me too," she replied before she could reprimand herself.

Anthony's smile widened even more after hearing it.

"It is good to hear," he said. "You must be hungry. I can hear your belly rumbling even from there. Come and sit down."

"I thought this place was already closed?" Anniet pointed out. She didn't want to be any burden, but still, the possibility of having something edible was very attractive.

“How can it be closed if you and I are there? Sit down, or if you prefer, come to the kitchen, then we can chat while I make something for you.”

He seated Anniet at the wooden table in the middle of the kitchen while he took out a frying pan and some products from the fridge.

“I am sorry for coming after you have already finished your work,” Anniet said, looking around the spot-clean kitchen, “I didn't mean to bring any extra trouble.”

“Do I look troubled?” Anthony asked, smiling at her over his shoulder.

Anniel wanted to apologise again, but words didn't come out of her mouth.

“No,” she said instead, as Anthony didn't look troubled at all. If anything, he looked somehow... happy, and Anniet thought that if she apologised again, it would be more of an insult to his kind offer than a polite gesture.

“No,” she repeated again. “You don't look bothered. Thank you for that.”

Anniel was watching him working, glad that he wasn't facing her, so she didn't have to hide her curiosity and could openly examine his steady and so precise movements that created an illusion of being slow and relaxed when, in reality, they were very swift. He was wearing the same or a similar-looking black satin shirt tucked into black trousers at the front and loose at the back. His black jacket was hanging on a chair next to her. There were no other clothes or even an apron, so he must have worked all day in the same outfit, but despite it being the end of the day, all looked immaculate without a single stain or even a crease. His figure was lean and slender, but as he moved, his satin shirt revealed a firm and perfectly muscular back, which brought to Anniet's memory the image of him standing soaking wet in the rain with his muscular body displayed clearly under a wet shirt. A little voice in Anniet's head was saying that it is not nice and no reason to pay so much attention to how Anthony looked, but she wasn't very eager to abandon these thoughts, especially when it didn't make any harm as Anthony wasn't even looking at her right now.

“So, how are you finding this place?” Anthony asked. “Did you see or do anything interesting? Did you meet a lot of people and make new friends?”

Anniel smiled to herself for a moment before replying. During all this time she had been in this place, she literally spoke only with three people: the headmaster on arrival, Anthony, and Raineel. Was it a lot? Yes, it was, maybe not in numbers but in new experiences.

“Yes, I have met someone really extraordinary,” she said.

“Are you willing to tell me?”

“Definitely!” Anniet thought to herself. Yesterday's encounter was so unusual that it was difficult to believe it wasn't a dream, and she was very eager to share it with someone. Once she started talking, there was no stopping. The more she spoke, the more she remembered, and it was difficult to believe that all had happened just in one day! Luckily, Anthony seemed to be very interested in her little adventure, and after placing a plate in front of her, he sat himself at the table and was attentively listening to all she said, asking questions here and there.

By the time Anniet finished, she realised that while talking, she had eaten the whole plate without even registering what was on it. All she knew it was very delicious. Kind of guilty, she looked at the plate for a while before lifting her eyes back to her companion.

“Thank you,” she said. “It was very nice.”

Anthony didn't say anything to it in return; instead, he returned to her story.

"She must be a very inspiring person," he suggested.

Now he did it! All else was forgotten, and Anniet's attention returned to that mysterious person she met yesterday.

"She is extraordinary! And not because she knows a lot! Even though she is the smartest person I have ever met, it is not about that. And not about being nice and kind and friendly. There is something... something... Well, I don't know what. Or rather, I know but don't know how to say it. I cannot wait until tomorrow when I can go to her class. Hope she is not hiding from students tomorrow. But she said she wouldn't, she said she will see me tomorrow. I am so gutted that I overslept today!"

"But she didn't suggest she would see you today, so you didn't miss anything," Anthony smiled at her enthusiasm.

"I know, I know," Anniet agreed. "Have you met her? I didn't even ask when she came there."

"I believe I did," Anthony said.

"Have you attended her classes?"

"No," he shook his head.

"Why not?"

"For more than one reason," Anthony said, picking up his words, "one of them being that I didn't arrive at this place as a student."

"Oh!" Anniet didn't even think about it. "And what door opened for you?"

"None," Anthony said with a slightly sad smile.

"None?!" Anniet couldn't believe what she heard. "Then how did you come in?"

"I opened the door by myself and walked through it."

"Oh, I see! So you were not invited as a student... That's sad. What door did you open to come in?"

"I chose a door that led me to this occupation."

"I don't wonder," Anniet said enthusiastically, "you make such delicious food! No wonder you have been appointed to be a chef. So you are not allowed to study? That's a little bit sad."

"It is not entirely accurate, as this place doesn't place any restrictions, only suggestions. I presume if I want, I could go and study at any time."

"Then why don't you?"

"But who would make the food?"

"Are you working here all alone?"

"Yes."

"Every day?!"

"Yes."

"But that's so unfair! Isn't there anyone else to help you?"

"As far as I know, I am the only cook at this time on the premises."

"But how can it be? If you want to take a rest, what would happen?"

"I think we will see soon, as, coincidentally, I was planning to take a day or two off."

"Surely you should! You must be exhausted by now! I will come to help you sometime," Anniet suggested.

"That's very kind," Anthony smiled with his warm smile. "But it's not necessary. Unless you want to keep me company. Anyway, I believe you are a student here, so the best option for you is to learn as much as you can."

"I can do both!" Anniet said firmly. "But not on the days you take off," she added quickly, "I don't know how to cook, at least not something as lovely as you do."

Reinforcing what she said, Anniet took her plate to the sink to wash it and also picked up the frying pan left on the stove. Anthony didn't refuse it, just said again:

"I still think that studying is the best you can do while here. This place offers many opportunities. There is no reason to linger on somebody else's duties. However, I will always be glad to see you now and then when you have time."

"OK," Anniet said, promising to herself to make sure to find this now and then as often as she can. "What will happen to the kitchen if you take a day off?"

"Difficult to know," Anthony replied, watching how Anniet finished tidying up.

"Everyone will have to go hungry?"

"I don't think so. No one was hungry before I came, no one will be left hungry after I leave. This place is run on strong magic, and magic always finds a way. There is no reason to try to guess, as magic doesn't require knowledge about how it has to be done, only belief that it will be done."

"So that is how magic works!" Anniet found it fascinating but challenging to understand how it is possible to believe that something will happen without knowing how it will happen, "then there has to be someone who is doing it."

"Doing what?"

"Magic."

"If there is, it is not known to anyone," Anthony laughed at this suggestion.

"I must admit it is difficult for me to understand," Anniet said. "Anyway, thank you again for your hospitality, it was truly good to see you again."

"Do you have any plans for this evening?" Anthony asked.

"Me? No. I just don't want to take any more of your time."

"But please take it," Anthony laughed. "The more the better."

Annet didn't know how to respond to it, but Anthony rescued her.

"In the evenings, there is a large campfire for those who want to spend an evening outside. It isn't that popular, and mainly only kids attend it, but I like it. If you want, I can show you where it is."

Campfire! Anniet loved campfires! People would sit down around it, leaving all worries and disagreements behind as if the mystical fire that cast all possible shades of light on their faces simply would not allow it. And there were stories! Lots of stories! Any kind on any subject. Even people who are not usually that talkative would be prepared to tell stories for those who want to listen. As a child, she used to love it. Same as any other child. They would eat hot potatoes baked in

hot coals, black and burned on the outside, soft, tender, and hot on the inside, and would listen, listen, and listen. About old days, about the Old World, about old kings, about the current King, about his generals, about other worlds, about anything that someone knew and was ready to share with others. May it be for the tenth or even one hundred time, but still, nevertheless interesting, as no two stories are told in the same way, all depending on the storytellers and their moods. There were no set rules at this time, and anyone was allowed to relax and do what they wanted, and no rules were needed, as somehow the fire had its own rules, making everyone calm and friendly.

To hear that the campfire is there every night was a delight. To hear that it is not popular was strange.

"I love campfires!" she said. "I love stories!"

"Stories?" Anthony asked with curiosity in his eyes. "What stories do you like?"

"Any! There is always someone who knows good stories at the fire. I love listening to them."

"But these kind of stories usually have a little truth in them."

"Why not?!"

"People like to exaggerate and complicate every event. Then others who hear it take it for the truth."

"I never thought that way," Anniet admitted. "But still, what difference does it make? All stories are about people who are not there anymore or far away, never to be seen. Even if it is exaggerated, what difference does it make?"

"I never thought that way," Anthony said, putting on his jacket and picking up his little dog from the floor and leading the way. "What would you like to hear today?"

"Doesn't matter! Doesn't matter! It has been so long, long since I have been camping! Can I carry him? I promise not to hurt him. I love animals."

There was a slight hesitation, then Anthony carefully handed over his shaggy pup. "He really must love his dog," Anniet thought, taking it gently. For some reason, she was prepared to lift a very heavy weight, but the puppy was as light as a feather.

"Why haven't you been camping for a long time?" Anthony asked, keeping a close eye on how she would handle his dog and looking somewhat relieved when the puppy relaxed in Anniet's gentle hold.

"After the heroes of today have suffered this defeat, people are not willing to camp that often, and even when they do, they usually talk about revenge. It is not the same."

"Heroes of today? Who is that?"

"You know. Rainbow girl, Shadow from the sky, Sleeping dragon, and even Pink prince. And those under their command. And the King also."

"So that's how they are called in your homeland."

"And how are they called in your homeland?"

"In my homeland? They are usually called generals."

"Well, yes, I know they are generals, but they have done so many incredible and unbelievable things, and also they possess such a power that a regular mortal cannot even dream about. Of course they are heroes."

"It may become difficult to see people behind such a description."

"But they are not people!"

"How come?" Now Anthony seemed to be very interested in what she said.

"At the very beginning, they are immortals who know no possibility of defeat."

"Didn't you say that they had been defeated not so long ago?"

"True," Anniet admitted, "and Rainbow general was killed... So she wasn't immortal after all. They say that even the King himself was injured. Do you believe it?"

"I have no reason not to believe it, no matter how impossible it seems, as there were many witnesses. But again, sometimes things are different from how they look. But aren't your words contradicting themselves? You said they are immortals, and you say they have been killed. You say they are invincible, and you say they have been defeated."

"True," Anniet couldn't disagree, "I always strongly believed that such things cannot happen to them. Do you think even the King is mortal?"

"We had many other kings in the past who were born and died, so immortality isn't a part of being a King. Also, any person can become the King. You know the rules. So there must be a day when our King was just a regular person like me and you before becoming the King."

"It isn't easy to imagine it, as he has been king forever."

"I cannot argue with it. But that just means that the day when the new king will arise is coming closer."

"OK, but what then about Mister Darkness?"

"That's a very strange name. Who is that?"

"Shadow general!" Anniet laughed.

"What about him?"

"He can fly!"

"Most of the King's Army can fly."

"Yes, on dragons. But he can fly by himself. It is said that his hands turn into wings and he is transformed into a half-human, half-bird."

"And?"

"Well, that's not very humane! Isn't it? And his hound is the size of a mountain, has shining red eyes, and there is no wall, no obstacle that could stop him. When Mister Darkness comes from above, his hound rises from the ground, and there is no escaping him, neither inside nor outside. Even his own dragon was afraid of his Deamon and never came to him!"

"Must agree that it does sound very scary when you picture him that way." Anthony shrugged his shoulders. "But still, he might be a human."

"You must be right..." Anniet agreed after a little thought. "Do you think he died too?"

"It is not certain yet," Anthony said.

"Yes. It is said nobody has seen his body. But he had vanished straight after Rainbow General's death, and the King conducted a deep search all around the country and attended this search himself, but could not find him. I think he must be dead."

“Why?”

“He didn't even attend Rainbow General's funeral! And it was said he never leaves her side. People say he loved her so much that he nearly got mad after being rejected.”

“Do they? Why would they say it?”

“Because after she had chosen Pink Prince, he made many women love him and then mercilessly broke their hearts, leaving them and moving on to someone else. Nobody could stop him, as even the King doesn't have any power over him. Rainbow General herself had to lock him up for some time to bring some sanity back to his mind!”

Anthony didn't say anything to all these statements and walked silently for some time. Anniет could see he was feeling a bit off. Most likely, he had a different opinion about this controversial but nevertheless deeply loved by the nation general.

“What is your dog's name?” she asked, trying to change the subject.

“Ehh... Deamon,” Anthony said with a shy smile.

“You really like the Dark General!” Anniет couldn't hold it anymore. How could she be so blind! He even named his dog after the famous hound!

“What's not to like about him?” Anthony didn't argue. “There are some things I think he could do better, but generally I think he is alright.”

There were always an incredible number of people who looked up to this historical figure. Lately, these numbers have increased drastically. After two major generals were gone, the nation wasn't so sure about their safety and security anymore. Strangely, instead of falling into despair, a new fire was born into people's hearts, and many have risen after two have fallen. Never before was it known for so many people trying really hard to find their way to the King's Army. Never before were departed generals loved this much as now, but not as ideals, but more as a shining sample, as something to reach for.

Anniет couldn't believe how she could miss it! Black was the favourite colour of General Blake, and Anthony was dressed only in black. The General refused to receive a dragon to keep his famous hound, which he must have loved very much, and Anthony had his dog at his side all the time. He even gave his dog the same name under which that demoniac hound was known. He must be one of General Blake's followers, and she just spoke so harshly about him!

“There are many good stories about him,” she said, trying to remedy the situation. It wasn't a lie because there were many. Way more than bad. Well, they couldn't even be named bad. It was just his description that was a bit scary. And attitude. And behaviour... Well, there is no denial – he was a frightening personality.

“Like what?” Anthony asked, looking at her.

“Like when he... the one about...” Anniет was struggling. She wasn't lying, there truly were hundreds of majestic, heart-lifting, mind-blowing stories about the Dark General. Why can't she remember any? “There are many,” she said in defeat, “I just cannot remember any. I think the scary ones have overshadowed the others, and I cannot remember anything else. And besides, I am not that good at storytelling. I like to listen.”

“So you never tell stories?”

Anniет shook her head.

"No," she smiled, thinking that if she would, most of her audience would get upset and start crying.

"Well, I think you would do very well if you tried," Anthony said. "You described yesterday's events very well."

"That's just because you wanted to hear what I said," Anniet laughed.

"Is there any other reason for telling anything to someone? What's the point of telling others something they don't want to hear?"

"Good point," Anniet couldn't agree more. It's just that people usually wouldn't want to listen to anything she wanted to say. "We must be getting closer," she added, smelling the burning fire.

By now, the sun was almost gone, and light was giving way to the incoming dusk. Perfect timing! They turned the corner, and a large bonfire greeted them with its warm and flickering light. It was set in a large yard, surrounded by several chairs, benches, and simple logs for everyone to choose. Just a few people were sitting at it, and several children were playing around.

Children always liked Anniet, and sure enough, soon they were surrounded by this little chatty folk asking who she was, how she came, and if they could pet and play with her dog. Anthony didn't receive this kind of interest and sat himself down on a log to watch this greeting. Anniet was eagerly answering all questions and told the children to go and ask Anthony if they could play with his dog. The kids said they would, but none actually did it, so Anniet had to do it herself.

"Sure, they can pet it, but I doubt he will want to play with them. His old bones might be too weary for that," Anthony said.

That was strange, as Anniet didn't think his dog was old; if anything, she thought it was a young pup that would grow much bigger one day. Hearing that he was old made her wonder. She let the children pet him; Deamon didn't reject it, but neither did he look too excited, so to make sure it would not get too annoyed, she returned the dog to its owner. Strangely, but as soon as it was given back to Anthony, the children completely lost any interest in it. Or maybe it happened because they turned away, occupied with some new things and adventures seen only by them.

Anniet sat down next to Anthony. A few people greeted her, but none spoke to Anthony.

"Have you done something bad? Are they cross with you?" Anniet asked, thinking that such a cold shoulder is not very welcoming.

"Don't worry about it," Anthony smiled. "What story do you want to hear?"

"Are you going to tell it?" Anniet asked excitedly.

"Why not? No one else is," Anthony said.

"Story, story time!" Anniet shouted happily to the kids, making sure they wouldn't miss any.

Everyone gathered around expecting her to tell it and were a little surprised when Anthony spoke instead. He spoke about an Old World that everyone knew existed there somewhere, as time after time a traveller from it would come through the mists, but no one truly knew how people lived there, as all information that these travellers would bring was changed and distorted while being passed from one to another. He spoke about cities built by these unknown people that were as large as oceans and as high as mountains. One could travel all day and would not cross these cities. There were little trees or flowers in these cities, so people had to carve them from stone to remind themselves how they looked. People lived there in large numbers but hardly knew each other, as they rarely spoke or communicated with each other or spent time together. All information was

passed through small or large talking boxes that not only spoke but also showed pictures and images. One didn't have to travel somewhere to see how it looks there, as they could look into these boxes and would know. Inhabitants of these cities walked very little and rode only for pleasure, as they mainly moved inside machines that would transfer them from one place to another, somewhat similar to transferring machines existing in this world. Still, people would not need to give any energy of their own for these machines to move, but would take the energy from the world surrounding them. Just as this fire was taking energy from a dead tree to burn, these machines would consume the energy of living and non-living things from that world, so anyone could use them, no matter how weak they were. Anthony spoke for a long time, describing in detail all that this small audience wanted to know, and even more – things that no one could ever even imagine. By the time he finished, it was a dark night around.

Anniet enjoyed this evening a lot. Besides the story she heard, two more things made her wonder. How did Anthony know all this in so much detail? She even asked if he was one of these travellers from the Old World, but Anthony denied, reassuring her that he was born there in this world and that he simply spoke directly with a few of these travellers. The second thing was even more intriguing – it seemed to her that people were seeing Anthony somehow differently than she did, and not only that, they were forgetting about him as soon as they turned away and as soon as he stopped talking. They would remember what he spoke about, but not about the speaker himself. After each pause, everyone got confused about who it was that spoke and were pointing at everyone but not Anthony. After Anniet asked him why, he said that some things cannot be helped, and it is better not to dwell on it.

By the time Anniet came back home, it was already past midnight. Anthony had to walk her back again as she was completely lost and didn't even know where her place was. Before going to sleep, Anniet made a promise to herself that tomorrow, after her classes, she would familiarise herself with the surroundings not to get into such a situation again.

The following morning, Anniet woke up early and was happy with herself for that, as to oversleep one more time would be devastating. She ran to the School, to the information wall, checked where martial art classes were, and after wandering around for a bit, found it. She pushed on the door and, as it wasn't locked, let herself in.

Anniet didn't expect anyone to be there yet; all she wanted was to come early to make sure she didn't miss anything, and she was surprised to see an elderly man already sorting training equipment. He turned around, greeting her with a warm smile.

“Oh, a new student. And an early one. And eager. That's a very promising start. But somehow I have a feeling it is not me you are looking for?”

Anniet looked dumbfounded at him. The man was properly elderly, but there was no weariness or apathy that usually dwells around old people. This man, despite his age, was full of calm energy; his moves were relaxed and fluent. And he definitely wasn't a person whom Anniet expected to see.

“Who are you?” she asked without thinking.

“That's a very good question,” the man smiled again, “short and straight. If I were to say that I am a martial arts teacher, would it satisfy you?”

“No, you are not!” Anniet said sharply.

After saying that, she felt an extreme urge to close her mouth with her hands so it would stop talking before she could think about what she was saying, but it was too late, words were already spoken, and Anniet braced herself to bear the consequences of it. But to her surprise, this man didn't get offended at all by such abrupt speaking, and the words he spoke weren't something that Anniet expected to hear.

“You are right again – a very bright personality. But I still will have to stick to my answer. In this place, for this time, I am a martial arts teacher.”

“I didn't mean to say that you are not a teacher,” Anniet explained herself, relieved that no offence was taken, “I just expected someone else to teach in this class. I am sorry for disturbing you.”

After saying that, she quickly left and ran back to the information wall. This time she studied it very carefully just to find out that there wasn't any other place for martial art training than the one she had already visited.

After that, she walked back. All this running consumed a lot of time as the School premises were extensive, and there were already a few students practising in that training class. This time Anniet didn't enter, just peeked through the door, and backed away without entering after watching exercises for a few minutes. She didn't know what to do and stood in a corridor for a while watching more and more students entering the class.

Then, an unexpected realisation entered her mind – of course! There probably was more than one martial art teacher in this School. How can it be different when Rainee herself said that sometimes she goes hiding from her students? Maybe even today, she is enjoying nature instead of working hard! Of course, she said to Anniet that she would see her at School, but that was two days ago, so maybe she has changed her mind by now. Just to be on the safe side, Anniet waited for an extra hour, watching everyone who was coming to classes. Slowly, the inflow of people ceased, and only the sounds of training could be heard from the training hall. It was clear now that Rainee would not come. Anniet left her guarding spot and, with all her speed, dashed through the corridors and streets outside of the town towards the mountains.

Anniel wasn't a very good runner, so after a few minutes of running, she had to slow down to walking speed. The other day, when she walked the same route, she was admiring the beauty of nature. Now, all these wonders still didn't go unnoticed by her, but she didn't stop and didn't give them much attention. All she could think about was Rainee and how much she wanted to find her.

In nature, unlike towns, Anniet could navigate very easily, and after a good walk, she found a place where, just a few days ago, she had met Rainee. Just two days! It seemed like two years. The opening was empty – no one was there. A bit disappointed, Anniet was about to turn around to find a way down, but then changed her mind. Slowly but firmly, she approached the edge of the falling water and looked down. Then she took her clothes off, put them in a ball, and tossed them down. This time, they landed on a bank, not in the water, but Anniet didn't even doubt that they would land where she wanted them to. A small voice deep inside her head was telling her that if something went wrong this time, there might not be anyone to give her a helping hand, but she didn't pay any attention to this voice and lightly jumped down instead. After a short fall, cold water engulfed her. This time, she didn't kick, didn't struggle. Instead, she allowed herself to sink down, prepared to be underwater for a long time. To her own surprise, this long time wasn't that long after all. After a few seconds of dipping, her body stopped sinking, and the air in her lungs started to lift her up. A few pulls of her arms, and Anniet's head popped out to the surface. Truly, this experience was nothing

like her first. It wasn't either as she imagined it to be when Rainee told her to do, but it was still not scary at all.

Anniет swam to the bank, got out of the water, and waited a few minutes in the sun to dry off before putting her clothes back on.

Then she rapidly walked the same way as last time. She knew it was the right way, as on her way she found a place where Rainee made training sticks for them, and after a short walk, she found these sticks where she had left them. Anniет felt an urge to collect them and take them with her, as a hidden feeling that she might never find Rainee ever again was slowly creeping up, and these things might be the only reminder of her. Anniет ignored this thought and walked further. Rainee was right, there is no point in dwelling on items. She was after her friend, not after a memory about her, and she definitely didn't need any reminder, as there was nothing to forget; every detail was embedded in her memory without any need to be reminded. After a while, she found a place she was holding, her highest hopes.

Anniет crossed a large field where she and Rainee had trained and walked to the edge of the cliff. The view was the same beautiful, the sun was the same bright, the town in the distance was the same peaceful, but none of it brought any joy to her heart. Anniет turned to the right and walked towards this narrow path carved on the side of the mountain wall. She didn't hesitate or shrink back this time. Her heart was pounding very fast at seeing these heights again, but Anniет didn't pay any attention to it. Rainee said that there is no possibility of falling, so what is there to be afraid of? She definitely was not going to jump. Without any effort, she covered the distance leading to the stone carved in the shape of a seat. But it was empty. Anniет stood there for a long time in deep disappointment, then slowly walked to that stone and sat down. Somehow it didn't feel as comfortable as the other day. If anything, it felt distant, as if she were in a place where she didn't belong. All lonely, she looked at the beautiful view below but didn't experience any joy in seeing it. On the contrary, the heaviness that was building in her heart from the moment she met that other teacher instead of Rainee has reached its peak, and tears started to roll down her cheeks. Anniет fought them back as much as she could, trying to tell herself that it was nothing, that she would find her, but the more she fought, the less she believed herself. What if she would never meet Rainee again? Rainee promised to be in class today, but she wasn't.... What if she left, and Anniет would never see her again? Just the thought about it was unbearable, and Anniет didn't want to stay in this lonely place by herself anymore. So she stood up and walked down. But where? Suddenly, all this place that seemed nice and promising lost all its charm. Where will she go? What will she do now? Anthony said that the best option for her was to learn while she was there. But what? Just two days ago, while at Rainee's side, she thought that she wanted to know this and that, now all was covered by some cloud of sadness and despair.

By the time she came back to town, it was already getting dark. She was tired and hungry but didn't even feel it. On her way back, she stood for a little while in front of Anthony's cottage. She gathered her courage, walked through the gates, knocked on the door, waited for a bit, and when no one answered, pushed it open. The room was empty; he wasn't at home. At this time of day, he must be at the bonfire. Anniет wasn't sure she wanted to go there, but somehow her legs carried her across town. The place seemed a little bit busier than yesterday, people chatting happily. But no matter how hard Anniет looked, she couldn't see Anthony anywhere. So he wasn't there either... In one day, she lost both of them.... Anniет stood all by herself in the darkness, not willing to step into the illuminated area, as somehow she had lost any will to do anything. What was the point? These thoughts had taken over her before, but then she was longing for new adventures, to see new places.

When she came there, all she got for the first few days was just rewards beyond what she could even imagine. And now all was gone. Just some memories left.

"There is no reason to dwell on memories of the past as they have been and gone," Rainee's voice sounded in her head. That was true, all was gone. But would it have been better not to have it at all? Definitely not! Maybe the world suddenly became a dull place, but not because of the experiences she had. No. These two people have enriched her life and made it so bright that after they left, it was unrecognisable. But still, it was lighter than before she met them!

With that thought, Anniet stepped into the light and walked to the bench. A few people greeted her, and a few children from yesterday came to ask if she was going to tell any more stories today, too. It was hard to convince them that it wasn't she who was telling it yesterday, but eventually they left. And there she was thinking that she was having a hard time... And how Anthony must feel when everybody was eating food he prepared, listening to the stories he was telling, and not even remembering that he existed...

"Don't pay them too much mind," Anthony said, stepping over the bench and sitting next to her. "Some things cannot be helped. It is not their fault."

"Anthony!" Anniet's heart leaped to the heights she didn't even know were possible. "You are here!"

"Yup," he said.

"I couldn't see you and thought you were gone too!"

"I just walked back to get you something," he said, handing her a little bag.

Anniet opened it, wondering what it could be, just to find a sandwich in it.

"After you didn't come all day again, I thought that you would probably go on new adventures and would be hungry after coming back," he said with a smile.

And he was right! Just now Anniet realised how hungry she was after running around all day.

"Thank you for being so thoughtful," she said, taking the sandwich out of the bag and sinking her teeth into it.

"Pleasure," Anthony said with a grin. "Now, who else is gone apart from me?"

"She is gone..." Suddenly, the sandwich in her mouth didn't taste so nice as it had a moment ago.

"She?"

"Rainee. I told you about her yesterday, and today she is gone."

"Why do you think she is gone?"

"I looked for her everywhere and could not find her! Have you seen her today?" she asked with hope, thinking that surely she must eat if she is still here and Anthony probably has seen her! Why didn't she think about it before?

But Anthony just shook his head in return.

"No," he said, "I haven't seen her today. But she rarely comes to the dining quarters anyway. So just because she didn't come, it doesn't mean that she is gone."

That lifted Anniet's spirits a good deal.

“Do you think I will ever meet her again? What if she left? The headmaster said that to leave this place, you don't have to walk through the gates, that you just walk, and the next moment, you are away. What if she left like this?”

“Surely you will meet her again,” Anthony said in a reassuring voice. “Even if she left this place, it doesn't mean that she left this world.”

“But then how would I find her?”

“Didn't you say yourself that she is your friend? Well then, that is what friends do – they meet each other because they like to spend time with each other. Where did you look for her? I thought you were going to attend her class today.”

“I tried, but she wasn't there. Some other teacher was instead. Then I walked to the mountains to see if she was hiding from her students again, but she wasn't there either.”

Anthony looked at her and was about to say something, but then changed his mind.

“And that is why you are so sad today?” he asked after a bit.

“Yes,” Annet replied, finishing the sandwich. She was feeling a bit better now, as if this sandwich had filled not only her belly but her heart too. “I also thought that you were gone too.”

“Why?”

“I stopped at your place on the way back, but it was empty, then I came there, but couldn't see you either.”

“Well, I am not going anywhere,” Anthony said encouragingly. “At least not at any time soon. And I promise I will not leave without telling you. And thanks for visiting me and seeking my company. It means a lot.”

Once again, Annet thought that the way Anthony speaks is so different from what she was used to. She was a little bit afraid that he might be unhappy with her wandering around his place, and instead he thanked her for that.

“Thanks,” Annet said, referring to his promise to tell her before leaving.

“But still, even if she and I leave, it is not the end of the world,” he continued. “Even if you cannot meet her today, it doesn't mean that you will not meet her after some time, maybe after a week, maybe after a year, maybe after ten years. What difference does it make? The day you meet her again will be the day you meet her. The gap in between will not have any effect. The only difference it makes is how you spend that time. Do you believe she would want you to spend it being sad all the time?”

Annet quickly shook her head. Definitely not! If anything, Rainee would be extremely unhappy to find out Annet was like this.

“You might not realise yet, but this place is full of magic,” Anthony kept talking, looking at her with his gentle eyes full of interest that never ceased from the very first time they met. “And by magic, I mean proper old magic, not these few tricks that our day's magic barriers can do. This place offers you only what is best for you at this moment. Not only what it thinks is best for you, but it reads your heart, your desires, your true wishes, and provides you with solutions, with possibilities to get them. But only if you seek. Only if you put effort into it. If you don't, that means you don't truly want it, and it will not help anyone with false wishes. If you met someone there, that means it is best for your desires to come true. If you lose someone, then it would mean that this is the shortest way for you to reach what you truly want. Even if it doesn't seem that way from the

beginning. It doesn't give you what you want at the moment; it opens up for you the shortest and most certain way to reach what you truly wish, not only what you wish, but what you truly desire. But it is up to you if you walk that way, as it only opens it but doesn't drag you along."

"I understand," Anniet said, as somehow she truly understood what Anthony was trying to say. "I don't know myself what I truly want. I thought I wanted to meet Rainee again, to be with her, to learn from her, as I had never met anyone like her before. But it might not be true then, because I put so much effort into it, but I couldn't find her."

"Maybe this effort wasn't the one that is required to reach your goal?"

"Maybe," Anniet agreed. "Thank you. I do feel much better now. I am glad that you are not gone."

"Pleasure," Anthony said.

"What story are you going to tell tonight?"

"Why do you think I am going to tell any?"

"Well, because nobody else is saying anything, just waiting to listen."

That was true, and Anthony just smiled at it.

"What would you like to hear?"

"Something nice, something about brave, strong people, not about those who do nothing," Anniet suggested.

"Very well," Anthony agreed.

The story he told was much more homely than the one from yesterday. It was about a few friends who set out on a quest to do something good for the world, who wanted to make changes that would benefit many, not just a few, and the twists of their lives that had set them apart for a long time, until they all met again after many years. All changed but all still being the same.

Anniel was listening to it full of awe. And not just her. Everyone around was silent and full of interest. By the time the story was finished, everybody's hearts were uplifted. A few moments after the story was finished, everyone had many questions, but no one could remember who the storyteller was. So after long debates, they decided that the storyteller had already left, so everyone slowly left too.

The following morning, Anniet walked straight to the training facilities. She had made up her mind. If Rainee was not going to be there, then she would train with that old man until either Rainee came back or she came up with something better to do in her life.

When she walked into the class, there were already a few other students. Rainee wasn't anywhere in sight, so she walked straight to the old teacher and asked if it was all right for her to join his class.

"It is always alright to join the class," he said while smiling at her, "but unfortunately, there isn't a lot that I would be able to teach you."

That was a new blow to Anniet. Until now, she thought that in this place she could join any class without being rejected, and this reply was unexpected and reopened freshly healed wounds.

Just now she realised how much confidence Rainee had raised in her. Until they met, such a reply would not be just acceptable but even expected. Throughout her life, she had been rejected many times, and never before had it bothered her so much as now. Now, somehow, she felt that it was not fair to be treated like this.

“Why not?” she asked instead of leaving.

“Because you already have a teacher,” he said. “My teachings would be strongly opposed by you and constantly compared to what you expect your teacher would say. There is very little that can be learned that way.”

“What if I lost my teacher?” she asked silently.

“There is no such thing, as a teacher is for a lifetime. It is not possible to lose one. One can either change teacher or allow another to join in. You are not ready to do neither one nor another.”

All was said in a very gentle and soft voice, but also as firm as a rock. Annet couldn't say anything more, as what was said was kind of right. And if these were the rules, then he was right, she wasn't ready to let go of Rainee, neither was she prepared to share the place taken by her with someone else. So she turned around to walk away. Halfway, she turned back and asked:

“Then am I allowed to borrow a training sword?”

“You can take and use any equipment you might want,” the old teacher said.

Annet walked to the stands and picked up a random wooden sword. She turned around to leave.

“Don't you want to take two?” the old master asked.

Annet was going to ask why, but then realised that if by any chance she would meet Rainee and Rainee would agree to give her one more lesson, then it would be a shame to have only one sword. She happily took two, thanked the old teacher for the advice, and left carrying a wooden sword in each hand and a heavy stone in her heart.

After leaving the class, she didn't know what to do for a while. Her first thought was to go back to the mountains, but she chased away this thought. No! She had decided this morning to do some training, and she would do it. It was not a very big deal that she was chased away from the training class. She could train by herself. She already knew a little bit, so she could work on it.

After making such a decision, Annet walked around looking for a suitable place. She found a spot in an empty square away from any curious eyes and decided to practice there for a while.

First, she tried to remember how Rainee corrected the moves she already knew from before, but after a while, she had to give up on it, as nothing she tried worked. And Rainee was right, the sword wasn't a stick. Even this wooden one felt completely different. Then she tried moves that Rainee taught her, but again with not that much success. Then she got so angry and upset with herself that she couldn't do anything for some time, just to cry in anger. Then Rainee's words started to come back to her: “You cannot do more than you can, that's why you are learning to do more.” “Self-love is the most important ingredient in a good warrior. If you love yourself, your sword will love you. Remember, your sword is your friend. He will always agree with you.”

Then, following the same logic, if she was so angry with herself, then her sword must be angry at her too... Not that much of friendship there, no wonder it doesn't listen.

So Annet stood up back on her feet and tried over and over again, while at the same time trying to be loving to herself. This task was close to impossible. But she chose not to give up, no

matter how long it would take, even if it would take late into the night or even if she has to do it the next day too.

Rainee said that she has to learn it so well that it would come naturally to her like a blink of an eye. She is a pupil. She is allowed not to know, she is allowed to make mistakes. No matter how many – it is all legit. She is a pupil and that's why she is learning.

Well, she was a pupil without a teacher... This thought stabbed her right into her heart. A bunch of thoughts invaded about how, after finally finding someone who seemed interested in her and willing to spend time together, in the blink of an eye, she had lost that person. That she trusted everything Rainee said, and now she was in doubt if it even ever happened. How differently she spoke with her than anyone else, and how differently she had treated her. Now, when she was gone, Anniet didn't know anymore how to face the world that speaks the way that used to be normal before. But all these thoughts really didn't even matter, as they were just so little and minuscule thoughts. What was truly big was that she really, really missed Rainee. Anniet realised that she had known her just for a day, had seen her just for a few hours. But she missed her so much. Much more than anyone else she had known so far in her life.

Thinking about it, tears were rolling down Anniet's cheeks. Rainee wanted her to love herself – she will do it. She asked her not to be angry – she would do it. Luckily, she didn't ask not to be sad, for it would be challenging to do. Anniet now felt as sad as a person can be. She didn't even feel sorry for herself; on the contrary, somehow she was feeling happy, happy for meeting her. Even if just for a short time. And this happiness didn't oppose that overwhelming sadness that took over her.

Annet let those tears roll down her cheeks; there was no one around to see her and say anything about it. The wooden sword in her hands finally started to obey, but she didn't even notice it. All she could think of was how Rainee was correcting her moves before, and now, somehow, she was responding to it. If Anniet had thought about it, she would find it very illogical, but she didn't think, she just obeyed these corrections while repeating moves over and over again.

Then suddenly she felt a familiar hand on her back, straightening her posture in a way that it hadn't been done before, the other hand moved down her arm, changing the angle at which she was lifting the sword.

In an instance, Anniet dropped her sword as some unnecessary burden, turned around, and hugged the person standing next to her, squeezing with her arms as much as she could without any intention to let go. She didn't even look; she didn't even need to look. Instead, she kept her eyes tightly shut and burrowed her face into Rainee's shoulder. Anniet could hear Rainee snorting at such a greeting, but she didn't care. A much stronger force than little laughter would be needed to push her aside. But nobody pushed her. Instead, one arm hugged her back and another gently stroked her hair.

"Eh? You really missed me that much?" Rainee's voice sounded next to her ear. Anniet didn't say anything back, just nodded her head.

CHAPTER

7-1

Reunion

While holding this girl in her embrace, Rainee thought that over and over again, faith proved itself to be a tricky thing. She didn't have anything to do in this place, nor did she plan to come there. Just the classroom felt a little bit too suffocating that day, and she told everyone who came to attend that today session would be outdoors, and she walked out to look for a suitable place. This remote and rarely used square was in her mind.

To see that someone had taken it for training caught her attention, and she immediately recognised the girl from that little encounter a few days ago. She waved her class to stop a bit further away and watched this exercise with interest, and was very pleased with what she saw. So this girl really paid very close attention to all she had taught her the other day. Also, even on her own, she managed to put aside all the troubling worries and anxiety. Her heart was now calm and peaceful in the moment. Very sad but also very calm. This sadness was good. The one that Rainee would call relieving, not restricting. And the girl wasn't trying to suppress or minimise it, nor did she try to inflate and flare it up. She was sad and allowed that sadness to flow through her as it was supposed to do. Very good. Actually, it should be said extremely good, as usually it takes many months of practice until someone in a state that this girl was in, manages to do so. What was her name? Anniet. Nice name, but sadly didn't suit her anymore. Name that was already becoming a ghost of the past.

Rainee stood in silence, admiring Anniet's moves, that were smooth but also full of small details. She nailed it perfectly. Those parts that her attention was brought to. Time to give it a slight extra push, a few extra touches.

Without a word, Rainee walked closer and, while blending into motion, straightened the girl's back, which was slightly hunched and twisting too much, resulting in an uncomfortable angle in her arm.

The girl recognised her immediately at the very first touch, which in itself was a pleasant surprise; the reaction that came after was something Rainee neither expected nor was prepared for. The girl glomped onto her so badly as if her life depended on it. Not out of neediness but just simply because she truly, madly missed her. That deep sadness of losing someone dear was floating around the girl all the time; it could be sensed from far away. But these days, most people were carrying the pain of loss, which was actually the primary motivation for them to come there to look for a new life, a new start. So it wasn't something standing out from the crowd to draw attention. But thinking back, she didn't have this feeling of loss when they met for the first time. So all this sorrow really was from missing her...

That was really touching. Not many people have surprised Rainee that much throughout her life. She knew what it is to love and to be loved, what it is to miss and to be missed. But it usually came from people who knew her. This girl didn't know her at all. There were many, many people who needed Rainee this badly. If Rainee were to allow this neediness to enter her, it would consume her immediately and would suck the joy of life in no time. But this wasn't what was coming from this girl. She just simply, sincerely missed her, not because of neediness but because of love. To be

loved so strongly by someone was a truly precious and wonderful gift. And to receive it from someone you just met brought an additional surprise.

“What happened?” Rainee asked Anniet. “You couldn't find me?”

Annet just nodded her head in response, confirming Rainee's guesses.

“Class dismissed for today,” Rainee said aloud. “We will continue tomorrow.”

These words didn't pass unnoticed by Anniet, and she lifted her head to look around, wondering to whom they were addressed. Behind Rainee, a few meters away, there was a bunch of people looking at her with curiosity. She looked at Rainee, back at these people, until she realised that this must be Rainee's students. And they have been dismissed because of her interference... As a confirmation, a young man expressed his dissatisfaction:

“Why is the class cancelled? Can't you meet with your friend after class?”

“I am sorry,” Anniet apologised rapidly. “I didn't mean to interfere.”

“You have to stop apologising for things that you didn't do,” Rainee interrupted, gently wiping away tears from Anniet's cheeks. “It brings nothing but confusion.”

Then she turned back to the man who spoke.

“Marcus, I doubt you miss my history teachings so much that you cannot wait until tomorrow.”

“Why do you have to teach history?” the same man wouldn't give up. “It is obvious that you know so much more than some history. Isn't that why we're all coming to your classes?”

“I am coming to these classes because I love history lessons,” one woman disagreed with him.

“Me too,” a middle-aged man agreed, “but I can wait until tomorrow. It is interesting, but I am not in a rush to hear it all. There are many other things to do, and the girl is obviously under stress – she needs help.”

“History? That's what you are teaching?” Anniet asked, thinking that this man got it completely wrong; she was not under stress – on the contrary, right now she was as happy as a human could be.

Everyone spoke at the same time, bringing up questions but leaving little time for answers. Rainee answered Marcus first.

“I think history is a very fascinating subject, it might be about the past, but it reflects on today's behaviour, twisting current understanding, especially when what is believed and what actually happened doesn't match.”

Then she turned back to Anniet.

“What did you think I was teaching?”

“Martial arts,” Anniet answered honestly.

“Martial arts?” Marcus interrupted again. “You can even teach martial arts!?”

“Sure, she can,” Anniet answered instead, not understanding what question it was. “If all doors have opened for her, she can teach anything she wants. Isn't that the rule?”

“All doors?!” “But how is it possible?” “I didn't know it was possible.” Voices sounded around, and Annet understood that she had said something that wasn't for her to say.

“I am sorry,” she looked at Rainee with her eyes wide open, filled with fear and distress. She has done it again! She just opened her mouth and brought a problem. Now she was stressed! Not knowing what will happen next. “I didn't know it was a secret...” she added in an apologetic voice. If she were able, she would go back in time and cut her own tongue out, just for this one time.

“You have to stop apologising for things that you didn't do,” Rainee said in a way as if she hadn't said the same thing just a moment ago. “There are no such things as secrets. You should feel free to speak all you know at any time.”

“If it is not a secret, then why have you never told anyone about it?” Marcus asked, his face clouded in disbelief.

“Nobody ever asked me,” Rainee said simply.

“Then why did you tell her?”

“Because she asked me.”

“Why would she ask you such a thing?”

“Because I wanted to know,” Annet couldn't believe all this questioning. “Is that why you don't like teaching? Because people are rude and demanding?”

“Pretty much,” Rainee smiled at her again. “With the only correction – I do like teaching.”

“How is it ‘rude and demanding’?” Marcus looked at Rainee with his sharp eyes. “Didn't you yourself say repeatedly that we all should speak freely what we think and only what we think?”

“Yes, I did, and I stand for it,” Rainee agreed. “You should always speak only what you think and not what you think that others want to hear. But one isn't opposing another. A person can be honest and truthful, while being rude and demanding at the same time.”

“Then what are you saying? Is it good to be rude and demanding or not?”

“Well, that's an easy question, and even you yourself know the answer. It is never good to be rude and demanding.”

“Then I shouldn't say what I think? I should say something nice instead?”

“Then you would be lying. I prefer rudeness over lies all day long,” Rainee smiled at him.

“Then what am I supposed to do?!” Marcus was losing his patience, and people who were standing close to him suddenly dispersed, some leaving this place completely, some just moving aside, the same as picnickers would scatter at the sight of a stormy cloud. Rainee was untouched by this upcoming storm.

“In your quest, you should always be truthful and observe what effect it has on those surrounding you. This is the only way to meet, recognise, and understand yourself. Finding and understanding yourself is the only key that will unlock the door you want to walk through.”

“What if I don't like the effect I have on those who are surrounding me?”

“Then you have to change.”

“I am trying to change!”

“No, you are trying to pretend to be someone that you are not. It is not the same. Pretence doesn't require you to recognise yourself, it requires you to observe what others demand and to act

accordingly. You are already very good at it. But this skill cannot take you to the place you want to be.”

“Then what do I do? How do I change? What even is that change?”

“It is up to you to find this path; I can only point the direction and describe how it feels to walk on it. I cannot walk it for you.”

“Can't you walk this path with me?”

“I can,” Rainee confirmed. “As soon as you step on it and want my company, I can walk it with you. But first you have to find the path. I cannot drag you onto it. Come,” she said, turning towards Anniet, “I want to show you something.”

“So you are leaving?” Marcus frowned.

“Yes.”

“What about class?”

“It has been dismissed.”

“Can I come with you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You are not interested in my personal life, so it wouldn't be anything to your interest.”

“I can learn.”

“Interest is not something that can be learned.”

While talking, Rainee picked up a wooden sword from the ground, took Anniet by the hand, and was already moving away.

“I want you to teach me martial arts!” Marcus shouted from behind.

“Out of the question,” Rainee said without even looking back.

“Why not?”

“Old John is a martial arts teacher here.”

“Old fart doesn't know anything!”

“Old fart is the best swordsman in the kingdom and the best teacher you will ever meet. He knows way more than I do. Take the privilege of learning from him instead of shunning away.”

“So you will just go?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Free will, Marcus, free will. Everyone is entitled to do with their own time and life what they want.”

“What about my free will? Why yours counts and mine doesn't?”

“Excellent question,” Rainee turned at him over her shoulder. “You think about it carefully, make enquiries if needed, and tell me tomorrow where you got it wrong.”

None of these questions made Rainee stop or even slow down. By now, she and Anniet were a good deal away, and Marcus didn't say anything anymore, just stood waiting until these two disappeared behind a corner.

"Is he your boyfriend?" Anniet asked carefully.

"No."

"Your husband?" Anniet guessed again.

Rainee shook her head.

"Brother?" Anniet tried her luck once more.

"Nope."

"Then a good friend?" Seeing that Rainee was not cross or offended by her questioning, Anniet was getting braver.

"Did he sound very friendly to you?"

Now it was Anniet's time to shake her head. She tried hard in her head to think about what relation there could be between these two. Surely he couldn't be her father, as they were more or less the same age, and also it was obvious that Rainee knew more than he did.

"Then who is he?" Anniet finally gave up and thought it was best to ask.

"He is my student," Rainee said with a smile.

"Student? He didn't sound very much like a student," Anniet was confused. "He is probably in love with you..."

"On the contrary," Rainee disagreed, "in all this conversation there was not even a single drop of love, and even right now he is burning with anger and hatred. I think you could feel it by yourself. That's the opposite of love. You cannot have both in one place. Where there is anger, there is no love, and where there is love, there is no anger. Love is too big, and where it stays, there is no room for anger or hatred. Also, love doesn't come partially. You cannot half love. So you cannot have just half of love being in you. Love doesn't share its place with anything. When love comes, everything else leaves."

Anniet thought for a while about what she had just heard.

"But it cannot be entirely accurate," she said again with caution, hoping that Rainee would not get upset with it.

"Why not?" Rainee smiled. She didn't look upset at all; if anything, she seemed curious to hear more.

"Usually, people are often angry with those they love," Anniet said. "Well, at least in the place I lived before. But even if you are right, then still, if you are loving, you are also caring and kind, and many other things. You cannot be just loving! Can you? Or when you worry for someone you love, then at that time you don't love them anymore? Because you said that love leaves if it cannot get all the place?"

"You are partially right in what you said, but also very wrong. When you worry, you are needy at that moment, not loving. It is not the same. Some people would say that love coexists with some feelings and doesn't with others, but I would disagree with it. For me, when love is present, nothing else fits.

And you are right – a loving person is caring and kind, and gentle, and firm. But it is not because it coexists with these feelings, but it is a natural outcome of love. You can be kind even when you don't love. Kindness is a very good quality to have. But you cannot be unkind while you love. It is simply impossible.

Many people are caring without love. Caring is an essential quality of humanity. You can be caring for many reasons: because it is the right thing to do, because of responsibility, because of what you have been taught, and many others. But this caring is changeable. It will change depending on where you grew up, on what you have been taught, on what people around you think, on your opinion, and on the opinions of others. If your surroundings and understanding change, caring will change too. Love is not essential for people to be caring.

But when you love, it becomes impossible not to care. You don't have to think, or be reminded, or be responsible. None of that is needed – you just do.

To care or to be kind out of responsibility, out of morals, might be very tiring and draining. Do it out of love, and you will never get tired. And most importantly, when you care out of love, it will never change, no matter the surroundings, teachings, or any other circumstances.

In fact, there will be a time when caring out of responsibility and caring out of love will oppose each other, as actions that should be taken would not match or might even be completely different. Then, if you choose to care in a way that responsibility dictates, love will slowly leave, and responsibility will slowly take its place. You would still be caring and you would still be responsible, but you wouldn't be loving anymore.

People might be saying that you are loving, and even you yourself might think that you are still loving, but it doesn't matter what people think – you either are loving or not.

There might be times when love requires actions that nobody around approves of; then it is up to you whether you abandon love to stay with others, or you stay loving even if no one around believes it.

That is how the word “love” has been transferred many times, ripped away from things that are truly loving and placed on something that comes from responsibility or common beliefs. That's how love becomes unrecognisable to the masses.

That's why some believe that while one is loving, at the same time one can be angry or worried. You can be worried at the same time while you are caring, or while you are kind, and you can be angry at the same time while you are responsible. You can be even angry at the same time while you are kind, but only if this kindness comes on its own, not out of love.

If you love, and the kindness you feel is an outcome of that love, then you will never be angry while being kind. Because this kindness doesn't come as a separate feeling but is a part of love, an outcome of love. You cannot maintain it and be unloving, just as you cannot love and not have this kindness.

But you can be kind without love. Then kindness is a quality on its own. An outstanding quality, but still nothing in comparison to that kindness, which is an attribute of love. Kindness on its own can be exhausted; kindness out of love cannot.

Kindness on its own is like a puddle of water that can be dried out, and for it to be maintained, you have to remind yourself or be reminded to be kind constantly; in other words, you have to purposely pour some extra water into that puddle for it to survive. Anger, hatred, and fear are like a hot sun, like an external heat source, that constantly keeps evaporating that puddle, and the more

heat, the faster the water drains, and more effort is required to maintain this puddle so that it does not dry out.

Kindness that comes from love is like that pond you jumped into the other day. It is constantly refreshed with new water that comes from the waterfall, that comes from love. You don't have to maintain that pond, you don't have to keep pouring any extra water into it. The sun can shine on it as long as it wants, it will not evaporate it; if anything, it just brings you a pleasant contrast in temperatures that love brings and that heat brings.

And it is not only constant, but also a lot comes out of it, creating new waterfalls, creating never-ending kind actions that will never drain because your pond will never drain. The only way for this pond to drain is for the incoming waterfall to disappear. In other words, for love that feeds this kindness to disappear. If that happens, then this pond becomes a pool that will suffer from external influences, which cannot be a source for anything else, because every time it does, it will get smaller, and your personal effort, or the effort of some external force, will be required for it to fill up again. If not maintained, it will become a puddle or even dry out.

That's why I strongly believe that love does not share its place with anything else, whether it be good or bad. But it brings with itself much more than anyone could ever have without it: many attributes, many outcomes that we value, just bigger and stronger than we had before, we don't even realise that what we had have left us and a new better version entered, but it is not a new or better version, as it is just an outcome of love.

Love doesn't come without bringing these additional gifts with itself. First and foremost, it will bring happiness to you, then a large bouquet of other gifts like kindness, caring, understanding, fulfilment, confidence, firmness, bravery, creativity, and many others. It will never bring any anger, nor guilt, no shame, no hatred or resentment, no feeling of superiority, it will not bring a desire to lecture, to change others, to teach others, but it will bring a desire to share, a desire that others would learn, would know what you already know too. It will never bring fear either.

That is one of the strongest false beliefs in humanity: that if you love, you fear for those you love, you worry for them. Worry is a shadow of fear, fear is the enemy of love, and only one of them can stay. It is the same as light and darkness – there is no light in darkness nor darkness in light, it is either one or another.

Truth is the ally of love. You can love nothing that is not true, as it would mean that you love an illusion, and as soon as the illusion disappears, this kind of “love” will vanish instantly. Love is very present; love is not about the past and not about the future, so it is not about what happened before, but also not about what will happen. And fear is only about what will happen. The past can have a huge influence, especially when misunderstood and misinterpreted; it might cast a shadow on love and might give strength to fear. That's why I love history, true history, not what people thought or interpreted. Sharing a true history helps to take these shadows of the past away.

Anyway, about anger, every time someone was angry with you in the past, they did not love you at that time. Maybe they loved before and after, I am not a judge to say they didn't, but definitely not while screaming at you in anger or punishing you or wanting you to change or forcing you to learn something. They did it for many other reasons, but love was absent in that moment.

Therefore, there was confusion about my and Marcus's relationship. That is another sad page in people's understanding. For some, or rather many, reasons, people believe that they can be more familiar, more rude, more demanding, and many other unloving things to those who are closest to

them. There is a strong belief that those who are close should be more tolerant of abusive behaviour than those who are not.

Which is far away from the truth, but by believing it and acting as if it were true, people bring it into their lives and set it as a rule.

Abuse of any sort is definitely not an attribute or outcome of love. Love flees away at the very first thought of abuse, and, on the contrary, while love is present and strong, no thought of abuse will ever enter a person's mind.

When you look from that angle, it is easy to see how little love is present in family relations. And for some reason, these relations are believed to be the most loving. Proper confusion for anyone who wants to understand what true love is.

Hope I didn't bore you to death with my talk – it's not that often to find an audience who really wants to listen and understand what is said. It is difficult to stop sharing when there is a willingness to accept what was shared. One day you will understand. Here we have reached the place I wanted to show you.

CHAPTER

7-2

Reunion

Anniet was walking next to Rainee without paying any attention to where they were going. She was just simply happy while listening to all that Rainee said and hoping that she would never stop talking, as all that she heard was truly fascinating, something she had never heard before nor ever thought about. Now, when Rainee said they had reached their destination, she looked around as if just waking up from a sleep.

“What is this place?” – She asked.

They were standing in front of little white gates leading to the pretty house that could be reached via a footpath made from colourful stones that crossed a garden full of flowers.

“That would be my home.” – Rainee said, opening the gates and showing Anniet in.

Anniet looked around with even more interest than before. So that was where Rainee lives. It truly matched her character a lot.

“I didn't know you could have the whole house for yourself here,” - she said after they walked through the garden and reached the doors.

“I don't know how the housing system is working here,” - Rainee said, opening the doors and inviting her in. – “The door led me to this place, and I was told that this is where my home will be while I stay. I must admit it is a bit bigger than I would need, but now I see a purpose behind it. In any way, now you know where I live so you can easily find me whenever you want to see me. That should set your heart at ease and help to avoid any stress related to it.”

They entered the house, and Rainee was showing her around, but all Anniet could think about was how truly kind her new friend was. This kindness definitely didn't come from some puddle but rather from a large lake with a very powerful waterfall filling it constantly. So she walked with Rainee around the house, but didn't really hear or see much, until Rainee said something that brought her attention back to earth.

“Could you say it again,” - she asked, - “I am afraid I missed what you just said.”

“I said that this is a spare room in this house, I never use it, so you can stay in it whenever you want. It has its own bathroom and even doors leading to the back garden. You can come and go even if you don't want to disturb me.”

“I thought I heard something like that,” - Anniet was convinced now that she didn't mishear. – “But I would never dare to take such an offer.”

What Anniet said was true. Such an invitation deeply touched her, and she really, really wanted to be brave enough to take such a generous offer, but at the same time, she knew that there was no chance she would ever dare to take this offer. To her relief, Rainee didn't seem to be offended by what she just said.

“Too bad,” - Rainee said, closing the door. – “But if you change your mind, do let me know. Let's go to have a drink in the back garden.”

Just now, it slowly started to dawn on Anniet what she was offered and what she had just rejected.

“Did you just offer me to move in to live with you?” – She double-checked again.

“Not at all,” - Rainee smiled, getting a couple of glasses from the cupboard. – “I just offered you a spare room in my house if you want to come and stay here at some time for any reason.”

“Isn't it the same?”

“No, it is not.”

“What is the difference?”

“The difference is that you will still have your own place, and here you can come when you want and if you want. When you move to a place, you have to stay there, no matter if you like it or not, as you don't have any other place to call home.”

“Why would you allow me to stay with you?”

“I guess because that's what you wanted.”

“So you allow everyone who wants it to stay at your place?”

“Well, so far, only one person before wanted to move in with me, and he was allowed. It would seem strange not to allow it.”

“And he is?...”

“He is what you would call a boyfriend.”

“I didn't know you have a boyfriend.”

“It is not surprising, as you know very little about me,” Rainee laughed.

“Can I change my mind?”

“About what?”

“About your spare room.”

“What about it?”

“Can I have it?”

“I thought you wouldn't be brave enough to stay in it?”

“I think I will. I hope I will. I want to have a chance to try.”

Gosh, she wished to be a braver person who is not afraid to do what she wants, who is not afraid to bother other people. Who could just roll into a friend's house without fear of being an unwanted guest.

“Then it is yours,” Rainee smiled at her, “take a chance.”

Annieth sighed in with relief. She couldn't believe she nearly blew away an offer to be a housemate with such an incredible person.

Rainee's house was on a hill, and from the back garden, there was an outstanding view of mountains on the right-hand side and the town on the left. This view reminded Annieth of something.

“Can I ask you something?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Does your boyfriend have very beautiful black eyes, black, long hair, and skin that looks much whiter than it really is because of all this black colour surrounding him? He likes to wear a black suit and knows how to use magic?”

Rainee looked at her for a bit with a question in her eyes.

“My boyfriend has very beautiful eyes, not black, but grey in colour. He likes to keep his hair slightly above his shoulders. His skin is white, but he never looks pale, and black isn't a colour he likes to wear. Also, magic isn't his strongest suit. But why do you ask in such a strange way?”

Rainee was describing her boyfriend with so much affection, and her voice was so gentle when she spoke about him... It took a few seconds until Anniet got over it, as she had never heard anyone speak about others in such a passionate voice.

“Just because there, in that little cottage under these large trees, lives a man who is so different from anyone else, and he said that he was following a friend to come here. Just now, when I saw his cottage, I thought that maybe he was following you. As there is only your house that he can see from his place. So for a moment I thought that he might be your boyfriend who followed you.”

“If he were my boyfriend, why would he live down there in a cottage and not up here with me?” Rainee asked.

“Yes, you are right, it doesn't make any sense. But if you allow me to stay in your house and your boyfriend arrives, what would I do?”

“You would have to move to your old place,” Rainee smiled.

“He wouldn't like someone else living in the same house?”

“I wouldn't like someone else living in the same house,” Rainee said it as the most natural thing. “At least not for some time. I haven't seen him for a very long time, and if he comes, he would have all my attention, and it wouldn't be fair to others to be ignored entirely while in the same house. But he will not come - no need for you to be worried about it.”

“Did you two fall apart?”

“No.”

“Did you argue?”

“No. Why would you argue with someone you love?”

“I don't know, everyone argues with their boyfriends and girlfriends.”

“I see. But still no, we don't have this custom in our home.”

“Then why did you leave?”

A long silence came after this question, and Anniet already thought that Rainee was not going to answer it.

“Many things happened in a very short time,” Rainee finally spoke. “Many changes come unexpectedly. I didn't see any other way but to leave, and I didn't see for him any other way but to stay. And so far, I don't see a way for us to be together for now. But life is a mysterious place, and something that seemed impossible yesterday is possible today. I will not answer your question, as anything I say will make no sense to you, as so far it doesn't even make any sense to me. But come, let's sit down so you can tell me what an interesting character you have met in that little cottage that left for you such a deep impression.”

Annet agreed without hesitation. It was obvious that this person impressed her a lot, and she was more than eager to share it.

Rainee was listening to her talk while at the same time analysing events that happened today. Her thinking was much faster and more precise than that of an average person, and she was capable of listening to a few people at the same time without missing a detail, so listening to one while at the same time being in her own thoughts was an easy task.

Most of all, Rainee was captivated by the decision she had made just a minutes ago. She was telling the truth that never before had she offered anyone to share a house with her. Never before had such a thought even crossed her mind. She didn't plan to do it today either. She took Anniet to her home to show her where it was so that such confusion, as not finding her, would never bother this girl again. It was true that she was deeply touched by these deep and genuine feelings that this girl somehow manifested for her in such a short time. But it wasn't something new to Rainee – she had many admirers, some of them were carrying feelings for Rainee much stronger than Anniet could even imagine at this stage of her life, but still it was also somehow different. This girl didn't have any reserve left for herself. Her heart might be tiny yet, her ability to feel not that developed, but somehow she let Rainee into her heart without any reserve, without any hidden corner left for herself in case something unexpected happens. Only a person who doesn't expect anything in return can do this. Also, only the person who doesn't expect anything in return can truly love. And also also , it was an exceptionally rare trait, and for a regular person, it takes more years to develop it than this girl has lived so far.

When showing around the house, it seemed just so natural to offer this spare room to Anniet that it surprised and fascinated Rainee. Surely she did it. It was more than interesting to Rainee herself what would come out later. Not about a girl's reaction but about her own. The girl reacted exactly as Rainee thought she would. It was so easy to predict the actions of those who had so many fears, dogmas, and doctrines engraved in their minds and in their hearts. So many rules implied by others, whether by individuals or society. However, how soon Anniet recovered and realised what offer she was turning away was really impressive. And on top of that, she was brave enough to say that she had changed her mind. “Well done,” Rainee prided inwardly. It was a really brave thing to do for such a timid and shy individual. Maybe not even that shy, the word “suppressed” fitted more.

She spoke about the man she encountered with such passion. He might be a very impressive personality, but just personality doesn't bring up such passion, admiration, and joy just to speak about someone. Love is the only fuel that can power up so much. Rainee could bet that if Anniet were to tell someone about her, there would be no less or maybe even more enthusiasm in the way Anniet would speak. However, the feeling that was manifesting in this girl's heart for Rainee and for that friend of hers was not the same. It might come under the same name, but it was as different as water in a lake and in a sea. Some might argue that water is water everywhere, but try to tell it to the sea fish when dropping it into a lake. Same with love. It comes in different ways, different shades, but all under one name. That's why there was so much confusion about it when people tried to compare and measure what is not comparable. The love of a parent cannot be compared to the love of a child or the love of a friend. This feeling that was establishing itself in a girl's heart, unknowingly even to herself, was the one that would last the longest in a person's life if allowed to grow and if addressed to the right person. It could bring joy that could hardly be imagined without it, and also it could bring pain that sometimes is hard to bear. Listening to Anniet, Rainee hoped that this experience would bring her happiness and tried to chase away the thought that in reality just a very few she met really experienced this happiness.

The more Anniet spoke, the more of Rainee's attention she captivated. One phrase she said swiped all other Rainee's thoughts away, and now Anniet got her full attention. It's not that before

Rainee wasn't paying her that attention, it's only that everything else at this moment became uninteresting, and Rainee's thoughts didn't have to work on anything else.

"So you are saying that none of the doors have opened for him to enter?" she asked.

"Yes," Anniel confirmed. "At least that's what he has told me. But I don't see any reason for him to lie, and he doesn't seem like a person who would lie at all."

"So how did he enter?"

"He opened a door by himself and walked through it."

"How strange. I didn't think it was possible to do so."

"Others today said the same about all doors opening for you."

"Yes, you are right. But still one has more chances that all doors would open than to open a door by himself."

That was true. This place worked on magic, such strong magic that it was hard to imagine someone using it, but nevertheless it was the truth. All doors opening was a rare occasion, but possible depending on who entered. For example, for old John to enter, all teachers' doors would open, but not for a student or management. Why would it open? He doesn't come here to learn. If he is capable of learning anything new, then it is not this place that could offer it to him. His knowledge was way beyond what Rainee could even imagine. And he is not meant to lock himself into this School, no matter how privileged it is, so he cannot join management, and the door for it will never open for him, no matter who he is, no matter how great an individual he is.

For no door to open was basically impossible, as for a person to find a way here, it meant that there is a place for him. But to open the door by oneself was an impossibility, as these doors were not locked doors to the rooms or other premises. In fact, they were not even doors unless there was a right person to walk through them. It could be said that every person who arrives creates that pathway behind the door, and only when it is created does the door become a door, and it opens immediately. That was the activating mechanism. No pathway created, no door opening, because there is nowhere to go through that door. It is more or less the same impossible as to walk into a painting. You cannot open a painting and walk into it.

"So he had to open the door by himself to come into this place? That's like playing a lottery. You don't know what you will get until you take it."

"Yes, he said he has chosen to walk through the "cook's" door."

The entrance was divided into a few categories: students, teachers, services, self-expression. To be a cook, you have to walk through the service door. That meant that you come not to learn and not to teach but to help those who are learning and teaching.

"So he could open more than one door?" Rainee asked.

"Why do you think so?"

"You said he chose to walk through that door. To choose, you need to have choices."

"I never thought that way," Anniel admitted, "you are so smart! You can ask him yourself. He said he comes to the campfire every night. Did you go there too?"

"Yes, I do go sometimes. But not every night. How did you say he looks like? All dressed in black? Black has become a very popular colour lately after general Blake. It is not easy to stand out from a crowd by wearing black these days."

"I know," Anniet agreed. "But it suits him so well that it is difficult even to imagine him wearing a different colour."

"And his name is?"

"Anthony. However, it is not his real name."

"Why would he give you a false name?"

"He said that for some reason he is not able to tell me his name, and he also didn't want to lie to me, so for now he is calling himself Anthony, but wanted me to know that it is not his real name."

"Very fascinating," Rainee said.

Her interest was building up with every word Anniet spoke, and Rainee was about to make more enquiries when suddenly a very unfamiliar feeling started to take over. Instantly, she began to lose interest in all she heard, and no matter how hard she tried to return her thoughts to the subject, it was to the same effect as trying to hold dry sand in a fist – the harder you press, the more of it slips through your grasp. Even Anniet noticed this change and asked anxiously:

"Are you alright? What happened? Did I bore you too much? As it feels like you are walking away."

Rainee just smiled back at her, thinking that this must be really how it feels after having someone present and listening for some time, losing this presence and leaving just a half-empty shell sitting in front of you.

"No, you didn't bore me at all. Just it isn't easy to keep attention on this Anthony for a longer time. Don't be surprised if I forget completely all that you just said. Don't be offended – it is very interesting, but around him there is a stronger force than I have, and this force will not allow me to retain these memories for much longer."

"Oh! That's what it is... I was wondering why everyone keeps forgetting him as soon as they turn away."

"But you don't have this impediment?" Rainee asked, not even trying to hold on to these memories that were rapidly slipping away. Instead of letting them run and enjoying a "touch" of them while leaving. Same as feeling a tickle of the sand grains slipping through your fingers. Why try to grasp something that is not possible to maintain? Isn't it much better to take pleasure in having it while it hasn't disappeared into nothingness? Strange as it might sound, but this way you can maintain it for just a little bit longer. Memories will be gone, but the feeling of having them, being touched by them, will remain.

"No," Anniet replied, and Rainee had a hard time remembering what she was saying "no" about, but she managed to recollect what they spoke about just now. "I can remember him all the time. I don't forget anything," Anniet added.

Rainee looked at her intently for some time, as if just now seeing her truly for what she was, and the smile on her face was growing even bigger.

"Lucky girl," she said.

"Do you think he is dangerous?" Anniet asked carefully, picking up her words. Maybe he is... There must be really something strange about him if even such a person as Rainee couldn't withstand whatever was surrounding him.

"Who?" Rainee asked.

“Anthony.”

“Who is Anthony?”

At first Anniet thought that Rainee was joking, but then, to her distress, she realised that she was not. She didn't know what to say, but apparently Rainee recollected their conversation.

“Oh, I remember now. Why do you think he is dangerous?”

“Because there is something strange about him! Everyone just keeps forgetting him!”

“If everyone suddenly forgot about me, would you think me dangerous?” Rainee asked.

Anniel shook her head. Of course not. What difference would it make to who Rainee is if people forgot about her?

“Then why do you think he is dangerous? Didn't you yourself just a few minutes ago describe him as a kind, interesting, and gentle person? How does this description match “dangerous”? Think with your own mind and feel with your own heart, and you will never go wrong.”

After that, they sat on the cushioned bench in silence for some time, looking at the view in front of them.

“Do you think he is lonely?” Anniet asked, looking at the little, cute cottage in the far distance.

“Who?” Rainee asked her with curiosity.

“My friend who is forgotten by everyone?” Anniet said with a sigh, realising that Rainee had already forgotten what they had just spoken about and not wanting to put any pressure on her.

Rainee looked at her for some time, then followed her look towards the cottage.

“There is no reason to believe that someone who is alone is lonely,” she said finally. “The loneliest people I met were living in big families, surrounded by many friends. They are so busy and so occupied by others that they don't even have time to realise how lonely they are. To be alone and to be lonely are not the same.”

“Have you ever been lonely?” Anniet asked carefully.

“Once,” Rainee said. “Not that long ago, I found out what loneliness feels like. It is not a very pleasant feeling.”

“Once!? I used to feel lonely all the time.”

“Used? How did you get over it?”

“I just chose to stop paying attention to it,” Anniet giggled. “And what about you?”

“It passed slowly. Once communication with The One was re-established, loneliness became impossible again.”

“The One! So you can talk to The One?!”

“Everyone can talk to The One. There are no special skills required. To hear him back is more difficult. But even then, there are places where you can learn to do so. Have you been to any of them?”

Anniel shook her head in response.

“Why?”

"No one took me there," Anniet said, choosing her words. "They said feelings are required to speak with The One."

There were places that would teach communication with The One. In the old days, those places were different and not so widely available. In the old days, it was said that The One could answer only "yes" or "no" to the questions, and only those chosen and approved could be accepted into these schools that resembled old churches or shrines more than schools. When Rainbow general came into power, she made changes, claiming that "yes" and "no" are not all that The One can say, that these answers are just for those who are deaf. She relentlessly taught the nation the art to speak with The One in proper conversations. The truth to be told, not that many succeeded.

"Yes," Rainee said, "The One doesn't speak in words as all he says is too large and too precise to fit into the spoken language. She speaks through feelings and understanding. Why did no one take you to the learning centre if you wanted?"

Anniel was told that there is no point in taking her there. Normal people who went didn't get much success, and for a person so void of feelings and sympathy as she was, there was no point even to bother. But she didn't say it aloud. Somehow she thought that this newly found friend wouldn't be happy for her speaking about herself like this. So she said nothing, secretly keeping a watchful eye on Rainee in hopes that she would not get offended by her silence. Luckily, Rainee was as carefree as a person could be, leisurely leaning back on the cushions and smiling at the sun.

They sat for a short while, both occupied with their own thoughts.

"Do you think you can teach me to feel?" Anniet asked.

"To feel what?"

"Just to feel like most of the people do?"

"No, I cannot teach it," Rainee said, plundering hopes in Anniet's heart. "I don't like the way most people feel and don't see any point in learning it."

"Oh!" That was all Anniet could say. The answer was unexpected.

"Can you teach me your way?..." Anniet asked carefully again.

"My way what?"

"To feel the way you like?"

"I can teach you feel the way I like," Rainee smiled, with that answer lifting Anniet's heart back to the sky. "But do you really want it? It takes a long time and requires lots of honesty. And people will not approve of it. They might even dislike you."

"I want it, I want it," Anniet reassured. "People don't like me anyway, so it's not a big deal."

"Why do you say it in the present time? Don't bring that relic of your past into today. Have you lately met anyone who wouldn't like you?"

Anniel didn't have any other option but to shake her head. Rainee was right, lately everyone seemed extremely friendly with her to the degree that it gave her a fright not to mess things up by doing or saying something inappropriate. Well, maybe this young man by the name Marcus didn't like her too much, as she interfered with his studies. But she didn't say it aloud, as Rainee had already told her twice that it was not her fault. She didn't know how it could be not her fault, as if she weren't there, Rainee wouldn't dismiss her class. But again, if she weren't there, she wouldn't meet Rainee. Anniet ran through her head all that had happened today.

“But really, what is he supposed to do?” she asked aloud.

Just after speaking, she realised that this question was completely off topic, but Rainee answered it as if she knew precisely what Anniet was thinking about.

“He has to meet himself instead of trying to hide who he truly is from others and from himself.”

“He seemed so angry. Who is he enraged at?”

“At himself.”

“Why?”

“Why? That's a very tough question. Because at some point he was told to do better, to be better than he is. That he is not good enough as he is unless he lives up to somebody's expectations. He must have taken it for granted, as all his life is a chase for this improvement.”

“Is that bad? Wanting to improve.”

“It would be good if he would try to improve where he himself wants to excel. Unfortunately, when you chase other people's visions about yourself, you are doomed to exhaust yourself and fail.”

“But he tries so hard...”

“The cause of his effort is false. Before he changes it, he would do a favour to himself if he did not even try. At least not in the direction he is trying. He should try to forget what he was taught to believe and see himself for who he truly is.”

“And what is his quest?”

“To be accepted into the King's Army.”

“I thought that you just had to apply...”

“He applied three times and was rejected.”

“I never heard about anyone being rejected...” Anniet wondered. “Is he not happy with the position offered and aims for something higher than he can get?”

That often was a case when, instead of being accepted straight to the King's Army, someone would be redirected to other services, either to improve or take a different path. But Anniet had never heard about anyone being completely rejected.

“He aims for too little,” Rainee sighed. “He doesn't see himself for who he truly is, so he cannot be evaluated. He is trying very hard to learn how to crawl when he is an eagle with the most powerful wings The One ever offered to a bird species. Birds cannot crawl, so his efforts will never succeed. All he has to do is to spread his wings and fly.”

“Like general Blake!” Anniet said excitedly. As he was the only person known to the world who could literally fly by himself, and it was said his wings were those of the most powerful that god has ever created.

“Like general Blake,” Rainee smiled at this suggestion. “Can you imagine if this proud and powerful general were told that he is not good enough as he is and has to do better?”

“Wasn't he told this many times?” Anniet asked, thinking that this legendary figure had such a relentless character that many tried to tame him many times.

“Yes, but what others said didn't have any effect on him, as he is not pursuing somebody else's dreams and ambitions. He follows his own dreams, his own aims. That's why he is a general.

Marcus is pursuing somebody else's visions, not his own. He is a much brighter and more wilful person than most. So to pursue somebody else's expectations for him is like for a bull to squeeze into a rabbit's hole. Not even that. He believes that he has to do much better to grow to the rabbit's size when he himself has outgrown it long ago, or most likely never even been so small. His starting point is unknown to him. The more he improves, the more he devalues himself until the day when opinions of others about him and what he does and how he does it will become unimportant. Only when he values himself more than what others think about him or tell him, only then will he reach his starting point. And this point will surprise many. Until that day comes, he will be nothing, just an echo of somebody's whim.

"What if that day never comes?" Annet asked, thinking that this man truly has to be something very special to be spoken about like this by Rainee.

"Then there will be one more life on earth wasted, one more opportunity missed."

"Can't you tell him his starting point?"

"It is easy to tell, but no telling is needed there. One thing is that he doesn't believe anyone; to believe you need qualities that he doesn't have at this time. Believing in someone has started all these problems, so before he can again rely on it, he has to face what has happened."

"It sounds like he has lots of trust in you."

"Demand, not trust. Believing that my knowledge is bigger is just common sense. He is very strong in common sense. But I have to prove to him every little step he is willing to take in the direction I show. That is not a belief, that is common sense. Belief is a sort of blind trust in someone. A person who believes in me would walk into the wall if I tell him that there is no wall and he can walk through. And he would succeed despite his own eyes seeing this solid obstacle in front and his own mind and experience knowing that such a possibility does not exist. True belief becomes a faith. True faith in what others say becomes a bigger certainty of what the same person themselves believes. Then I can lead. Until the reality of the wall is more certain than the reality of my word that there is none, there is nothing I can do. All I can do is to teach the truth that one day will show to that person that there is no wall, and the person will realise it themselves and will walk through, but it will not be because of believing in me, but because he knows now that there is no wall. True belief is the power beyond our understanding and could carry us to the heights we don't know or even imagine. But it is very rare as it has been killed in everyone at a very young age.

"Killed how by who?"

"Killed by people who teach us. Starting with parents and finishing with everyone around. People promise things that they cannot fulfil. People encourage others to do things that are not possible to do. People want to be thought of as higher than they really are and say things that they don't know.

If I met you before your belief is broken and tell you to walk through the wall, you would try, any child would try until some point. If you try to walk through and bang into it, would you try it ever again? I don't think so. Next time you stretch your arms and check if the wall is possible to walk through, and after doing it a few times, you will not even try. It's broken. Now you rely on your own senses.

If after that I come and tell you to walk through because I know how to do it, and if you would believe me, I would guide you through, would you do it? No. You would need proof. First, I would have to prove that I can do it, then that I can help you to do it.

In Marcus' case, I would have to explain every step needed to the degree that he can understand it. That's learning, not believing. Belief is instant, learning takes time. I can put him on a path he wants to walk, but he doesn't believe that such a path exists. I can drag him to it, but I cannot make him see it. To walk on something you cannot see, belief is required; when there is none, such walking is not possible.

In the physical world, if you drag someone on an invisible bridge, it will hold them, no matter if they believe it or not. In spiritual matters, on a soul level, when you don't believe, it doesn't exist for you; when you don't want to see, it doesn't exist for you. Things that you believe exist. If you believe in things that are not true, that are not real, you will create a false reality around yourself, and actual reality will simply stop existing for you, until you choose and make an effort to leave what you created and enter what is real."

"Sounds very complicated."

"May it be, but there is nothing simpler in this world. Beliefs matter; what you believe will define your reality. Seek for truth, not mine, your, hers, or his truth, but for truth as truth is. Just with that, you will choose to reach for it. Just this simple action will activate the universe to break you out of your own false belief cage. Believe in another person more than yourself, and that person will lead you where they stand – may it be to their own imaginary cage, or may it be to freedom. Believe in someone who is below you, and they will drag you down; believe in someone who is above you, and they will lift you up. Sounds simple, and it is simple. The difficulty is that we rarely believe in people who are above us, as their ways are unusual and challenging to understand."

"Why did you refuse to teach him martial arts?" Anniet asked, thinking that for her there is no difficulty in choosing and making an inner resort to believe in what Rainee would tell, no matter how unbelievable it might seem.

"With such an unsettled heart, he already knows more than he can swallow. To teach him more would be the same as to sharpen a knife held by a toddler. Besides, I wasn't lying – old John is the best teacher of martial arts that ever walked this world. He can teach him much more than I could. I know a lot, but nothing close to what he knows."

For Anniet, it wasn't easy to imagine it.

"He refused to teach me," she said in a low voice.

"Who?"

"Old John."

"Why?"

"He said there is nothing he can teach me."

"That is not true," Rainee said without a single doubt. "He must have said something different."

"I swear it is true!" Anniet said eagerly.

"Don't swear on anything; it is a very bad habit. What exactly did he say?"

"He said that there is not a lot he can teach me, as I already have a teacher, and anything he does would just interfere."

“Is that what he said?” Rainee laughed silently. “But see, he didn't tell you that he cannot teach you anything. What is not a lot to him might be an ocean to you. Who is your teacher he spoke of?”

“You...” Anniet said in a very low voice, understanding that Rainee hardly could be called her teacher as she taught her only for one day... But still, she didn't have any other.

“Me?” Rainee asked in a surprised voice, making Anniet shrink even more. “And you say it in such a small voice? Usually, my pupils are very proud to be taught by me, and if anyone asks, they state it firmly and loudly, full of pride. Are you feeling a little bit ashamed?”

“No, no, no! I am not! I'm very proud. I just thought that maybe you wouldn't be pleased to hear it.”

“I? Why wouldn't I be happy about it? I think you nailed the moves I taught you splendidly. I see you are carrying two swords with you now. Mastery of two swords is a handy skill, but not many can do it. But why not try? Do you want to try now?”

A big smile entered Anniet's face and stayed there for a long while, refusing to leave no matter what. It wasn't the correct reason why she was carrying two swords, but it didn't matter at all. In fact, it was even better!

CHAPTER

8

Creation of the world

The King was returning from the Valley of the Mountains. He was deep in his thoughts about the outcome of the meeting. No one could say that the result of this meeting took him off guard or by surprise, but nevertheless it wasn't what he was hoping for.

He left home more than two years ago to come to the Valley of Communications. He spent most of the time raising his spiritual power and awareness at this remote, secluded island of mountains, one of the last places where the clean, unstained energy of connection was so abundant. And he succeeded – the leaders of the old have heard him and came to his call.

He had raised an issue of conflict in humans and asked for help, the same help as he provided so many times for them in the past. But after long debates, the agreement that was made wasn't in his favour. Only a few agreed to aid him or even to consider aiding. It had not surprised him, as this situation was much different than any before. All Earth already was left to his kind – every other kind retreated one by one or in groups, not being able to cope with the uprising human power and its never-ending greed. It was an unheard request to create a new world for the very same kind of people who already have complete control of this old and beautiful place. A world that everyone used to call home a long time ago, in a distant history. Wouldn't a new place end up being exactly as this one if the same creatures would have control over it? Wouldn't it just multiply the problem?

Well, he doesn't know the answer. He didn't know then and doesn't know now.

But even after his proposal was rejected and the request denied, the idea about a new world for people who don't want to fight, who just want a simple, casual, peaceful life, didn't wither, didn't go away, but just kept growing.

He stayed on the island for a few more months to recover and to think. This pure energy surrounding him was so reviving for clear thinking. Many times he asked The One for advice, but the answer was, as expected, never changing – for a self-sustained new world to be created, all eighteen Gifted must be present and willing to incorporate the powers given to them. If any part is missing, then the new world cannot sustain itself, and to compensate, it would have to be constantly maintained by somebody's powers and effort. A task not possible for any living being, at least not for a long time. The majority of the population living in that world would be able to do so without struggle. But the will to maintain what was created would have to be constant and unchanging, otherwise the conditions of the world would change according to the population's will. But people's hearts are constantly changing – how would it be possible to maintain the entire population free of feelings and desires that would break the boundaries of the new world?

Human heart... Sometimes it feels as powerful and united as anything can be. But it needs so little to change its course. Would it be possible to educate and enlighten everyone? Definitely no. He lived very long, long enough to abandon even a shred of hope of such a possibility. There will always be someone who is not content with what they have, who seeks a different life without considering how it will affect others, or even those who think that they know better what is good for others and will use force to prove and achieve. Once new ideas are seeded, they spread among people – sometimes growing the world into a better place to live, but unfortunately, most of the time

they destroy all that was built with such effort and bring society down to its knees. He has seen it happening over and over again.

His best friend, Armanin, the leader of the magic world, offered his help in any possible way, and that was a big relief and support. But even with such a powerful ally, it was not enough to persuade others.

The King blamed no one. How could he? For so many centuries he tried to prove that humanity has more to itself than greed, and so many times he succeeded in doing so... but just for a short time... So many times he tried to lead and rule his own people, he tried to educate and enlighten, he tried to step aside and let others decide the course of history. To no avail... Things could go well for a short while and then drift back to chaos. The greed would always pop out and grow somewhere if not in one place then in another, if not for one reason then for another. Like a never-ending plague.

So why would someone believe that something would change in a new world? The same people are going to live there, and the same problems will arise. Why would he himself think that it can end up differently?

But he still did. He still believed that in the right place, under the right circumstances, all of his kind can live together in peace without getting on each other's throats. All he has to do is create the right place and right circumstances. To make the impossible possible... Why not? One person is enough to create anything as long as desire is strong and based on love and doesn't cause harm to anyone. His desire was strong and growing with every day, and it was out of love. The only thing was how to make it possible so everyone would be able to retain their free will to change if that change could destroy the whole world.

Once his mind was set and the task clear, thoughts and visions started to come. One crazier than the other...

Armanin came to see him again, and he shared some ideas with him. His friend surprised him once more. He didn't scold the idea but instead, after long thinking, offered his help again and even suggested some new ideas.

With his help, ideas started to take shape, and the impossible started to become possible. So many gaps yet and so many unknowns, but he was sure now that he would succeed, no matter how long it would take. Especially now, when his own life had changed so drastically.

After millennia of loneliness, he wasn't alone anymore. People couldn't understand the feeling that he called loneliness – no matter how many people were around, no matter how many relations he had, he always felt alone. Now his heart was filled as never before – he didn't know such a state was even possible. The thought of losing it seemed not acceptable, and for the first time in many, many years, a shadow of fear of his own actions, if his personal happiness was threatened, crept out. He didn't fight that fear, nor did he feed it to grow bigger, but just the fact that it was here, that he felt it, was so unfamiliar and gave him more thought about his own state and his own humanity. He thought for years that he and the other seventeen Gifted lost humanity upon accepting the Gift from The One, but now he finally understood it was never the case, he was just... let's say more advanced than others, that's all.

He asked The One why he felt so different after he had met his wife and why his inner state had shifted, or at least opened the gates to something that he never even suspected was possible for him anymore. The answer from The One was that an encounter and reunion with the second half of

your soul always opens unknown parts of yourself. Second half of the soul... soulmate... Didn't sound bad. But now only The One would know how he would behave if someone were to threaten that soulmate of his – would he stay true to himself, or would he struggle as any regular mortal? Even though about it was alien and a spark of excitement was in his chest, excitement for the unknown – unknown even for him...

All these thoughts were spinning in his heart and mind for days while he was travelling back home. But in the last few hours, the feeling of unease started to overtake him, and he was urging his horse to go faster and faster. Through the years, he learned to trust his instincts, and now he knew that something was wrong, that danger was coming. And he was still so many miles away from home. He gathered energy from the surroundings and poured it right into the horse he was riding – into his heart, into his lungs, into his legs and muscles. With every blast of energy, the speed of the horse increased drastically. In no time, the horse was flying more than running. Faster and faster, like lightning. Anyone who witnessed them flying by couldn't understand what it was, this shadow-like gust of wind passing by. An hour had passed, and two and three, the evening started to approach, but neither rider nor horse were slowing down as if they didn't feel any tiredness, as if they were out of this world altogether.

And here it was in the distance, a shade of light that was not supposed to be at this late hour of night. A light of fire followed by distant screams. And the stench of burning to follow. He reached an opening on the top of the hill, and there it was – far in the distance, a city at the top of a large hill was engulfed in flames. Such a familiar scene... He had witnessed it so many times... Too many, way too many. But never had he recalled feeling such horror as he was feeling now.

The King lifted his right arm to the sky and pulled firmly down like pulling down the sky itself, and the sky obeyed. The clouds from all four directions poured towards the burning town, raising roaring winds. He spun his arm, and the wind obeyed it, curling into endless small twisters, lifting on its way all possible sand from the ground, bringing it to the burning city. Hardly any time had passed, and rain began, and clouds were coming and coming from all directions, squeezing and squashing above the city, turning this rain into a deluge of sandy water falling from the sky and putting out the flames.

He could hear people screaming and shouting. People were running for their lives. People were fighting back. And also there were people who chased and killed, who robbed and raped. Always people... No other enemy, just people slaughtering people... Always the same – one brother craving what the other had and willing to do anything to rob, to take away, to claim as his own what never belonged to him. Because it's never enough, never enough. It's like a curse placed on humans.

But this time, he didn't dash towards the city, he didn't try to step into the middle of the fight to save one person from another. Instead, he turned to the side and raced to the place that for the last several years he had been calling home. A (Little) house on top of a small hill covered with beautiful trees and facing a deep valley with a view of the once beautiful and lively city that was now smoking from rain, fire, and fight.

The house was not on fire, and a glimpse of hope returned to him, but it was brutally brushed away when he saw a woman's body lying in a yard.

He had lived so many years, he had been violently injured so many times, his heart was pierced through by a sword or knife or arrow countless times, but never before had he experienced

such pain. If the peak of the biggest mountain pierced through his heart and exploded into thousands of shreds, it would be nothing compared to the pain that struck him now.

He jumped off the horse, ran to his wife, and fell on his knees next to her body, lying face down on the ground. He gently turned her over, lifting her into his arms. He prayed non-stop to The One, not even knowing what he was praying about, and not listening to the reply. The wounds in her back and in her stomach were hideous, but her heart was still beating against all odds as if powered by some unknown, unnatural force. Gently, gently, he started to pour his energy into her, gradually increasing her strength. A couple of minutes later, she opened her eyes. Her gaze landed straight on his face as if she had expected to see him. She lifted her hand and gently touched his face.

“You returned,” she smiled into a whisper. “I am so glad.”

The rain started here too, falling on the King’s face, disguising the tears rolling down his cheeks. He stood up with his wife in his arms and sat himself under the tree with his back resting against its ancient trunk while laying his wife on his lap with her head on his chest. He kissed her head, breathed into her hair, feeling like he could just sit like this, with the love of his life, forever, until moss starts to grow on him, just as on that old tree behind him. As if in alliance with his wishes, the leaves of the tree rotated slightly, forming a perfect natural umbrella above them that was shielding them from heavier and heavier rain.

“I was waiting for you,” she said in a quiet voice. “I didn’t want to go before seeing you again.”

The pain in his chest was crushing; it started to spread from his heart to the rest of his body. He didn’t fight it, secretly hoping that it would grow so big that he would not be able to cope with it anymore and would simply die like normal people do.

“You are in such pain only because of fear of loss, fear of separation. But there is no such thing as separation for those who truly love. The body you hold will go, but I will remain and will always be with you. What difference does it make?”

“The only difference is that I will not be able to follow you...” he answered softly. “Not now, not tomorrow, not ever. I am bound to this world without a chance to leave, without a possibility to leave. Without a chance to meet anyone who leaves from here ever again.”

He closed his eyes, feeling in the moment, trying to take every possible bit of every second. There were and still are so many people who would give up everything they have, including their own soul, for immortality, imagining that it is the highest gift one can receive. How wrong they are... How completely and utterly wrong they are! One cannot go any further from the truth, calling this incurable curse a gift...

“You know so much truth that it actually became your own prison, where you yourself are both a prisoner and a guard. You know the truth so well that it is not possible for more truth to enter because of the walls you have built around yourself. Well, let me tell you that truth never opposes another truth. You are the one who taught me and so many others that there is nothing impossible or forbidden or too audacious, as long as one has motivations from the heart that do not restrain others. And now you say that here is something impossible. They both cannot be true, at least not in the same light.

“The One itself told me that before I accepted The Gift. He made sure that I fully understood the consequences of it.”

“And The One itself taught you the truth about freedom of will and wish. And The One doesn't make mistakes and never opposes itself. So if both these statements are factual, then the truth you know is incomplete in some ways. All you have to do is open yourself to receive more.”

What she said was true, and he understood it by himself long ago, but no matter how much he tried, he was not able to connect it.

“I am a part of you, and you are a part of me – it is not possible to separate something that is one whole,” she continued. “Don't be sorry for me – it isn't me who will suffer, as I already understand the truth, and I will never be alone or apart from you. You, on the other hand, are not able to accept it yet, and until you do, you will feel lonely. But please, every time you feel this way, remember what I say now – I am next to you, just as I am now, or even closer. Not in your imagination, not as a memory, but right next to you, as close as one can be.” The silence fell over them for a while, then she added, “If your will wouldn't be so strong, I might be able to reach you in that prison of yours and show a way out, but no matter what one can say, no matter what knowledge is passed to you, it is only something you know until you understand it. Until you feel it, no matter what you know, it will make no difference whatsoever. Your will is like a mountain, and only you can find a way out of it.”

The time was passing, and they were both sitting under this tree like nothing else in the world was happening.

“I can stay like this forever,” he said. “Maybe this is a way to stay together?”

She laughed into his chest, then said after a while:

“No matter how much you love me, you also love life; it is a part of you that makes you the person you are. And you know that only you now are connecting me to this body, no matter if it is broken or healed. To keep me in this body, you would have to lose yourself.”

“I don't mind.”

“But I do, even if you don't. And you know yourself, it isn't true what you just said.” She lifted her face and he kissed her, tightening his embrace.

“Jonathan, there is something I wanted to tell you for a while, but I don't know how to say it so you would understand it, not just hear it. You always beat and battled yourself for being born out of the race of greed.” She waited for a bit before adding, “But you are not.”

He didn't say anything, just smiled with a sad smile while looking in the distance towards the smoking city where clouds slowly started to leave, taking away the rain and storm they brought with them.

“I told you a lot about my family,” he finally replied. “And my parents and parents of my parents and my siblings and their children. I know you love me and want to see the best in me, but I am from the origin of the purest examples of greed. I don't beat myself for that, but a man must understand where he has come from and what his base is. I have been blessed not to be put in situations that would awaken greed in me, but that is not up to choice – once my kind is placed in the “right” surroundings, the greed will grow without a fail when in other nations it doesn't. When other nations have a choice to subdue to it or not.”

“And still you are not your family, and you have been in countless situations but never succumbed to greed. Not by chance but by your will, by your choice. Where others might not have

a choice, you do, because you are not of the kind of greed. Or at least you always had an option to choose what kind you want to be.”

“Then who am I?” he asked while kissing her head.

“A kind of faith, a kind of hope,” she replied.

Both were silent for a minute. “An easy escape,” he thought to himself, “a nice way out of unwanted origin...”

“There is no such a kind as faith,” he replied aloud. “Faith is an attribute that every nation shares. It never became dominant in any nation.”

“The same they say about love, but at the same time everyone who remembers old ways knows that there are people of the kind of love who can be born in every nation. Or you will try to object to that, too?”

“How would I object to it, even if I wanted to, when I am holding one right now in my hands?” he replied. “But still I never heard about anyone from the kind of faith.”

“Maybe they are very rare, or maybe they are not recognised because no one was looking for them. Or maybe you are one of the kind. I don't know. But nevertheless, it doesn't change the fact that you are born of faith, of hope. I know that I will not convince you now, nor will I be able to change how you take it. But still I am telling you this as a fact, not as a fantasy – you are born of faith, and it doesn't change if you know it or not, if you believe it or not, that is the fact. But I do want you to know it, as maybe, just maybe, it would help you to understand yourself a little bit better and help you to release yourself from the prison you have put yourself into.” After a short silence, she added, “Maybe it will help you to see that, despite it being a blessing, it also holds you back when unintentionally used wrongly, as now the biggest faith you have is faith in yourself.”

“I have faith in you,” he said in reply.

“And yes and no,” she said. “If you had faith in me, you would already be opening to what I say, not just hearing it. But your faith is in a trust in yourself, that's why you don't allow yourself to make the slightest mistake or be surprised – you always know all outcomes. Sometimes control them, sometimes let them be, but still all actions are under what you let happen or what you have expected that might happen. But if you are not allowing even the possibility of a mistake or surprise, you're closing yourself off from learning about something of what existence you are not aware of.”

“And who should I have faith in?” he asked. “I fully trust you, I fully trust my friends, I fully trust myself.”

“Maybe god?”

“God? In which god should I trust? All gods that these fools are building statues and churches for fall into either the categories I already mentioned or under the category “lies”. You know how many different temples and churches they built for me or other Gifted? Does it make us any different? Does it make us any greater because of that?”

“The One,” – she suggested quietly.

“The One?” – he asked in surprise – “but I have complete and unmovable faith in The One. I trust him even more than I trust myself and the rest of the world. He is always here, he is always ready to help, he is always telling the truth, he knows everything, and he shares everything. I met

him, or rather, got as close to him as any living being in this or the other world can get. I have complete faith in him.”

“It sounds like you know everything about him, but when you know everything, you can discover no more. When you know all the ways, you cannot find a new one.”

Both fell silent for a while.

“Do you think there are still ways that I can discover?” – he asked finally.

“Always,” – she replied.

“Would you help me discover them?” – he asked again.

“Always,” – she replied again.

“Then you will have to stay with me,” – he said, silently smiling while tears rolled down his face.

“Always,” – she replied again, gently brushing away these tears with her fingertips and kissing his lips.

“I... cannot see or hear people who crossed over,” – he said these words very slowly and very quietly – “I never had this gift nor was I ever able to learn it.”

“Then feel me,” – she whispered in return – “you can feel me now, you will feel me when I go.”

“But would you mind if I simply don't let you go?” – he asked with his eyes closed. –

“Despite what you said, I would rather have you in my arms and love you than let you go and love life... Life was meaningless long before I met you, it will become the same meaningless if you go. No, not the same, much, much worse, something I don't even want to think about.”

“I would not mind,” – she smiled – “but things don't always depend just on us.”

Neither of them said anything anymore. They just stayed together under that big old tree, she resting on his chest, and he holding her in a tender embrace with his cheek pressed to her head. They stayed like this for a while until a silent, unexpected sound came from the house. A child was crying.

“You have a guest?” – he asked.

“No,” – she replied – “it must be Aydeen. I told Justine to hide with him in a hiding room. But there is only a certain amount of time a child can be afraid and silent, he probably got tired of hiding.”

“Who is Aydeen?” – he asked again.

“A little beautiful boy,” – she replied – “Green eyes, slightly curled hair, brave, calm, and straightforward. He is very, very smart. There is still half a year to go to his second birthday, but he is already talking a bit. He always tries to do his best no matter what – so much that it pains me sometimes just to watch it, I always want to say "Slow down and enjoy" but I know better by now than even to try.”

King was listening very intensely, and with each word, his heart was beating faster and faster.

“He loves his bigger sister very much, but he probably just got tired of sitting in that tiny room under the ground, as there is not much to do, and he likes to do things. He loves life just as much as his dad does, and he is waiting to meet his dad very badly.”

The silence fell upon him, and only the beating of his heart could be heard; only his embrace became tighter and tighter.

“I thought it was impossible,” – he finally said, staring straight in front of him, obviously at something that only he himself could see – “I always thought that it was impossible for me to have a child.”

“You think and overthink many things, but not all you believe is always true,” – she replied, smiling.

“I have a son and wasn't here for him for all this time... Wasn't here with you while you were bringing him into the world, while you've been helping him to grow and take his first steps... With all the time given to me, with all the power given to me, I wasn't here...” – His eyes narrowed – “I have a son whose mother was left to defend his family on her own while I was aimlessly travelling... I have a son who has to hide under the ground like a mouse just because his dad didn't manage to make this place safe for him to live and grow.”

By the irony of fate, as if to confirm his words, the sound of iron and marching feet rose from the dark valley below the hill. Armed people were approaching.

For the first time in many years or maybe in his entire life, he felt such hopelessness and dread. The approaching people were no danger to him, but if he had to take his attention to them, then he would not be able to sustain his wife's life; even now, it wasn't easy to do after the blow that he had just received. He could hide himself and her with the help of this tree by altering its branches and trunk, and stay unnoticed for as long as needed until they would eventually leave. But then this would leave the children unprotected. Even if they are well hidden, a loud noise would definitely betray them. And it was clear that these soldiers would not just pass by. He used magic, which these days is called witchcraft; they will search each house, each corner, to find the one to hold responsible for it.

The choice was made – he lifted his hand with a clenched fist, but then it was pressed back down by force.

“A life for a life is never a choice, it's not for you to choose who lives and who dies,” – she said. – “Promise me right now that you will not break your vows just because one of the living shares the same blood as you – it never was a reason.”

“How do you expect me to live on if I failed to protect you at first and then our children?”

“How do you expect me to live if I am the reason for the downfall of the man I love more than I love myself? How do you expect me to live if the gift from god I brought into this world contributes to one of the greatest tragedies that might befall humanity? How do you expect your son to live in this or other world, thinking that it is his fault that the man who didn't break or tremble for anything has fallen for his sake?”

His hand collapsed, and horror started to creep over him. What a useless and hopeless situation... He stood up on his feet, supporting his wife by his side. If he manages to get the children out in time, they can ride the horse away from here. Justine is a good rider, and she will protect the boy until they find them. He looked at his horse and froze to the ground – the poor animal was lying on the grass, still not recovered from the hellish ride they had hardly a few hours ago. There is no way anyone can ride it at any time soon. His body started to tremble from tension.

“I am sorry that I put you in such a situation,” – she said softly, embracing him and placing her head on his shoulder – “it pains me to see that I have pushed you to make impossible choices.

But understand that despite what you think, he is a lucky boy in a way, because if he is to live, he will have the most wonderful father to look after him, and if he dies, then he will stay with me, and we both will look after you and wait for you. Have faith. No, be faith, as you were born to be. And have faith in god, have faith that he is and can do so much more than you give him credit for.”

He looked at her for some time then, without a word, he leaned over and kissed her. The clouds have parted by now, and the moon has peeked out. The footsteps of the soldiers were approaching fast, but he didn't care any more about them. His heart returned to its usual calm, his mind returned to its normal clearness. All he could think of was how much he loved this woman who stood next to him in his embrace. The woman he was planning to spend his life with, but who, despite still being here in his hands, was also already far away, far beyond. He parted from her lips and looked at (in) her face for a while. Faith... why not? He has faith, always did, and still does. But reality often chooses a different way. Maybe he really tries too hard? Perhaps faith is more than knowing and understanding, trusting and trying...

He touched her face with his fingertips one last time, and she kissed his palm in return.

“You will always be in my heart,” – he said.

“It cannot be different because we are one, just have faith, and you will find a way to be with me again in full.”

While looking in her eyes, he lifted his right hand to his chest and, with his thumb, he drew a sign across his heart and pressed his fist to his chest. His chest started to glow with a green light that spread across his entire body in no time. All his body was glowing in a beautiful emerald green that was getting brighter and stronger. With a sudden movement of his hand, he pushed this light from his heart down into the ground. The light spread around him like a green pool of water and rippled away in all directions at extraordinary speed. Soon, all that one could see up to the horizon was covered in this beautiful green light, and it was spreading further and further. His heart was pumping this light, this energy, like a never-ending fountain. All around got quiet: the approaching footsteps, the distant shouting of people, the sound of nature in the woods, the wind, and the air itself. All had stopped as time doesn't exist in this place, in this state.

As many times as he experienced this before, his mind would wander full of questions, full of wonder. This time, he didn't feel that wonder; all he felt was love for this beautiful little person who stood next to him. While one hand was sending energy down the Earth, the other was tightly but gently holding this wonderful human being next to his side. He didn't even feel sadness any more, just gratitude for the privilege of having her in his life, thanking The One for this wonderful gift he encountered.

He felt how the energy collided on another side of the globe with a force and was making its way back to him right through the centre of the Earth. At that moment, a firm hand landed on his shoulder, and a pool of shimmering golden water-like light spread across towards the horizon, overlapping and mixing with his green. Warm golden shimmering dreamlike dazzle. It always made him feel amazed by its beauty. He didn't need to look whose hand it was resting on his shoulder – Armanin, his best friend, no, his true brother in heart, the leader of the Magic Nation, had come.

“Oh, thanks god for that,” – he thought – “thanks god”. He didn't remember the last time he called The One a god, as the title “god” was long corrupted in his mind. Sometimes it seemed that people call god anyone who is a bit more different or has more power than others, but at this

moment, all that his mind could do was just repeat "Thanks god". Thank you for a friend, thank you for a wife, thank you for a son, thank you for life...

The green light of energy erupted out of the Earth, engulfing him in a column of green that shot from the ground under him right into the sky. Then a white-as-snow energy dropped next to him to the ground and started to make its way to the horizon. His heart lifted, and his lips smiled. He didn't know how it happened, but the leader of the Truth and Honesty Nation was also here. How did they know to come? He had no idea, as he himself didn't have any plans for it to happen, neither today nor anytime soon, but he didn't mind, he didn't care, he was just happy.

Golden light erupted from the ground, engulfing him too, mixing with the green light. That was different as the energy should return to the sender... Why Armanin's energy returned to him instead? But again, he didn't care that much. Just at that time, a blue energy pool dropped down and rippled away from them. The leader of Wisdom, of Innovation Nation has come too... Have faith, she said, be faith, and have faith in god. Is this what faith feels like? When you get something that you never planned or worked towards? Never even thought was possible? Then he is happy to be a faith.

The white light erupted from the ground around him. It was so strange to stand surrounded by the energy that didn't belong to him, to feel that energy so alien yet somehow so familiar.

The crimson red energy dropped to the ground and dashed to the horizon. He turned his head, and the leader of the Courage and Strength Nation bowed to him in greeting just before the blue light erupted from the ground, engulfing him too.

No more lights have dropped. So five altogether out of eighteen. As he intended to be all alone, this is five times more than he was hoping for. And such powerful alliances too.

Then, just a second before the red light erupted from the ground, a pink energy had dropped to the ground and made its way to the horizon. Warm baby pink... very beautiful, very enchanting, but he had never seen one like this before... He looked down and at first he thought that this light was also coming out of him, but then he realised that it was coming out of his wife... But that was not possible... His wife never became one of the Gifted. Or had she?.. "Is she Gifted?" – he addressed this question to The One. "No, she is not," – the answer was clear.

He looked with amazement at his wife, his eyes full of disbelief.

"Have faith," – she whispered to him. – "Faith that there is so much more than you can think of, or you can do, or even imagine. Have faith that you are limited only by the limits of your imagination."

Is his imagination limiting him? Are there no other limits? Have faith in god because god has no limits... Not allowing a thought to manifest into something understandable and solid, moving only on an impulse, he drew the sign in front of him pushing aside thought that there is no one in front just an empty space, and pulled down right on the sign not even thinking or seeing and a pool of energy had dropped down, colourful like a rainbow, just alive and ever changing. Shimmering glamour of a pastel-like mixture of colours. It spread at lightning speed, merging on its way every other colour of energy that was already on the ground, and hit him from the ground nearly at the same time as pink energy did.

That was it, the circle was complete. Too late for anyone to join, even if they wanted to. All energies had joined around the globe and around him. He lifted his arms, joining them together above his head with palms facing outwards, and started to pull them slowly apart. Little by little,

very, very slowly, until the enormous resistance he was feeling suddenly disappeared, and his hands separated in a powerful movement. Obeying it, the column of energy split in half to the very top, and both parts started to drift away from each other, increasing speed as they moved. As if circling a giant ball with its base in the centre of the Earth and the top at never-ending heights of heaven, it circled both sides across the globe, taking with it every bit of energy offered, floating on its surface, until both sides collided together with an enormous power and disappeared.

The new world was created and separated from the old.

....

“And that is how our world was created.

The end.”

....

.....

Silence took over every person who was listening to this story. The sound of running water in a river and wind in the trees didn't fall quiet as neither the river nor the wind were disturbed by the story. Neither were insects nor birds. All the usual daily sounds continued, as the story told had nothing to do with them. But people didn't speak for a long time. The whole class was silently processing what they just heard. Rainee, the young lady teacher who told this story, was patiently waiting for the questions from her students.

“Well, this story is good but different from those I heard before,” – finally, silence was broken.

Rainee didn't reply as it wasn't a question, so she had nothing to say to it. After a short silence, a question finally came from a young girl:

“Did she survive?”

“Wife of the King? No. The first King never had a wife in this world; there is no mention of her in any history books, legends, or songs.”

“But why did she have to die? King made it in time to reach her, and we all know that our King could heal any injury, wound, or illness as long as the person was still alive.”

“There might be a few reasons here. One is that the facts we know are not as old as this story; maybe at that time, the King wasn't that powerful yet. Also, his powers would be different here, in a world he created, than in the old world where he was born. But the main thing is that he didn't make it in time; he clearly said that the only reason she was able to stay alive was with his help. That means that life's cord was broken, and a person couldn't sustain their own life, no matter if the body is healed. At a time, King wasn't able to deal with critical circumstances without withdrawing his life-sustaining support. It is highly unlikely that making a new world would require less than one hundred percent of his attention. The moment he chose to do so, he knew what would happen. What forces helped her to stay in her body until he came back is not known to me, and I believe it wasn't known even to King Jonathan himself.”

“What about the boy,” – another voice asked

"This isn't a mystery at all. King had a son by the name of Aydeen, who was crowned as the second King and died protecting his people. His death is marked as the beginning of the dark era in every history book."

"Yes," – another person agreed – "and Justine must be the same lady Justine from legends that sacrificed herself to bring peace back to us?"

Rainee neither confirmed nor denied it, but just said:

"Legends usually have a drop of truth in them, but wrapped into people's fantasies and misunderstandings, which makes the truth unrecognisable. But yes, I believe you are talking about the same Justine."

"Who was she?"

"She was the daughter of his wife."

"But that is such nonsense!" – Someone finally erupted. – "There is nothing to support this story – no one ever heard it before. There have been so many historians who dedicated their lives to finding the true story of the beginning, and none of them have come up with this. And you expect us to believe it only because you said so? Where did you even hear it from to present it to us? And with such precision! How would you know how they felt, what they said, and what they thought?"

"There are two replies about expectations," – Rainee answered with patience, dismissing accusations and an irritated tone. – "One is no, I don't expect anyone to believe me, I share what I know, and it is up to each of you if you believe it or not. Second is yes, from everyone who comes to attend my classes I do expect them believe my teachings otherwise you wouldn't be able to learn anything. Classes are free to join or leave. From those who stay, I do expect willingness to learn, otherwise, why would you stay? I do not expect you believe blindly, that's why questions are welcome. I do acknowledge that this subject might be new to you all and oppose many other ideas about the creation of our world. So everyone can take time to think about what was presented and prepare your questions for tomorrow. For the questioning part of your speech: I read it in a Living Library, also known as the Library of Kings, established by the First King. The writing was done by King Jonathan himself, so I have no reason to doubt it. I know how he felt because the writings in the Living Library are done in a way that transmits more information than just a regular writing by words. Any more questions?"

"Where is that library?" "Why has no one heard about it before?" "Why do only a few of the gifted come to help?" "Who are Gifted?" "What about colours?" "Why didn't he use his dragon?" "Why couldn't he die?" "Was Armanin the King's friend or the King's brother?" "Why did King think he was born from greed?" "How could a King's wife contribute to creation if she wasn't Gifted?"

Questions were pouring non-stop now, not allowing any time for an answer to be presented.

"Could you all just stop this gibberish?!!!" – A commanding voice sounded, and all other voices suddenly died.

"But Marcus, it is not your class, and Rainee allowed us to ask questions." – someone said carefully.

"What does asking questions have to do with all this mess you are making?" – Marcus wouldn't back off.

"You are so crude...." "Yes, very rude."

“You all are making havoc out of the class, and I am being rude and crude?” – Marcus was close to exploding. – “No one can either answer or even hear your questions!”

“But you don't even want to hear the answers....” – someone pointed out. – “You don't even like history. All you want is for the class to be finished sooner so you could talk with the lady teacher about your....” – the voice slowly died without finishing the sentence under Marcus's sharp look.

All the place fell under silence again. Rainee took the opportunity to speak.

“The library is in a so-called side pocket, very similar to this School, with the difference that you have to travel to enter it, but you can find the entrance only if you have been called and answered that call. It is not correct to say that no one has heard about it before, as there are writings of many past kings; also, it is not known how many other people visited who didn't leave writings. Upon entering the Library, you don't gain all the knowledge; you have to read and study, and there are many, many writings, so what you know will depend on what you choose to read. Why only a few of the gifted come to his aid is told in a story; you can study it in copies I handed out before class for the answer. Gifted are eighteen people. One from each nation that at one time lived in the Old World together. Many, many thousands of years ago, they sought aid from The One to save their people from nations that have fallen for evil and were destroying, abusing, and enslaving every other nation. Their request was granted, and they were gifted power to create another world for those nations who abused others and freed the old world from them, sealing them away in the newly created world. This ability came at a cost, and that cost was immortality, as all eighteen gifted were needed to be present in living form for the world they created to stay active; otherwise, the boundaries would disappear, and both worlds would collide again. King Jonathan is Gifted; therefore, he is immortal, so he cannot die. Colours represent emotions that are dominant in one or another nation. King Jonathan always thought that his green emerald represented greed, but most likely it doesn't, and it makes much more sense for it to represent faith, as greed was and still is a problem only to the human race, not to other nations. If King Jonathan's energy were of greed, then each world that he helped to create would be affected by it. He didn't use his dragon because at that time he didn't have a dragon; he got it much later in history as a gift from King Armanin. King Armanin was his friend, not a brother, as they both were from different nations. He called him brother in heart, as there wasn't any closer person to him than his friend throughout his life. King thought he was born from greed, as he was born into a human family, and according to his words, to one who was very much affected by it. It never occurred to him that he might be different from the rest of his kin. And I don't know how King's wife could contribute to creating a new world and not become Gifted. King Jonathan never found it out. Today's history class is finished, and we will continue the same subject in the following history class. To avoid this, as Marcus called it havoc, I will ask all of you to prepare written questions for the next class, and we will start from there. Now, a short few minutes break, and we will start an ethics class.

Without any difficulty, Rainee answered all the questions that were raised, despite all of them being spoken at the same time.

“What is an ethics class?” – Many voices raised the same question. – “I never heard about such a class.” “When did it start?” “What's the topic?”

“It is a new class and it starts today. Today's topic of discussion will be what is rude and what isn't, and differences between being crude and straightforward. History class today is over; only those who wish to attend the ethics class should stay.”

She looked over a large field occupied with a few hundred students. Numbers really have risen in the past few months. Nobody was leaving. A few people stood up, but only to move closer. "Well, apparently, holidays are over, and it is time to go back to work," Rainee thought to herself. A little sadness came after this thought, but to her own surprise, a blast of joy rose up, that was hiding behind the belief that the new lifestyle she was having now is better, more relaxing, and allows her to concentrate on other things than just lifting up the morals and abilities of others. "Apparently not..." She thought, allowing this joy to fill her heart and not paying much attention to longing for something even more.

CHAPTER

9-1

A new beginning

In the past few months, Anniet's life has taken a steady but never boring pace. After waking up in her new room at Rainee's house for the first time, she could hardly believe it wasn't a dream. She tiptoed silently outside as a little thief full of fear and hopes that it was real, that it was not some sort of misunderstanding. Despite it being an early morning, she found Rainee already up, enjoying a cup of a hot drink and reading a book. So it was real! She stood for a while hiding behind the corner until Rainee, without even looking at her, stood up, made another drink, and pushed the cup across the table towards her. It was obvious that she knew very well that Anniet was here so there was no reason to hide any more. All that she had achieved by this hiding was that Rainee had to make her breakfast, that's all.

For the whole next month, she was afraid to leave this house unless she was going out together with Rainee. She was worried that if she left, she would not be able to come back. For some, it may look strange, but never in her life had Anniet received this kind of treatment from anyone. Usually, people would shun her and only tolerate her company when unavoidable. She had friends, or what she thought friends were at that time, but they never invited her, only allowed her to tag together, and she had to be very careful what she was saying and how she was behaving while with them, not to be turned away. She was never invited into anybody's home without a reason and never stayed any longer than she had to. She thought that this was what friendship was and tried to be the same with Rainee, but it never worked. Now, when in Rainee's company, all seemed nice and easy, but when on her own, fear would creep over her that she might lose it in the blink of an eye.

Days were passing, and that overwhelming fear started to disappear slowly. Nothing she could say or do ever upset Rainee or anyone else around. Rainee would be either interested in what she said or would point out why it was not true. Everyone else around also was friendly. Not to the same extent as Anthony or Rainee, but still nothing like what she was experiencing at home. And somehow she started to think that maybe to take her life at home as normality wasn't a very good idea, maybe her life wasn't that normal after all. More and more trust in others and herself was slowly growing, and one day she asked Rainee if it was OK for her to go out on her own.

Rainee just laughed at this question and ruffled her hair, saying that "Little Anniet finally grew up". With that, all tension somehow disappeared as if it had never even been there, and her own behaviour up until then made her laugh. On that day all changed. Suddenly, she had become as free as a human could be. Any fear of Rainee chasing her away vanished instantly, leaving just deep gratitude for the incredible patience that she received from her new friend in the past days.

The reason that brought this breaking point was wearing a black suit and had very beautiful, black lively eyes. Every day while looking at that little cottage from the back garden, Anniet would remember the incredible personality of its owner. And she never forgot the promise she made to him to come and help him sometimes. While with Rainee, she met him a few times when they visited the dining hall and also at the campfire. But it wasn't the same as on the few times when she met him on her own. Rainee, like everyone else, saw him completely differently and would not pay any attention to him and forget about him as soon as he was out of sight. It was so strange to see her

friend having the same impediment in this matter as everyone else. Anthony, on the other hand, didn't forget anything and seemed very happy that Anniet found a new friend. And his opinion about Rainee was very high. But no matter how hard Anniet tried to keep all three of them together, it just seemed impossible. With Anthony around, there would always be something popping out that would make Rainee leave, and she would go with her.

On a day when this all-locking fear left Anniet, just as suddenly as it appeared, all changed dramatically, and she became a completely new person, or so she thought that way. Instead of being dependent on Rainee, she was just deeply appreciating her company and the time they spent together, whether relaxing, chatting, or training. She started to attend Rainee's classes not as her shadow but as any other student. Every day, she would go to the dining hall to help Anthony, who didn't seem offended by her ignoring him for so long. Only while spending some time with him, she fully realised how much work and effort he put into everybody's well-being. And to think that after enjoying all these meals, nobody would ever thank him and would not even remember his existence...

Once she asked him if he felt lonely because of that. She will never forget his words he said to that question:

"Lonely? I would happily exchange memories of the whole world for a memory of one person. But I didn't even have to put any effort for it to happen. No. I definitely don't feel lonely. If I ever felt lonely, that was in the past, not in the present."

The words themselves left an unforgettable impression, but the way he was looking at her while saying it was something that made her never forget that moment. After that, she clearly realised that the way she feels for him is entirely different from anything she had experienced before. It brought both joy and sadness. A lot of fantasies at sleepless nights and a strange inner fight. After that time, he never spoke with her in a similar manner again. He was ever so friendly and attentive, but never in a way Anniet secretly hoped for. A few times, she gathered courage and came to him to tell him how she really felt, but upon seeing him, this courage dissipated into nothingness, and she never dared to say anything. She questioned him a few times about his personal life, and he tried his best to satisfy her curiosity as much as he could under these strange circumstances he was under. Anniet found out that he was an only child in his family and was brought up only by his mother, as his dad disappeared into the mists when he was little. He wasn't very popular among others until he learned some skills, and then people started to value him for what he could do, not for who he was, so he had only a couple of good friends; he couldn't tell her about the friend he followed to come to this place. He never got married, but he did have many intimate relationships long in the past before understanding that it did not bring any happiness, neither for him nor for others, so he left it behind and moved on.

In addition to what he said, Anniet understood that one – he was older than he looked. She knew that there were some people who looked very young despite living more than one decade. It was supposed to be normal, however, where she lived, most people were ageing at the same rate with just a little difference. She tried to imagine Anthony looking older than he was, but no matter how she tried, it didn't match him, so she gave up on it. The second thing she understood was that he had been disappointed by romantic relations and didn't want them any more. That finding put a heavy stone in her heart. She cried for a few nights, and then decided to leave these thoughts behind and enjoy his company and friendship as it was. Maybe not always to the most remarkable success, but as much as she could.

After that, her life got into a nice and steady routine. Sharing her time between Rainee and Anthony, and a little bit of studying. Well, she thought it was a little when others would say that she studied a lot, but in reality, she just loved to attend Rainee's classes, no matter what she would teach. She would grab any opportunity to take sword lessons from her, which were usually in private but didn't go unnoticed by others. However, no matter how many people would ask Rainee to teach it to them too, she would reject these requests. And she loved to spend time in the library, but only because Rainee or Anthony would recommend her to read something so fascinating that she could hardly leave it aside until it was finished.

Sometimes she would stay in her own home, most of the time she would stay in Rainee's home. Very often, she would dream of staying in Anthony's home and was offered this on multiple occasions, but she never accepted this offer, as the reason she wanted to stay there was different from what she was offered. But she would visit his cottage very often, and soon she felt that she had three homes instead of one.

The School itself was getting busier and busier with each day passing, and the little town slowly started to grow into a city. It was actually growing and expanding. First, it seemed that there wouldn't be enough space for all these people, but the town started to grow and transform – new houses appeared from nowhere, new streets opened up. It didn't grow outwards as usual towns would expand. No, the boundaries didn't change, or at least not the way one would expect. The city unfolded from within, from the centre as if some unseen and unused space would reappear.

Anniel met many interesting people who were coming from all around the world, from places she had never even heard about and who looked so different in appearance.

Once, she asked Anthony why he was not attending any classes, and he said he was not really interested. She disagreed, saying that Rainee's classes were always very interesting, and since that day, he would come to each class held by Rainee. As the number of attending students increased drastically, Rainee transferred her classes outside. Not because they wouldn't fit into classrooms, no, classrooms too have expanded according to the number of people. Rainee just said it was more relaxing than indoors. And she was right.

Anthony would lie down at the very outskirts of the field chosen for class, with his eyes closed. Sometimes, it wasn't easy to figure out if he was sleeping or listening. Same as today. Sometimes Anniel would stay with him sometimes not, depending on whether she wanted to be left alone or if she wanted to interact with others. When next to Anthony, no one would ever talk or bother her in any way. No matter if he was sleeping or not.

Rainee was already teaching history, physics, and geography. Today, she announced that a new ethics class would be added. Anniel was sitting next to Anthony when she named the topic of the new class.

"I'd better go a bit closer," Anniel said silently to Anthony. She didn't want to wake him up in case he was snoozing.

"You are neither rude nor crude," Anthony replied, making it evident that he didn't sleep after all.

Anniel looked at him with a fond smile. Sometimes, he was so naive.

"You are so sweet," she said, standing up.

"That's true," Anthony said, looking at her through his half opened eyes, "anyone who said differently was lying and is not worthy of your thoughts."

Anniel didn't say anything to it, just smiled in gratitude before walking away closer to the centre. It was so nice to hear him saying it. No matter that he didn't know her that much to see the truth. Still, it was nice when someone said that she is not rude. Throughout her life, she had heard only the opposite.

“Two main things about our topic before we go any deeper,” Rainee started. “Despite any beliefs and prior teachings, they are unmovable and unchangeable. It is never rude to tell the truth. And it is never crude to be short and straightforward. In any other case, rudeness depends on the intent of the person, what they are trying to achieve, and what impact they want to make on others. But no matter what intention a person has, if they say the truth, bear in mind that truth and personal opinion are not the same, so when truth is stated, no matter under what intention, rudeness does not exist in it. Any questions about that?”

“Yes, how is one supposed to know if someone is telling the truth or their own opinion?”

“Well, that's very easy. If what you know matches what you think, then for you it is a truth. Keep in mind that we are talking about rudeness now, not about how to distinguish truth as a truth is in genuine, as that would be a more complicated subject that takes longer to learn and understand than a day or two. We must realise that rudeness in reality is a non-existent phenomenon invented by humans. First, we created our own standards, and those who don't behave according to these standards we call rude. And I am not talking now about high standards that could be taken as an example for others. No, those who don't uphold those standards we call stupid, silly, ignorant, and many other similar words, which is not true, either, as usually they are just less educated or less capable than we are, or they just want to be different. But when we call someone rude, we typically do it for one and only one reason – because the person crossed our pretence boundaries.

Many of us have been taught from early days how to behave, and most of us have tried to act in a suggested manner even when we didn't like it, just to please others and be accepted by them. By doing so, we sacrificed a lot, giving up our freedom. Instead of doing, or even thinking and feeling, how we wanted, we changed ourselves to meet the criteria set by others. We were expected to meet these criteria to be accepted by those who surrounded us.

By doing so, we build borders around ourselves, defining how we should act under certain circumstances, and rarely would cross these borders ourselves, or if we do, we either apologise for doing so, or justify why we did it, or take it as a little adventure, a little naughty moment when we allow to ourselves something that we shouldn't be allowed. And when someone else walks through life without respecting these boundaries, it flares up a rage in us: "How dare they?". We wouldn't allow ourselves to do it, so why should they?! "It's so rude," we say. When reality is, we ourselves never wanted to behave in a way these borders define, and did it only because, at some point, the world expected us to do it, and we obliged. So why isn't the same world demanding it from someone who doesn't oblige? If the world agrees with us and demands it from the intruder, then we are happy and supportive. If the world doesn't, then we demand it ourselves.

The smaller these borders are, the less likely you are ever to call someone rude. The broader and more extended they are, the more rude others will look to us. If you didn't put any restrictions on yourself in your actions, in your life, then it is highly unlikely you will ever call anyone rude,

even those who behave rudely. If something doesn't bother us personally, we don't become offended, no matter how others behave. We might get curious but not offended. A person who truly behaves rudely is in a lot of pain, and you would see that pain, not the way they act.

Let's go back to the question of whether the person that you consider rude is telling the truth or their own opinion. Some things don't have truth in them, as truth is not compatible with them, and only personal opinion can be said. Let's say someone asks me if their hairstyle is pretty. There is no truth in it. All I can say is my opinion that might be matching yours or might be different. If I say it is pretty, it will not become truth; if I say it is not, it will not become truth. It would become a lie or the truth in what I say, but not about the beauty of the hair. If I think it is not pretty but I say it is, then it is a lie because I just lied, but this lie is not about hair; this lie is about what I said.

Anything related to beauty, to comfort, to taste, and similar things doesn't have truth in it, as each of us sees and feels the world differently from our own perspectives. To try to match someone else's opinion means to lose part of oneself. By asking someone's opinion on these matters when in reality you don't want to hear an opinion but want confirmation, encouragement, or a compliment, you can put others in a situation where they may either lie or hurt you. In this case, if your personal opinion doesn't match my personal opinion and I choose not to lie, then you will consider me rude and heartless when in reality we just have different opinions about something. It was unethical for you to ask for my opinion when you didn't even want to hear it in the first place. If you want a compliment, not an opinion, then simply ask your friend to compliment you on something you like, and I believe you will have way more success. If you asked for a compliment and your friend gave you his opinion, then maybe he is not that good a friend after all, as he didn't even listen to what you asked for.

So in these matters, truth never stands for itself, as there is no truth. If we call someone rude because what they say doesn't match our opinion, then either they wanted to insult us – that's rude, or they said the truth as they think – that's not rude, no matter what effect it had on us. Ask the opinion of others only when you want to hear their opinion, not when you want others to match their opinion with yours.

To state your opinion when nobody asked you about it might be rude or might be not, depending on many factors: if you said what you think without knowing or guessing in advance that it will be unpleasant for others - it is not rude; to say your opinion to compliment - is not rude; to say your opinion to express yourself, your thoughts - is not rude, to tell someone that their opinion is not good and state your own - is rude.

If I were to state that I think that the blue colour is prettiest and you would tell me that it is not true, that the green colour is prettiest, you would be rude, as you just said to me that my opinion doesn't matter and yours is right. But if I made it as a statement, if I say that the blue colour is the prettiest as a fact, then it would be rude for you not to stand up and say that it is not true because I just stated my opinion as a truth on a matter where truth does not exist, so I lied and truth has to be always spoken up. Statements like this are not just a lie, they also cause a lot of misleading and misunderstanding. Those who dare to stand up for truth and disclose these lies, no matter how unimportant these lies look, are brave, not rude.”

“So are you telling me if someone comes to me and calls me ugly, they are not rude?”

“No, I am not saying that at all. If someone comes to you to call you ugly, they want to insult you. You can definitely call it rude. From my perspective, where I stand, it is not rudeness; it is an attack or an assault, as every insult is. If someone came and hit you, would you consider it rude?

Probably not, most likely you would consider it an offence. Then why, when your emotional self is hit, should it be taken more lightly than when your physical self is hit? But if you want to call it just rude, then it is entirely up to you”.

“Then, if I ask someone if I am pretty and they say that I am ugly, is it not rude? That is just an opinion?” – A young girl with a really pretty face asked.

“I can see there is room for confusion,” Rainee answered. “And it might seem that I am contradicting myself, but no, that is not just an opinion. That is also an insult. This part might be more challenging to understand for many, but let's look at it like this: for every one of us is given the right and choices to have our own likes and our own preferences.

I am allowed to think what flower is more beautiful for me, what colour I prefer, what animal is cutest, what dress is prettiest, what landscape is the best, what food is tastiest, and so on. Many, many things about how we feel, how we see, how we take in, what we prefer are individual for each of us. And it never should be a problem.

Problems begin when we start to choose for others. When we tell others that this flower is the prettiest (prettiest) not as our opinion but as a truth, as a statement, and expect others to agree with it; that this food is tastiest or healthiest and others have to eat it or otherwise they do something wrong; that others have to behave to these standards and not to others, otherwise they are lesser or at least strange; that others should look that way and not differently, otherwise they look ugly.

Let's put it simply like this – each of us is given the right to choose for ourselves, not for others, have an opinion about ourselves, not about others, how we should look, not how others should look, what we should learn, not what others should learn, what we should do, not what others should do.

The only right given to us in relation to others is: do I want to stay with another while he or she is looking and behaving in a way they do. If not, then it is not up to us to expect them to change to suit us better. If you don't want to stay with a person as he is right now, then don't stay. By staying, you just hurt yourself and others. Any attempt to modify others is unacceptable, and believing that we can is brought to us through many misunderstandings.

It doesn't mean that you always have to leave a person for good, but if someone is behaving rudely with you, don't stay just because they were nice a minute ago. If you suffer through bad behaviour hoping that it will pass, how will they know that it wasn't acceptable to you?

And your withdrawal shouldn't be a punishment for others until they change, as they might never change, and definitely will not change until you punish them. Your withdrawal is for yourself.

So no, if someone is calling others ugly for any reason, it is not acceptable as it is sorting out how others should look. It is not an opinion any more. Such sorting comes only from injury, and I wouldn't advise anyone to stay with someone who is sorting you to their liking. Any more questions so far?”

There was silence until someone finally said:

“All that was said is entirely new and difficult to grasp. I have already forgotten most of it, and despite knowing that there would be a lot I want to ask, I cannot remember what it is.”

“I will give a printout of today's discussion for everyone interested after class, so that you can read through it. So let's move further with rudeness. In our discussion, we covered a large part of rudeness, as calling someone rude only because of a different opinion is very common. Let's face

the truth: if anyone there is disrespectful, it's the person who doesn't allow others to have their opinion.

We often call someone rude when we have set some standards as the norm, and others don't want to live by these standards. Same as before, in reality, it is those who expect others to live by rules who can be called rude, as it is not for them to decide. I would call it controlling, but it can be called rude. Of course if someone is staying at somebody's house or in somebody's life, disagreeing with that somebody's rules and instead of moving away, expecting rules to be changed for them, then they are out of line, as every person is allowed to set rules for themselves, for their lives, for their home. Only they should be deciding when these rules are changed, if changed at all, and not someone else."

"But what if two people live together?"

"Well, there has to be a reason why they live together. As far as I know, there is no shortage of living spaces for it to be the reason. If people live together because they love each other, then the mentioned problems don't exist. When you love someone, you want to make life better for that person, and others don't have to force you to change, as you would be the first one to do so on subjects that are changeable for you. If someone expects you to change where you don't want to change, then there is not too much love from them. If someone expects you to change without changing themselves - then they are not loving you. If someone only takes and never gives or gives very little - they are not loving you. If someone expects you to do things for them - they are not loving you. If they don't love you, why do you want to stay with them? Even if you do love, why would you stay with someone who doesn't love you?"

Your decision to stay with someone who doesn't love you will bring only abuse and exploitation, especially if you love and they don't. A person who is exploiting others is downgrading very rapidly, so by staying with them under such conditions, you are causing harm to them too, not just to yourself.

But let's look from another perspective - do you expect them to change? If you do, then there is not a lot of love from your side. There is nothing wrong with drifting apart for a while if you need some time to realise what you want from life, and anyone who loves you will happily give you this time. If they don't, then they are simply needy, not loving. And if after drifting apart, you are happier, then stay that way, no matter what others say; your happiness is most important to you.

And also, you cannot make someone happy while not being happy yourself, so even if you think that somebody else's happiness is more important than yours, staying with them will not help to achieve it. But that's a discussion about love that again is much wider than today's topic. Let's go back to rudeness.

So, clashes of opinions and rules are reasons why we call someone rude, no matter if the other party is bringing any rudeness into it or not. But that is just a gentle part. The other part that I will cover now is usually met with much more violence and accusations.

Nearly everyone of you attending this class today has something to hide from others, some things that you consider shameful or feel guilty about. You say, even to yourself, that it doesn't exist, and for your life, you will deny it if someone points it out. That "someone" would look to you like rudest person in the world. Someone will simply state a truth, whether willingly or unwillingly, and if that truth is what your heart is hiding, you will take that person as rude at the mildest or for attacking you on stronger subjects.

The more you want to hide this truth, the more offensive you will be to those who disclose it. It can go to such a degree that you, on your own or in a group, would act very violently, anything from verbal abuse, such as calling someone rude or crude, to physical violence or even murder, towards someone who has spoken about something that you want to hide or believe is good to hide. However, the rule is unchangeable and straightforward: the one who says the truth is never rude, just as truth is never attacking. Any questions about that? No? Any objections?"

The whole class was sitting quietly, thinking deeply about what was just said.

"Can you give any examples?" – someone asked eventually.

"Examples? Apart from personal ones that cannot be named, there are plenty of everyday life examples affecting everyone:

Let's say if someone refuses to accept a gift given, they are called rude. When actually it is a quality that should be looked up to and developed. By rejecting what is not needed, one saves a lot, even in physical matters. But understand that habits that are established affect all, not just a part of us. So when you believe that refusing something given is bad, it will have the same effect in physical matters, in emotional, and in spiritual. If in the physical world you take everything offered, even if you don't like it, not daring to say "no, I don't need it," then you will also accept from others all emotional crap addressed to you, and also will make yourself obliged to accept from others beliefs that you don't like. By doing so, you are causing extraordinary damage to yourself and to those who give you these so-called gifts. When by refusing them you would save yourself and others from lots of trouble that will be faced in the future, whether in this world or in the afterworld.

Other mass examples: saying thank you as a standard for things done; trying to smile when you are sad; cheering someone up when they feel down; doing things for others when they cannot do it themselves; feeling sorry for others; not mentioning something others don't want to hear."

"But all these are good things!" "What to hide there?" "How can it be wrong?" – a lot of murmurs could be heard in response to Rainee's statement.

"They are good things if there is nothing to hide, if they are done not as polite pretence but from genuine feeling.

But by many each is taken as a rule, as a standard of good manners, and by doing so it loses its purpose.

Saying thank you when you don't mean it encourages people to do things that you don't need or want, in other words, waste people's time. Not mentioning that it leaves a distorted impression for them of what you need and what you like.

Smiling when feeling sad is good when you feel that sadness, it is nothing wrong to smile through the sadness if such is your reaction to it. Bad is to say that your sadness is not important, that you are not even sad. Then you completely confuse yourself and others about what you feel as a response to a particular event, and also lock that sadness inside and carry it through your life.

Cheering someone when they are feeling down is not the same as supporting someone at that moment. Staying with someone while they feel down can be very nice and supportive, but cheering them up is not so, as usually it is done because we ourselves are so afraid of sadness that we don't want to see it in others, so we do all the cheering not for them but for ourselves. We don't know how to behave when we are sad, and we don't know how to behave with others when they are sad. So when we are sad, we hide it from ourselves, saying that it is not important. When others are sad, we cheer them up, making others believe that their true feelings are not good, that they have to choose

how they feel. Also, making them dependent on someone to pull them out of the reason that made them feel down, instead of learning how to go through it and become stronger.

Doing things for others leads to dependency, too, and leaves a person without evaluation of their own strength. Helping others is a good thing, but helping others is never doing things for them. When you are at service it is not the same, as you are committed to doing one or another work; without it, there would be no society, just individuals. Still, when you constantly do things for others that they cannot do themselves, it creates an illusion that they are entitled to receive it when reality is that we are all entitled only to what we can do ourselves, and nothing else; everything else comes as a gift and goodwill from others, but doesn't become their responsibility or liability.

To feel sorry for others is never a good thing, as it helps no one. No matter what happened to someone, it has already happened, and feeling sorry is just keeping them in a past that will not return. They might need help or sympathy but not your pity. Feeling sorry for someone is basically saying that they are in a state that is somehow lesser. It is not true, especially when people are mainly locked onto seeing just the physical world, physical abilities, and feeling sorry for others, not realising that by doing so they just cripple a person even further, making their spirits believe that they have something missing too, and pushing them into an emotional state of despair. The physical is lowest in the hierarchy of human existence, and losing a lot of physical abilities doesn't cripple a person that much as losing a small part of the spiritual self.

Not mentioning something that others don't want to hear might be controversial, as we are all entitled to have free will in choosing what we want to hear. However, when there are people living together, or even if in a close group, these "don't speak about it" points will inflate with time, cutting away love, understanding, and friendship, with the same force as someone constantly nagging each other about something. It is up to a true friend to constantly remind about these points at any opportunity given, just as it is up to a true friend to understand that nagging on them at times when the other is closed will not change anything, but will only make others close more. However, there are reasons why a person is hiding something even from their closest friends, and the world will work to disclose these reasons by constantly attacking that part until it is finally opened and healed. So by pretending that something that others don't want to be mentioned doesn't exist, you are just prolonging their suffering."

"What if what you say brings pain and anger to others?" – A familiar voice asked.

The look in Rainee's eyes softened a little bit, and she smiled at Anniet before answering her question.

"Pain is not the same on every occasion. Pain can be inflicted or pain can be reminded. People get angry at times when pain is reminded, and it happens just because they choose not to heal their own wounds, their own pains.

Responsibility to heal it lies with the injured person and not with someone else, not even with those who inflicted that pain; everyone else can only help, and those who pretend that there is no injury in the person are not helping. Only those who remind them about these hidden wounds are helping.

Unfortunately, with our education, instead of gratitude, people get offended, blaming that their pain wasn't respected. The truth is that there is nothing to respect, as pain should never be respected.

It would be very rare to be attacked back at the time when you inflict pain, as a person wasn't prepared for that, so there is no immediate reaction to protect from it. That's why people who

usually inflict pain on others go through their lives without even understanding what they are doing, and people who remind others about their pain are called rude and callous and receive all the anger and punishment that they never deserved.

To avoid such treatment, we learn not to mention to others what they don't want to hear, and in return expect others to do the same with us. Poking somebody's wound and reminding them about it is not the same, and there is no mystery about how to find the difference, as it all depends on intention.

It is just as easy to distinguish if you are inflicting pain or reminding about it. Control, shaming, guilt-tripping, manipulating, sorting, pushing opinions, punishing, and more are what hurt people. Telling the truth, pointing at something that is already there, telling a compliment, speaking your opinion, doesn't hurt; it only reminds.”

“So then are you saying that there is no such thing as rudeness? There are no rude people?” – A new voice came from the crowd.

“And yes and no,” Rainee said. “As with every human creation, it exists only until people believe that there is such a thing, and while people believe in it, it will exist. It doesn't help to pretend that there is nothing, as it will bring just an extra layer of lies, and it will only complicate things.”

“Do you yourself think people are rude?”

“Only when they want to be rude. It is the art of feeling intention behind action, whether verbal, physical, or even unspoken emotional pressure. If you come to me with the intent to be rude, then yes, I will take it for rudeness. Everybody's wishes should be respected, and if that is your wish, why should I oppose it?

The problem starts when people don't really understand what they themselves wish for, not to mention understanding what others wish for.

Sometimes you think you are asking a question, when in reality you wish to tell your opinion.

Sometimes you think you are kind, when in reality you just wish to soothe uncomplicated things so you could live life as if nothing happened.

Sometimes the intention is to control, but it is taken for advice or even for generosity and kindness.

Sometimes the intention is to help, and people take it as an offence.

Often, those who had no intention, just spoke aloud their thoughts and observations, could be battered to death for bad intentions and blame themselves for a lifetime, when in reality it is they who have been rudely punished for just living their own lives and doing what everyone is supposed to do – expressing themselves.”

While Rainee spoke these words, her eyes were locked on Anniet, but Anniet was deep in her thoughts and didn't realise that what was said was directed at her. Rainee sighed inwardly. When someone is not prepared to hear the truth, when they don't want to hear it, then the whole world can scream and shout it as loudly as possible, it will bypass unnoticed by a recipient. Human will is one of the greatest gifts from The One, and it is not for others to decide what a person is doing with it. When there is no opening, nothing will go in, no matter what outer force is exercised; if forced upon, then it will just strengthen the shell. Until the time comes when, for any reason, may it be as small as a tip of the needle, a person will realise that there is a need for help, that maybe things are

not as he thought and believed them to be, just then a possibility for truth to enter is created. Until then, everything will just slide by, as it did just now, or will meet resistance, which is actually a much better outcome than meeting agreement.

When resistance is met, at least there is a chance for a person to understand that he is fighting against something and to look at what it is. When agreement is met, it is like creating another reality when a person agrees to all that is said instead of letting it in. It just creates an extra shell, but the kind that makes it impossible to break, as a person already believes that he took the truth in and doesn't see the reason to do it again, so they just happily build a false reality around. There is no chance to break through it by word, as a person is in total agreement with all you say when both realities don't match. It is basically impossible to teach a person who agrees with you. Why would it be? They already believe they are on the same page, when often, not just in a different book, but even in a different library. That's why her first teaching to anyone is disobedience. Only a person who is capable of disobeying what he is told can look into what he is disobeying, too.

Of course, the easiest and most efficient way of learning is through trust and belief, but that requires an opening of the soul for intake without questioning, without agreeing or disagreeing, and this quality is extremely rare. All people are born with it, but it is destroyed at a very young age by those we trust and love most. And effort doesn't even matter, as one can teach another only what they know, only what they are.

A person with destroyed trust cannot teach another to be trustful; they can pass to others only what they have. That's why rejection is also such a vital skill.

The audience today was surprisingly well behaved, looking more inwards than pointing out to others, which was a pleasant surprise. A perfect environment to learn. The barrier holding it up, however, was very wobbly, and tension behind it was building in many places. Still, it was very nice to have such a long moment of peace. The longer it lasts, the more understanding will come into those who want to understand, and surprisingly, it was a majority of the audience. However, as expected, someone finally erupted. And it will create a chain that will turn order into chaos.

“So, according to your words, we all should be going around poking each other's sores without a single consideration for what others feel about it!” – An angry voice sounded.

“It's not what I said, but if there were only two options: one, what you say, and another, respect the sores of others and live pretending that they don't exist, then I would choose the first one. If everyone would do that, then in just a few generations, humanity would finally get rid of the belief that it is alright to live in pain, or even accept pain from others, as this option just leads to never-ending stagnation in agony.

However, I do not suggest any of it. As we live now, even if some people would try, it would just create groups and outcasts. If everyone did it, most likely it would cause severe distress and merciless disagreements for many years until, probably, the third generation would start to learn how to reject new injuries, the fourth generation would be in much better shape, and in the fifth or sixth generation, this problem would be finally cleared. As everybody's lives matter, it is not an advisable course of action, as there is no reason to sacrifice first, second, and third generations for the sake of future good. In fact, sacrifice will never bring good, and by curing one problem, it will create another.”

“Then what are you saying? If no way is right?! Is there a third way?”

“There is always a third way. And a fourth, and a fifth. And more. If you are not happy with it, bring it to The One who created the world with infinite possibilities, not only two to choose from. If you don't see them, it doesn't mean that there are none. Fear is a very powerful ally if you want to see as few ways as possible, until finally closing yourself down completely.”

“Give at least one example.”

“One example? Open yourself up instead of hiding from so-called poking. Start actually seeking it. Feel every pain that it brings without caring too much what others think about it, don't hide it from others. Be curious whenever new, yet unknown depths are touched instead of being fearful. Open for the unknown without preparation, then you will be in a moment to experience what this moment brings to you.”

“Wouldn't it mean then that everyone would just be able to stomp me, spit on me, and insult me?!”

“It means precisely this, as it is not up to you how others behave. Up to you is only how you react to it. By opening up, surely you will feel more inflicted pain at the beginning, along with pain that is just reminded. But understand that no matter how much you guard, you are receiving it anyway. The only difference is that you guard and keep it safe after receiving it. I say no. Expose it and let it heal.

Only by allowing yourself to realise how much it hurts until it is gone will you teach yourself not to be hurt again.

Only by letting yourself realise how much some people are hurting will you allow yourself to avoid their company.

Only by allowing yourself to know what really inflicted pain, you will stop attacking those who touched your sores by accident, and will say stop for those who actually make you bleed in places where there was no wound before.

Only by allowing yourself to realise what truly brings pain will you stop inflicting it on others.

Only experiencing with yourself, not with others, can bring you understanding about the difference between the pain that is brought to you by inflicting it on a healthy part and the pain, or even agony, of some rotten wound that you have been hiding for years, expecting that it will somehow disappear.

Well, as we all know, these kinds of wounds don't disappear on their own, usually someone has to reopen them and remove dead tissues to bring life to them anew. This work is very unpleasant on its own, and when on top of that your patient is screaming at you, swearing, and biting, it just complicates everything. So if you behave like this, don't be surprised that not many will come to help you. Most likely not, as most will just let you rot silently, and you will call them your friends. Only the brave will come to your aid, and you will call them your enemies.

When one day you seek to heal yourself, you will start to value those who actually help and see how insincere those who ignore it are.

Yes, by opening up, you will feel more pain. Still, it doesn't mean that you will be in more pain; on the contrary, pain will slowly start to leave you, and without the inner agony that you carry on a daily basis, you will become receptive to feeling what is happening to you right now. You will stop allowing others to abuse you and will stop being abusive.

Now I will share with you the biggest secret that will help you in any way if you master it. I don't know how it has become a secret to humanity, as it actually is one of the greatest gifts given to us.

Nothing that others do will have any effect on you unless you accept it. For you to receive something it is not enough just for others to give – you have to take it. For exchange there has to be two ends: one that gives and the other that receives. For any influence, there have to be two conditions met: one influencing, the other agreeing to be influenced. Nothing, neither good nor bad, can be given to someone who refuses to receive it.

With just a very few exceptions of physical force, whenever someone hurt you, you agreed to accept that hurt. Every time you benefited from someone doing you good, you agreed to receive that good. The One didn't create any human hopeless and in the mercy of others. You always have a choice, either to accept or reject what you are given, whether by force or with love. Same as you always have a choice about what you give to others.

With that, today's discussion is over. Everyone who wants a printed copy of what we spoke about can come and collect it from me now or find it later in the library.”

“Why is class over so suddenly?” – Marcus asked. – “I wanted to ask so many more questions.”

“Not much can be learned in attack mode. Attack goes hand in hand with disagreement, superiority, and rejection. None of it is compatible with learning. This is not a fighting arena to see who is stronger; this is a class where I teach those who want to learn. We have gathered here for this purpose alone and nothing else.”

“Will this class be continued?”

“Those who genuinely want to discuss this matter further can find me tomorrow outside of School.”

“Where?”

“It is up to those who want to attend to find it.”

“How? That is so unfair!”

“Marcus, there are no unfair things in this world unless you agree to accept them. Those who truly want to attend will find it; those who want only to argue and attack will not. Those who don't trust what I say will not even try to find it. I think it is really fair to those who truly want to learn.”

Such a task as Rainee made was unheard of. Some people left without looking back. Most came to collect the printout before going. Soon, only three people were left in the field: a man dressed in black sleeping under the tree, a young teacher sitting on a large stone she had chosen as a desk for herself, and a young girl sitting in the middle of the field, deep in her thoughts.

That evening was the first in a long while when Anniet didn't go to the campfire. She stayed at her own place, trying to work on what she had heard today. Surely, if she would go to Rainee, she would explain it in more detail, but somehow Anniet... didn't want it? Somehow, she didn't want anything. She tried to think, but it didn't work as thoughts were scattering without allowing her to arrange them into something understandable. She tried to read, but couldn't understand a word.

Usually she would read a printout of the past class a few times, but today these papers were lying next to the entrance and she didn't dare to touch them.

The King's story was so fascinating! Why can't she just go and pick it up? Maybe because the other dreadful piece of paper was next to it... But why was it so repulsive? What did they even speak about? And Anthony said something really sweet to her today. She could remember how she felt when he said it, but for her life, she could not remember what it was about. Nor could she remember what Rainee was talking about. That could be easily fixed just by looking at a piece of paper, so why would she not? Whatever she spoke about was way too overwhelming, too confronting, so that at some point she just switched off. That never happened before. So she just sat there staring in front of herself for a long time.

Darkness started to take over, and it was time to go to bed, but she couldn't be bothered, as sleep too avoided her, just as any thought. So she just stayed where she was waiting for morning, hoping that morning would bring more clarity.

Instead of the morning, a knock on the door came. That was even more unexpected than anything else and brought her back to earth. No one ever came to her since her arrival. No one ever knocked on her door, no matter if here or at Rainee's. She never found it strange, as it would be more unusual for someone to visit her. She never had visitors at home either, unless some emergency would come up. "Home? That was not a home! That was a prison!" Some unexpected anger came, bringing these strange thoughts that startled Anniet even more.

The second knock was a bit louder, more demanding, and she was sure now it wasn't the outcome of her imagination, so she stood up to open the door.

Anthony walked in as soon as she opened it without even asking if he could. That was unusual as he would always be very reserved to the point that it would make an impression of a timid person. By now, Anniet knew he wasn't timid, but nevertheless, sometimes he was so naive on specific matters.

"I thought you would use a friend this evening," he said, closing the door and turning around to look at her.

All the worries of the day were suddenly swiped away by some unknown force, and instead of answering, the corners of Anniet's lips started to twitch. She tried to speak, but instead just a strange, angry sound came from her mouth. She wondered what it was trying to explain herself, but realised that tears were choking her throat, and the more she tried to make any sound, the more they were coming up until she couldn't hold it any more. She wanted so badly to hug Anthony and cry her heart out, but she couldn't even do that, as the way she felt about him was so different from what he was feeling for her, and she didn't want him to realise it and to be pushed into a corner. So she just dropped back on a seat, covering her face with her hands. What is she even crying about? She didn't know.

She could feel Anthony sitting next to her, and the next moment his arm hugged across her shoulders, pulling her closer and pressing her to his chest. It was such a strange feeling. It felt as if Anniet was watching herself from the side, but also being engulfed in these arms, and also crying non-stop. Like three different people, but also the same person. This hug felt so natural. Not intimate, not offensive. Why did she even think it would be any different? What wouldn't she do to be in these arms at least for a few minutes, and now, when it happened, she just couldn't stop crying.

Oh well, never mind, as Rainee says, it cannot be helped, but what will he think about it, as there was no obvious reason to be so sad, as nothing happened.

"I don't know why I am crying," she managed to say.

"I know," he said, kissing the top of her head and pressing her even harder to his chest, "don't worry."

Now she definitely wasn't worrying any more about the crying, even if it wouldn't stop, no matter how hard she tried. So she chose to ignore that crying part of her and stay in the one who was living in the moment, being held by these gentle arms and listening to the steady heartbeat of the person sitting next to her. It felt so natural to be like this, and she was happy. Happy that he had come, happy that she was crying, happy for whatever happened to bring this moment. She didn't know how long it would last or if it would ever repeat itself, so she just stayed in it now while it was offered.

Minutes were passing, and nothing was changing, just her getting exhausted from all this crying and getting sleepy. Secretly, she was hoping that this crying would not stop any time soon, and it didn't. She fell asleep before it stopped.

In the morning, she woke up lying crouched on a seater covered with a blanket with her head resting on somebody's knees. She didn't have to think long to remember whose knees it could be. A little peek through half-open eyes confirmed her guess. What should she do? She didn't want to pretend to be sleeping, but she didn't want to move away either. And what should she even say? What happened to her last night? How did he know that she would be sad? As she said goodbye, as usual, before leaving. Probably when she didn't come to the bonfire, he realised that something was not right. But she herself didn't know what was wrong...

"Hi," she said silently without moving.

"Hi," he replied.

"Is it OK if I stay like this a little bit longer?" she asked again, thinking that there could hardly be any more cosy place on the planet, and she definitely would like to take a few extra minutes before getting up.

"Take your time, we are not in a rush," he said, and she knew that he was smiling. That's good!

A twister of thoughts was playing in the background of her mind, suggesting that he should be tired of sitting like this with her all night, that there was no reason for her to bother him even more, that there wasn't even a reason to put him in such a situation at all. She ignored these thoughts and snuggled deeper into the blanket. Anthony's hand moved from her shoulder and stroked her head a few times before returning back. Thanks god it didn't feel uncomfortable in any way. So she could be in this close proximity with him without getting too crazy. That was good to know. She turned her head slightly to look at his face, and after meeting his eyes, slowly turned away. It was better not to push her luck; there are limits after all.

Anyway, what happened yesterday? Why had she became so sad? Right, Rainee was giving an extra lesson about rudeness, and it made her realise that she had been called rude so many times for no reason. Is that why she got so upset? How strange. What difference does it make? She doesn't live there any more and will never return. That's right, she doesn't want to go back to her previous life for any reason. She doesn't even want to talk about it or remember it. It is good that Rainee has spoken about it; at least she knows now. It is interesting what Rainee will say today.

Today!!! In a moment, Anniet was standing on her feet with her eyes wide open.

"I missed it!" she said with horror. She overslept Rainee's special class! Where only those who want to attend will find the way!

"Don't worry," Anthony said in his so calming voice, "I am sure you will make it on time."

"How can you be sure?" – How did he even know what she was talking about?

"You want to attend it, and all who wish to attend will make their way," he said simply.

"Then let's go, let's go," Anniet urged, running to the sink and splashing her face, quickly combing her hair, and getting ready to leave in less than two minutes.

"Not before breakfast," Anthony said, standing up. "I am sure she wouldn't be happy to see you fainting in the middle of her talk."

Such a picture made Anniet laugh inwardly, but she had no food at home, and there was no time to go anywhere else. She was about to object, but one look at Anthony's face made her realise that it wouldn't be an easy task to do.

"Then let's go," she said without arguing. "We can grab something from your place. Anyway, we will walk by it."

"So you know where you are going?" Anthony asked, following her through the door.

"Sure, I know. It is so obvious. In fact, it was obvious before becoming obvious. I don't know how to explain. I knew it even before it had become known. I know it sounds strange, but it is just how it is. Don't you know where to go?"

"I will follow you," Anthony said.

But he didn't follow; he actually led them to his cottage, where they, despite Anniet's protests, had a full breakfast before moving forward. After breakfast, Anthony put an extra-large sandwich in a bag with some apples and oranges. Only then did he allow her to show the way.

"What is it?" Anniet asked, pointing at this snack bag.

"It's a lunch box," Anthony smiled.

"Lunch box? Never heard about it before. What is it for?"

"For us," he said, "in case we get hungry."

Annet didn't say anything to it, just thought that he was really into feeding people... At first, Anniet was a little bit impatient, but as minutes passed, Anthony's calm took over her, too, and she stopped rushing around. Just then, she realised how silly she was, as it was still an early morning, and it was highly unlikely they would miss anything. And even if they would, then Rainee definitely would tell her later in the day what she had missed.

She led them along way that was so familiar by now. Halfway, they bumped into Marcus, who was heading in the opposite direction.

"Have we missed it?" Anniet asked with surprise. She was sure that Marcus wouldn't leave earlier.

"How would I know," Marcus said in an unhappy voice, "how one is supposed to know where that class is going to be? Instructions were really dumb. How can one find it with no information?"

He was really stressed. Anniet would think that it was silly, but wasn't she herself acting the same just a short time ago?

"Thank you," she said to Anthony. Just now she had finally realised what a big impact he made on her. If not for him, she might be running around the woods in a similar manner as Marcus did now.

"Who is he?" Marcus asked, looking at Anthony. "How come I have never seen you before? Who are you?" He redirected his questioning to Anthony.

Same greeting every time he sees Anthony and Anniet together... Anniet tried many times to introduce them, but all in vain; all was forgotten in a short time. Anthony himself never bothered to answer him, simply not paying him any attention. However, this morning he replied

"Ghost of the past," he said.

It made Anniet laugh and put a strain on the already short-tempered Marcus.

"Well, Ghost of the past, are you coming together with her because she knows where she is going, and you don't? Then maybe you will not mind if I join too. After all, Lady Rainee definitely shared the class location with her friend."

He was calling Rainee Lady, but he was always so angry at her... Anniet could not understand it.

"No, she didn't share the location with me, but you can come together, as it is obvious where to go. I thought everyone who wants to attend knows it, but maybe I am wrong."

Marcus didn't say anything to it but walked behind.

"Never in my life have I seen such an irresponsible teacher," he was expressing his thoughts aloud. "I genuinely don't understand how such a great personality could have such a laid-back attitude."

It was fascinating how he recognised, more than anyone else, that Rainee was really someone extraordinary and admitted that her knowledge is much deeper than his, and would try to take in anything she says, and would keep asking for more, and would call her Lady Rainee. Still, at the same time, he was constantly criticising her, angry and demanding. Anniet truly liked Marcus, and despite what she thought about him at the beginning, they have become really good friends, but still, this attitude was difficult to understand.

"You are always so annoyed with her and have such a bad attitude when she thinks so highly of you and spends so much time trying to help you. Why is that?" she asked.

"Who is thinking highly of me?" Marcus snorted. "All she does is pull me down all the time and push me away, refusing anything I ask."

"We must be seeing the world with entirely different eyes," Anniet couldn't believe what he was saying. "She never pulls you down, and she gives you more of her time than anyone else. And when she speaks about you, she always says that you are a much greater person than you yourself realise and that she is not willing to teach you things you ask for because it is not what will help you to start seeing yourself as she sees you."

Marcus just snorted again.

"Well, it is up to you to believe or not, but I don't have any reason to lie. Besides, I too think that you are much better than you are trying to be. But if you don't believe it, then there is nothing I can do."

"Why do you two live together?" Marcus asked.

“Sorry?” Anniet didn't understand the question.

“Why do you live in her house? You have your own place, and nobody has lived with her before.”

“Because she invited me,” Anniet didn't understand the nature of the question.

“Are you a couple?”

“Sorry?” Anniet stammered once more.

“Are you a couple?” Marcus repeated. “Do you love each other?”

“I do love her to bits and pieces,” Anniet said, taken aback by such a question. “But it doesn't make us a couple. How did such an idea even get into your head? What a strange way of thinking! She just offered me a spare room in her house because I like being in her company. Besides, she has a boyfriend.”

“But he is not here?”

“Obviously, he is not here; otherwise, we all would see him. But what does it have to do with you thinking that we are a couple?”

“Nothing really,” Marcus said, “don't be offended, as it wouldn't be anything wrong if you were. Just she always does what you ask—even invited you to live with her. She teaches you to fight with a sword. She comes with you to the gatherings. I am wondering what the secret is. How can it be achieved?”

“Try to be loving instead of needy and demanding,” Anthony suggested.

“Who are you?” Marcus squinted his eyes with his question, making Anniet sigh. “Oh yes, the ghost of the past. Why do you think I am not loving?”

“To be loving, you have to produce some love,” Anthony laughed, “you hardly manage to squeeze out a single drop of respect.”

“OK, that's enough, that's enough,” Anniet interrupted, seeing that nothing good is coming from the direction these two are heading. “But I must admit that what Anthony said is right, you don't respect her, at least not in a way the rest of us understand respect. I don't think you love her either; all you like is her knowledge. So you just try to use her to your own advantage.”

“Is it bad?” Marcus asked, not trying to argue. “I was told that this place is for learning, and she is a teacher. Is it bad to use her knowledge to my advantage? How else can I learn?”

“I see where you are coming from and to some degree can understand your logic, but she is not a library, not a book that you can just use as much as you want. And the most significant difference is that she sees you better than you see yourself and knows what you need to progress better than you. A book or a library cannot give you such advice. But instead of taking her advice, you ignore it entirely and try to squeeze out of her something that she thinks would be harmful for you.”

Marcus was walking in silence for some time before asking:

“Do you think that is the case?”

“I know that is the case!” Anniet said firmly.

“Then why did she never say it to me?”

“Because you never listen! And never ask.”

"I ask her all the time."

"Yes but not questions! I mean, not something that she truly thinks about you. You often ask why she does this or that, and she has to explain herself. That doesn't provide you with any information about you. Why does she even have to explain herself? She never asks you to explain yourself."

"I never saw it that way," Marcus admitted. "I also ask a lot about a subject."

"Yes, and I love your questions when they are not blaming, as then every time you raise a question, it leads to an interesting answer. I truly love it. But still, you never ask anything about yourself. I mean her opinion. You never ask what she thinks is best for you, and when she shares it anyway, you simply don't listen and take it as an offence. You never seek her point of view; you just think by yourself what you think is best for you, and then try to press it out of her. Well, at least ask, not pressure. Explaining why you want it, what good it would do for you, and that you realise that if something goes wrong, you will take full responsibility."

"When something goes wrong," Anthony corrected.

"Sorry?" Anniet didn't understand him.

"You said if something goes wrong. The correct saying should be when something goes wrong."

"Why does it have to be so certain?"

"Didn't you say yourself that she is very smart? Then, if she thinks that it would bring more harm than good, why should there be a doubt?"

"Who are you?" Marcus asked, squinting his eyes.

Anniet just completely gave up on this conversation.

Luckily, they had arrived. A large field on the edge of the cliff with a view of the town in the distance. A few other students were already here, but not chatting with each other; instead, they sat quietly as if enjoying a little time with themselves.

"I am going to ask them if this is the place," Marcus said.

"Why wouldn't you just simply trust?!" Anniet asked in disbelief.

"Trust who?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know... Anyone... Me? You? Her? Anyone? Why can't you trust?"

Marcus opened his mouth to say something, but then changed his mind. But instead of going to make enquiries, he sat down and waited patiently like everyone else.

Chapter 12; A Teller in the School

... “Hearts of people hardly change overnight” ...

Rainee was sitting in a "Seat of Kings", enjoying the view.

She didn't know the history behind this place and why it was made so special, but the name suited it nicely.

One truly felt like a king of the world while sitting here.

So much comfort was created for someone, and it stayed through all this time, so much safety, so much care.

She knew it was ancient, but it wasn't fading away.

And it would hardly ever fade away.

If someone cannot find this magical spot in this place built on magic, there truly is not a single drop of desire to hear the truth behind what she says, so there is no point for them to be here.

She was going to allow open discussion today.

There was no need for those who want only to be heard while speaking nothing to be here.

She wasn't expecting any surprise, as hearts of people hardly change overnight.

Well, one changed a little bit.

And it was a pleasant surprise too, as against all odds it didn't harden.

That was a relief.

She was glad that Anniet had this mysterious friend of hers that Rainee wasn't allowed to think about.

She did her best not to think.

If pieces of information about him were just floating as a background, they could stay, but as soon as she would connect one to another to get a picture, all would disperse and vanish, as if they were never here.

Not doing so was a true challenge.

Rainee loved challenges.

But for someone who dedicated her life to connecting these pieces in ways others would never even think possible, now not to do so was a true mission.

Not a single one.

Not in the simplest way.

Simply do not think about him in any way.

Feel but not think.

Feelings were allowed.

But only as long as they didn't connect to anything that would awaken knowledge.

That way, there was no point in even retaining these feelings, these so-called brushes.

But it was a mystery, and she loved mysteries.

She was allowed to remember that he was Anniet's friend.

Also, she was allowed to know how she felt about him.

For anyone else, he simply didn't exist.

Well, the headmaster had stress about him; she even set a reminder about him for herself, but it didn't help.

And Rainee wasn't allowed to remember about that reminder either.

What a fascinating mystery!

But she couldn't be excited about it, as it will take over the calm that is required, will instantly connect all these little scattered pieces of information, and all will disappear.

First to arrive was Marcus.

No surprise here.

But he didn't stay and went off, wandering, trying to find something that was already found.

He doesn't listen to his inner voice, and this voice is so accurate and powerful...

What should she do?

How can she make someone hear who already has such precise hearing and firmly believes that it is just rubbish in the background, not allowing him to concentrate?

How does one teach someone to see when he already can see but believes that he is not seeing?

If he would just stop searching and look into what he already has, it would surprise him a lot.

He left, then came back again, then left again, then walked by once more...

What a restless soul.

Then other people started to come in.

They had a different attitude than Marcus.

They knew well that this was the place they wanted to come today, and if it wasn't where they found Rainee, then never mind, this place was nice on its own.

They just sat down and took in that invisible power this place offered.

Then Anniet came with her mysterious friend, and they brought Marcus with them.

Somehow, Anniet even managed to calm him a little bit.

Good that she came.

Rainee wasn't sure she would.

The outcome of yesterday's reaction could not be predicted.

Rainee wasn't sure if she herself should interfere, as the potential for shutting Anniet down even more was much greater than the chances of success.

But she was about to take a chance anyway, when someone else had stepped in.

Someone she was not allowed to think about...

Oh god, how frustrating it is!

Still, it is good that he exists and is here...

don't connect, don't connect, don't connect!

No connections to anything,

“It is just good that he is here” is allowed to stay on its own.

Let it stay like this.

It brings a pleasant feeling too, so let it stay, no reasons or approval needed.

Time was passing, more people were coming, but nothing close to the numbers she had yesterday.

Good.

The fewer the numbers, the less chance for anarchy.

She'd better start now before this restless soul, under the name of Marcus, explodes.

Prolonging his agony, unfortunately, is not helping him with his problem; otherwise, she would do it all day long.

Today's lesson was very different from yesterday's.

Only about fifty people attended, and those who came were not very keen to argue or blame.

How Rainee handled it was also completely different.

Mainly she allowed others to speak, to bring their stories and tell what they think, and after that she would tell how she sees that story, and nearly every time brought different colours to it and turned the cards around.

The atmosphere was very light and friendly.

The stories and explanations were very fascinating, but Anniet found it difficult to follow.

Something had clicked last night.

What she would have interpreted one way yesterday, all seemed different today.

All she could see was how fast people were to blame others without even thinking about how much harm they do themselves.

And over such minuscule reasons that for them looked like mountains.

She didn't have any questions to ask.

She didn't have any stories to tell.

She simply didn't want to think about her past any more.

No matter how much she tried to bring her attention to the lesson it didn't happen.

Her mind was occupied with the feeling of such gentle and also so strong arms that were holding her not so long ago.

The culprit of these thoughts was lying and snoozing next to her.

Not even realising the impact his actions had.

How badly she wanted to tell him about it...

But what was she supposed to say?

He obviously didn't want this kind of relationship

And she was his only friend.

How could she impose on him something he didn't want...

Wouldn't it put their friendship in an awkward situation?

No, no way, she cannot do that.

He was way too dear to her to risk losing him.

The group started to laugh about something, and Anniet rewound in her mind what it was about.

People were making fun of Marcus again.

Rainee suggested moving from a discussion about rudeness that was nearly exhausted to a debate on being crude.

She asked if someone could give any examples, and immediately someone said:

"Marcus!"

It brought this laughter in agreement with this suggestion.

How unfair!

He didn't even say anything today.

And even when he does, the only person he might be crude with was Rainee, as anyone else had never received any hardship from him; they simply were afraid of him when he got into his moods.

Rainee waited until the laughter stopped before asking:

"Can anyone identify what action we just witnessed?"

"Assault". – Anniet said without hesitation before thinking.

She bit her tongue after speaking as she tried to refrain from making such straightforward statements in case she herself would be accused of attacking someone.

"By whom?" – Rainee asked softly, smiling at her.

"By everyone," – Anniet replied.

Now she didn't have any choice left to keep her thoughts for herself, as she definitely would not say to Rainee anything else but the truth.

"Well done," – Rainee praised her. – "If there were an evaluation test, you would have the highest score. Can you explain why?"

Annet was going to shake her head, but then changed her mind. Why would she be afraid to tell what she thinks? What if others disagree? If she is not right, Rainee will correct her, and she will know; if she is right, why should she be afraid to speak it, just because others might not like it?

"Marcus is never crude," – she said. – "He might be demanding and be straightforward, but he never swears, never threatens, never calls names, or even laughs at anyone. He is learning to say what he thinks, but it is difficult for him. Instead of encouraging and helping, people are usually trying to shut him down, telling him that he is rude, as they don't like the way he thinks. But he is never rude or crude. He is just impatient. That cannot be the same. And no matter how much hardship he is receiving for it, he does his best to tell the truth as you have asked him to do so."

Uncomfortable silence fell over everyone, bringing shivers to Anniet's back, but she ignored it. She spoke to Rainee, not to anyone else, and Rainee didn't show any signs of displeasure over what was said.

“Any other thoughts?” – Rainee asked, – “Any disagreement?” – She added after nobody spoke. No one disagreed either.

“Well, that concludes our discussion about "crude". Well said, I could not say it better myself. A crude person is someone who swears and calls names, no matter what tone or manner. A crude person is someone who makes jokes about others, even funny jokes that make the object of the joke smile or laugh on the outside and bleed and shrink from inside. Not considering someone's feelings does not make one crude, as no one is obliged to do so. The One never made a compulsion for one person to be considerate of others. It is an excellent quality that can be developed while growing, but is not essential for growth. It always should come from free will and own wish, when it is forced or expected it makes a lot of harm.

A crude person is someone who does not consider the feelings of others, but only while seeking gain for himself. When you seek something from someone and then call them crude for not meeting your expectations, it is hardly ever the right thing to do. In reality, the more abilities someone has, the more demands and expectations are placed on them, the more likely they will be called rude, crude, or cold-hearted for not meeting all of them. And the more a person tries, the more hardship they will receive. In short, it is good to know more than others, and a person who knows more than others is not crude for not using his knowledge and abilities in a way others want them to be used. The crude person is the one who knows better for others. And I want you to work on the difference between one and another. Any more questions?”

Marcus lifted his hand. Through all this laughter and talk, he was sitting still and not showing any emotions about it.

“Do you know why my behaviour receives this kind of outcome?” – he asked after Rainee acknowledged him.

What a straight question! That definitely caught everybody's attention, and every look landed on Rainee.

“Yes,” – she replied with an indication that this is the end of her answer.

“Could you tell me?” – Marcus ignored it.

“No,” – the answer was again straight and short.

“Could you explain why I cannot be told, even if you know, and I want to hear?”

Everybody's eyes were jumping from one speaker to another. Nobody was used to hearing Marcus speaking in such an undemanding tone.

“Yes, I can explain that,” – Rainee said. – “You know, as well as I, that to tell a person things about them makes more harm than good, as those who want and seek to see, find it out by themselves, or with little help, and only then do they truly see, understand**, and are capable of hearing**. Others can only guide. Telling is never a guiding. Telling something to someone who doesn't want to hear will bring to them only a flavour of blame and a sense of being attacked and devalued. Telling someone what is evident to everyone but the person themselves doesn't make them see or even look at it. It has the opposite outcome. It makes a person try to prove that it is not

true and to hide reality even further away from themselves. That's why telling is considered a bad manner and an unsuitable method of teaching."

"Can I ask you something else?" – Marcus asked.

"Yes."

"Is it true that every door has opened for you upon your coming to School?"

"Yes."

"Is one of these doors a 'teller's' door?"

"Yes."

"Has it opened for you too?" (Have it opened for you too?)

"Yes."

"Would it mean then that you have the ability of telling people the truth about them without harming them?"

"It would indicate that such a possibility is present."

"Could you then, as a teller, tell me your opinion on why my behaviour brings from others a different outcome than anyone else receives, when saying or doing the same things?"

Dead silence fell upon the field. Everyone was looking at Rainee, hardly daring to breathe. Teller was a very mysterious position, and there was very little known about it as it was even more rare than a magic wielder. Some called it dark magic, some called it lies, some called it a curse, some called it fortune-telling, and no one had ever seen or known anyone who has ever met a teller in their lives. Most people believed that it was just a myth. To find out that one of their kind was standing in front of them was truly fascinating.

Chapter 13; Kind or Unkind

You are much stronger than anyone else, and you don't cry = problems

It was obvious that Rainee was thinking hard. This request must have caught her off guard. She finally answered:

"As a teller, as a teacher, or as a friend, I don't see a possible positive outcome of bringing you face to face with your faults and weaknesses, as they are very much mixed with your strengths and credits. To bring it up as a problem would mean to criticise your strongest points. Being a teller doesn't make one supreme in any way; it just indicates that I am capable of seeing what my words would bring to someone I speak to – benefit or harm. It doesn't provide me with a way to be only beneficial. I am afraid I cannot fulfil your request as it will not bring any good into your life, but will just disturb it further."

After that, everyone was prepared for another argument between Marcus and Rainee. But instead, Marcus continued in his calm and peaceful tone.

"Isn't it 'knowing better for others'?"

"I would say it falls under the "knowing better than others" category."

"But the future cannot be certain for sure."

"Sometimes it is very close to certainty."

"But still only close. Shouldn't it be for me to decide what is best for me?"

"Very well," – Rainee said after a short pause. – "By this day, there are many reasons for this outcome. Still, they are pointless to mention, as when one is removed, others will take its place as they are generated from just very few primary reasons, of which the most important are that you are much stronger than anyone else, and you don't cry."

".....?????....." – That caught everyone off guard, not only Marcus.

Only one person was laughing silently, but so quietly that only Anniet could hear him. Anniet nudged Anthony to stop it.

"Well said," – he backed up Rainee, but again in a very low voice that only Anniet could hear, and only because she was sitting very close.

"Sorry, I didn't understand," – Marcus said honestly.

"Which part?"

"The second, about crying."

"First one about being stronger than others didn't bring any questions?"

"No, I am fine with that one."

"OK," – Rainee didn't argue. – "I am saying that because you don't cry, you are sad, and because you are sad, people are afraid of you."

".... That doesn't make any sense.... How can someone be afraid of a sad person?"

"Sadness comes together with pain, and you can choose one or another. If you choose to feel sadness, then it leaves; if you choose to ignore it, then it stays, and pain will follow to join it. Anger doesn't build without sadness. If there is no sadness or pain, anger doesn't have a foothold and cannot sustain itself, nor can it even appear. Inside every angry person is unfelt sadness and pain. People are not afraid of those who are not angry. So people are not afraid of those who are not sad and of those who are not in pain. You try to be someone who allows himself to feel and express his feelings. But you don't. You try to conquer your anger by ignoring it or fighting it, but it is impossible while sadness exists in you. So you cannot be the person you want to be until the day you allow yourself to feel your pain, to feel your sadness, and to feel how angry you are with those who have caused it, who have demanded you to be strong. Until that day, you will be who you are, but not what you want to be."

"Are you telling me I have to start crying?"

"I am saying to start seeing yourself for what you are and love yourself as you are."

"What if I don't like who I am?"

"Too bad, as I like that person a lot. And you would like him too if you only allow yourself to look at it. If you don't like yourself, then you cannot appreciate or value your strong points. All you can do is give all your energy and time to the image that others want to see, and you join them, abandoning yourself. It is not even a pretend self, as your true self is too strong to hide under such a

weak pretence. It is just an imaginary image of what pretence would be if it were to become strong enough to hide you under. Hope it will never happen.”

“So if I start crying, will it help me?”

“No.”

“No?! Didn't you just say yourself that the reason I cannot progress is because I don't cry?”

“Now you would cry out of anger about not being able to break yourself down to become what you are trying to shape yourself into.”

“Is that bad?”

“Yes, because you are much grander than you want to make yourself to be. Crying about that will just confuse you even more. You would cry about how bad your true self is, and it will distance you even more from yourself. You might even cry about how unfair people are, but only because they don't appreciate the effort you put in.”

“Isn't that what you meant?”

“No! What I meant never found a way into your heart, as you are not open to hearing it. Instead of hearing, you just listen and try to work out what I am talking about from what you already know, by looking at it from different angles. Well, it will not help, as you already know all of it. The day you will be ready to hear things that I am telling you, it will come as a completely new understanding, and there will be no need to try to understand it – you will simply do. Until then, anything that is said will just distract you from seeking that passage, that doorway that would set you free.”

“Is that why I am not accepted in the King's army?”

“Yes. The King's army is not to spread fear. On the contrary, it is to bring safety and trust in people's lives.”

“Are people really that scared of me? I never did any harm!”

“Is there anyone who is scared of Marcus, if not all the time, then at least sometimes?”

Everybody's hand shot up in the air. Marcus was left speechless for a while.

“Why?” – That was all he could ask.

“Intimidating,” – Annet said aloud, just then realising that she actually spoke, not just thought.

“Intimidating? The Dark General is the most intimidating person in the whole world, and he is leading the King's army!”

“General Blake loves and is proud of who he is.” – Rainee said. – “He doesn't try to pretend to be someone else. The day when you love who you are, people will love you too, no matter if you are intimidating or not. And I can reassure you that you will hardly find a place safer and more secure than at General Blake's side. Unless you are the one who stirred the problem, and he came to clean it up. Even then, your fears will be only about all you have done and how to make sure it doesn't surface, not about what he would do. But there is no reason to fear that, as when he comes, it will surface no matter how deeply it is hidden.”

“So you have met him?”

“Yes. It is hard to be in the King’s army or the King’s academy and not meet him, as he has dedicated his life to it. And to helping people.”

“I help people too!”

“I know.”

“But somehow it doesn't count as everyone forgets about it...”

“Is there anyone whom Marcus has helped?” – Rainee asked again.

Again, the majority of hands came up.

“As you can see, it is not forgotten,” – Rainee suggested.

“I don't understand then how anyone can be afraid of me,” – the usual tantrum started to break out through Marcus's calmness – “did I ever abuse anyone?”

“Is there anyone abused by Marcus?” – Rainee asked.

This time, not a single hand came up.

“Apparently not,” – Rainee smiled at him.

“It makes no sense,” – Marcus said more to himself than to anyone else.

“Would there be anyone recently helped by Marcus who would be kind, honest, and brave enough to tell Marcus how it felt to be helped by him?”

There was a very long silence when nobody spoke.

“I will,” – one young girl broke this silence. – “I don't think I need to say how he helped me.”

That was true. Everyone knew the incident just a few days ago when this girl nearly drowned and was saved by Marcus.

“I will not go into details, but after all was over, I felt so guilty for falling into the water, especially after he said to be more careful and not to take risks any more, that I truly wished that someone else had saved me.”

Marcus looked at her in disbelief, then looked around, and seemingly everyone else understood what was said, but this understanding eluded him.

“I truly find it difficult to understand,” – Anniel's voice sounded.

She honestly couldn't grasp the meaning of what was said and couldn't keep quiet any longer.

“How can someone be picky about who and how they are saved? Or even what is said after? When I wanted to go swimming in a river, everyone told me that they wouldn't be willing to risk their lives to save me if something bad happened. So I never did. Why would I expect anyone to risk their lives for me?”

“Did you genuinely believe they wouldn't save you if you got in trouble?” – Someone laughed at what she said.

“I did,” – Anniel confirmed, confused about the nature of this question. – “Why wouldn't I? Everyone has only one life; why would they be willing to use it on me? If something bad could happen to me, the same could happen to them while trying to save me. And they would die or get injured, not because they wanted to have fun, not because they were not careful enough, but because I did it. I wish that, at that time, I had a friend caring enough to help me if I needed it. Other people did; they had friends and families that were looking after them, and they could swim, dive, and have fun. But I didn't have such good friends, and it never even came to my head that

someone who doesn't even know me that well would come to my aid, even when those whom I know said they wouldn't."

"What a unkind people you have grown up with?!" – others couldn't believe what they were hearing.

"How are they unkind?" – Anniet couldn't understand. – "They told me not to take risks, as they would not be willing to come after me. How is it unkind? Why should they do it if they didn't want to? I think that it is a very kind thing to say, so that I would know. I think it would be unkind for them to let me go for a swim without knowing that no one wants to risk themselves to save me if needed. I don't understand how it is unkind to tell someone not to take risks if they are not willing to risk their lives to bail you out if something happens. And how is it unkind not to want to risk your own life for someone else? I think, on the contrary, it is very kind. Why should it be taken for granted that when you are not careful enough, others will come and save you? Wouldn't it mean that you can be careless all the time? Somehow, I don't believe that is why people are helping each other. That this is the actual reason for help. I don't see how I could be picky about who is helping me. If more than one person is willing to do so, then I am really lucky, but I consider it to be a true blessing when there is at least someone. Of course, I would be feeling guilty. Why wouldn't I? I just made someone risk themselves because of my actions. But I also would be so grateful that this guilt would be the least important to me, and I wouldn't even be thinking about it. Even if someone who just saved my life were shouting and cursing at me, how could it make me feel less grateful? Never mind advising me to be more careful in the future. I would gladly be more careful in the future, not to bring such risks to those who are coming to my aid."

When she finished, the whole class was looking at her without saying a word. Even Anthony had opened his eyes, but luckily, in these eyes, there was not the questioning and disbelief like in everyone else's, but support and lots of kindness. He smiled at her, encouraging, and Anniet's heart, which was already falling down in fear that she had said something wrong, returned to its place.

As it was obvious that Anniet was not going to speak any more or explain herself further, and no one else knew what to say, all eyes landed on Rainee again, expecting an explanation. Rainee thought intensely for a few seconds, choosing her words before speaking aloud:

"The majority of society will expect to be helped, and some people pledge to these demands more than others, believing that to save others is their duty. The more someone believes that their duty is to save others, to help others, the more others will demand and expect it. Also, they themselves will not be capable of feeling grateful for others helping them. Why should they? They already believe that help is a duty.

Such beliefs create a vicious circle with seemingly no way out. Even the strongest person will succumb at some point under these demands. It has to. That's how the world is made to break people out of these circles, as no one is born to save others, no one is born to help others, no one is born to serve others.

We are all given the ability to do so if we want it and when we want it, but not when others want it, and it is definitely not something we have to do even when we can. That's how this extraordinary thing that one human can do to another is completely distorted and transformed into rules and duties.

It is extremely difficult to want to do something when it is already expected of you, when you and others believe that it is something you must do, that it has become your duty only because you can do it.

Then every goodwill, every effort made is overseen and taken for granted. When you do it out of duty, out of expectations, it's not help anymore – it's a harm.

To be able to be helpful while not harming ourselves or others, we have to be able to disconnect ourselves from these demands. To recognise where we are and where others are. What I am doing for myself and what for others. What are my wishes and what are the wishes of others, what are my wishes and what are my expectations of myself, and what are my expectations from others and what others expect from me.

Just then, I can recognise what the expectations are and where they are coming from: me or others. Who has been so unloving to me: myself or someone else.

Only then can I be helpful, as I will be able to maintain myself and not get absorbed and dissolved into what others or even I myself expect that I should be doing. If it happens, there would be no "me" any more, just people using me and my abilities.

If I stay myself, it would be me myself using my abilities, whether to help others or not to help if I choose so.

When others are using me, I have no control over it and am at the mercy of others. Those who truly care about me and understand me will never use me; those who use me either don't care or don't understand what they are doing and will definitely not understand my limits and will suck and drain me out without a single consideration until only a shell is left and then will expect to squeeze out something else and will let me be only when there will be reasons, understandable for them, why I cannot give anything any more. Reasons so obvious, like old age, or illnesses, or even death.

There is no joy, or satisfaction, or happiness in being used. And those are things that revitalise us, that bring back to us more energy than we use to do something.

When I am using my abilities and my knowledge to help someone, it brings me joy and happiness, it brings me satisfaction and fulfilment. It brings me a desire to look forward to seeing what difference my efforts have made.

When someone else is using me, all that it brings to me is tiredness, and all I am looking forward to is rest and being left alone.

Me, using myself, opens me up for life; me being used by others closes me down for death.

Someone who understands the difference once will never mix these things again, neither in himself nor in others.

One more important thing is to understand that the term "me" can be used only when I have at least some understanding about who I am. Otherwise, I am a stranger to myself and will join others to use and drain myself with better success than anyone else can achieve.

Very good observation, and I am happy that this subject, which is extremely difficult to bring in understandable examples, came out so naturally today. For those who didn't understand the difference, don't beat yourself, as only very few do; the willingness to see it will lead you to understanding. For those who grasp it at least a little bit – well done, you just touched on teachings that not everyone, after decades of training, can reach. I cannot think of a better place to finish today's class.

Chapter 14; No baby steps

Human minds work in strange ways – you give them the secrets of the universe and they will ask how to bake a potato...

After finishing, Rainee fell silent, looking with fondness at that strange, timid girl who surprised her once more by creating such an opening. Usually, to pass on this kind of message to someone would require a lot of time and effort until someone becomes open to receiving it. Today, out of the blue, just by a few words, this opening was created in everyone who attended. Not just openness, but also eagerness to hear the truth with it. It's just unbelievable, seeking and wanting to hear when you already have a slight understanding of what will be said! There is no better environment for something new and opposing all beliefs to enter. She was hoping to end all conversation here and now, so that class would allow the weight of her words to sink in. Especially when this place magnified understanding immensely. Well, of course, it didn't happen... In a few minutes, unwanted questions started to pour out. Never mind, human minds work in strange ways – you give them the secrets of the universe and they will ask how to bake a potato... It cannot be helped, but the same could be said about what has already happened; it cannot be reversed. Each and every one who attended this class absorbed a part of this truth, whether they realise it or not. And it will stay and will never leave, and on the day they choose to convert it to knowledge, it will be a significant start.

“Why should expecting help be wrong? Rainbow General herself said many times that ask for help and you will receive it!”

“The General said that help will always come if you seek it!”

Sounded among other questions.

“Rainbow General this, Rainbow General that... There is no Rainbow General left! She couldn't even save herself, what's the point of even mentioning her any more?” Rainee felt anger, so unfamiliar to her, building up. And she didn't know what to do with it... After years of training and immense success, it was so strange to be on the other side. That's why it was obvious that Marcus will not benefit just from hearing her words. Talks are never enough; one cannot make someone, or even oneself, look at something that they don't want to look at. It just seems that there is nothing, no matter how hard you try. There has to be some extra light, some external influence, some unexpected discovery, some words that didn't slide by, but shed light on this invisible door to pinpoint at least its location. Just then, it is possible to figure out how to open that door, if you want to get free. Or barricade it if you want to stay where you are...

“Misinterpretations of her words don't make anyone understand what she meant,” – Rainee said aloud. – “Think for yourself. If you drown, if you fall, if your life is in real danger, are you able to seek help? I don't think so. At least it never happened in my life, nor to anyone around me. I have never seen a person whose life is threatened and needs saving, seeking for help. A person who seeks can help himself; he doesn't need saving. Sometimes, he needs a helping hand, and it will always

come, but he doesn't need saving. If a person who is drowning is able to seek or ask for help, then he is not drowning, but has difficulty with swimming. But there is much literature on this subject written by the General herself, so I am not going to cover it here. All who want to understand what she truly meant can simply study it with an open mind.”

Seeing that she is not eager to answer questions any more, turmoil slowly died, and everyone returned to their own thoughts. Rainee thought about what had happened from a different angle. No matter how much is explained, people always think that help has to come to rescue them. So when they need something, they keep asking and praying for help, but that is just asking that someone else comes and does something that they cannot do themselves. Sometimes it happens, sometimes not.

What Rainbow General tried to tell them was that when you want to help someone, help will come if you put all your effort into it, but it is not enough. Help doesn't mean someone else coming and taking over. Help is just helping you to succeed in what you want to do, in what you already do, in what you strive to achieve. Isn't that what happened today? She really wanted to help Marcus, especially when today he was trying much harder than his usual. She did her best with no success whatsoever, and then help came, Annet spoke, and Rainee got the best help she could possibly ask for. It is not like Annet came and took over resolving all issues. Help is to receive aid, not when someone comes and does everything for you. That is not help; that is taking over or saving. She did her best, but to no success. Annet spoke and opened the gates so her words could pass through. All is so simple. Hopefully, the gatekeeper will recognise what he has received and use it to his advantage. With these thoughts, Marcus lifted his hand.

“Yes,” – Rainee acknowledged him.

“Can I ask something not related to today's subject?”

“Not very wise, but give it a try.” – Said Rainee, thinking to herself that “nope, the gatekeeper didn't recognise anything”.

“Could you open up a martial arts class for us?”

“What a surprise,” – Rainee laughed inwardly.

“Old John is a martial arts teacher at School. When he teaches, there is no need for another teacher.”

“But you would bring something new, something different. You are always full of new thoughts and ideas that nobody has ever heard anywhere else.”

“I will take it as a compliment, not flattery.”

“It is neither one nor another; it is just simply a fact. Is there anyone else who would want to learn martial arts from Lady Rainee?” – He asked, referring to the class.

Instantly, all hands lifted high up. “A sneak attack,” Rainee laughed to herself again. – “A crafty one. Should I reword it? Especially when the intent wasn't to be sneaky.”

“Are you asking for yourself or for others?”

“I ask for myself,” – Marcus said openly.

“What makes you unhappy with Old John?”

“He makes me dance...” – Marcus said in an unhappy voice.

“That is an excellent technique and very good for you. Why would you think I would teach you something different?”

“I have been doing it for four months....”

“May it be because you are not advancing?”

“But even if I do it for the next four years, would it make any difference?”

“Probably not,” – Rainee agreed – “unless you understand the reason behind it.”

“I am tired,” – Marcus finally said in a voice that no one had ever heard him speak in before. – “I am tired of being stuck in the same place. I am feeling like giving up soon. On myself, on the world, on everything. I want to move forward. It is suffocating me to be stuck in the place I am in. The very first day I saw you, I knew that you could help me break free. The next inauguration is coming soon, and I have not moved anywhere. I want to be ready. I want to be prepared like no one ever was before.”

“Your fighting abilities are not standing in the way of you being accepted. No one who will be accepted next time will know as much as you do, and no martial arts I can teach you will help you to get in.”

“But shouldn't it be my call what I choose to learn? I was told today to trust you, to trust your advice, to trust your opinion. All this time, I thought I did, as I tried my best to follow your advice. It was new to me to hear that I do not. And it made me realise that it doesn't work. And will not work. I simply don't know, don't understand the things that you are telling me. I am a fighter, a warrior. I know how to fight, I love it, I understand it, I want to learn it! Why can't I learn from you?”

“A teacher bears full responsibility for all that is taught. I don't believe what I would teach you could bring much good.”

“But for my actions, I would bear full responsibility now and always. I am always told to trust, and no matter how much I trust, when I think I have succeeded, I am told again to trust. What even is that trust? If it is so easy, why can no one show me? If I say that all I would learn from you I wouldn't use for a bad course, would you trust me?”

“No,” – Rainee said firmly, standing up – “A person can do only what he can, and what he can comes from his heart, and in a moment when the mind goes blank, the heart is in charge. Much stronger people than you have fallen for the same reason with much steadier hearts than yours. The heart doesn't remember promises made by the mind; it has its own rules.

When two sides are clashing, one considered to be the enemy who is breaking all rules, who has come uninvited, bringing just chaos and pain, and the other side are people that you think you want or have to protect, or maybe even someone dear to you, like a family member or friend. Would you be able to step into the middle while loving equally your enemy and your friends?

You think "yes," but what do your thoughts have to do with your heart? Love doesn't reside in thoughts. Thoughts are incapable of love. If your thoughts, your sanity are taken away, would you be able to pierce the heart of your enemy without hatred? Without fear? With nothing else in your heart but love for them? With the desire that these actions of yours would benefit, protect, and do good for your enemy, the same as for those that you are protecting? Would you be able to do the same to your friend or family if your heart tells you that this will benefit them most? At the same

time when all what you know, all you have learned, all what you think, all what is reasonable is opposing to what your heart dictates?

Because no matter what you think, no matter what others think, you would love that person more than reason, more than consequence, and you will do only what is best for them, even if it brings pain, blame and loss for you?

How would you know what is dictating your actions if you never look into your heart and never listen to it? How would you know if it is fear and reason that tell you what the best course of action is, or if it is love and understanding?

Would you be able to fight an enemy with love for your enemy, not for the love of those they are attacking, burning, or torturing?

Let me ask you again: what do your thoughts have to do with love? What do the teachings you received and learned so well have to do with love? How can you love and listen to others when your own self has never been heard or loved by you? You think that doing what you want is love? You think that doing what others want is love? You think that doing the right thing is love?

Let me say, while you think you don't feel. If you don't feel, how can you hear what your heart dictates to you?

How can a blind person bear responsibility for falling into a ditch when someone has taught that person how to run before how to see? Come.” – she pointed Marcus to join her.

Marcus came immediately.

“Do you know what it is?” – Rainee stretched her hand forward, showing on her palm some strange glowing bands that appeared from nowhere.

“Binding bands,” – Marcus answered easily while everyone else was wondering what it was.

“Do you know why they are used?”

“For fast teaching, so the moves could be used on the go without learning them in advance.”

“Not very accurate, but it will do. Have you ever used them?”

“Only when a child.”

“I see,” – Rainee said. – “Put them on.”

Marcus obeyed immediately, putting a pair on his wrists and a pair on his ankles.

“The moves that Old John is teaching you are not really even moves, that is why you are having difficulty learning them. You are right, it is more of a dance between two people. One is leading, and the other is allowing himself to be led. You cannot learn in advance, as there is nothing to learn in advance; you just do what the leading person does without questioning, without hesitation, without resistance. You learn to trust another person entirely, following him at the very moment he makes a move without any thought, straight from the heart. So you can see someone is trying to teach you what trust is for the past four months. You haven't seen this technique before, as even if it is known by many, not that many can do it.”

While Rainee was talking, she was slowly moving her hands, then her arms, then incorporating her whole body into this move, and from the side, it did seem like these two were dancing as Marcus was mirroring every move. Well, it didn't look like he was repeating it; it looked more like they were moving simultaneously, and only because of Rainee's words, it was obvious that it wasn't the case.

“Has Old John used binding bands on you while teaching?” – Rainee asked.

“No,” – Marcus shook his head.

“See, he has more trust in you than I do.” – Rainee smiled at him. – “I don't think you will manage even with these, when he was sure that you could do without them.”

“How do you know he is sure about it?” – It was obvious that Marcus disagreed.

“Instead of rebelling, you should put effort into knowing the person, then you would know it too. He never does anything in doubt. And to be frank, he is the only person who could actually succeed if you would just allow him. You say you trust me. But how many times did I tell you that he is the strongest teacher in the entire kingdom? Did you think I was lying or making fun of you?”

Marcus didn't say anything back. It was obvious that these words took him aback, but at the same time, his face could not stop smiling despite the enormous concentration on it.

“With this technique, you don't need concentration, at least not that kind you are having right now.” – Rainee said – “Happiness, on the other hand, is a perfect ally to succeed in this exercise. That's why you are capable of keeping up, but as soon as happiness starts to dissipate, you will start to worry, as it is an unavoidable companion of the concentration you are using. It will just get in the way, and the bands will break from your resistance.”

Marcus tried to follow the advice, but he, like everyone else, didn't fully understand what she meant. The moves were getting more intense, starting to take the shape of proper martial arts movements that, despite still being very fluent and consistent, required more precision, more flexibility, more agility. Slowly the smile on Marcus' face was changed to (by) full concentration, and at that very moment, the band on his wrist broke. His arm moved forward when the band moved to the side. Soon after, all three other bands dropped down for similar reasons. Marcus didn't know any more what Rainee would do next, and Rainee stopped.

“Put it back on,” – she said. – “Thinking will not help you, trying will not help you, concentrating will not help you. Being in a moment will help, being happy will help, wanting to be with me will help, wanting to be led by me will help. Wanting to learn from me will not help. Trusting that you will do so, without your own effort, if you only allow my teaching to get in, will help you. Trust is not about knowing in advance; it is not about showing up or trying to catch up; it is about believing, believing in the one who leads. Without this belief, not even the strongest general will be able to lead you in a battle. Without this belief, there is only one place for you in the King's Army, and it is a general's position. But to be a general, you have to believe in yourself, as that is what they believe in. Otherwise, how could they lead? How could anyone believe in them if they don't believe in themselves?”

Members of the formation are not manipulated marionettes; that would be an army of zombies. Each member in a formation is only led, and as soon as they don't trust the leader, they are out and fight on their own until that trust is regained. People standing closest to the general are those who have the most trust. Not from the general to them, but from them to the general. And this trust sometimes is equal to unbreachable, but it is not brainless; the brains are not used in formation, hearts are.

Only those who can trust in themselves can trust in others. So the people standing closest to the general are people who trust in themselves the most. By trusting in themselves, they can do nearly anything close to impossible, whether they are led or they are on their own or have to lead.

Master this technique without bands, and there is no way you would be rejected from joining the King's Army. Old John is a genius. He never stops surprising me."

While Rainee spoke, the bands were falling and falling from Marcus. He kept putting them on, but the more he tried, the less success he got.

"OK," – Rainee said – "let's start with baby steps...."

"I don't want baby steps!!!" – Marcus's scream interrupted her. He fell on his knee and smashed the ground a few times before picking up the bands and putting them back on – "I don't want baby steps," – he repeated in a calmer voice. – "I don't want it. It is suffocating me, these baby steps. I want to break out of whatever is holding me, not tiptoe around in baby steps. Can't you bind me with stronger bonds? These are just leading bands. Make those that don't break. You are stronger than I am. Much stronger. There would be no problem for you to lead me with those."

"I could," – Rainee confirmed, standing straight and looking at Marcus. – "But what good would it do to be dragged across the ground by those bonds? They are used for those who are incapable of understanding how to perform, and just directing is insufficient. But it is not your case. You can learn anything I show you to the smallest detail in a short time. What good would it do to you?"

"I don't know." – Marcus kept saying – "I don't know. I just need help. If that is not asking for help, then I don't know what it is."

"I really would do with help now too," – Rainee thought to herself as it was truly heartbreaking to see him like this. Then she relaxed and a smile came back to her face – "Since when do I believe that I have to do everything? That success depends only on me, only on my own strength? So strange... When have I lost my true self? Was it recently, or was it long ago, and I simply didn't see it before?"

Rainee stood tall, stretched her right arm, and a wooden training sword materialised in it out of nowhere. She lowered it down to her side and made an inviting gesture with her left hand, pointing in front of herself. No one understood who she was inviting as she didn't look at anyone, not even at Marcus, who was standing in front of her, full of confusion.

CHAPTER

10

Help always comes

For a moment, Anniet thought that Rainee was calling her and nearly stood up to go forward. But then the realisation came that it cannot be the case. There was nothing she could help with Marcus' training. She knew it very well, because not so long ago, he had asked her to teach him what she had learned from Rainee. All that she had learned in more than half a year he swallowed in several minutes. Well, actually, he swallowed it in no time, and the rest of the time it took for her to show it. He was so disappointed after that, asking if that was really it.

She was feeling so sorry for him now, when he finally got a chance, and he wasn't able to take it, as apparently it was too complicated for him.

There was a movement next to her, and Anthony stood up.

"Where are you going?" – Anniet asked quietly, trying not to draw too much attention.

"To help your silly friend," – Anthony said, taking off his jacket and putting it across Anniet's shoulders. – "In case you get cold," – he added, then turned around and walked towards Rainee and Marcus.

"Who is he?"

"I don't know."

Could be heard across the field. Anthony didn't pay any attention to anyone and walked straight to Marcus.

"Who are you?" – Marcus said, looking at him with his squinted eyes – "Oh, I remember – Ghost from the past. What do you want, Ghost from the past?"

"Keep quiet for once and start listening," – Anthony said in a calm voice, with a single movement of his hand easily turning Marcus around and positioning himself behind him – "Why are you trying to look at me? I believe she is your master, not me. How are you going to learn anything if you keep looking over your shoulder?"

He was right, Marcus was taken aback by such treatment and tried hard to turn back and look at him, but to no success as Anthony had his hand on Marcus' shoulder and held him in position easily. While Marcus was struggling, Anthony pressed into Marcus' hand a wooden sword that he got who knows where from. Then, before Marcus could do anything, strong, solid black bands appeared on Marcus's wrists, ankles, and waist, connecting him to the same set of bands on Anthony. Not a second later, after it was done, Rainee attacked at lightning speed and was met by a sword in Marcus's hand. The sword might be in Marcus's hand, but it was obvious that it wasn't him who blocked the attack.

"Watch out for your opponent," – Anthony said next to Marcus' ear.

He was right behind him, just an inch or two away, and every movement Anthony made, Marcus was mimicking. It was apparent that it was not the other way round, as at some point Marcus even tried to resist it. It could be clearly seen how his arms were being dragged by these bands that, upon resistance, didn't break, instead expanded, engulfing all of Marcus' body, and

returned to normal size only after he stopped resisting. During all this time, Rainee never ceased her attack, but it was easily blocked, avoided, or pushed away.

“You asked for these bands,” – Anthony said again – “Why are you resisting them now? It doesn't feel as exciting as you expected? Why should it? It is rarely used for a reason. How did you expect breaking feels? Like a sail on a sunny day? Or was it only words, and you already want to quit?”

Upon hearing that, Marcus finally stopped resisting.

“Who are you?” – he demanded again.

“Never mind me,” – Anthony said – “it is not me who is teaching you, nor am I your opponent. You didn't want to dance? Well, here is a fight for you then. I thought you like it. Or you don't want it either? Just make up your mind what you want from life. Why do you keep trying to look at me while I am fighting your battle? It is not me you have been begging for all these months to give you a lesson, and now, when your wish is granted, instead of submerging into it, you keep looking over your shoulder. Does it really take that long for you to understand what is happening? Stop twisting your neck, your face is getting too close, someone might think you are going to kiss me. Watch your opponent, or should I put a band around your neck, too? To teach you how to do it?”

It was obvious that this kind of treatment wasn't something that Marcus was used to, and it was difficult for him to get over it and submerge himself in the training that he asked for.

“Who is he?” – He finally gave up trying to find out by himself and turned to Rainee.

“I don't know and it makes no difference, but he is right, this lesson is for you, and if you don't want it, all you need to do is to say it. So far, instead of being grateful for receiving all you asked for, you are behaving like a spoiled child. Should we return to the baby steps?”

All the time, she never even once looked over his shoulder at the man standing behind Marcus, as if he simply didn't even exist.

“No!” – Marcus said quickly. – “What should I do?”

“What do you want to do? So far, you're just whining and talking. As for a fight, if not for the aid, you would already be dead multiple times.”

That worked like a switch. Marcus held his sword with both hands and lunged to attack. Everyone could see that it was him making a move now. Once he finally joined the fight, the gap between him and Anthony increased significantly.

This combat was going in cycles between Rainee attacking and her showing some moves. When Rainee attacked, Marcus would either defend or avoid it. At the beginning, he would try to attack too, but soon stopped, as every time Anthony would reprimand him. Not completely curtailing his actions, but making it difficult and heavy until Marcus understood that attacking wasn't the point of this training.

Annet watched it attentively, and it had been a very, very long time since she finally understood the rhythm. How long? Well, it was already late in the morning when it eventually dawned on her.

When training started, it drew lots of interest; everyone stood around, and there were many hidden smirks when Marcus failed to catch up. When Anthony joined in, it sparked immense

excitement, and everyone wanted to know who he was. And the interest in fighting reached its peak in no time.

But time was passing, and training never stopped. People started to get tired just from standing, while three fighters never slowed their pace. Some people stood in pairs and tried to follow the training, learning something from it, but soon abandoned this idea as all was going too fast and too random, and no one could keep up with it. So people just sat around and watched. Some left and then some came back again, new spectators came and then left again. When dusk started to take over, the last spectators finally abandoned this field in hopes of returning home before it got completely dark.

When Anthony said that he was going "to help a silly friend," Anniet wanted to protest that Raine is not silly, but then realised that it was not Raine he had in mind. Then, when he put his jacket over her shoulders, she didn't bother to ask anything more, just sat frozen for a moment. She was really touched by this gesture despite not really understanding why she should get cold on this warm day. When the fight started, she soon forgot about everything else and was truly taken aback by how strong and skilful Anthony was.

By now, she had completely forgotten that on the very first day, he used magic and gave her a very similar impression to this one. Any magic wielder is supposed to be really powerful, so why is she surprised? But still, looking now at the training unfolding in front of her, it was obvious that he was even stronger than Raine as he was blocking her attacks at ease while also dragging the resisting Marcus with him.

Never before had Anniet seen binding bands being used, but it was obvious that the one who was leading had to overpower another to be able to control him. It was funny to see Marcus, who was always so powerful, being unable to resist. It even made her feel sorry for him. She knew that Raine said that to feel sorry for others is not something good, but by now she couldn't even remember why.

When dusk came, bringing the darkness of the night, she understood what Anthony meant by saying "in case you get cold". She did get cold from the night's chill and put his jacket back over her shoulders. During the day, it was too hot to be with it, so she kept it folded on her lap. Anniet refused all kind offers to take her back home. No! She is not going anywhere! No matter how long it takes.

At some point, a slight rain started, and she moved under a large tree, hoping to keep herself dry. Surprisingly, no matter that the rain increased, not a single drop managed to find its way to her through the leaves of this tree, and she was feeling like in a story heard from Raine where King Jonathan made a tree umbrella for himself and his wife.

When evening started to approach, Anniet opened a bag that Anthony called a "lunch box" and ate half of the sandwich, leaving the other half for him when the training was over. But hours were passing, and it wasn't getting even close to the end.

Finally, darkness took over the place, and Anniet could no longer see anything, not even the moon, as it wasn't looking through the clouds. Last time she was here at night, on the day she met Raine, this place seemed so light! Now she couldn't see even her own hand. All she could hear was the sound of this never-ending fight.

Luckily, under this large tree, all the ground was dry and the moss was soft. Anniet lay down on it and covered herself with Anthony's jacket, which, despite being of light material, proved to be

surprisingly warm. The last thing she heard before falling asleep was Marcus complaining in an unhappy voice:

“I cannot see a thing! How am I supposed to fight?”

“Then go to sleep,” – Anthony's calm voice answered – “if such a minor thing stands in your way.”

Anniel didn't understand how seeing could be a minor thing, especially when fighting, but it must not be that important, as neither Rainee nor Anthony complained or stopped.

Anniel woke up from the bright sun shining on her face. When she opened her eyes at first, she couldn't understand where she was. The rays of the sun found their way through the branches and leaves of the large tree under which she was lying. At first, she thought that she was somewhere in the woods on her journey from home to the unknown, when she left her home village without knowing where she would go or where she would stay. But soon the sound of a nearby fight brought her back to reality. It was already morning, and the fighting never stopped! Anniel thought that even if she had slept in the softest bed, she wouldn't have rested any better.

She sat up to look at those who fought all night. Rainee and Anthony looked just the same as last night. There wasn't even a drop of sweat on them, and their breathing wasn't heavy. “Are they even humans?” she thought for a moment before chasing that thought away. Of course they are humans**, they** just must be much stronger than anyone else she has met before. And to be frank, she didn't meet that many people, so she didn't even know if that was a very, very strong or mediocre among strong people.

Marcus, however, was definitely a human as he was showing all possible signs of tiredness. But still not giving up. But still, as he looked now, it was highly unlikely that the training would last much longer.

Anniel stretched out and sought that lunch box again, thanking inwardly Anthony for it. And for the jacket that kept her warm overnight. While eating the second half of the sandwich, she was thinking about his actions and came to the conclusion that he must be able to predict the future, and wondered if all magic wielders can do so.

There were more people in the field watching this never-ending training. They must have returned when daylight came back. There were many speculations about how much longer Marcus would last and who this other master training him was. Some were saying that he jumped from the clouds when Rainee summoned him. Some were saying that he was living in the mountains. Anniel was listening in disbelief. None of it was even close to the truth, but people would say it as if they knew for sure!

Despite everybody's presumptions, the hours were passing, and Marcus was not giving up. People slowly dispersed again, as there was only a certain amount of time they could watch this fight, which was truly remarkable, but could not benefit them. Only very few remained. Anniel was wondering if these few had figured out the rhythm of the training, as when she understood it, watching became way more interesting.

It was all the same. Rainee would show some moves that never repeated themselves, then she would go into an attack. There were no gaps in between; there was no talking or explanation. Rhythm, attack, rhythm, attack. Any bystander would never think that there is training going on, and only those who knew it could understand, as in a rhythmic phase both sides moved simultaneously at the same time, and one would never think that one is leading and another is

repeating. There was no delay in Marcus or Anthony's movements, and they were so synchronised that one would think that many hours of training had to be put in to achieve such unison.

However, Annet could see by the binding bands activating themselves that without these bands, Marcus would go off rhythm every so often. So he had to be corrected by Anthony, who, no matter how attentively Annet watched, never got a single step wrong. When Rainee was going into attack mode, Marcus would either defend himself or avoid her attack. The only thing was that he should always be avoiding! Reality was that he didn't even have to avoid it, at least not in a way one would think. If he would simply repeat all the moves that Rainee showed him, her attack would never reach him! Also, it was evident that Anthony knew that, but deliberately allowed Marcus to make mistakes and would try to lead him to realise it by himself. It might seem very obvious and easy, and it would be if not for the length of the phases. One phase would last anything between fifteen minutes to half an hour. With that, it was close to impossible to memorise all that was shown, and it wasn't easy to understand the reason behind the phases, as it was evident that Marcus didn't get it yet.

A new evening started to approach, and Annet began to think that she will have another night under the tree when Marcus suddenly said in a very weary voice but with a big smile on his face:

"I got it! I understood!" – and collapsed down.

Anthony lightly caught him, and with that, the training was over.

Through all this fight, Rainee never looked at Anthony. All the time, she was looking only at Marcus as if Anthony wouldn't even be there. When Marcus collapsed, she simply turned around and walked to Annet without saying anything to Anthony or even giving him a single look. Annet even started to think that maybe she cannot see him, but surely if she cannot see him, then Marcus floating in the middle of the air would get her attention!

"Come," – Rainee said, stretching her hand to Annet and helping her to stand up – "Let's go home. You must be tired."

"....." – Annet couldn't find any words at the beginning. Was she the one who was supposed to be tired? Truth to be told, she was a little bit stiff after all this waiting, but in comparison to those who did all this training, it had to be nothing!

"What about Marcus?!" – She asked, looking over her shoulder while trying to catch up with Rainee, who was making her way down the hill at a steady pace.

"What about him? Isn't he taken care of?" – Rainee asked without looking back.

Annet looked again at Anthony walking a few meters behind with Marcus dangling in his hands.

"You can say that he is taken care of," – she said, returning a smile to Anthony, who smiled warmly at her while effortlessly carrying the senseless Marcus's body.

"Then why worry?" – Rainee asked without a single care in her voice.

"Is he... Is he alive?"

"Sleeping," – Rainee said.

"Sleeping?" – Annet looked over her shoulder again. – "And what about Anthony? Do you think he will be alright?"

"Who is Anthony?" – Rainee asked.

“The man who is carrying Marcus!”

“Why shouldn't he be alright? Does he look like he needs help?” – While speaking, Rainee didn't look back a single time.

“No. No, it doesn't look like he needs help.”

“Then why the worry? Can you walk all right?”

“Would you carry me?” – Anniet asked with a little laugh, imagining how they would look if Rainee carried her while Anthony was bringing Marcus behind them.

“I would,” – Rainee smiled at her.

“Then why didn't you carry Marcus?” – Anniet tried to make another joke.

“Because he would be very embarrassed to be carried through the town by me,” – Rainee ignored the joke – “and I believe no one will remember your mystery friend anyway, so he is safe in his hands.”

So, after all, Rainee knew that Marcus was taken care of, and by whom! She just couldn't remember his name, that's all. Anniet didn't say anything more and walked the rest of the way in silence. Despite her brave face, she was really stiff and tired. How Rainee and Anthony were still standing, she didn't know. Time after time, she would look back to check if Anthony was alright, but he was never more than a few meters away, neither falling behind nor trying to catch up with them.

When they reached Rainee's house, she opened the gates, showing Anniet in, and closed them behind without sparing a single look at those two who were following behind. While passing by, Anthony smiled at Anniet again, just as on any other regular day, and walked towards the town with Marcus in his arms.

When at home, Rainee showed Anniet to the couch, not listening to any objections. Then she brought from the kitchen some fruits, a big jug of juice, and a few slices of bread, put them on a table, dragged that little table next to the couch in front of Anniet, told her to take her shoes off and lift her legs on the couch, put a blanket over her, lit a fireplace, and just then sat down. She poured a large glass of juice and handed it to Anniet.

Just while drinking it, Anniet understood how thirsty she was! That's right – she hadn't drunk anything since yesterday morning. These couple of apples and oranges that Anthony had in his lunch box must have kept her going!

“What about you?” – She asked after draining her glass.

Surely Rainee must be hungry and thirsty, too, as she didn't see her eating or drinking. Rainee didn't say anything, just poured another large glass for Anniet and a small glass for herself before sitting back on the other side of the couch. She too kicked her shoes off and put her feet under the same blanket from the other side.

“You shouldn't be waiting like this any more,” – she said finally. – “It's not good for your health and brings no benefits to anyone.”

“Are you angry with me?” – Anniet asked, not being sure what she had done wrong.

“Do I look angry?” – Rainee asked.

Anniel shook her head. No, she didn't look angry. Then why this harsh speech? Never before would she think such words to be harsh, but again, never before had Rainee spoken with her like this.

"I wanted to see," – she finally said.

"That's why I didn't tell you to go home earlier," – Rainee said. – "But you must understand that there is no need or benefit to torture oneself just to see somebody else's battle. What if it went on another day, and you stubbornly stayed where you were? Wouldn't it mean that I would have to make a choice, either cut the training short or leave you suffering? Neither one nor another is what I would like to do."

"I was alright," – Anniel pointed out.

"Just with the help of your powerful friend."

"Sorry," – Anniel said just now, looking at it from that angle.

"Don't be," – Rainee said – "what I said is not meant to make you sorry but to make you understand that sometimes to help someone it is best to take good care of yourself. Did you find it interesting?"

Anniel nodded her head.

"Strange, as there was nothing really interesting in it. What did you find interesting? What did you learn?"

"Many things! Most interesting was to see how truly strong you are, and that there might be someone as strong or even stronger."

"Oh?" – Rainee looked at her with a curious smile – "and who is that? Who has taken over my throne?"

Anniel backed up a little bit after these words, but as Rainee didn't look offended, just curious, she answered honestly.

"Anthony."

"And who is Anthony, and why do you think he is stronger than me?"

Anniel sighed deeply before answering.

"He is the man you yourself just called powerful and who helped you to train Marcus."

"Oh, I see. So he is the same person! He must be truly powerful then. Shame I cannot think about him, so I will never know."

"Never..." Anniel thought to herself. Never was a really long time.

"Sorry," – Anniel laughed silently – "I didn't mean to take away your throne. I don't think I have done it either."

"Take it!" – Rainee waved her hand – "It is not good to put people on thrones, as no matter how good they are, they will never be able to stay there. What else did you find interesting?"

"Many things," – Anniel repeated – "Never before have I seen these bonds being used..."

"What do you think about them? Would you like to try them?"

Anniel quickly shook her head.

“No!” – she said – “not these black ones. I wouldn't mind trying the first set that you tried at the beginning. They looked fun. But these that Anthony used...” – shivers went through her spine even at such a thought.

“Clever girl,” – Rainee praised her – “never forget it, even if you are very desperate. What else?”

“That it is possible to achieve this technique that you are trying to teach Marcus without any bonds.”

“Why?”

“Anthony didn't have any bonds, and he could follow you at such speed that it seemed that he was doing it at the same time!”

“How do you know he wasn't?”

“He couldn't do it! Not that long and that many times. If I had not heard about this technique, then I would think, maybe, but now that I know it exists, it is obvious that he didn't even know what you were going to do before he joined you. Your technique to train Marcus was also new to me.”

“You figured it out very fast,” – Rainee said.

“Not at all!” – Anniet disagreed – “I realised it only this morning.”

“Still, Marcus realised it only this evening.”

“Oh, that's what he shouted about?”

“Yep,” – Rainee confirmed.

“I see,” – Anniet said while thinking to herself – “he is very powerful.”

“Who?”

“Marcus.”

“He can be,” – Rainee confirmed – “but no, he isn't at this point.”

“He is stronger than anyone I have ever seen before I met you, and he was able to keep up with you for nearly two days!”

“Still, it means nothing. Strength lies in people's hearts, not in their abilities or physical strength, and his heart is wobbly. He will be powerful if he allows himself to be.”

They stayed in silence after that. Anniet still had many questions, but she kept them to herself as Rainee was sitting in the opposite corner of the sofa with her eyes closed, thinking about something, and Anniet didn't want to disturb her. Besides, it was very nice and cosy to sit like this without a single worry in the world.

Rainee was sitting deep in her thoughts, thinking about many things at the same time. No matter where her thoughts would wander, there was always an unknown figure involved in it, that didn't allow her to see a clear picture. Well, she could have a clear picture, but that would mean losing any grip on this Mister Incognito. So what was she allowed to know? That he was a male, that Anniet was in love with him, and that he must be very caring towards her, despite what she herself thinks. There was much evidence supporting it, but she knew that if at least one piece is connected to the picture, all will vanish, as knowledge of it has already vanished, just feeling

without reason remained. That he was somehow connected to today's training. How was he connected? ... Who knows... She could know. It is easy to know; it is not easy not to know.

OK, let him be. Let's go to the training. As soon as she gave up on keeping all control in her hands and asked for help, help came. Why does she even wonder about it? She had done it before countless times, and it seemed as natural as breathing, and she never had a doubt that a different outcome could be. Why are things different now? Why does she have to remind herself about such a natural flaw of life? Has she really changed so much? She must have... Is that how change feels when, instead of gaining, you are losing? What else has she lost? Well, she will not know until she finds out. Why can't she think about what shape this help came in? Who came to her aid? She knew the answer, but she could not use it. She is not allowed to think about it either, as it will disappear too. Disappear, too, like what?

Rainee wasn't even sure if this state she was in was any better than forgetting about all of it completely, as she could not remember much anyway.

Instead of resting, Anniel silently slipped off the couch and tiptoed to the kitchen, trying not to bring any attention to herself. What a restless soul... And a sweet one too. She was worried about Rainee and wanted to make her feel better and more comfortable. Was Rainee herself really in such a poor state that people wanted to care for her? Probably not, as the girl was simply making coffee... She had such a kind and gentle nature. How could people miss it or even abuse it? Makes one wonder. It was so interesting to have her around as a friend. Not that long ago, Rainee wouldn't have been able to keep her around even if she wanted to. If she had such a friend a year or two ago, the most she would be able to spare her would be a day or two in a month, if even that. Was it a disaster, or was it a blessing that now she was capable of spending as much time as she wanted like this?

Rainee was always loved by many. Looked up to by many. Why does this time feel somehow different? At least here she was allowed to think as much as she wanted and connect all the dots she had. It's just not much mystery in there, as the girl's soul was as open for her to read as an open book can be. There was nothing hidden there. Thanks god there was nothing hidden. Rainee was sick and tired of all the twisted corners in most people around. Is that why she liked this girl so much? It was like a fresh breeze for someone surrounded by dust, like a fragile but beautiful flower on a large pile of garbage... How to make sure it is not stomped over? And why on earth would she even want to make sure of it? Didn't she know by now that it is simply not possible?

Anniel brought two cups of coffee, placed them on a table, then walked behind Rainee and put her hands on the back of her neck.

"You are so stressed," – she said – "it brings in tension. Is it because you got tired after all this training? You don't look tired," – she added after a little while. – "Why are you so stressed? What are you thinking about?"

Stressed.... Yes, to be honest, she was stressed. This girl is really sensitive to others.

"About your mysterious friend," – Rainee smiled.

"Gone..." – Anniel said in a surprised voice, removing her hands from Rainee's neck.

Surely it is gone. Why would anyone keep stress once it has been disclosed?

Anniel walked back and handed Rainee her coffee cup before sitting back on her corner of the sofa.

“What about him?”

“I love solving mysteries, but I am not allowed to do so this time. It is really stressful not to think. Wonder why people like doing it...”

“Doing what?”

“Ignoring what is obvious.”

“Don't know,” – Anniet said. – “Why don't you allow yourself to think about him?”

“Because in a moment I do, all I know disappears.”

“It doesn't make any sense; you don't remember anything about him anyway.”

“I know that he is and that you like him. Isn't that a lot?”

Annet was silent for a moment before saying:

“I will tell you that he is and that I like him every day. So you don't need to be stressing yourself over it. If you want to remember that much, I will help you to find out about it over and over again.”

“I will think about it,” – Rainee smiled, leaning back on her cushions and closing her eyes.

It was such a simple moment, but it brought so much satisfaction. Or was it happiness? Was it what it meant to have a friend? Rainee had many friends, but why did this one feel different? But really, did she have any friends? Not as normal people would understand what true friendship is. Well, she had one friend, but his friendship came at a price. Here, right now, there was nothing to pay, no price whatsoever. Just here will be a lot of pain when the time comes to drift apart. Surprisingly, this pain will not be single-sided. Throughout her life, she didn't remember sitting like this with someone covered with the same blanket, having nothing else to do. The feeling she felt now was very similar to she would feel in children, who were spending time with their friends and caring about nothing else in the world.

Rainee was slowly sipping her coffee while watching Annet, who bravely tried to stay awake for some time but then lost that battle.

CHAPTER

11

The sweetest person in a world

The next morning, Anniet woke up on a couch alone. Raine was nowhere around. After getting ready for the day, Anniet grabbed the black jacket that she had carefully placed on the back of a chair yesterday and dashed to the town. Anthony wasn't there.

Despite this place getting busier and busier, Anthony had more free time than ever before as a few new cooks had arrived, a few new dining places had been opened, and he didn't have to be at work every day.

Before going to see if he was in his cottage, Anniet checked the information board to see if Raine was having any classes today, and good thing she did! There was a new class starting this afternoon. Martial arts! Held at the Cliffside field next to King's Seat. That was a funny way to call it, but at least the directions were clear. And she had enough time to get there!

Half running, half walking, she had reached Anthony's cottage to find him waiting for her at the breakfast table.

At first, she opened her mouth to refuse it and to say that she didn't have time for it, but then closed it without saying a word and obediently walked to the table. Wasn't she the one who just yesterday morning, while eating the last pieces from the lunch box, promised herself never to argue with Anthony again...

"Thank you for this," – she said, handing him his jacket and somehow feeling a bit sorry to let it go – "and for all you did." – She added, remembering Raine's words that her time while on the cliff wasn't that bad, only because of the help of her powerful friend.

"Just how powerful?..." – she thought to herself while sitting on a chair. That's right! So far, this understanding somehow eluded her.

"Who are you?" – She asked while looking at him partially with awe but also with some fear. He could do things that others could not, and again, this strange force not allowing anyone to remember him started to bother her slightly.

"There is nothing more that I want but to tell you," – Anthony answered while looking directly into her eyes.

"Have you done something bad?" – She asked again.

"Bad is a concept of perspective. I can tell you only if you define bad."

"Have you killed someone?"

Anthony kept silent for a few seconds before answering, and it was obvious that he was choosing his words.

"Many people who would recognise me from my past would laugh at this question, as they believe that death and I are inseparable. However, the truth is, I have never taken anybody's life. My question is this: would it make any difference in how you see me if I did?"

Annet was looking at him while thinking about this question. Would it truly make any difference? Well, she didn't know. She already thought about dozens of horrible things he could have done to receive such a punishment he was bearing right now. None of her thoughts got in the way of how she was feeling about him.

“Probably not,” – she said, picking up a fork and digging into her plate. – “How have you become so powerful?” – She asked again.

“By willing and by training,” – Anthony's answer was short and straight as usual.

“What did you do with Marcus yesterday?”

“Tucked him in his bed,” – Anthony smiled.

That was it! Annet could not think any more about any bad or horrible things that Anthony might have done in the past. He was the sweetest person she had met in her life, and she could not bring herself to think any other way any longer. She relaxed, and the fear was gone.

“You are so sweet,” – she said honestly.

“Am I?” – Anthony was still looking at her with his questioning eyes – “What would you have done with him?”

“Probably the same, if I had had the strength to carry him. But because I don't, I would have to leave him in the woods under a bush,” – Annet giggled.

Anthony could do nothing but laugh at it too.

“Where did you learn to fight so well?” – Annet asked again, but this time in a completely different manner.

“In many places,” – Anthony said – “it didn't come at once. Old John gave me the basics and showed me the right direction.”

“I see, so he has trained you, too! Rainee speaks so highly of him. Do you agree with her?”

“There is nothing to disagree with.”

“So why, instead of cooking, wouldn't you teach what you know to people?”

“I didn't come here to teach.”

“Did you come here to cook?”

“No.”

“But you do. Why did you come here?”

“I thought I came here after my friend, but there must be more to it,” – Anthony said after a short pause.

“Why did you help to train Marcus if you didn't come here to teach?”

“Because there was no one else who could do it.”

“True,” – Annet agreed – “I didn't think that there could be anyone stronger than Rainee.”

“Why do you think there is?”

“Because you defended against her so easily! And she herself said that you are very powerful.”

“Can she remember me?” – Anthony asked with rising curiosity.

“She tries very hard, but no, she cannot. Sometimes I think she can, but she says that she cannot think about you, and the more she does, the more everything disappears. Who is your friend that you have followed? I never asked you this.”

Anthony looked at her for a while, then was going to say something, but then changed his mind.

"I would rather not say," – he replied honestly.

"You cannot?"

"I think I can, but I will not."

"Why?" – Anniet was curious.

"Because I am a little bit afraid," – Anthony smiled. – "Afraid that if by accident I tell you more than I am supposed to say, you will forget about me too."

Such a thought never crossed Anniet's mind, and it was so terrifying that she even closed her mouth with her hands. No, no, no, she definitely doesn't want it to happen.

"Don't, please don't say it," – she said firmly – "I don't want to know. Are you coming to Raine's new class today?"

"Why not."

"Good, is that why you are not working today?"

"I knew my favourite customer would be heading this way, so I chose to stay here," – Anthony smiled.

"Yes," – Anniet looked half guilty at her empty plate. – "Thank you for this. And for a lunch box, and for a jacket, and for keeping the rain away from me, and for... Thank you for all."

"Pleasure," – Anthony smiled again – "just remember that I am not the only friend you have, so not all can be attributed to me. Ready to go?"

Anniat happily nodded her head in reply. All her worries and suspicions were gone, and Anthony looked just the same as before, much stronger, much more skilful than she could ever think, but still just the same lovely person she had known for the past few months.

Today's lesson was not what Anniet expected. Many people arrived, and all were given the same bands as Marcus the other day. Not those blacks that bound him to Anthony, but those that Marcus kept dropping at the beginning. So everyone had a try at what it feels like. And it felt awesome! It felt not too different to Raine's hands guiding them directly, and it was so easy to follow it. At first, it felt like Raine was guiding her by hands, by legs, by her whole body. Then at some point she realised that there are actually two forms of guidance she is receiving. One was guiding directly her body as she felt at first, another was something like a message before it, like a knowing of what she would do and when she would do it in advance, and how Anniet should do it. Once Anniet realised it, there was no way to go wrong. The direct guiding of the body was slowly disappearing as it was no longer needed.

For some reason, people around her were dropping these bands in the same way as Marcus did yesterday. "How strange," Anniet thought, closing her eyes not to be distracted by it. This way she couldn't see Raine, but in reality, it wasn't needed, as she knew very well what Raine was going to do, how she was going to do it, so why look? She opened her eyes a few times just to be sure that she wasn't just following her imagination, but every time she looked, Raine was doing precisely what she expected her to do, so after a while, she didn't look any more. What to look for there? She could do it all day long. At least it felt like this at the beginning. With time, the rhythm

was getting faster, moves were getting more complicated, and eventually Anniet thought that she would not be able to keep up much longer. Not because of not knowing what and how to do, but because she got tired, her own body, which at some point was so obedient, stopped listening that well, and the moves were so advanced that she had never done before, and she simply couldn't keep up with it. Shame, as she would have loved to stay in this training to the end, but maybe next time she will do better. And with that thought, the lesson was over.

Anniet opened her eyes just to see that out of the long rows that had joined the training at the beginning, it was only she alone who was still wearing these bands and was still performing. Everyone else had already abandoned their place and now was simply watching her and Rainee. She was about to get all embarrassed, but seeing Rainee's happy and smiling face looking at her with pride, all other thoughts left immediately.

Apparently, there was a limit for everyone to how long they could keep up after the body guidance was at first weakened and then removed, and she was the one who stayed the longest. Anthony didn't attend this training. Well, he attended, but while snoozing under the tree. Marcus attended. He didn't look that bad, as Anniet would expect him to look after two days of training. She didn't know how well he did today, but not as well as she did.

It was already early evening when class was over. After it was finished, she returned to Anthony, who was happy and impressed by how well she did. Rainee was about to leave when Marcus came to her to talk, but she just waved her hand to stop him.

"Not today," – she said – "tomorrow morning. And only if you are well rested. If you come in the same state as today, we will train how to rest instead."

Other people were squashing around her too, asking for this, asking for that, but after saying "class is over," Rainee didn't speak or answer anyone else and was making her way out. Anniet jumped to her feet. No way she will let Rainee go on her own, as something was not right, something made her angry. Was it all these people bothering her with all these problems of their own? As if answering her thoughts, Rainee turned towards her instead of walking by.

"I have to go," – Anniet said to Anthony – "you'd better go home."

"That's right! You'd better go home, you fool!" – Rainee said in a firm voice, looking at Anthony with a look that Anniet hadn't seen on her before.

Anniet stood speechless, not knowing what had just happened, looking from Rainee to Anthony and from Anthony to Rainee, not knowing what he had done to receive such treatment. Anthony seemed utterly unaffected by these harsh words. Rainee broke the tension, stretching her hand to Anniet.

"Come," – she said with a warm smile as if she wouldn't have spoken so harshly just a second ago – "I will show you how to escape students."

As soon as Anniet touched her hand, she felt a firm grip, and all around lost its shape, blurring into one. Next, she knew they were standing in a wide opening surrounded by rocks. People had vanished, and no noise was around them anymore. There could be heard silent murmurs from somewhere far away in the distance, somewhere down below the hill, but because of the echo, it was difficult to say how far behind everyone was left. But it was clear that it was nowhere close by.

"Wow," that was all that Anniet could say. "That was a proper escape! How did you do it?"

"You run very, very fast while at the same time wishing to leave everyone behind," Rainee winked at her eye.

It was clear that it was not how it was done, but nevertheless, it did the trick and left everyone somewhere far away.

Anniel looked around. They must have been somewhere much higher in the mountains, as the weather here was cooler, and a few scrubs and stones replaced the trees. Most of this opening was taken by a lake with see-through water. The lake was surrounded by mountains rising even higher from every other direction but this one.

While Anniel was looking around, Rainee had already taken her clothes off and was walking into the lake. The water was very shallow at the beginning, but soon it got much deeper, and Rainee dived in for a swim. It looked so refreshing that Anniel was going to follow.

"If you do, you will get very cold," Rainee said without even looking back, instead diving down like a seal or fish that was born in the water.

At first, Anniel was going to ignore this warning, but then had a second thought and put only her foot in the water and quickly pulled it out. No matter how many times she tried, she could not keep her foot in the water for any longer than a few seconds. Eventually, she gave up on trying and climbed a flat rock to watch Rainee swimming. She stretched Rainee's clothes in the sunshine so they would be nice and warm when she came out.

The water was very clear, and she could see Rainee even in the far distance. She must be an excellent swimmer, but again, what to wonder about there, as Rainee proved to be good at anything Anniel could think of.

Rainee didn't take too long, and when she came out of the water, she didn't even have any shivers or goosebumps on her skin. On the contrary, she looked all rested and refreshed. Rainee flattened herself down on the same rock where Anniel was sitting, waiting for the sun and wind to dry her out.

"Aren't you cold?" Anniel asked.

"No," Rainee said, "I don't get cold."

"You don't feel cold?!" Anniel was surprised.

"To get the right answer, you have to ask the right questions," Rainee smiled slightly. "You asked if I get cold. Getting cold and feeling cold are not the same, are they? I do feel cold, but I don't get cold from feeling it. Same as I feel heat, but I don't get hot from it. You don't have to succumb to all you feel. Just as you can have your own mind in a circle of different opinions, you can also maintain, let's say, your own temperature while in different surroundings. Cold is just another sense that is pretty nice if you can feel it without getting it in."

"I have never heard anything like this before!" Anniel marvelled once more about how differently Rainee saw all around herself. "Where did you learn it?"

"Watching, observing, reading, thinking, feeling, trying," Rainee smiled again. "In other words, living. You cannot learn all just by studying, exercising, or trying to do what others tell you to do. Others can only advise, but you have to try yourself, to experiment, to change, and to try it your way. I have nothing against learning, but the problem with it is that it teaches you to do things in a certain way, and if you do, you think you have succeeded, and if you don't, you think you have failed. When there is never one or another. There is no such thing as failure, and success is very

relative, as if you aim for it once you reach it, there is nowhere else to go. When you seek something new while using all that is known, you will never fail or succeed, as you will never know what is around the corner. Learning this way is most effective; however, people don't call it learning, they call it messing around. They want to learn by the book. But someone had to write that book."

"I see," Anniet said, hugging her knees and looking in the distance. "Will I ever become like you?"

"No," Rainee said, "why would you become like me? But you can become like you."

"I thought I already was like me."

"Well, think like this – it is far, far away from the truth."

"Then how do I become like me?"

"Watching, observing, reading, thinking, feeling, trying, in other words, living." Rainee repeated the same words she said before. "Also remembering that there may be many people opposing you becoming you, but only one person really gets in the way and prevents it from becoming reality. Everyone else can only try, but without the approval of that single person, they will never succeed."

"And that person is?" Anniet asked, already knowing what Rainee would say.

"You." Rainee confirmed her thoughts.

"But it is important for me what other people think..."

"And that is why you will get cold if you go into cold water." Rainee answered.

"Then I should stop feeling?"

"Then you will not feel if that water is cold, but it will not stop this cold from affecting you. You simply will not know why you are getting cold. A terrible choice, as it can lead to severe damage or even death."

Annet was sitting in silence for a while, thinking how all must be simple. No, how all is simple while it is just her and Rainee.

"You are so smart, you should be a general." She said eventually.

"How do you know I am not?" Rainee smiled, opening one eye to look at Anniet.

"There is only one female general and she has died," Anniet said with a little bit of sadness in her voice. Rainbow general seemed so invincible, and to realise that she had been killed like anyone else truly was mind-blowing.

"True," Rainee said, "But don't be sad, someone will take her place."

"You?"

"No, not me. How could I? I have my faithful students to look after," Rainee laughed, lifting Anniet's mood up again. "Besides, the King has more generals than you think of, and some of them are females."

"Are you one of them?" Anniet lifted her head again.

"No," Rainee denied, "I am not."

"Shame, you would be a good leader."

“And who would be spending time with you if I were a general? Do you know how busy they are?”

“I would follow you,” Anniet said firmly.

Rainee didn't say anything, just smiled, trying to imagine Anniet in the King's Army.

“What made you so angry earlier?” Anniet asked.

“Why do you think I was angry?”

“You spoke harshly to Anthony.”

“Did I?” Rainee asked. “How?”

“You said that he is a fool and he should go home.”

“Did I?” Now Rainee was interested.

She stood up, put her clothes on, giving Anniet a grateful look for warming them up, and sat in front of Anniet with her legs crossed.

“Your mystery friend is a fascinating figure,” she said, looking directly into her eyes. “Does he make you angry or stressed?”

“No,” Anniet said. “Never. He makes me feel safe and secure. And... happy. I never had a better friend than him apart from you. Do you think he is a bad person?”

“Does the description you just gave me define a bad person?”

“No,” Anniet agreed, “but he must have done something bad to become like this...”

“Doing something bad doesn't make one a bad person. Sometimes, the worst people are those who do nothing. There are many stories where the best people have done the most terrible things. It didn't make them bad. It made them cause pain and suffering for others, which in itself is the worst punishment one can receive. A person and their actions are not the same. Actions come and go, while people remain. Actions can be done for many different reasons, and from my experience, bad actions come from a lack of knowledge and fear. Only those who try their hardest can do the most terrible things. But also, only those who try their best can do the most wonderful things. Those who don't try do neither good nor bad. In other words, they do nothing, and that in itself leads to a bad outcome only.

So don't be afraid to do something and make a mistake, even if you cause harm to someone unintentionally. If you do, you will be in fear, and only bad things will come out of it. Remember, all of us are the same powerful beings, and others had the same chance of success to avoid it as you had to harm them. Learn from your mistakes, don't ignore them. It all depends on intention, and only a person without fear can have good intentions. Everyone who hurts others intentionally is under the command of fear themselves. We all make mistakes, each and every one of us. Just, the stronger we are, the more impact our mistakes would have on others. But if we choose to stay weak and small because of this fear, then we would be harming ourselves at least, and also those who would benefit from us if we became stronger.

The secret is that there are no bad people. There are only choices and decisions based on many things that go on inside of us at that very moment. Only those who choose to move forward will be able to find that truly good being inside of themselves created by The One himself. If your friend has done something bad, it doesn't make him a bad person; it depends on whether he is

willing to do it again when circumstances dictate, or if he has moved forward, growing bigger than the reasons that made him make that mistake.

But saying that, there is not even evidence that he has done something bad, as very often people are just afraid of something they don't understand. However, if he is powerful, to overpower him would require someone even brighter than he is. That's what makes his story interesting. Come, let me have a proper look at this figure.”

While saying the last words, she stretched her arm and placed her hand on Anniet's chest.

“What should I do?” Anniet asked with her eyes wide open.

“Nothing,” Rainee smiled. “I would say ‘think about him,’ but he is all over your head and heart all the time, so even that is not needed.”

Anniet blushed slightly, thinking that Rainee must have seen through her a long time ago, but didn't move an inch. If Rainee wants to see what is in her heart, then it is open for her.

Even before trying, Rainee already knew that it would not work, at least not the way she would want it to. But nevertheless, she wanted to have a proper feel of him. Earlier in the day, she lost control over herself, and the dots connected, and all was gone by now, nothing left, no memory whatsoever. Not even a feeling, as it was swiped away as soon as knowledge and understanding were attached to it. That must be why she got angry. Anger wasn't her usual suit, and to know that it was expressed openly wasn't a good sign; not even remembering it was even worse. Why would she be angry with Anthony? Oh, right, because he was that mystery person! As all is gone anyway, there is nothing to save, so why not look at what we have openly, even if it will last just a second?

All that Anniet knew about him came in a full, complete picture within a moment and blasted again out in small pieces, dissolving into nothingness. Again, and again, and again. Over and over. Every time opening Rainee's eyes and leaving her blind again, without even a memory of what it felt like to be able to see.

“Fool!” she would repeat over and over again, bringing more and more worry to Anniet's face until her wide open eyes couldn't be ignored any longer and drew Rainee's attention. She never stopped creating that picture of truth about Anthony from Anniet's knowledge, and that picture kept popping out every time, but somehow this girl was making more and more room in that picture. How strange. The spell was perfect and unbreakable, but despite all odds, it left this strange link. If not Anniet, connecting this mystery person to the rest of the world, no one would be able to reach him, no matter how strong-minded. Rainee would have forgotten about him long ago without a single worry or need to remember. Such strong spells don't have these kinds of weaknesses. How come this one had? And what role did Anniet play in it? It was obvious it wasn't something in the girl herself, as Rainee could remember all about her. There were no secrets in the girl nor in her life. And the feeling that Rainee was fully aware of why this weakness in this spell was disclosed got stronger and stronger; she just wasn't allowed to remember it.

Minutes were passing, and instead of “fool” before each explosion, Rainee changed it to “of course” and slowly it grew into a smile that was getting warmer and warmer until she finally said “lucky girl” before removing her hand. Hardly several minutes had passed, but it had exhausted Rainee more than the previous training that lasted nearly two days. Fighting against the spell had taken its toll, and she lay down again on the rock to take a rest. Now she would gladly go for sleep, but there is still a long way till they reach home.

“So?” Anniet asked after Rainee's hand was removed from her chest. “Do you know who he is? Can you remember him?”

“No,” Rainee said while looking into the clouds. “But I don't want to know it anymore. Or rather, I don't feel a need for it. Somehow, I am glad to have these few touches that I can retain and am content with it.”

“So all your efforts were in vain? You got stressed so many times, and now you are so tired.”

“No efforts ever go in vain. I don't feel stressed anymore, and I don't think I will become angry over it again, but you are right, I am tired, so we'd better go home now. Otherwise, tomorrow Marcus will have to teach me how to take a rest, not vice versa. And if you come tomorrow, it would be good if you wouldn't stay as long as you did last time. There is no need to waste your time on somebody else's battle. I can promise you there will be nothing much different from what it was last time, and you could spend your time more meaningfully, as this place provides so many opportunities. Why waste them just to watch how someone else is struggling?”

CHAPTER

12

Moment of peace

After that, all the days got into some sort of routine. Rainee was right – Marcus' training didn't change a lot. But she and Anthony would repeat it over and over again. When Anniet asked what the point of these trainings was, as it didn't seem that he was improving that much, Rainee answered:

“He has to learn somehow what trust is and how it feels, and then, one day, he might connect that feeling to himself. Trust is a funny thing; to some, it comes with ease, and others have to work hard to surrender to it. And for those who either learned to refuse it or locked their trust into something that is not trustworthy, it is extremely difficult to regain it.”

“But how is he learning to trust if no matter what, he cannot follow you without bonds?”

“But it is not me he is learning to trust,” Rainee smiled with a glint in her eyes.

At first, Anniet didn't understand what she meant, but then it had become so obvious that she didn't know how she could miss it. Of course! It was Anthony who was leading him, not Rainee! Marcus might be trying to follow Rainee, but in reality, with each training, these black bonds that connected him and Anthony were activated less and less. If before their black power would spread over Marcus' body ever so often, now it rarely would happen ever again.

“So you wanted him to trust Anthony from the very beginning!”

“I wanted him to have a feeling for what trust in another is. I didn't aim for him to trust Anthony. Why would he trust in your friend?”

“.....” No matter how many times it happened, these conversations would leave Anniet speechless every time. “So who do you think is coming to help you?”

“I don't know.” Rainee said honestly.

“Then you don't even know if someone will come to help you?”

“On the contrary,” Rainee laughed, “I am certain of it.”

“You don't remember who helped you last time, and you don't know that anyone will come to your aid, but you are certain of it... It doesn't make sense. How does it work? How is it possible? And even if help will come, how would you know it is what you need?”

“Have you ever seen air?”

“No.”

“But when you swim and are getting short of oxygen, you lift your head, certain that it is enough for you to breathe in, and air will come. Do you check in advance, before breathing in, that the air is what you expect it to be and not some different variation of it?”

Annet didn't answer, as there was no need to answer. It was obvious that she didn't think about air, either if it is there or if it is good enough before breathing.

“Receiving help when needed is similar to breathing – you don't have to think about it to receive it. People don't realise how much help they are receiving only because they think too much. They think what help should come, and if it doesn't match expectations, it is either refused or most

often taken as something else, some side effect, but not help. That's why they don't understand that receiving help is a natural, never-ending process, same as breathing. You either get oxygen without thinking and being picky, or you die if there is none. Oxygen is a critical outer substance for you, as a physical body, to survive. You cannot stay alive without it for even a moment."

"I can survive for a minute or two," Annet disagreed.

"No, you can survive for that long without taking in some fresh air, but you still have some inside of you. If there were none, if all oxygen were removed from you, your body would die instantly."

"I have never thought that way."

"We rarely think, and there is no need to think. We are not created to think about it, but we can know about it and understand it. But we don't need to know how it works to use it. People are ignoring these obvious signs or, at best, think that they are unique to only one case. No. Nothing of this sort is unique. Take the world you can see around as a sample for things you cannot see. The most vital things for our existence, in other parts than physical, are in the same order – the most vital are those that are given for us to use without thinking about how to use them. We can refuse it, but just for a short time. We can complicate it if we want, same as we can complicate breathing: we can "learn" breathing three times in a row and exhaling once, or breathing only in a house while running through the open spaces while holding our breath, or many more crazy things. And if taught from early days, these crazy things will look completely normal to us, as if this is how it should be, but reality is that it is not needed, and you can simply breathe easily as a newborn baby does, before learning any other nonsense."

"So there are more complicated things?"

"Sure, there are, but they are not so vital. Same as food for the physical body. We don't get it into the mouth as soon as we open it; we have to go searching for it and put effort into it. But food is not as vital as oxygen. Even if all food is removed from you, you still can live for a relatively long time."

"How long?"

"Well, it depends on your development in other areas. Why such a question?"

"Anthony is very concerned that I would eat regularly..."

"He must be wise and love you much because you are a little neglecter to yourself. You burn more energy than you remember to take in."

"You said it is not essential."

"Then learn how to get this energy, which you are burning, from other sources so that you could skip meals. You cannot expect this sort of energy to come to you effortlessly, as food doesn't come to you effortlessly, so you have to seek it and gain it before you can use it, not vice versa. If you pass out from not breathing on purpose, then as soon as you lose consciousness, your body will breathe in. If you pass out from not eating, your body will die instead of eating unconsciously. Don't mix up these things."

"What about water?"

"Water is something in the middle – you cannot exist without it, but you have to look for it to live."

"What about you? Can you stay without food and water?" Annet wondered.

“For some time.”

“But you eat and drink!”

“Sure, I do. It is nice to eat and drink. It tastes good. I love it.”

“Can you teach me?”

“Teach you what?”

“To get food energy from somewhere else?”

“One day,” Rainee promised. “Anyway, who is”

Rainee didn't finish, seeing Anniet sighing. Same question over and over again. But she answered anyway.

“He is my friend who lives in a cottage next to yours.”

As time passed, Anniet stopped being so involved in Marcus' training. Rainee was right, there was not much she could get from it. The way these three were moving was way too advanced, and she could not do it by herself. And when Rainee had time to train her, there was much more interesting to follow what Rainee was teaching her instead of asking her to teach something she saw and memorised from Marcus' training.

None of his trainings lasted that long as the first one, nor did they end with Marcus getting unconscious again. But they would last all day from dawn to dusk, and there would be no breaks (brakes). However, discussions about how a true, loving warrior should fight, what he should feel, where his attention should be, were fascinating, and Anniet tried her best never to miss a single one.

Rainee's time was getting very scarce; now she was teaching history, geography, ethics, physics, martial arts, and Marcus. At first, people called the subject "Marcus" as a joke, but soon it was clear that there was no joke in it, as he was swallowing most of her time. His personal training was every third day and would take all the time, and then in other classes, he would get more attention than anyone else.

At first, there were many complaints about it to the degree that it was even brought up to the headmaster. But the headmaster said that everyone is entitled to do with their own time as they think is best and spend it as they think fit. And no one else can squeeze out something different from what a person wants to do, and even if it were possible to do so, it would benefit no one, as it can be achieved only by forcing, in other words, by taking away something that belonged only to one person and dispersing it among others.

No matter who, may it be a teacher, a student, or anyone else, it is not for others to decide how to share their time, even if it is strongly believed that if this time is spent differently, it would bring more benefit. Everyone can only be grateful for the time someone else is willing to share and use it to their own advantage as much as they can, but cannot demand more. It is very advisable to ask or to indicate that there is a need for it, but there is no reason to get needy and angry if the request is not granted. Someone asked what about their rights as students of this school, and the headmaster said that she knows an outstanding teacher of ethics who could explain this subject very well, and by coincidence, the very same teacher is offering classes in this school now, so it would be very advisable to ask her to explain. With that, this issue was over, as there was only one teacher of ethics, the same one that everyone came to complain about.

Annet didn't understand the origin of this complaint. Even if Marcus was having more airtime, it was not like Rainee came and gave it to him. He was seeking it so much all the time

when everyone else was just expecting to receive it. Was he grateful for it? Probably not. From his point of view, Rainee could do for him even more.

Strangely enough, he could sort of remember Anthony. Well, not really remember, but somehow he connected the person standing behind him during training with Anniet, and was asking her about this "Ghost from the past" all the time. There was very little Anniet knew herself. But it was funny how he could remember the nickname Anthony gave him as a joke, but not his real name. Every time Marcus would meet Anthony out of training and Anniet would introduce them, reminding Marcus that this is the person he wants to know about, they would talk for a very short time, just a few words, and something else would draw Marcus' attention, or something would come up, and he would have to go.

Anyway, Anniet became really good friends with Marcus and could understand more and more why Rainee was thinking so highly about him, as he was a truly remarkable person, one of a kind she had never met before. Anthony, on the other hand, didn't think that much about him. When Anniet asked if he thinks Marcus is a great person, he said:

"No."

"But I think he is very strong, and very intelligent, and very interesting, and knows a lot," Anniet said.

"Yes, I agree with that," Anthony didn't argue.

"And he has many more qualities that others don't have, or at least he is better at everything."

"Yup," Anthony agreed again.

"Wouldn't it make him a great person?"

"He has many great abilities, and he is good at them, but abilities are just abilities, not a person; it is just what a person can do."

"Rainee says that he has great potential."

"I cannot argue with that either," Anthony agreed, "but potential isn't a person either. It is only what someone can become."

To herself, Anniet thought that in this case, she didn't really know what the person was then.

Anthony himself had more free time than ever before. His services as a cook weren't needed that much any longer, and his place would hardly ever be open again. Nobody minded, as nobody could remember him. People would remember having very nice meals, but where and who made them eluded their minds. Anniet was happy about it, as apart from these times when Anthony was at training, they would spend a lot of time together.

Anthony would not attend anybody's classes but Rainee's. After trying a few different classes, Anniet followed his example. Instead, on days when Anthony and Rainee would train Marcus, she would spend hours in the library. And what a library it was! Just upon walking into it, one could feel like coming to a completely different world. Walls and windows were decorated with scenes and portraits of kings of the past, surrounded by what must be famous people of those times.

Annet had never seen so much preserved history in the real world (as she called it). There was very little known about any other than the current King. She never even knew that there were this many. A King was a King; he ruled for centuries, as long as any living being could remember, and long before that. Sure, everyone knew about the First King who created this world, but no one knew for sure what was true and what was fiction. Then there was a second King, Aydeen. After he

died, the Dark Ages engulfed the kingdom for a very long time. Some say decades, some say centuries. And only when the First King returned did normality come back to those who managed to survive.

After that, not much was known. All people knew was that kings would change time after time, and anyone, not necessarily from a royal bloodline, could become King,. But no one was sure how it could be done. Also, the history of previous kings was very scarce. Some said because the current King didn't want to be overthrown, others would say that all history was destroyed before this King came to reign.

But here all was different, and history revealed itself not just in books but in endless pictures too. The library must be expanding with every reign, as the closest to the entrance was the current King and his generals. Every time, after walking through the doors, one would be met by the King adorned in his golden armour with his Rainbow general standing right behind him as she always used to do.

Sometimes Annet was thinking to herself: was the King really so invincible as everyone would say? If he was, how could he be injured twice recently? How could he allow all these terrible things to happen? How would he let his favourite general die at his side?

Next after him was the Rainbow general on her own. There were no mysteries about her; she was always so open and nice and would always be at the King's side.

Then there was a Pink general and his famous or infamous, depending on the time of history, dragon, so hated by generals of old days and so loved by everyone on the battlefield now. It was said that once she spreads her wings, no misfortune will ever touch those who were fortunate enough to find themselves under them. And her wings were truly of a magnificent size. It was well known to everyone that this general had the complete devotion of the Rainbow general from the battlefield to personal life. She was in love with him from a very young age, and she was looking at him as a future king from the time they were just children. There was a funny story floating among people about how, being just a small child, she single-handedly beat up a sword master who was rude and abusive to little Prince Angus, who was always so sweet-natured. Little Rainbow general rammed her sword at the abuser's chest, asking how dare he behave like this with his future King, and telling him to kneel down and apologise at once.

Then there was the Dark General, loyal to no one but the Rainbow General. At his inauguration, he told the King that he didn't come to serve him, but to serve the Rainbow General. He refused the King's gift, by this action losing the right to have a dragon. People said he did it to maintain his hound, as it was well known that dragons would not like their owners to have any other pets and would devour them instantly once raised up by the King. So the Dark General never had a dragon, but somehow, by his own will and power, he was able to transform himself into half bird, half human, and would claim the sky as his own domain, while his hound would follow him on the ground. There was not a single obstacle that could stop that hound. You could not stop him by closed doors, as he could walk through them as if they didn't exist. You couldn't hide in a tree or on a roof, as he could climb any height, nor could you hide under the ground, as he could walk under the ground like under the water. Scary and merciless, hardly ever smiling, the Dark General was looking after each and every one who was in trouble and would come to their aid no matter where and when. While other generals were protecting people from intruders, the Dark General took it much further and would watch over the streets of the Capital or any other place he would come, and if you brought trouble for others, he would come no matter where you are, may it be even your own

home. His relation to the Rainbow General was completely unknown, and there were only countless speculations. However, he was well known for breaking the hearts of many women who were brave enough to lay their eyes on him. And it was difficult not to do so, as he was extremely handsome. So good-looking that even his scary personality couldn't prevent him from being loved very much by women.

Then there was the Sleeping Dragon, or Prince Ragnar. Some people would even call him a Baby Prince. He was the second son of the King, but he was named like this not because of that, but because of his famous tantrums and unpredictable personality. He could be as sweet as a child one moment and as wrathful as death itself in another moment. His sword was of enormous size, which could hardly be carried by anyone else. His dragon would rarely come out; therefore, he was called the Sleeping Dragon. But when it would show itself, it was nothing like his brother's sweet-natured dragon, but a fierce, scary beast; however, little was known about it. Tall and strong, larger and more muscular than other generals or even the King himself, he was also very favoured by women, but not a single one ever managed to tame him for anything more than a short love affair. He would rarely show his power on the battlefield, and his squad was more known as the King's guards and for maintaining order in the Capital city.

All these famous figures were looking from the walls of the library and were drawn so realistically that one could think that they were standing next to you. Rainee said that the King had more generals, and Anniet had heard about them, but they would hardly ever be portrayed next to the King, and none of them was drawn on these walls either.

Further, as you would go into the library, the older generations of Kings would look at you from the paintings. Some very nice, some very scary; some friendly, some arrogant; some had one, two, or even three generals, some would be on their own. Unfortunately, there was no picture of either the First King Jonathan or the Second King Aydeen. Also, it was not known if the very oldest picture was of the Third King or someone much later, and if all previous Kings were displayed on the walls of the library, or some were missing.

But the library was so attractive not only because of these paintings, no matter how nice they were, but because of rows upon rows of never-ending books. The King's library was a small reading room in comparison. It seemed that it had an unlimited amount of books, journals, scrolls, and other writings in it from different times in history, all sorted in many ways.

At first, Anniet was overwhelmed by it, not knowing what to pick up, but Anthony would always find her something to read that would fully captivate her attention.

And no matter how busy the day would be, Rainee would always spend evenings together with her. They would sit at the campfire listening to stories. When told by Anthony, it would cover a large variety of events, whether from this world or from the old world. When told by others, it would rotate around the King and legends about him and his generals.

That's how days and weeks were passing by – steady but never dull.

Until one day, it all changed in an instant.

The end of first book