

Anniel woke up from the bright sun shining on her face. At first, she didn't know where she was, but the bed was so soft that she didn't even want to open her eyes. Then memories started to come back, and she slowly peeked through half-opened eyes to look around. She was alone in the room. Her body was so sluggish and lazy as if after labouring for a week. That's right, she got that fever yesterday, now she remembers it clearly. She had such weird dreams, too... Anniel slowly turned her head to see what she was lying on, but it was just a regular pillow and not a phantom or ghost dressed in a black suit. She slowly touched around herself under a duvet to see if she was still wrapped in that soft and fluffy blanket that kept her so warm, but there was no blanket. So it was a dream after all, she thought with relief. But such a nice dream. Then why the thought that it could have been reality frightened her? Really strange. She will have to speak with Blake. Things cannot continue like this. Doesn't matter what he will think, and it doesn't matter if he already knows. She will feel much better if she just tells him how she really feels; otherwise, their friendship might take an awkward turn if she is always radiating just love and affection towards him when all he wants is just to have a friend. If that is the case, she will just explain herself and tell him that she is happy to have his friendship and will ask not to be startled by these flashes of affection that flare up from time to time.

Anniel pulled her arm from under the duvet and froze at the sight of a black satin sleeve on it. She slowly lifted the duvet and then put it down again. Then lifted it again. She was wearing Blake's shirt! There was no doubt about it. How and why were the questions she could not answer.

At that moment, a noise from the next room drew her attention. She listened carefully, and there could be no doubt, someone was in the next room, and the smell of cooking was entering from there. Someone was cooking! Anniel knew only one person who would cook around her. She sat up in the bed. Thought to go and tell that person how she feels about him suddenly became unrealistic. Was that not a dream then? She stood up and stayed in the middle of the room for some time, not daring to make a move. What if it really wasn't a dream? What should she do? What should she say?

She looked in a mirror on a wall just to see a scared little self dressed in this black satin shirt that was way too big for her and covered her legs nearly down to the knees. The sounds in the kitchen were getting noisier, and Anniel could not ignore them any longer. She tiptoed to the door and silently opened it to have a look. What she saw brought her great relief. It was Old John doing his best efforts in the kitchen.

"It has been a second time that seeing me brought disappointment to you," - he said, smiling and looking towards her. - "But don't stand there with your bare feet, just because you feel a little better. Come and get yourself comfortable on a couch or get back into bed."

Disappointed... Yes, he was right, she does feel very disappointed. And here she thought she was feeling relieved.

Anniel looked for her clothes, but then touched the sleeve of this silky shirt she was wearing right now and changed her mind. So she took the blanket from an armchair, wrapped it around her shoulders and came into the lounge.

She didn't know what to say or what to do, so she just silently walked to the couch and sat in a corner watching Old John with wide-open eyes. She wasn't really afraid of him, but it was also a little bit scary to have a stranger in her room.

Old John didn't say anything, just brought a cup with a hot drink and handed it to her. Seeing that Anniet was hesitant, he encouraged her:

"It's OK, it is not too hot, so you will not burn yourself."

Annet quickly took a cup. Burning herself wasn't on her mind, and she also didn't want to insult anybody. But despite all, she heard herself speaking.

"Why are you here?"

Gosh... She really was not concerned about others. It was obvious that he was taking care of her: the drink in her hands smelled like a remedy, and her stomach was making strange noises at the smell of cooked food. But still, this question was playing in her head all the time.

"Straightforward as always," - John smiled and walked back to the kitchen. - "That's a very good quality you have. And your questions are always right on target. There are many answers to this question, but if I were to say that your friend asked me to come and look after you until you get better, would it satisfy you?"

"Rainee?" - Anniet asked, feeling how involuntarily this name brought a smile to her face.

"Yes," - John said.

"Was she here?"

"Yes she was." - John confirmed.

"Was it she who put this shirt on me?" - Anniet asked carefully.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she thought that it would give you the comfort you need right now."

Annet felt speechless and didn't say anything, but lifted the cup to her mouth. Surprisingly, it tasted very nice despite obviously being a medicine.

She didn't know what Rainee meant by saying it would give her comfort, but it definitely worked, as it felt very nice and smooth to the skin, but that was the least important. It truly gave her a feeling as if she was not alone right now. It felt somehow awfully familiar as the blanket she was snuggling into right now resembled too much that one that was wrapped around her shaking body yesterday.

"Was he here too?" - she finally asked, not knowing what was better to know or not to know.

"That I could only guess," - Old John said, bringing a plate with hot food for her. - "But I don't see him leaving without coming to see you, especially when you were not feeling that well. So if I ought to answer then, without even knowing it, I would say yes, he definitely was here too."

"Leaving?" - That was all Anniet picked up from what was said. - "He left?"

Old John didn't answer, as there was not much to say; he already told that Blake left. "*He is definitely a lot like Rainee*", Anniet smiled to herself.

"Did he go far?"

"Yes," - John confirmed that, - across the ocean.

"For how long?"

"That I cannot tell you, as no one but King knows it."

“And Rainee?”

“Rainee too.”

“So both of them go there...”

“All three,” - Old John corrected.

“All three?” – Anniet didn’t understand.

“General Ragnar went too.”

“.....,” Anniet sat quietly for a while. Just yesterday, they were camping and riding together, and now only she is left here.

“So what now?” – She asked in a little bit of a lost voice.

“Now? Now, you get better and then look around. This place is going to be your new home for the foreseeable future after all.”

“And you?” – She asked. Surely he cannot just stay around all the time.

“I? I will help you to get better and show you around as much as you will allow me.”

So she wasn’t right after all. He is going to stay around.

“Do you know what happened to me?” – Anniet asked, - “I was all good yesterday, and I swear I was going to take a rest, I didn’t lie.”

“Swearing is a very bad habit, so it's better not to keep it. Those who believe you will trust just a word, those who don’t will still be in doubt, even if you swear. You'd better put it in the “not needed” or even “harmful” box, as swearing usually just puts restrictions upon the person who has sworn. I do know what happened, but I presume you want to know it too. To pass on information is a bit more difficult task than just knowing. It is not possible to pass by words all that I know, so you will receive just a small, incomplete amount, even if I say.”

Annet smiled to herself again. The more he spoke, the less guard she had against him.

“You really sound a lot like Rainee,” - she said aloud. – It is probably the opposite, as you were her teacher, probably it is a lot like you, but for me, it doesn’t feel that way, as I met her first. I would like to know this little bit that you can tell me.”

She is not going to make the same mistake twice. Rainee already corrected her once that what is little to Old John might be an ocean to her.

“There is no mystery about what is causing any illness, with no exceptions. Same as any other illness, this one was caused by an attack on yourself. I am sure that your teacher has already told you that many things can try to harm you, but only one will succeed.”

“I attacked myself...” - that was something Anniet didn’t expect to hear. She nearly swore again that she didn’t do it, but stopped just in time. But still, she could not agree with this statement, - “I didn’t. I didn’t do anything bad to myself. I was just sitting and thinking when I started to feel a bit dizzy.”

“If all were just so straightforward, then we would not have sick people,” - John smiled. – “And in fact, it is straightforward once you see it, but until you do, it is not very easy to understand only from an explanation. What have you been thinking about?”

“Many things,” - Anniet said aloud while thinking to herself, - “about what has happened, about what Rainee said before leaving, never before had she spoken to me like this. Also...” -

Anniel fell silent for a moment but then swallowed her pride and continued, - “also about riding together with Blake, about how I felt while he was holding me and also what it meant when he disclosed that it is possible for others to know how you feel and what you think.”

“If to leave you, friends, aside, what else did you think about?” – John asked.

“About how people were watching,” - Anniel said without hesitation. – “How everyone was looking, talking, and even pointing at me.”

“And here you have your reasons. It tears you apart. You don’t want to let go of either your beliefs or your desires, and they are pulling in opposite directions. For you to avoid falling sick over the same thing again, one has to leave you. Your beliefs are deeply rooted in you, and many things are built over them. Look at it like this, that it is not you holding it, but they are holding you. It is not entirely true, as this saying describes physical impossibility, but still, at your understanding level, this is the only description that I can use. So let’s stay deeply rooted and hold you. While you’re holding onto what has become dear to you, what you want to have, the way you want to live. They both oppose and tear you apart, pulling you in opposite directions. If you keep both, you will get sick very often, every time this confrontation is triggered. So to get better, one has to leave. Either you have to let go of what you hold dear and what you dream of having, or believe opposing it has to leave you. In other words, it has to be uprooted, and by doing so, everything that you have built over it during your life will be affected and messed up to the degree that if you choose to do so, you might think yourself to be a very bad, heartless, or inconsiderate person.”

“Are you happy with where you stand?” – Anniel said, remembering the question King kept asking during the inauguration.

“You are a very bright personality,” - John praised her. - “One day, when you stop being afraid and ashamed of it, you will understand it yourself. That is a very good question to ask yourself, as long as you are honest with the answers.”

“I understand what I want, even though I am not happy where I stand. But I don’t understand what is holding me back, and even then, how could I escape if it is holding me?”

“Your biggest holdback is the opinions of others. Need for approval or at least the desire that there would be no disapproval. You want to be allowed to do, allowed to be. Or at least left alone to your devices, in other words, to be unnoticed, to be out of sight. The thought of people observing your actions, judging, criticising, and disapproving is unbearable to you. You are desperately trying to find a way to appease their unhappiness, how to find a way to please everyone, how to make them see and understand what your actions are built on, to show that it is something that they would understand, agree with, and approve. It is not even a fear of confrontation, as you would be able to do it with ease as long as you have a firm ground under your feet. But unfortunately, this ground is based on the opinions of others, and little depends on you, as everyone is entitled to have their own opinions, and you are powerless to change them, no matter what you do.”

He made a pause before continuing.

“You cannot keep it while reaching for what you desire. People will never approve. And there is nothing you can do to change it. You will die from exhaustion if you try before reaching this goal.”

“Why?” – Anniel asked quietly, feeling the very same feeling from yesterday creeping over her again. Was she really so hopeless...

“Because it is not for them to approve. You are asking of them something that doesn’t belong to them. They think it does, and you wholeheartedly agree. They are expressing their rights, and you handle it for them. Through your life, you learned that what others think is right and what you think is of lesser importance unless approved, or has no importance at all if criticised or disapproved.

You desire to live your life as you want, and also you desire to get approval that you can do it from those who have nothing to do with it, but believe they do. Two desires fighting against each other, and you are in the middle. One of these desires has to go as they are opposing each other. While both are active, you will get nothing, you will go nowhere, and you will be constantly torn apart: feeling guilty, ashamed and unfulfilled at the minimum or sick and crippled when things escalate.

Believing that you should be doing the right thing is a holding power. But this belief is based just on multiple opinions that were sold to you as truth. It is difficult for you to leave them behind, as no one else wants to do so, and your desire is for others to approve, for others to agree.

You want something, but you are afraid to stretch your arm and take it, as you know that if you succeed, there will be a lot of disagreement, and if you do not, everyone will know that you tried and will judge and criticise and even laugh. If you seek what you want, there is nothing you can do to avoid criticism, disapproval, condemnation, and many other things you have learned to avoid at any cost. The only way for you to avoid it is to let go of what you desire. That would fulfil your other desire, the desire to be unnoticed. In the situation you are now in, you cannot have them both. You seek something that many believe belongs to them.

That’s why saying that it is holding you is incorrect, as after all twists and turns, it is still you holding it. Freedom and imprisonment don’t come together; to maintain one, you have to lose another.”

Old John spoke slowly and with pauses for her to hear his words, and would move to another phrase only after she understood what he said earlier.

“That is why it is so difficult to help people? No matter what you do, they will feel like losing something.” – Annet asked finally. Now she knew very well what desire she was going to keep and what would have to go. How to do it was a completely different question.

“When you try to help someone who doesn’t look for help, it will always feel like interference for them. Because a desire that is leading to doom is still a desire, and they will fight to keep it, expecting miracles to happen, not realising that the true miracle is the offered way out.”

“How do you know this much?”

“I lived for a very long time, so I learned a lot.”

“How long did you live?”

“That is something I don’t remember.”

“When were you born?”

“That is something that I don’t remember either.”

“Are you older than King?”

“I remember holding him as a baby in my arms.”

“But King lives forever!”

“King lives for hardly a millennium. That is much shorter than forever.”

“I see...” - Anniet was looking now at the person sitting in front of her with entirely different eyes, - “Yes, you are right, he doesn’t even look that old. In fact, he doesn’t look old at all. Why are you old?” – For a minute, she got afraid that what she said might be offensive, but again, why should it be, as his name was Old John, not just John.

“I am afraid I don’t know it either,” - he said with a smile. – “I presume I look how I allow myself to look.”

“Why are old people not pretty?” – Anniet asked again. For some time, she was trying to see him as a handsome man, no matter how old, but it was difficult. She remembered very well how she felt about missing how beautiful the headmaster was, only because she looked older. Now she was trying not to miss it, but it didn’t work. Just after speaking aloud, she realised what she had said. But luckily, Old John answered before fear got a firm grip on her.

“It is an excellent observation,” - he said, - “you should be proud of those instead of shrinking. Beauty of the human doesn’t come from the physical body, it comes from the soul. The physical body becomes old when the connection to the soul through life becomes scarce. When it happens, it is not easy to see true beauty.”

“Headmaster became young and beautiful again,” - Anniet said, relaxing once more, - “I think King did it.”

“I think so too.”

“Then why doesn’t he do it for everyone? Why doesn’t he do it for you?”

“It is very rare to find a person whose appearance wouldn’t match their inner state. You could say the headmaster was an exception. And even then, she had to make some personal choices, some inner shift to receive and accept help like this. King is strong, but a human soul, even in its weakest state, is still stronger. If King were to make somebody's body young again, the soul of the person would overpower it, and it would get back to what it was very fast. People don’t understand what the soul is and think it has something to do with the mind. Then they think that they want to get younger again and believe it is what they want. However, true wishes come from a soul, and for someone to become old, one has to become very detuned from their soul, so they are simply incapable of feeling it, so they think instead, and make wishes instead of feeling what they truly want. The body reacts to both the soul and the mind, but the soul has an upper hand, no matter how much it is suppressed. It cannot be any other way. If the mind disconnects from the body, the body doesn’t die; if the soul disconnects from the body, it dies. If old people could feel how tired their souls are, they would understand why their bodies are withering away.”

“Is your soul tired?” – Anniet wondered.

“It must be,” - Old John smiled again.

“You don’t look tired.”

“I am old, so my connection to my soul must be very poor, but my mind and my will must be very strong; that’s why I keep living.”

It was so interesting to listen to such things!

“You know so much!” – Anniet said with amazement. – “Do you know all? I mean about others. As obviously you don’t know much about yourself.”

“I doubt it,” - John said, - “but you can try it,” - he added winking his eye.

“You would tell me?” – Anniet looked at him while sinking down into her blanket with anticipation.

“I would.”

“Anything?”

“Anything I know and have permission to say.”

“Would you tell me how Blake and Rainee met?” – There were various speculations about it, but no one knew for sure

“Under one condition,” - he said in a very serious voice.

“Yes,” - Anniet said, listening attentively. There probably was some sort of secret. Rainee told her many times that there is no such thing as secrets... But still, she was happy to fulfil the conditions required just to find out about it.

“If you finish your drink and eat your food.” – Old John laughed. – “But I presume that is two conditions...”

Anniet laughed too. She quickly drained the cup and picked her plate from the table, ready to listen.

“OK then, where should I start?”

“At the very beginning,” - Anniet said eagerly.

“Uh, that’s a tough request as the journey of life has many beginnings but does not have an end. It is like a river, it might start with one little stream, and we can call it a birth, but for it to become a proper river, countless streams have to join it, countless events that make somebody's life interesting and unique. So let's trace the stream that you requested at its very beginning.”

Deep in the countryside, in an area rarely visited by travellers but often covered by mist, three travellers were making their way through the enchanted forest. It was called enchanted not because of any enchantment placed upon it, well, at least not any known to local residents, but because of its incredible beauty and strange looks. There were no mountains around, however, the forest was full of countless streams of water, creating a perfect environment for all possible greenery to grow. And it did grow. On every stone, on every fallen twig, plants overlapping plants. Most of the trees were covered by moss and other tiny plants, and the trunks were blending perfectly into the surrounding green. With one exception. Old oaks were not affected by it at all, and their dark brown trunks and branches made an exceptional contrast, standing out against all this green background. And the branches were very strange-looking, stretching low and high, far in all directions, creating an illusion of many twisted hands. Despite all this weirdness, the atmosphere in this forest was very pleasant. A forgotten and rarely used road stretched through this forest, and oaks, on both sides of it, created a perfect alley with thick branches criss-crossing above. Some were stretching pretty low, but still, three riders were able to pass under them.

All these beautiful surroundings didn't leave the travellers speechless. Why should it? It was three children travelling, and like any other children, they could not stay in awe and silence for too long, and their chatter and laughter could be heard from far away. Two boys and one girl, at the age of one, would say, by the look of nine or ten year-olds, were discussing yesterday's events.

After reaching one large tree, they all stopped and looked up.

"Why are you hiding?" The girl asked, looking at the thick branch.

One would think that she was talking to the tree, but it wasn't the case, and soon the head of a much younger child popped out from above the branch. It was a small and skinny boy lying on top of it, and his lean body couldn't even be seen from below.

"Ssh!" he said in a silent, disapproving voice. "Don't be so loud."

"Why?" The girl asked again, "Who are you hiding from? There is no one else around."

"There is!" The boy in the tree disagreed. "A monster lives in here, and you will just draw its attention and show where I am."

"A monster?" One of the boys who just arrived got excited. "What monster? A dragon? Ren, I thought you said that dragons don't live in the forest!"

"I said so because it's true. Dragons don't live in the wild. There has to be some different kind of monster. How does it look, this monster?"

"Scary," the little boy in the tree said, "Scary as a demon from the tales. He is huge, nearly the same size as me, with large teeth and red eyes. And it is always after me when I am on my own."

"Then why do you stay here, in the forest, by yourself, and not at home with your family?" The other boy asked in a very gentle and soothing voice.

"I don't want to go home," the boy in the tree said, "everyone is sick there, and something tries to catch me when I am at home."

"Another monster?" The girl asked, wondering how many monsters could be pursuing one little boy.

“No, not a monster,” the boy denied, “I don’t know what it is, I cannot see it, but when I am at home, it feels like something is trying to get a grip on me, and I want to run away. But when I do, the monster comes after me, and there is no one around to chase it off. So I am hoping that if he doesn’t see me for a while, he will think that I have left the forest. But all has been in vain now.”

“How long have you been hiding?”

“Since early morning.”

“Well, it is an afternoon now, so it has been a few hours. It has been a long time, and there is no point in hiding anymore. If he left, he left; if he didn’t, then he is not going to leave. You’d better come down.”

“You might be right,” the little boy said, sitting up. It could be seen that he was all stiff from lying silently for so long. He tried to shuffle himself down the branch but nearly fell.

“I will help you,” one of the boys said, standing up on the back of his horse and lightly jumping to reach the branch of the tree. By doing so, he shook that branch badly, and the little boy screamed in fear, trying to keep his balance. But his helper was already sitting next to him. He took a firm hold of the little boy and swung backwards, hanging on the branch only with his knees. The little boy thought they were falling down and shouted even more until he was safely handed into somebody’s hands.

“Ruffus,” the girl said in a strict voice, “just because you are being bigger now, it doesn’t give you any right to go and randomly grab people, even if you want to help.”

“Shh, don’t be afraid,” her companion was calming the scared boy, “my brother is very strong and very careful, he would never do you any harm.”

Ruffus, who was still hanging head-down from the tree with an upset face after being scolded by the girl, whom he earlier called Ren, after hearing what his brother said, blossomed with a big smile, swung himself back to the branch and then lightly ran across it to the tree trunk to slide down. He did it so easily, demonstrating that he was really strong and skilled. The little boy even forgot about all his fear and watched him with awe.

“Angus, you shouldn’t praise him for behaving like this, as he will try to show off even more,” the girl said while sliding down from her horse and helping Angus to put the little boy on the ground.

“No, I won’t,” Ruffus disagreed, “I will be more considerate next time. I just wanted to help. I also like it when you or Angus say nice things about me.”

“Sure you do,” Ren smiled, then added, looking at the boy who was hiding in a tree, “you are very skinny, very small. Even if that monster is nearly the same size as you, it cannot be neither very scary nor big.”

What she said was true, the boy they got out of the tree really was very small and skinny. The loose clothes hanging on him didn’t hide it, but made it even more obvious.

“Have you eaten anything today?” Ren asked again. The boy shook his head, “I thought so,” Ren continued. “My name is Rainee, but you can call me Ren. This is Angus, and the one who scared you is Ruffus. What is your name?”

Surprisingly, the boy was very reluctant to answer, or maybe he didn’t have time, as all this commotion really stirred something in the forest. Shrubs next to them shook, and a black hairy animal walked into the opening.

"It is him!" the boy shouted, hiding behind Angus.

"Him?" Rainee couldn't understand, "a monster? But this is not a monster. This is a dog."

"Dogs don't look like this! Look at him! Look into his eyes! Look how scary he is. And he is always after me, no matter how many times I tell him to go away! No matter how many times my mum chases him away. He always waits for me whenever I want to go somewhere. Look at him! He is not a dog! He is a demon!"

"I am looking at him," Rainee said, "but no matter if I look all day, he still is just a dog. An abandoned dog. But still not a monster. All he needs is just a bath and a good brushing."

"Chase him away! I don't want him!"

"I am not going to chase him away as he has done nothing bad," Rainee wouldn't agree, looking at the dog, which was sitting and watching them with its smart eyes. "And he is not even a dog, he is a puppy, a child just like you or me. Why would I chase the puppy away?"

"A puppy!!!" The little boy couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What puppy? Look at him. He is humongous."

"No, he is not," Angus disagreed, "it is you who are very little. That's why the dog looks so big to you."

"Have you ever seen such a large puppy?" The boy asked, getting a little bit calmer after seeing that other children were not afraid of this creature, which was terrifying him.

"No, I haven't," Angus agreed, "but there are many things that I haven't seen yet."

"Is there a river close by?" Rainee asked. "Then we could wash him and see how he looks when we get all the mud and twigs out of his coat. Come!" She called the dog.

But the dog just looked at her, acknowledging that he had heard her, but didn't make a move. All his interest was only in the little boy.

"You will have to call him, as it looks like he is interested only in you," Rainee said.

"Me?" The boy was surprised, "Why would I call him? I want him to go away."

"Why would you want him to go away? Has he done something bad to you? No? Is there anything you don't like about him, apart from how he looks? No? Then how do you know that you don't like him? If you are afraid of him only because you call him by strange names, then don't do it. Don't call him a monster if it makes you scared. Let's give him a different name. Let's say Blake. Blake is a very nice name, I like it. What do you think?"

The boy looked a little bit confused at what was said.

"So if you don't like the name, you can just change it?" he asked.

"Sure you can," Rainee laughed. "It is just a name, isn't it? You can give a name, and you can change it. My name is Rainee, but Ruffus wants to call me Ren, and I don't mind. Ruffus' name is Ragnar, but he doesn't like it, so I am calling him Ruffus, and he likes it much more."

"And what is your name?" The little boy turned towards Angus.

"Angus," was the answer.

"No, I mean your real name."

"My real name is Angus. I like it, so I don't see a reason to change it. And what about you? You never said what your name is."

The little boy thought for a few seconds before answering.

"My name is Blake," he said.

"No, it is not," Rainee laughed, "I just gave this name to your dog."

"My dog?" The boy was surprised. "I don't have a dog."

"Well, maybe that's what you think. But I can see it differently, as you definitely have a dog, and it is sitting just right there and is looking at you. Why do you think he has been following you all this time?"

"He was following me because he is my dog? But nobody ever gave me any dog!"

"It doesn't matter, he probably gave himself to you. Look how he behaves. Isn't that how a dog should behave with its owner? Try calling him."

"How do I call him?"

"By name," Rainee laughed, "his name is Blake."

"No," the boy said firmly, "my name is Blake. His name is Deamon."

"Wouldn't you be afraid of him again if you call him by a scary name?"

"Deamon is not a scary name. And I always thought that demons were supposed to look like him, but I always thought that they had to be scary monsters. Deamon, come here," he said in a commanding voice, looking at the dog. The dog stood up immediately and walked towards him. "Sit, sit!!" The boy shouted, hiding again behind Angus.

Seeing the dog approaching, he wasn't that brave anymore. But to his own surprise, Deamon sat the moment he told him to. He was watching the boy again, as if waiting for what else to do. Encouraged by such a discovery, the boy got braver again.

"Lie down," he said, and the dog obeyed. "Come," the boy said again, and the dog obeyed again. "Stop! Stop and stay where you are!" The boy shouted again, waving his hands in front of him, but didn't hide this time. "I... I will come to you," he said after the dog obeyed again.

It was interesting to watch how he was gathering courage and slowly getting closer to that creature that he had been afraid of for so long. Slowly, step by step, he was inching towards it, prepared to run away at the slightest movement. But the dog didn't move. It was just sitting and watching the boy with questioning eyes until the distance came to nothing. The boy walked very, very close, just a few inches away from the dog, but still didn't dare to touch him. Instead, he walked around him a few times, and seeing that nothing was happening, finally stood at the dog's side and quickly stroked its back before taking a few steps backwards. Nothing happened again. Then he walked again to the dog and this time stroked his head, then his neck, then his back, then his head again.

After doing so, he got very proud of his achievement, and while standing next to it, he turned to Rainee and happily said,

"I have a dog!"

"Yes, you do," Rainee laughed in response. "But your dog is scruffy, it needs a good wash."

“Can I stroke your dog?” Ruffus finally couldn’t hold back any longer.

“OK,” Blake said, “but only if you are gentle and don't scare him.”

“I won’t, I will be gentle,” Ruffus agreed, coming closer and stretching his hand to touch it too. “He is so soft,” Ruffus said with surprise in his voice.

“Yes,” Blake confirmed, “my dog has a very soft coat, but he needs a good wash. Do you want to help me wash him?”

“Yes, I do, I do,” Ruffus agreed eagerly, “Have you ever washed a dog?”

“No,” Blake said, “have you?”

“No,” Ruffus said too.

Both of them looked back at Rainee.

“It cannot be that much different from washing your own hair or from washing a horse,” she said. “All we need is a river.”

After overcoming his fears, Blake proved to be a very good guide, and in no time, all four children were swimming and diving in a river. Blake’s dog was washed and scrubbed clean a few times and could bravely now claim the title of the cleanest dog in the world. After a good swim, the children had a picnic on a riverbank, sharing the food the three travellers were carrying in bags attached to their saddles. Later, they groomed Deamon with a horse brush, and now the dog didn’t look anything similar to the shabby creature that came out of the forest. Rainee was right, it was a young pup, but he was behaving very reservedly, and despite allowing everyone to treat him in any way they liked, he would obey only Blake.

Eventually, after the second swim, everyone was tired but satisfied.

“Can I come with you?” Blake asked while lying on his back and looking at the sky.

“Where do you want to go?” Rainee asked while lying in a very similar way.

“I don’t know. Anywhere you are going. Where are you going?”

“We? We are going nowhere,” she laughed, “we are travelling and going wherever we feel like going.”

“Can I travel with you?” Blake asked again.

“Not really,” Ruffus said, “you are too little to travel.”

“Ruffus, I told you many times already that it is not the truth. It was only what your mum told you. There is no size limit for travelling. How can it be? What difference does it make what size you are? It all depends on how much you can do and many other things, but size doesn’t really matter.”

“But I don’t see why someone else could travel when they are little, when I had to grow before I could travel,” Ruffus disagreed.

“You didn’t have to grow to travel. You had to grow for your mum to let you travel. That is not the same, is it? Your mum is not Blake’s mum. If Blake’s mum says that he can travel while he is little, then he can.”

“What if his mum would want him to stay at home with her?” Angus asked while looking into the river's running water.

“Then he would have to choose what he wants to do, to stay at home as his mother wants, or to travel as he wants,” Rainee replied.

“But what if he wants to do both?” Angus wouldn’t give up. “What if he wants to stay at home to make his mum happy, and he also wants to travel and be with his friend?”

“That would mean that he is having just the same dilemma as you do.”

After saying that, Rainee stood up and walked to sit next to him while placing her head on his shoulder.

“My mum wouldn’t mind me going,” Blake said, “She is always so tired and sleepy that she probably will not even notice me being gone.”

“Still, as you both live in the same place and she is taking care of you, it would be good to tell her,” Rainee wouldn’t give up, “otherwise she could be worrying about what happened to you, and you would not even know about it.”

“Did you tell your mother about going?” Blake asked.

“I don’t have parents,” Rainee said, “I live with Angus and Ruffus’s family. Mum wasn’t happy, but mainly because she knew that Angus would want to come with me, and father thinks that it is very good to travel, as you can see and learn many things, not only your own surroundings. Also, it is good to understand what it is that you want, and what it is that your family want from you. Also, what you expect from your family and the people surrounding you and how much of your true self you are prepared to give up in exchange for it. Father is very wise, and he knows so much. If he says that it is good for me to travel, I will travel a lot, as I believe what he says. And also I love travelling too. I do miss him a lot, but it is OK, because when I see him, it will make me even happier.”

She spoke about her stepfather with such passion that every word captivated Blake’s attention.

“What about your father?” Angus asked.

“I lost him...” Blake said, turning his eyes away.

“What do you mean you lost him?” Ruffus couldn’t understand. “How could you lose a father?”

“We went to the mist, and I couldn’t bring him back,” Blake said in a quiet voice.

“Then it is he who lost you,” Rainee said firmly, “It is not the responsibility of children to look after their parents. If your father had taken you to the mist, it was his responsibility to bring you back, not the other way round. Anyone who told you differently was lying to you, don’t listen to them.”

“But he died because I wanted to do different things than to keep the mist away,” Blake said, looking at Rainee with a bit of a confused look.

“You have been told many things that are not true,” Rainee was still relentless about it. “People don’t die in the mist; they are being sent to a different world because they don’t belong in this world for one reason or another. Nobody who belongs in this world has ever disappeared in the mists. Also, it is every adult’s responsibility to maintain a connection to this world if they want to stay in it, and not depend on someone else to bring them back, or depend on a mere chance that they

would never encounter the mist. In fact, it is very damaging to rely on other people for it. So, everyone who told you that your dad died in the mist, or that you were responsible for bringing him back, either lied to you or knew so little that they are not worthy to be trusted.”

“But how do you know?” Blake was still reluctant to believe her.

“King told me.”

“King? Have you spoken to the King?” Blake asked in awe.

“Sure, I have,” Rainee confirmed with a shine in her eyes, “He knows all, and he never lies. He told me all this not that long ago, after people tried to take me to the mist as a punishment, and got lost there themselves, and I had to find them and bring them back. Then he explained to me that despite what everyone said, none of it was true. First, people are not allowed to punish others; second, if I brought them back, it was good on my side, but only if I wanted to do so, that I should never think that it is what I am supposed to do, that it is my responsibility only because I can do it. And third, that it is adults who are responsible for children, not the other way round, that it is not my responsibility either to help any adult, nor to rescue them, nor to make them happy. Even if I can. The only valid reason to do so is if I want to. But then to know what I want, I have to separate it from what others want and expect from me, and the best way to do so is to travel on my own, or with my own friends, not with someone that someone else has chosen for me. So here we are – travelling. I wanted Angus to come with me, and Ruffus wanted to come with us. But still, if you want to come with us too, you will have to ask or at least tell your mum. Otherwise, she would not know what happened to you, and that would not be good.”

Blake was listening to her in awe, with his eyes getting larger and larger. He probably had never heard anyone speak like this before. Also, it was obvious that he was carrying blame for what had happened to his father, and to hear her opposing all his beliefs with such ease and logic made him look at her with entirely different eyes. And she even said that King himself told all of this, so it must be true then, as it was known to everyone that King spoke only the truth.

So after a long discussion, filled with swimming, playing and laughing in between, it was decided to go to Blake’s home to ask his mum if Blake could travel together. He didn’t have a horse, but Ruffus was eager to take him together. Angus wouldn’t mind doing it either. Rainee didn’t have a say here, as her horse, Aspen, refused to carry anyone else but her, so she wouldn’t be able to take Blake for a ride.

When all was agreed and arranged, all four turned back to the forest, and using the very same road where they had met up, reached the large village surrounded by fields of crops, gardens and orchards much larger than one would expect that this size of village might need.

The most interesting thing was that no people were working in these fields, but there were a few machines doing all the work.

These machines captured Rainee and Angus’s interest immediately. Ruffus didn’t pay them too much attention, and Blake was pretty scared of them, trying to hide behind Ruffus.

Many people, neither now nor then, have no understanding of how mechanical machines work. This innovation was brought by incomers from the Old World many years ago and sparked a lot of interest. However, they could not be used in the same manner as in the Old World. Here there

were restrictions placed by the First King, not to exploit and drain natural resources for one's own gain, more than one would need for themselves, to fulfil one's own ideas and express oneself in art or science, or in some cases, like feeding and clothing, to fulfil orders that had already been received from those who have a different lifestyle than farming. So the plans brought by incomers were useless, as the Old World didn't have these restrictions.

However, the idea stayed, and where an idea is born, possibilities are found. There were no restrictions placed upon how people should use their own energy, and that was what these machines were powered by. Somehow similar to magic but also nothing alike. People didn't understand what this energy was, and to them, it was magic.

But there was no magic to Rainee and Angus, as they were trained to see and use this energy in themselves, so they could clearly see what most of the people could not. Several smaller machines that were doing all the work were operated by one large and immobile piece, situated not that far from the village, and many small streams of this energy were coming from the village to feed and power it. Then it was distributed towards smaller working machines, and a large amount of it stretched further and disappeared out of sight.

"What an inefficient way to use energy..." Rainee was not happy with what she saw.

"Also very unpleasant," Angus agreed with her.

Both were right. While travelling from one object to another, an immense amount of this energy was lost in transit. Also, before any work could be done, it had to power up the distributing machine, power up the working machine, and only then was there a result. And the atmosphere around was really gloomy.

"I don't wonder that you don't like staying here," Angus said, "It is very draining just to watch this drainage, never mind participating in it."

Not many people could be seen outside, and even those who were didn't pay much attention to whatever was going on around them, but instead were sitting in the sunshine or doing some little household tasks, but without any eagerness for it. There were just a few children who were also way too quiet and devoid of interest, even after new travellers arrived.

All four stopped next to a middle-sized house and dismounted their horses. No one came to greet them, so they walked inside.

"Mum is probably sleeping," Blake said while walking in.

But he wasn't right as they found his mum doing some laundry.

"Here you are," she said, looking at him with a smile, "I was wondering what had happened to you."

Then she fell silent upon seeing the other three coming after him. It was obvious that to have visitors wasn't something common in this house. But the woman recollected herself fairly quickly.

"I see you made some new friends," she said, smiling at the children who suddenly piled into her house. "But I haven't seen you before," she added. "Are you travelling? We don't get to see travellers very often. But come in, don't be shy, you must be tired and hungry, let's sort it out."

For some reason, Rainee thought that Blake's mum was the most tired and hungry out of all the people in the house, but she chose not to say anything. During the months of travelling, they did come across places where people didn't have too much to eat, so maybe it was the same here.

However, to her surprise, when Blake's mum opened the fridge, it was full of food — much more than would be needed just for two people. So maybe there were more people living with Blake and his mum.

"My name is Ren," she introduced herself, taking the place at the table where the woman showed them, "these are my friends, Angus and Ruffus. Yes, we are travelling, and on our way, we met Blake. And yes, I think we have become friends."

"Blake?" the woman asked, looking around. "Then where is this Blake? Why is he not coming in if he is your friend?" Then she suddenly became angry, looking towards the door, and reached for the broom in a corner, "You again!" she said, furrowing her eyebrows, "Off you go! Go away! You are not welcome here!"

"He is! He is!" Blake shouted, running in front of her, and shielding the dog Deamon with his own body. "He is my dog! He is very welcome here!"

"Your dog?" the woman asked in disbelief, looking at him. "I thought you were afraid of him?"

"I was!" Blake confirmed, "but not anymore. I didn't know that he was my dog and didn't understand why he was following me. Nobody told me before. But now I know, and I am not afraid of him anymore. I like him. He can stay with me. He has to stay with me. If he is my dog, then he cannot stay with someone else."

"Who told you that he is your dog?" The woman was confused.

"Ren did. And then I saw it myself. He listens to everything I tell him. Sit!" he said in an ordering voice, and the dog obeyed instantly.

The woman was bewildered at what she was seeing. She wasn't amazed by the pristine dog's behaviour, but rather by how her little boy was behaving with the dog.

"OK," she said in a little bit of a lost voice, "if that is what you want, of course he can stay." Then she turned back to the table where the other three children were sitting. It could be seen that all these unexpected things happening were taking her off guard, and she was a bit lost now. "Right, where were we? Oh, I remember. We are missing one person. Is Blake still outside?"

"No, no," Blake said quickly, "no one is outside, just horses. My name is Blake."

"No, your name is A..." but she was abruptly interrupted by her son trying to reach up to cover her mouth with his hands, but he was too short to do it, so he just shouted instead.

"No, no, no! My name is Blake. I like this name. It is a very nice name. I want to be called by it. From now on, my name is Blake. I don't want to be called by any other name!"

His mother watched him in disbelief.

"Your head is always full of the strangest things, my boy," she said in a soft voice. "Yes, Blake is a nice name, but your father gave you your true name for a reason..."

But she was interrupted again.

"I don't want these reasons anymore. He was mistaken! I cannot do anything, and I cannot help anyone. I don't even want to think about him anymore. I don't want the name given by him! My name is Blake. After I go travelling, I want you to remember me by it."

Blake's last sentence got his mum's attention over anything else he said.

“Travelling?” she said in confusion, “What travelling?”

“I am going to travel with Ren, Ruffus and Angus,” Blake said proudly, “We came back to tell you this, so you would not get worried.”

“OK,” his mum said slowly, “and where do you want to go, and how long do you want to stay there? Who will look after you while you are away?”

“We don’t want to go anywhere,” Blake said with his eyes full of shine, “we will just go where the road takes us, and nobody knows how long it will be. My friends have been travelling for two years now, and they are not going home yet. Angus and Ruffus are missing their mum a lot, and Ren is missing their father, but that doesn’t stop them from travelling. So I will miss you too while I am going to be away, but I don’t know when I will come back. And nobody will look after me, I will look after myself. Isn’t that what you are always telling me? That I have to learn to look after myself? That’s what I am going to do.”

“Out of the question,” his mum said in a firm voice. “Your head is always full of the strangest ideas, but this time it has gone too far.”

“No, mum, no! It is not a strange idea! It is a great idea! I should have done it long ago, but I didn’t know it was possible. Everyone is saying that only adults can travel, but apparently, it is not true! Now I know, and I don’t want to stay in this place any longer. If I don’t go now, later I will not know how to do it on my own, and also I don’t have a horse. But Ruffus agreed to share his horse with me! So I am going to pack my things now, and we will be going very soon,” Blake said, turning to the stairs leading upstairs.

“You, young man, can stop now and save your energy, as you are not going anywhere!” his mum said in an undisputable voice.

“But mum! I want to go! I will not get another chance like this!”

“And I want you to stay! I don’t have another son! You are way too little to go travelling.”

“I know!” Ruffus said happily, “I keep telling him that!”

“Ruffus, could you stop encouraging lies!” Rainee said unhappily. “It will cause only confusion, and the lady already does not understand what she is doing.”

“But I understand very well what I am doing,” Blake’s mum smiled at this little girl with a serious face. “I love my son too much to let him wander off before he is ready to do so.”

“Love doesn’t hurt,” Angus said in a soft voice, looking at Blake’s mum with his large, mysterious eyes. “Blake is hurt badly now. So it cannot be done while loving.”

She looked at her little boy just to see his eyes full of tears that he was bravely trying to push away.

“You children stop confusing him,” she said sternly, “stop putting such ideas into his head, and he will not be hurt,” then she turned back to Blake, “we will be travelling soon. We will go to the Paradise Hotel, and we will have a good time there.”

“I don’t want to go to the Paradise Hotel,” Blake was nearly crying, “it is boring there, and there’s nothing to do. You are all sitting and doing nothing, and I cannot go wherever I want, as they would not allow me to leave that hotel.”

“You could go for a swim in the lake.”

“Yes, but I can go for a swim in the river. It makes no difference.”

“There are a few slides in the lake.”

“Yes, but I have already used them. How many times can I slide? And it is not that interesting to slide on my own.”

“You are on your own because you don’t want to be friends with other children.”

“They are teasing me and laughing at me. I don’t want such friends. But now I have made new friends, who don’t make fun of me and are very interesting, and they do what I want to do, and I like them, so I am going to travel with them, to see new things and to be with friends I like.”

“I am very glad that you have made new friends, but you are not going to travel with them. But they can come and visit you any time they want.” His mum was relentless.

“Why?!!!” Blake had already lost his battle against his tears, and they were rolling down his cheeks.

“Because I already lost your father, I am not going to lose you, too,” his mum said. “And besides, you are too little to travel. Even your new friend knows that. You have to wait till you grow up.”

“How long?” Blake was already giving up.

“It doesn’t take long at all,” Ruffus said happily. “You just go to your room and want very much to grow to the size that your mum would find acceptable for you to travel. You want it so strongly that your body obeys you, and then it grows, and then you can travel. You can do it now. We will wait for you.”

Upon hearing that, Blake’s eyes shone again, bringing back that spark of life that was slowly fading away. He turned on the spot and dashed towards the stairs leading upstairs, but didn’t make it that far as he was caught by his mum.

“You stay right here and don’t even try such a trick, as even if you come out two meters tall, you will not go anywhere. Also, I like you as you are, and don’t want you to grow up anytime soon!”

All this stress had a proper toll on the woman who was already not feeling that well. She had used more strength than she had. Her head started to spin, darkness covered her eyes, and she fell on the floor, bringing little Blake down with her.

When she woke up, she was lying on a couch under the close surveillance of four pairs of eyes.

Five, if counting the dog too. Blake was sitting next to her and was obviously very relieved after she had woken up.

“Are you alright?” he asked, seeing her waking up.

“What happened?” his mum asked.

“You fell,” Blake said.

“You are very tired,” the boy with a gentle face and soft, comforting voice said. “You don’t have enough energy to be wasting it like this. If you keep doing it, you won’t be able to do anything else but sleep, and even that might not be enough.”

Memories slowly returned to the woman's mind, and she opened her mouth to say something, but before she could, Blake interrupted.

"I won't go. I will stay with you. I will stay with you as long as you want. I won't be travelling. I promise you I ..."

But he couldn't finish as Rainee firmly pressed her hand over his mouth, silencing him.

"Promises are a very damaging thing, especially in the way you are doing it now," she said while looking at him. "If you make promises like this, it will do no good for anyone, just lock you in one place, and you will have a hard time getting yourself out of this place. If you want to stay with your mum, stay because you want to, not because you promised."

Just after saying it, she moved her hand away, allowing Blake to speak again if he still wanted to, but Blake kept silent. Then Rainee turned her eyes to his mum.

"Blake is not happy here," she said. "People are blaming him for what he hasn't done, and expecting from him something that he cannot do, and lying to him that he must do something for them that he doesn't want to do, and blaming him again for not doing so. I don't know what everyone is expecting of him, but it makes him very unhappy."

"His name is not Blake," the woman said, sitting herself up.

"For me, he is Blake, as that is the name he introduced himself with to me. Name is just a name, and if he doesn't like the name given to him, I will respect his wishes and will call him by the name he wants to be called. But Angus is right, you are very tired, and you will die soon if nothing changes."

"You are very straightforward, child," Blake's mum said, looking at her, "I think you should be more considerate of people, because what you say may make them unhappy."

"Truth doesn't make people unhappy," Rainee said, "truth just shows people how unhappy they already are."

"I wonder where you get such ideas from..." Blake's mum wondered, thinking inwardly that she definitely was not letting her son travel with such a strange child, as he was already very strange himself, and if influenced by this girl, who knows where he would end up.

"King told me," Rainee said.

"King told you what?" Blake's mum asked, not being able to follow the conversation.

"King told me the ideas that you find strange," Rainee clarified.

The woman fell speechless for some time, not knowing what to say. She looked again at this strange girl who was watching her with very bright green eyes. "Well, if you know King, then you would also know that he doesn't interfere in family relations," she said finally.

"True," Rainee said, "I do not mean to interfere either, but as you know only a little, I thought I would let you know more before you could make a decision, as how could one make a decision when knowing nothing? Wouldn't it be just a random guess?"

The woman felt that she was losing this strange battle and chose not to escalate it any further.

"How did I end up here?" she asked while looking around. She could remember now very well falling next to the stairs. "Did I hurt you?" she asked, looking at Blake, as she could remember holding her son in her arms before losing consciousness.

“Angus carried you here,” Blake said happily, looking at the boy he was pointing towards with awe. “He is very strong. I have never seen anyone so strong as he is. And no, you didn’t hurt me.”

“Yes, you did hurt him,” Rainee corrected Blake in a calm voice, “you made him afraid to do what he wants to do, reinforcing this strange belief he already has, that if he does what he wants, something bad will happen to those he loves. He will have a very hard time getting over it.”

Blake’s mum was looking at Angus, not understanding how such a small child could be strong enough to carry an adult, but after hearing Rainee, her attention was taken away. At first, she got a little bit angry. She tried to stand up, but was too weak and fell back onto the couch. Was she really dying? This thought frightened her, and all anger vanished. The children quickly came to support her.

“Am I really that sick?” she asked with fear, looking at the girl, but the boy with grey eyes answered instead.

“You are not sick yet,” he said, “but illness or old age will unavoidably come very soon, if you keep giving away more energy than you can regain.”

“I don’t understand,” the woman said as she truly could not understand what he was talking about.

“To recover the energy that you are giving away, you will have to sleep nearly all the time,” the girl tried to explain, speaking slowly and clearly, as if explaining something to a very small child, “if you sleep all the time, you can neither do anything that interests you, nor even be interested in anything anymore, so old age will come very fast as you will lose interest in your life and this world. If you try to push yourself forward without rest, then you will become sick, and without energy, it will be very hard for you to recover.”

The girl was looking at her encouragingly with the hope that she had broken this information into understandable enough pieces. But it didn’t make it more understandable; on the contrary, it brought even more confusion.

“Children, what are you talking about? What energy???”

Now it was time for Rainee and Angus to become confused.

“The one you are sending to that black machine, to power other machines. Don’t you even know that it is happening?” Rainee was truly confused. “I was sure that you were doing it intentionally.”

“Is that why I am feeling so tired?” the woman was astonished. “I never even realised that this was what was causing it. If that is the case, I don’t want it anymore! How do I stop it?!”

“You just refuse to give anything of yours to it,” Angus said. “Even if you did not get tired, it is not healthy to be connected like this all the time. Why do you do it?”

“Everyone does it,” Blake’s mum said, “it has been like this for a few years now. That way, we don’t have to go too far away, and the work is done.”

“Why would you want to stay at home?” It was Rainee’s time to ask.

“To avoid the mist. Mist is widespread here and sometimes comes for days. Even if mist doesn’t swallow you, it is not easy to navigate in it. You, children, should be careful too.”

"No, don't worry," Ruffus was happy to join the conversation. "Ren is the best mist chaser. It is not possible to see mist with Ren around."

Blake's mum looked at the girl with new eyes.

"You must be very special then," she said. "Al..." she didn't finish, seeing Blake's expression, and then corrected herself, bringing a large smile to his face, "Blake used to have this ability, but it vanished one day."

"Probably because people were abusing him and he didn't want to be abused anymore for the sake of others," Raine was relentless, "good that he got rid of it around such inconsiderate people. Anyway, let's go to the black machine. What happened there? Why are you giving it so much energy that there is none left to live? Were you starving? You should have asked King for help."

"We were not starving. Some new people came and offered these machines, so we could earn a living and not get into the mist at the same time. I didn't realise you can get sick from using it. How do I stop?"

"As Angus said, you stop giving away to it what is yours."

"But I don't know how."

"By choosing it," Raine said patiently.

"By choosing how?"

"The same as you chose to start sharing it." Raine was finding it difficult to explain something so simple and obvious. "When you got into this connection, you had to agree to give this machine something. Now you either stop agreeing or make a choice not to give anything anymore. It is your energy, and it is up to you if you want to give it away or not."

"But where and to whom do I sign this disagreement?"

"There is no reason to sign anything," Angus smiled softly at her, taking over from Raine, who was sitting speechless, "it doesn't matter if you sign or not, even if you did it before, it was just a ceremony. The real choice was made within yourself, and you can sign as many papers as you want, but if your inside disagrees, you would never be connected to it. So you had to do it willingly. You had to want to connect. Now you have to want to disconnect. If it would make it easier for you, I can bring a piece of paper to write on, but it is just an action, and the only difference it can make is if it would make you believe that the signature is more important than your will or choice."

"So it is enough for me to choose to disconnect..."

"Yes."

"OK, I am choosing," Blake's mum said, closing her eyes. "Is it done?"

"No," Raine said, half angry, half laughing, "what you are doing is saying that you want to disconnect, while at the same time thinking about all the benefits that this deal gives you and wanting to keep them. That is choosing to maintain this connection for the sake of benefits."

"How do you know?"

"Your fear is spreading so badly that right now, I am terrified of being left with no income and not knowing what would happen then. If I did not know that this fear has nothing to do with me, that on the contrary, I love to see what would happen when I don't know what will happen, then I would even think that it is me who is afraid."

“So what do I do?” Blake’s mum asked, realising that this girl was absolutely right — she was afraid of what would happen if she lost this connection that lately provided them with a comfortable life.

“You choose to refuse all that you receive via this connection. Refuse to receive and refuse to give. Then there is no connection left, and you would be free.”

Now Blake’s mum fell speechless for some time.

“But if I refuse everything, how will we live? How will I earn a living? Since these machines were brought, they have become the only way to earn it.”

“Yes, this earning and paying custom is very confusing,” Rainee agreed. “But then, if you want to live in a place where you don’t have to pay to live, or you could earn in a different way than just being connected to the machine, why wouldn’t you move?”

“Yes, mum,” Blake agreed eagerly, “Let’s move! I don’t like it in here. Let’s go live somewhere else.”

“Live where? Move how? Where would we go and how would we move? Even if I don’t like it too much myself, how and where could we move? I wouldn’t even know where to start or how to do it.”

“If you don’t know yourself, then ask King,” the girl suggested.

“King?” The woman was even more surprised, “What does the King have to do with it? What King would know about our struggles and what to do with them? How would I even contact him?”

“When I want to tell him something, and he is not around, I talk to him directly in my heart, and he knows what I am telling him,” Ruffus answered, saying it as the most natural thing. “He is around very little. If I had to wait to talk to him until he comes, then I would hardly ever be able to speak with him.”

“Or you can write to him,” Rainee suggested. “He answers all the letters. But to help with moving, King doesn’t even have to be involved himself, and you can just ask the King’s Army to help you. They would help.”

The woman was looking at these children with bewilderment for a while, then realisation came to her, and understanding, with a soft smile, changed the confusion on her face. What was she even thinking? Children are children, what would they know? They live fully believing that it is enough to want something and it will happen, not realising that it isn’t the case. She got caught off guard like this only because these children seemed extremely smart.

“Well, no matter what you think, if you don’t try, you will never know,” Rainee said.

“Also look at this situation from this angle,” Angus added, “if you stay connected like this, next time when you become too weak and lose consciousness, we will not be around to help, and people around are very weak themselves to provide much help, so you might not even survive and Blake will be left on his own. So it might be even better for him to travel with us before it happens.”

“Such a kind and gentle boy, and speaking such horrible things!” Blake’s mum thought, sitting up with a singular thought that she didn’t need any connection to any machine or even money. If that was leading to such an outcome, she definitely was not giving anything of herself anymore to contribute to it. And if King or King’s Army, or even King’s gardener, or cleaner can help her in any way, she is more than willing to seek and accept this help.

“You are such a genius,” Rainee smiled at Angus.

“I just said the truth, and it worked,” Angus smiled back at her, “Isn’t that what you are telling me all the time?”

“Worked what?” Blake’s mum couldn’t understand.

“The connection is broken, and King’s forces have been informed that their services are needed,” Rainee explained.

“Why would you think that way? I don’t feel any difference.”

“I can see the energy,” Rainee explained. “The connection is broken, and despite the other side still lingering around searching for something to connect to, it is not attached to you anymore, and it will not have any effect unless you yourself seek it.”

“I see,” Blake’s mum looked around the room, thinking that it was one of the two, that either these children were really different from people she had met until now, or they were mad and she had been drawn into this craziness herself. Most likely, it was the second, and she must have been infected already, because she was thinking that she was feeling a bit stronger already. “Why would you think that King services have been informed?”

“Well, if they didn’t hear this request sent, then I don’t know what they are even doing in King’s service.” Rainee shrugged her shoulders, “but I am sure that King heard, and if his staff proves to be deaf, then he definitely is not.”

“I think you are very strange and confused...” Blake’s mum started, but could not finish and fell silent.

Rainee’s face changed drastically, from being friendly and smiling to cold and sharp. She stretched her hand to the side, and for a moment, Blake and his mum thought that her hand was growing longer, but soon realised that it wasn’t the case, as it was a long, slightly curved sword that appeared in her hand. With this sword in her hand and a cold, stern look on her face, Rainee stepped towards Blake’s mum.

“No!!!” Blake shouted, rushing in between and grabbing onto Rainee’s hand that was holding this sword. “No, please, don’t hurt my mum! She didn’t mean it! She didn’t want to say anything bad! She is just tired! She just needs some rest.”

His mum did look extremely pale. It was difficult to say if she was scared by an armed little person standing in her room, but she really was close to fainting again.

Rainee was slightly taken aback by Blake’s pleas and was a bit lost, looking from him to his mum and back to Blake again, as if not knowing what to do. The sword in her hand disappeared, and she showed an empty hand to Blake.

“I am not going to hurt your mum,” she said in a gentle voice while putting her other hand on Blake’s shoulder and squeezing it firmly but friendly, “I promise you, I will not hurt either you or your mum. Trust me on that. Wouldn’t you? But things are not good here, and I think she needs help. But I cannot help if you don’t trust me. So would you trust me?” she asked while stroking Blake’s hair.

She knew that he didn’t, she knew that right now, he felt nothing else, just horror upon seeing the very same sword appearing in her hand again, and was already thinking about ways to go

around him. But to her own surprise, little Blake did let go of her arm and stepped aside while looking at her with his big dark eyes.

“What do you know,” she thought to herself while launching forward. “I still have a lot to learn.”

Rainee swung her sword, bringing terror to the woman’s face as it was landing very close to her. But it didn’t touch her; instead, it landed next to her. It was evident that it cut through something as some invisible force slowed its descent, and Rainee had to put extra pressure on her sword for it to go through. But it wasn’t something that could be seen. At least not to her. But it obviously could be seen by one of the boys as he, too, drew a sword out of who knows where and also cut something off, just much closer to the wall than to her.

Rainee and Angus looked at each other, and their swords swung again. What couldn’t be seen by others in the room was no secret for their trained eyes. The very same energy stream that got disconnected from Blake’s mum after she rejected it, and which was aimlessly looking for a connection, but without agreement from the other side, should never be able to do so, suddenly gained some extra force and engulfed the woman without her either wanting it, or even knowing that it happened. That’s why she got so pale, as that draining force connected to her with such power that she didn’t have any strength in herself to support its demands. If Rainee hadn’t cut through it, then this woman definitely would have lost her consciousness, and under such an exchange rate, who knows what would have happened. Such a connection shouldn’t be deadly, as when a person loses consciousness, natural self-defences should activate, disconnecting the person from a too-damaging exchange.

However, what happened just now wasn’t what should be happening at all. It was a proper assault from one side, leaving no choice to the other. Rainee and Angus didn’t see many machines in the Capital, but were educated that it was becoming popular in some parts of the kingdom and how they were operating. What happened just now wasn’t something that should be happening.

Before they could do or say anything, a new attack came in, and Blake started to run from one side of the room to another.

“It is trying to catch me! It is trying to catch me again!” he said.

He wanted badly to run and hide from this force invisible to him that was after him, but didn’t want to leave his mum with these two armed children, whom he himself brought into the house.

Rainee swung her sword a few times again, and Blake stopped. The attacker was gone.

Blake maybe didn’t see what was after him, but Rainee and Angus did. There were a few more of these strange, searching connecting cords that entered the room, now aiming for anything they could attach to. Angus and Rainee didn’t receive any attention from them, but the other three people in the room did.

“That’s not good,” Rainee said, “this machine must be broken, or not working correctly. I am going to switch it off. Ruffus, you don’t allow anything else but Angus to touch you, close your eyes if you are not sure. Blake, you go and hide back in the forest. I will find you when it is safe to come back.”

“What about my mum?” Blake asked, looking at his mum, who had fallen unconscious again.

“She cannot go with you, so she will have to stay here,” Rainee said before turning around and running out of the house.

First, she was going to use her horse, but just a look at them made her change her mind. Angus and Ruffus’s horses were already connected by that strange, unwanted power that seemed now to be sucking on anything living around. Her Aspen was still free and backing off from these strings that were trying to grab her, too. Rainee cut them off and told Aspen to leave this place immediately. There was no reason to put her at risk, as whatever was happening right now didn’t have anything to do with Aspen. She freed the other two horses, too, hoping that she had given enough time for them to escape, but she wasn’t sure about it.

For anyone who couldn’t see this energy that got loose, the town would seem the same as before, but what Rainee saw was complete chaos. The whole place went berserk. These strings of energy got entirely out of hand, enlarging, growing way bigger than anything reasonable, and people on the street and by the houses were falling down, not being able to cope with this drainage. The attaching strings got stronger, and Rainee wasn’t out of their interest anymore. While running, she kept cutting all of them, no matter if they were attacking her or others, by doing so, getting more and more attention to herself.

In a short time, she had reached that black machine now emanating all these unwanted connections, but she wasn’t sure how to reach it through all this attacking force.

“I will cover you,” Angus’s voice sounded next.

At first, Rainee was a bit worried about Ruffus being left alone, but soon realised that if things were to escalate, then not just Ruffus would be in trouble.

She spun her sword in front of her while Angus was covering her from behind, and in no time, they reached the large handle to switch that machine off. It was heavy and rusty as it hadn’t been used for a while, but Rainee managed to press it down, and all the nightmares surrounding them disappeared instantly.

Both exhaled deeply and looked at each other with big smiles — “They did it!”

But before they even finished exhaling, a burst of energy came flying from that far distance, where, not that long ago, the very same machine was sending excess energy.

This burst engulfed the black machine, exploding around and sending Rainee and Angus flying several meters away. The switch they had used just now flew away too, and the black machine got back into working order.

Rainee could feel a few of these draining strings engulfing her, looking for any opening to connect. The moment she worried about how Angus was doing, one of these engulfing strings connected right into her heart, dropping her strength by a considerable amount.

At that very moment, she felt free again. Someone must have just freed her, but without even looking to see who it was, Rainee jumped to her feet and dashed back to that black mechanical beast in front of her. It had to be stopped at any cost, and as switching it off was not enough, it had to be cut down. In her head, she was trying to come up with an idea of how it could be done, as right now the energy surrounding this machine was much stronger than her own, especially after the assault she just experienced, but she was not given a chance to come up with anything, as before she could reach it, the black machine exploded into pieces, and instead of it there was standing a young

and tall man in a nice green uniform. A new burst of energy came from afar, but this time it was met by this man's sword and, with just one swing, sent back to where it came from, and a new explosion in the far, far distance could be heard. A few fast shadows swiftly passed by, disappearing in the same direction. It was a few more officers on their dragons.

The young officer, who just put an end to all this havoc, turned towards Rainee and looked at her with a small, sarcastic smile playing on his lips.

"Getting in such a mess..." he said, looking at Rainee, "aren't you putting your fingers on something you cannot swallow? Making people come to rescue you..."

"If you didn't want to come, then why have you come?" Rainee said, hardly sparing him a single glance, and looking for Angus, who was getting up from the ground and cleaning dust and shreds from himself.

"You know, little lady, with such an attitude, there might come a day when no one will come to your aid," the young officer said, not happy with such treatment.

"What arrogance..."

"Me arrogant? When it is you, an ungrateful little child who doesn't know when to keep her mouth shut. What would have happened to you if I hadn't come so fast?"

"If I needed help, someone else would have come," Rainee said firmly. "If you came just to be praised, you shouldn't have come at all. I honestly don't know how you are keeping your general status with such a strange attitude."

"I honestly don't know how you are keeping your life with such an attitude..." the General said grimly.

"My life belongs to me, and I like it, that's why I keep it," Rainee was relentless. "Still, thank you for being so fast. Let's go," she said to Angus, and both of them turned around and ran away.

"Where do you think you are going?!" the General said strictly, "Prince Angus, return immediately!"

Upon hearing that, Angus was about to obey, but seeing that Rainee didn't slow down, he stayed at her side.

"To check on Ruffus," Rainee said over her shoulder. "And you are not Angus' commanding officer to speak to him like this."

"Prince Ragnar is alright," the General shouted after them.

"Your alright, and The alright don't often match," Rainee said before turning the corner and disappearing out of sight.

"I cannot wait for the day when I am your commanding officer..." the General said to himself, putting a strong emphasis on "your".

He spoke in a quiet voice, but an answer still came from far away.

"I am not in a rush to join your ranks, so stay alive to have a chance."

The General didn't know what to do — to be angry or to laugh, so he just shook his head, jumped on his dragon, and vanished out of sight.

Rainee and Angus didn't reach the house they were aiming for, but instead met Ruffus and Blake heading their way. So Blake didn't run to hide as she told him. "Of course he didn't... Why would he..." Rainee thought to herself. "People never listen. You tell the horse to run and hide — the horse runs and hides. You tell a person to run and hide, and the person either stands and watches, or walks straight into the middle of danger..." But luckily, he seemed all good and not even scared. In fact, they both looked very happy. Ruffus looked proud-happy, and Blake awe-happy. Something had happened to make them feel like this.

It didn't stay secret for too long, as upon seeing Rainee and Angus, Blake ran to them full of smiles.

"Did you see Ruffus' sword?!! It is so amazing! He said I can have one like this if I train long and try hard. I will train and try hard! I want one of these swords. But maybe not as big as Ruffus', as it looks so heavy and he must be very strong to carry a sword like this! I want one similar to yours! How do I get it? How long do I train? What do I train to get it?"

Blake could not stop talking, and with every word he said, Ruffus seemed prouder and happier.

"Sword?" Rainee asked, looking at Ruffus' side, where there was no sword. She knew there wasn't any even before looking, as Ruffus' sword was at his saddle, on a horse that ran away. Now she knew why he was so proud. "You did it!" she said in a happy and no less proud voice.

Before Ruffus could say anything, Rainee lifted him up without a single effort and swung him around as if he were weightless. She even tossed him up and caught him again as an adult would throw a little child. All the time, she was praising him nonstop, telling him how well he did.

For people who were already gathering around, it seemed a little bit peculiar that the girl, who seemed even younger and smaller than the boy in her arms, would behave like this with him, or even would have the strength to lift him. But Ruffus didn't mind. On the contrary, the more praise he got, the happier he was.

"That's my brother!" Angus said proudly, seeing confused looks. "He is very strong, and he is very smart, and he can do things that others cannot even dream about."

Upon hearing that, the smile on Ruffus' face, which already couldn't fit there, grew even bigger, and he seemed on the brink of explosion from all this joy and pride.

"Can we see it?" Rainee asked, putting him on the ground and ruffling his hair with encouragement.

She didn't need to encourage him, as Ruffus could hardly hold himself back. He put his arm behind his back and, with a swift move, pulled out a massive sword that definitely wasn't there before. It couldn't be missed, as the sword was humongous, even larger than Ruffus himself. The long, wide and shiny blade was emanating yellow light, giving an impression that this sword was made from gold. With a nicely crafted handle, it did resemble one of the swords artists would paint in storybooks, especially associated with Kings. The sword was massive in size even for an adult, but Ruffus wielded it easily with one hand, first swinging it around, then lifting it up full of joy and pride.

Blake's eyes were shining upon seeing this sword, which impressed him so much, again. But he was not the only one. A whisper spread among people, and Angus said again, with lots of pride in his voice:

"That's my little brother!"

While saying that, he wasn't looking at this miraculous sword, but at his brother. Rainee was the same.

A loud applause came from both sides of the street, but it wasn't the residents of this town who were clapping.

"Very impressive, Prince Ragnar!" the young officer praised him too, while clapping and walking closer. From his green uniform, everyone could easily say that he belonged to the King's Army, the same as a few more soldiers clapping on the street. "I am truly blessed to be here today to witness it with my own eyes, instead of hearing stories about it. And I am sure now that no story would ever represent the picture I saw just now. Your mother is going to be so proud, and I myself cannot wait to see you back in the Capital and in my class. Even King himself will not be able to convince me now that you are not ready yet to join the Royal Academy."

"Such a moment, and you have to ruin it..." Rainee said in response. But she didn't look like anything was ruined as she was still looking at Ruffus with the same delighted eyes.

"Prince..." "Did he say Prince Ragnar?" "How can a prince be here?" Voices around were spreading this message rapidly.

"Royal Academy..." Blake said with even more awe than before. "You have been invited to the Royal Academy!"

From what was said, everyone was picking up different pieces of information that were most important and relevant to them.

"Do you really think I am ready?" Ruffus happily asked, looking at the officer who spoke. "Ren, did you hear?" He referred his question to Rainee without waiting for an answer. "Major Gerald thinks that I am ready to attend his classes! Do you think the same?"

"In the way the major thinks? Of course, you are ready. You have been ready for a long time," Rainee replied. "It is not that you need to manifest a spirit weapon to join the academy."

"But dad always says that I am not ready," Ruffus said in confusion, putting his weapon back behind him, and it vanished out of sight.

"Yes, but by saying it dad doesn't mean the same as the major," Rainee corrected him. "The major meant that you are strong and skilful enough to join, which you are, and have been for some time now. Dad means that there is no reason for you yet to drop your freedom and dive into the routine of the Royal Academy, where others will tell you what to do. Dad is right, you are not ready for it, as it would be very boring for you, and the Major is right, you are skilled enough to be accepted. I would listen to dad's advice, as your skills are not going to shrink, so why rush into a place that will still be available for you at any point in the future."

"My little princess Rainee, you are exceptionally accurate as always," the Major smiled at her.

"There is no such person as Princess Rainee, and there is no need to invent her either," Rainee said, not touched at all by this polite approach of the Major.

“OK then,” the Major didn’t get upset, “my little lady Ren.”

Rainee didn’t say anything to it, but a soft smile on her face disclosed that, despite what she said, she must like this man a lot.

By now, the whole street was already jammed with people, and more were coming. Word has spread that there are special guests in the town, and these special guests are not just members of the King’s Army who, for reasons not known to anyone, suddenly came and destroyed their working machines. Just such an event on its own would draw people out, no matter if they were tired or not. But word was spreading that Prince Ragnar was in the town with his brother, and as Prince Ragnar had only one brother, then it must be no other brother than Prince Angus, whom everyone expected to be a future King.

Whispers were getting louder and louder until understanding of what was said reached Blake, too.

“Are you the real prince?” he asked Ruffus, who was still standing next to him.

“I guess so,” Ruffus said. “What would be a not real prince?” he asked with a little bit of confusion.

“I don’t know,” Blake admitted, “Maybe someone whose father is not a king?”

“Oh! Then I am a real prince,” Ruffus said happily, “because my dad is a King. If you come with us to the Capital, you can meet him. But still, don’t call me prince, I don’t really like it, and if you are to travel with us, then it would be very unpleasant to hear it all the time. Call me Ruffus. I like it better. But that is if your mum allows you to travel.”

“She will, she will!” Blake said happily. “When she hears who you are, she will definitely let me go!”

“That’s the spirit, my little lad,” the Major said, looking at Blake, “but I am afraid that you will have to wait for a little bit longer, as Prince Ragnar will not be able to travel any longer.”

“Why?” Ruffus couldn’t understand.

“Your mother requested to bring you back home as soon as possible.”

“But that is not fair! I am as big as Angus is, so I don’t have to stay home!” Ruffus was close to throwing a tantrum.

“This is out of the question,” another familiar voice sounded.

The young General had returned and was watching now from afar how things were escalating.

“Why?” Angus asked in his soft and friendly voice.

“Your mother requested all three of you to be returned home immediately after you are found.”

“Your words don’t make much sense, as if mum wanted to know where we are, all she had to do was ask father,” Angus disagreed.

“I believe that the Queen has spoken to me because our opinions on this matter match. She, same as I, thinks that it is time for you to put aside this aimless wandering around and return back home, to take the place you were born into.”

“What if I refuse?” Angus asked.

“I am afraid you don’t have this option,” the General said, making his way through the crowd that was parting in front of him without fail, as to stand in his way would never even cross anybody’s mind.

But then something happened that made him stop in his tracks.

This something had the shape of a little girl with a long, slightly curved sword in her right hand and cold eyes looking from a very calm face that, despite its calmness, also was radiating immense resolution and confidence not suitable for such a small child. Some power was emanating from her whole body and all her posture. Most of the people were not able to see this power, but still, seen or not, it couldn’t be ignored, and everyone slowly started to back off.

“I see,” the General said while looking at her, “now I understand why the Queen sought me out to entrust me with such a simple task. She thought you might be resistant to her request and asked me to pass you a message that, despite all, she would still love to see you back as soon as you are willing to spare her this pleasure. However, she said that she still insists that Prince Angus and Prince Ragnar be returned home immediately.”

“None of them wants to go,” Rainee replied calmly, “so mum’s wishes are irrelevant this time.”

“I must admit I am very glad to be here now and witness this with my own eyes,” the General said, looking curiously at her, “as despite hearing it countless times, my heart was still in doubt about the words said, as I could not imagine this kind of transformation. It isn’t easy to believe in something you cannot imagine. Now I see it with my own eyes, and all doubt has been swept from my heart. But still, my little lady, despite your best efforts, how do you expect to prevent me from fulfilling my orders? To do so, you would definitely need more than you have even now.”

“You are violating the very essence of the King’s Army and will never succeed while doing so. You cannot lead the King’s Army and be against it. While standing against it, you will not have any support that your status would demand otherwise. You cannot be a robber and a liberator at the same time,” Rainee said.

It was obvious that the words said had a heavy impact on the General, but changed neither his mind nor his actions.

“I don’t need any support, neither to fulfil my orders, nor to show you your place,” he said, moving forward with slightly frowned eyebrows and sharp eyes fixated on Rainee. But then he stopped again, this time with even more surprise on his face.

“Very impressive, young prince,” he said, meaning every word he said. “Exceptionally impressive. However, I would prefer you to demonstrate such skills while on a training ground, not in the middle of the street full of passersby.”

“I was never given a chance to demonstrate it on a training ground,” despite his impressive stance, Angus’ voice never lost this special friendliness and soothing tone.

And he did look impressive. As he was standing next to Rainee right now, nobody had a single doubt that a future King was right in front of their eyes. Some people even dropped down to their knees for a reason unknown to them, but most of them simply retreated as far as they could

from this, at first glance, such a gentle boy, who was now standing as an unmovable wall, radiating power that made even the general of the King's Army stop and reconsider his actions.

Soon, four children were left to stand on their own in the middle of the street in a large empty circle. Rainee and Angus stood side by side with their swords drawn out, and intense invisible power that this place hadn't seen before was coming out of them. Ruffus looked around in confusion and then pulled his sword out again. He didn't understand what they were preparing to fight, but chose not to question it at this very moment. The thought that they might be opposing the general of the King's Army never even crossed his mind. Blake didn't understand what was going on at all. He did feel some change in Rainee and Angus, but it didn't affect him in the same way as others, and he didn't know what was happening, but as he was going to travel with these three children, he had chosen to stay with them. He didn't have a sword; if he had, he would have drawn it too, but it couldn't be helped. So he just stood between Rainee and Ruffus with wide-open eyes and an oversized puppy at his side.

"This is an extraordinary image you all are displaying right now, and I truly hope that among all spectators there is at least one artist who will manage to represent it in a painting," Major said in a friendly voice. "It is a bit sad that such power is displayed for no apparent reason. General Jason is probably in a hurry to bring his request like this; that's why it is causing confusion. I am sure that if Prince Angus knew that the Queen wasn't feeling that well recently and asked to bring her children home at first sight, he wouldn't even question whether to go or not. It is not easy to locate travellers once they are lost out of sight. If whatever is causing her to feel unwell were to escalate, how would anyone be able to find you so quickly?"

"That's very easy," Rainee was unmoved by this explanation either, "all she has to do is ask father."

Major smiled at her, but his questioning eyes returned to Angus.

"I will go," Angus smiled back at him. "Mum must have missed us very badly to become unwell just to get us back."

"Me too, me too!" Ruffus said happily. "I miss mum very much. I will go to see her if she wants."

After hearing it, with a swift move, Rainee sheathed her sword, and it disappeared out of sight. She didn't have any reason to use it anymore. Her friends, who were about to be forced to go home, agreed to do it willingly, so there was nothing to object to any longer. Ruffus followed her. Angus, on the other hand, didn't change a thing. The reason why he had drawn the sword was different, and he wasn't sure that this threat was over, and his attention was never taken away from the general who was standing and watching him. It was difficult to say if he was looking in admiration at what he saw, or being annoyed.

And in fact, General Jason was feeling just like that, not really knowing what he was feeling, or rather, many opposing feelings and thoughts were rising in him. He truly liked this girl; in fact, it could be said that he even admired her. She was so different from everyone else. She was so confident, so firm, so skilful. He honestly couldn't wait until she would stop dassing around and would join the King's Army, where she so obviously belonged, so that she would be under his direct command. He would be able to help her in so many ways, to mould her into an outstanding officer.

She would make to his second in rank in no time. If not for that strange rule, placed by the King, that children were not allowed to join the King's Army nor be commanded over, he would not have considered her age, and she would have been signed into his ranks long ago. Now he could just watch from the side.

And she was right, she wasn't in a rush. Years were passing, and she had hardly grown at all. At such a rate, he truly could pass from old age...

The other part within him was so annoyed with her... Always full of herself, always full of "knowledge" that would drive everyone crazy, always speaking in a way that made no sense but could not be disputed. King said this, King said that... She would always take everything the King says for granted as some indisputable truth. Well, everyone was taking every King's word for granted, and it was always final and indisputable... Then why, when repeated by her, was it so annoying? She would notice everybody's mistakes, even the smallest, and would point them out without any consideration, no matter where and no matter when. She herself, on the other hand, was making mistakes all over and shamelessly would never even try to hide them or shun them. If pointed out, she would just shrug her shoulders and say that she was learning.

Of course, she was learning; she was only a child after all. But such a skilful child, too. All she needed was just a little discipline. But it was not easy to discipline her. On one hand, everyone was slightly afraid of the King, despite him never interfering, as he had taken her as his own child. On the other hand, it would backfire so often, on everyone who would try to do so, and not because of some extra protection the King would grant her, but because of a sequence of events that followed in some strange way, leaving her always above those who tried to discipline her. Instead, they would get disciplined... Just like now.

Not that long ago, there was an incident in the King's Academy when she had beaten one of the most skilful sword fighters he had ever known. Up until today, he could not fully believe it and thought this story was fabricated to some degree. The girl was skilful but not to that extent. But it made everybody wary.

Today, he was convinced that it was nothing but the truth. The way she stood in front of him! Truly majestic! And not about any skills, but about this power surrounding her. Where did that power come from? She didn't have it before, when her own life was in danger. He had to save her. Of course he did. The moment he felt this "call" for help, he was already on his way. So lucky that he was just seconds away. No way he would allow any harm to happen to her, no way he would lose the opportunity to see what she could be trained into.

Such a reckless little creature and such an arrogant one too! So, where did this power that was surrounding her just now come from? Did the King support her? That was the only explanation he could come up with. But it didn't feel like the King's power. Even then, he would not have any difficulty sweeping her away, just like a little bug. Yes, that is precisely how she felt to him right now – a little bug empowered by some additional force. Even with this empowerment, she was no match for him, and in fact, he was about to teach her a little lesson.

The words she said brought some sort of forewarning, but they didn't stop him. Something else did. And that something else was still standing in his way right now.

Little princess Angus...

Many people would call him a princess instead of a prince when in private, as he was such a softie.

God knows if the King could have a worse possible child... King's successor in your dreams. Who would ever listen to such a King? But again, it was not Jason's place to judge or argue, so he just taught this so-called prince all he was told to teach, but didn't have any hope in him.

Not because he was useless, no, he was learning everything very quickly. But he was so obedient, so pleasant. If you want to hug and love him, then he was a very suitable candidate; probably that's why the Queen adored him so much. But a leader of an army or a leader of the country? What a joke... Her, he could mould into a proper King in no time. Him? Not even in a dream. At least that's what he thought up until now.

Now he was standing here, truly impressive. Stronger than Rainee. In fact, much stronger... How could it be? To go through him would be a challenge even for Jason himself. How come that just several minutes ago, the same Angus was lying helplessly on the ground, unable to withstand a threat that for Jason wasn't an obstacle? Wasn't even a challenge? Was it truly part of the King's power with him? But, just as before, the King's power was nothing like that. Angus felt just the same as before, just somehow inflated? Boosted? Was he like this because he was trying to protect this girl? But she wasn't really under any threat. No matter how much Jason was annoyed with her, he would do nothing bad to her. Just to show where her true place was, that's all. So, there was nothing really even to defend.

Before Jason could decide what to do, Major Gerald spoke, and the situation changed. Rainee had put her sword away as if her work was done, the moment Angus agreed to go home of his own will. Did she honestly expect to stop them from taking him? Was she really that deluded? Here were twenty members of the King's Army with him at the front. Was she expecting to be able to stand against them and win? Her mind was such a mystery. Even in the days when she was a little child, and he was able to understand her thinking to some degree, it was hard to follow it. Now he would love to know what she was thinking, but it was beyond him. Why couldn't he know her intentions and reasons like everybody else's? Was she really already past him? That would make no sense as he knew she wasn't.

"Because you don't want to know what she thinks," the answer came to his head, and at first, he chased it away. What a strange thought, he just said that he would want to know. Jason didn't know where these answers to unasked questions were coming from, but he reminded himself that usually they were very accurate, so he asked The One, "Do I really not want to know what she thinks?" "Yes," the answer came straight away. As expected, it backed up that strange reply.

Oh, let it be. Rainee is out of his reach now anyway. It is not like it would make any sense if Jason were to go and educate her now, when she was not even opposing him anymore.

"Don't worry, little prince, your girlfriend is safe," he laughed at Angus, who was still looking at him in question, "but from now on I expect the same spirit from you on the training grounds too."

"Or I will slap that little friend of yours time after time, until you bring this spirit up," he thought to himself, but didn't say it aloud, silently knowing that it probably would never happen. He wouldn't mind, but there was a big possibility that the King would not allow it.

"I will do my best," Angus said, putting his sword away.

There was no sarcasm in his voice. This boy didn't even know what sarcasm was. It was obvious that he would do his best as he just promised, but somehow Jason already knew that this "best" would not be anything close to what he saw just now. Oh well, at least it was known now what this little prince was capable of, and it was just a matter of finding ways to squeeze it out of him. In ways approved by the King.

"Now, can anyone explain to me what the heck was going on here?" General Jason asked, looking around the gathered crowd.

.....

"And that is the story of how Rainee and Blake met," Old John smiled at Anniet, who was listening intently to every word he said.

"No no no no no," Anniet objected rapidly, shuffling herself closer to him, "It is not all the story! No! That is not fair! You stopped in the middle!"

"Did I?" Old John played surprised, but it could be easily seen that he was laughing inside, "I thought I extended it by a great deal and added to it some extra events, not related to Rainee and Blake's meeting."

"Well, maybe yes," Anniet couldn't do anything else but agree, "but by doing so, you made it as one story, and it counts now as one. And you didn't finish it."

"Hmmm, I presume it is sort of my fault then," Old John smiled. "So what else do you want to know?"

"All! I want to know all!"

"All? That wouldn't be that easy."

"Why?"

"For the very same reason as I mentioned before, even the life of one person is not just one stream that is easy to follow. Ever so often, things that are not worth mentioning make an invisible impact that influences further events more than moments that are spoken of in legends for generations. And here we have a few lives that merged together just for a brief time and separated again into different directions. And may this encounter have left a lifetime imprint on everyone who attended, all little rivers went in different directions, and it won't be that easy to follow them all."

"Oh! So they got separated..."

"Yes."

"So what happened?"

"To whom?"

"To Rainee?"

"Rainee? She stayed true to her word and travelled a lot, meeting many people, visiting many places."

"So she didn't go home to see her mother? Well, she didn't know that it was her mother then. So maybe she didn't love the Queen as much as she would have if she knew."

"Many people would support your thoughts, however, not many of them, including you, know yet what true love means. Once you understand it, you will also understand that for love, there is

neither family, nor bloodline, nor homeland, nor race. You either love or you don't. And once you truly love one particular person, it is extremely difficult not to love others. Do you want to know what that one person in everybody's life is?"

"Mothers?" Anniet asked carefully. She would have said "child" as everyone was always saying that a mother's love is the strongest. But then mothers often have more than one child, and John said it should be only one person. Also, some people didn't have children. But every single one had a mother.

Old John was watching her with his laughing eyes as if knowing what little turmoil his question made in Anniet's head.

"Did you really love your mother that much?" He asked.

Not that long ago, Anniet would bravely say "yes". But now she didn't dare to say it. She knew it would be a lie, but she didn't dare to admit it yet. But could she say "no"? She couldn't do it either.

"Don't be too harsh on yourself," John smiled at her. "You would not find a single person who, by saying 'no' to this question, would be telling the truth. But also any grown-up person who would say that they love their mothers the most would be either misled a lot or not allowed to live their own life yet. Every person loves their mother most while she is carrying them inside – they don't have anyone closer than their mother. Every baby will love its parents, particularly their mothers, because they feed them, and for that time of life, there will be no other person closer. But that's where people got most mistaken. Love is very present; it does not live in either the past or the future. Anything that is in the past or future is either memory or fantasy, but not love. I can see you are ready to oppose it, and in your opposition, you would be on the same side as me in my statement, despite us seemingly taking different sides. If you think about a moment when you loved someone in the past, then it is a memory; it has been and gone, and there is no love left. You cannot think love. Well, you can, but it is not love anymore. Because love you can only feel. If you think love, or speak love, then it is not love, it is just you thinking or talking about love. But. If you feel in the past when you love someone, you will find out that you still love them in that very moment. But the word "loved" doesn't fit. You would feel that you love, not loved. And it doesn't matter that it is in the past. If you learn to feel into the past, not to think about the past, then you will realise that feelings don't have a past, you will feel it just the same now as you felt then."

That's why it is not possible to miss feeling. Maybe it is not the right wording, but it isn't easy to find better. People who lost the ability to feel or whose ability has been reduced will surely miss feeling, as they cannot do it anymore or at least not to the same degree. But for people who didn't lose this ability, feeling now and feeling then are just the same. And that's where the major difference comes between babies and adults, babies don't have memories. I mean, sort of thinking memories. Their lives are in feeling. If, after birth, the baby is taken care of by someone else other than his biological mother, he will not miss her, no matter how strongly he loved her. It is because he never "lost" her, as when you feel in the past, now it feels just the same as then. And babies don't look or think into the future; they are not afraid either. Babies are very present, and they will love those who are closest to them at that very moment. They don't suffer from the change in people looking after them. That is the drama of the adults. What babies and even small children suffer most from is the dramas of the adults. If the mother of the child is terrified that the child might be taken away from her, then the child will take this terror as its own, as that's how babies are learning, if the

mother of the baby is worried for his future, then the baby will feel worried for his future even before knowing what the future is. If the mother feels the pain of separation that is approaching, then the child will feel that pain too. If the mother feels just love for the child, for the people who will look after the child and is confident and even looking forward to the child having a great future, that's how the child will feel.

Any trauma inflicted on a child because of the change in parents is purely just negative feelings absorbed and imprinted into a child because of their first parents' fear, guilt, shame, and pain. The sad thing is that love and those feelings don't come together, so at the time, when mum is worried about what will happen, afraid for the child's future, feeling guilty or ashamed, then she is not loving that child. In an ideal world where mothers would understand that their role in their children's lives should be relatively very short and wouldn't make of their children some little possessions, the children would not be so privatised. One mother would love another mother's child no less than her own, and the child would not mind who is looking after him, as long as he is loved and looked after. When he grows, he will start making preferences, but not while he is a baby. If you were able to feel what I say, not just listen, then you would understand that for a baby, for a small child, a mother or a stepmother, or even stepmothers doesn't make any difference. There might be a different mother every day, as long as every mother loves him, and the previous mother handles him while loving with confidence that the next will provide excellent care too, he will not suffer the slightest. And he will love each of them maybe differently, but no less strongly. And he will never lose or "forget" any previous caretaker, as his memory, yet, is not in thoughts, it is in feelings. So in reality, there is no such thing as a child loving his stepmother less than his mother. Not in a baby's or a child's world. These thoughts are born from adults and then planted into the heads of the children when they are already capable of thinking. So, when Rainee was a baby, or a child, she didn't love the Queen less than, let's say, Angus or Ruffus. She was the same mother to her as she was to them. Even if the Queen had loved Rainee less than if she had known that Rainee was her true child, it would not have any effect on Rainee, as she couldn't miss something that she didn't know could exist. That is again just an outcome of an adult thinking. So don't be confused that you are incapable of answering my question, neither "yes" nor "no". Because, yes, there was a time when you loved your mother the most.

And no, love for the mother never was meant to be the strongest for a person who starts to experience life, nor was it meant to be everlasting. Love for your second half will be much stronger, love for your children will be much stronger, and love for your friends will be much stronger. A child's love looks so big only because his world is tiny yet, and that love for his mother takes over all this little world. But when the world of a child starts to grow, that love doesn't grow together, it stays the same. The more fulfilling life a person has, the smaller their love for their parents will be, not because it has shrunk, but because life has expanded. Of course, if that life is filled only with pain and suffering, then sure, the love for parents will shine bright in it. But I doubt any loving parent would wish such a life for their children. If later your mother becomes your friend, then this love grows, but not in the love for your mother. No. It grows in love for a friend you find in your mum's person. So again, for everyone who hasn't made good friends, mum might be the best and only friend, but that is just because their lives were not that eventful or fulfilling. It is difficult for mothers to understand this very simple universal truth, and they cause a lot of grief to their children because of this lack of understanding. People in our world are not that generous in true love; they

call by the same name many other things, but still, it is just a name. When a child is born, parents, and especially the mother, are the world to them, and parents have all their love just for themselves. Most people can feel it, and for many, that might be the very first time in their lives when someone truly, unconditionally loved them. For people who are rich in love, the love of a child would feel very, very small. For people who were never loved with a whole heart before, it will feel very big, as they didn't have anything so pure before. And when a child starts to grow, his love for parents doesn't shrink, it just doesn't take the whole of him any longer, as he starts to love different things too.

And for parents, it feels like they are losing it, and they try to earn it back or even hold it back by force. They try to captivate children's attention to themselves, they try many harmful things, not understanding that they are chasing after something that is impossible to maintain. Sometimes a child becomes so emotionally crippled that it is afraid to spare its attention to anything other than its parents, but that is just heartbreaking and goes against all natural flow, and there will be a time when, after losing its parents, the child will simply not know how to live any longer. To understand how bad it is, one should see it as if parents were crippling their children physically by cutting off parts of a child's physical body, just to make sure that the child doesn't leave the house to look at anyone else. And after parents die, this armless and legless child is left at home on its own. So my answer is no, it is not the love for mothers. You are right, we all have parents, and we all have mothers, and we all have love for parents, but this love is not expandable, it is not able to grow, so it is not the love I am talking about.

Long silence followed as Anniet was trying to think what the heck she had just heard right now.

"Then, the second half," she said, bravely answering John's original question. Surely this must be right. Couples who love each other are usually very happy and are more friendly than anyone else. So, probably when you learn to love your second half, it becomes difficult not to love other people too.

"The love for your second half will be the strongest and last longest," John said, "but only if you fall in love with that other person that I spoke about, and that person is you yourself. As with anything else, true love can grow only from within and then spread around. The more you love yourself, the more you will be able to love others, and the more you will be able to love your second half. Sorry that my answer didn't bring any surprise and is very simple, but the thing is that all the greatest mysteries of the world start with the simplest things. It must. Otherwise, if it were some mysterious creature that opens a gate to the most wonderful places you could experience, wouldn't it be unfair to those who didn't find that creature? The One doesn't set tasks like this. The One always makes sure you have all that is essential to you. If you want to love others, then fall in love with yourself. As simple as that. The more restrictive you are to yourself, the more restrictive you will be to others. Love is something you give; you cannot give anything that you don't have. And you don't need to give any other things to love. To love, you need to give only love. Most likely, you might want to give many more things when you love, but those wishes come from love that already exists, which is already given.

"I see," Anniet said, pulling herself out of what she had just heard right now. If she sank into it, she would have too many questions to ask, and it would take her away from the story she just heard. No way she would allow it. Right now, while John was here, she wanted to find out what

happened in the past. “Then why didn’t Rainee feel the same way as Angus and Ruffus and go home to see her mother? If she loved her as strongly as others?”

“Love has little to do with it. Love is freeing, not binding. Even from what little Angus said, it was clear that he understood that his mum didn’t call him home out of love. He said that mum missed them so much that she made herself sick just to get them back. A loving person would never do it, neither consciously nor unconsciously. Ruffus didn’t understand it then, his childlike mind couldn’t get this much. But both Angus and Rainee knew it very well. Just both chose a different path to respond to it. Angus chose to satisfy his mum’s need, Rainee chose not to. In the same circumstance, different people will behave differently if they stay true to themselves.”

“Then who was loving?” Annet couldn’t understand anymore. All this love concept was not really understandable, and all the rules were not clear at all. “Why is love so difficult to understand? I certainly don’t follow the rules.”

“The mind is not capable of love for reasons,” John shrugged his shoulders, “it is simply not capable of handling love, as it is too deep for the mind. Love is very simple and the most complicated at the same time. If you feel, then there are no rules, as love doesn’t require a single rule. If you think, then there are not enough rules to put on it, as the mind is not capable of handling it, even if it were working just on it. If you leave it to the mind, then you will never experience it fully, as the mind will shrink it and make it unrecognisable, and will imprison it in endless rules and restrictions. If you feel it, then you don’t have to spare it a single thought, you just surrender to it, and love will dictate your actions, and you will know what to do. And it will never follow a rule of the mind, as the mind cannot reach that deep to understand why, in the same event, there are different outcomes. If you put it in a mind’s cage, then Rainee was more loving, as when you love, you don’t succumb to somebody’s needs. So if you follow just the rules that a person who is highly educated in love knows, then by these rules, Rainee would look more loving.”

“But from what you say, it doesn’t sound as if you think she was.”

“From what I know, you will hardly find a person on Earth at this time being who would be more in tune with love than Prince Angus is, and always was, for as long as I know him. It would be very difficult for him to act unlovingly. He would have to break himself to do so. He has never done it in his life.”

“So, then he was loving too...”

“Yes, he was.”

“But then, if Rainee acted one way and Angus acted another way, how can they both be loving?”

“Because the circumstances and the conditions were not the same. Not being an expected heir to the throne, she was free to do whatever she wanted. That freedom didn’t come easily, and she relentlessly fought for it, and she achieved it. Angus, on the other hand, was always living in the spotlight of every single person around him. People of the palace were expecting him to be a prince. The King’s Army wanted to make him the best leader they could. King’s Academy wanted to make him the best student ever. Other students were in constant competition with him, trying to prove their own worth, or become friends just for his status. People of the Capital were hounding him for attention. Ruffus has always been looking at him as an idol. And his mother was on top of all this pile, as she loved him so dearly that she could hardly stand to share him with anyone else. Her love

may have been very selfish, but still she wasn't capable of any other, and he was the apple of her eye. To fight all this away to gain freedom would be an enormous task. A person like Rainee might be able to do so, a person like Angus – no. Many people would say that was because Rainee was stronger in character, but let me reassure you that strength has little to do with it. If anything, staying under such pressure and not succumbing to it required much more strength than chasing everyone away. They both were different people with different characters.

Maybe if they both lived in a demand-free environment, they would develop more similar characters, as deep inside, for those who can see behind the curtains, they are very alike. But it wasn't the case. And while Rainee managed to free herself, Angus didn't. Up until this day. His nature is to look after people, and to make them unhappy is against what he is. Everyone demands a piece of him, and he gives them as much as they ask. Surprisingly, his soul is so large that he manages to retain himself after all this robbery. He knew very well that his mother made him the purpose of her life, and he allowed it. And against all odds, it didn't destroy him. Well, it didn't make him greater either, and without it, he probably would be the King already. Still, nevertheless he is the only person I know who managed to retain himself to such a high degree under such exceptionally high demands."

What Annet heard now shone a more light of understanding on what Rainee was saying about her and Angus's childhood.

"So, they took Angus and Ruffus back home?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And what happened to them?"

"Angus got back to the same lifestyle he had before going travelling, just with much more extensive training."

"And Ruffus? Did he get accepted to the Royal Academy?"

"Accepted he was, but he didn't go. The King said no, and the Royal Academy had to wait for a bit longer."

"Why would the King allow one son to go to training but not another?"

"Ruffus was too little to join the academy. Rainee was right, he would have been too bored in it."

"But didn't you say that he was about the same age as Rainee and Angus?"

"He was in appearance, but as you could gather from his advice to Blake, he grew up not in a normal way. He stretched himself in size, but in his heart, he was still a little toddler, just as on the day when his mum told him that he could not travel."

"And what happened to Blake?"

"Blake? He stayed with his mum, and they moved to a different place."

"So he didn't go travelling?"

"No, Rainee was right in what she said, his mum's actions put a heavy burden on him, making him believe that her happiness depended on his behaviour. And as he loved his mum, he didn't follow his own dreams and did what his mum requested of him. It is not easy to free yourself from such requests."

“Oh, what a shame. He wanted to travel so much! Can you imagine if all four of them weren't stopped then and could go on adventures together?”

“I can imagine,” John said, smiling, “and I believe it would make many lives much easier.”

“I cannot believe they met at such a young age! And then went their separate ways just to meet again in the future.”

“Some rivers are drawn to each other because of the similarities in them, and after merging, even for a short time, their waters get mixed and changed. All four generals of today must have much in common to be brought together at such a young age and sent on a self-discovery journey. Their lives would have taken a different turn if that journey hadn't been stopped by interference and the demands of other people. Later, they had to fight hard to receive again what was so freely and effortlessly given.”

“I cannot believe Blake was afraid of his dog!” Anniet laughed to herself.

John didn't say anything but smiled together with her.

“That general Jason was a bit scary for some reason, despite not doing anything bad... Is he still around? I have never heard about General Jason, but Rainee said the King has more generals than four. Is he one of them?”

“No,” John smiled again, “at that time, Jason was the leading general in the King's Army, but his time came to an end after Rainee and Blake came to power.”

“They took his place?” Anniet asked, thinking that it wasn't that nice despite him being a little scary.

“No general is taking another general's place. Everyone has their own place, as they have reached it by different means in different ways, and only they themselves can let go of that place. General Jason was a very commanding person, and, unfortunately, he believed that this was what made him so great. He found it extremely difficult to be commanded by others. He was alright to be under the King's command, and when Angus was appointed as general and got higher in rank than him, he agreed with it, as Angus was believed to be the future King, so in his eyes it was unavoidable. However, he wasn't able to accept the fact that after the inauguration, Rainee and Blake got higher rankings than him. And he never recovered after that.”

“Why?”

“Why? Difficult to say. Not difficult to know, but very difficult to say. Let's say one of the reasons was already mentioned in the story — he couldn't wait until Rainee would join the King's Army to mould her into something he wanted her to be. It became a true obsession for him. On the day when he thought that his dream came true, to find out that she became his commanding officer and completely out of his reach was a proper blow, and he never recovered since.”

“So he left?”

“You could say so. When people lose a reason to live, they leave this world for good.”

“So he died?”

“Yes.”

“Why did he have to die?”

“He didn't have to. But that's what happens when you implant your own reason to live into somebody else's life, somebody else's actions. Then the outcome of that life will have a direct impact on your own. It is not that uncommon for one person to die very soon after they lose someone they love. It happens because they put the weight of their happiness on the person who departed, and then didn't see a reason to stay on their own. In Jason's case, it wasn't even that. He glued his life to the fantasy about the future that never became reality. It couldn't be different. When such a connection is made, someone has to suffer. He made the aim of his life to train Rainee into what he wanted her to become, when Rainee never wanted either to be trained by him or to become who he wanted. So just by living her own life as she wanted to live it, she eliminated all future dreams for a person who had nothing to do with her life. It had to be. When such a connection is made, one of the lives has to be destroyed. It could be either Rainee's life taken away from her, or Jason's reason for life had to be crushed. Rainee loves and values her life too much to give it away just to satisfy somebody's whim. So it wasn't satisfied.

Jason put too much weight of his own future on something that wasn't his to put on, nor could his choices and decisions achieve it; in other words, he exchanged reality for fantasy about someone else's life. After it became clear that this fantasy would never take place, he didn't manage to find a way back to himself and rapidly faded away.

“So it is not good to build your future around other people?”

“It is not good to build a future for other people. It is good to build your own future, whether it is around other people or not. It is good to love. When you love, you don't restrict. There was no love in Jason's actions, just arrogance and ambition. Ambition about something that wasn't his. It is never good to have a dream to mould someone into something.”

“What about another officer? Major. Did he die too?”

“No, he's still around. You might meet him one day.”

“Why didn't he die? He wanted to get Ruffus into his academy, but you said it didn't happen. Shouldn't he die too?”

John could do nothing but laugh at such a statement, bringing even more confusion to Annet.

“He didn't die because he didn't attach his own life to the actions of Ruffus. It is very good to want, and to seek, and to express what you want, even if it is about someone else. It is not good to pressure, nor is it good to lock yourself into a future that is entirely dependent on another person. It is good to want another person to be in this future or even dream about it, but that is just about it. He wanted Ruffus to join the academy because he was very eager to see how he would do. But he never made it the purpose of his life to make a good student out of Ruffus. With Major's dream, the most he could get was disappointment if Ruffus did not join or did not excel. Even in a scenario, if instead of joining as a student Ruffus had joined as a teacher, it would not have a too devastating effect, as nothing was locked, all was just open and desired. While in Jason's case, he was locked up in a future where he was Rainee's superior. If she had never joined the King's Army, then he would have been very disappointed, but it would not have destroyed him. If she were to join it as an equal, then he would suffer a lot, but probably would pull himself out after countless disagreements and clashes. But she joined the King's Army as his superior; instead of commanding her, he was under her direct command. He couldn't live with that, so he left. And because he could not see the future without the King's Army and didn't want to stay in the position he was in, he passed away.

“Couldn't he get a better position?”

“He definitely could. But again it would have required him to learn from people he despised at that time or at least to go in the same or similar direction. And he could not bear such a thought. Shame, he was so close and yet so far.”

“So he killed himself?”

“But aren't we all in charge of our lives, and if we die, it is we who kill ourselves? You could say he killed himself. He couldn't see a suitable place in this world anymore, so he got old and died very rapidly. That's a real shame, as he would make an outstanding addition to today's generals if, at the point of decision, he had chosen himself over his beliefs.”

“You are old, but you are not dying,” Anniet pointed out.

“You are right here,” John could not argue.

“How did Rainee and Blake get superior to other generals?”

“But that is definitely a different story,” John smiled at her.

“So next time Blake and Rainee met, it was at an inauguration ceremony when they became generals?”

“No, they met before. And their second encounter was that which shaped the events that took place later. But that is also a different story,” John added, seeing the sparkle in Anniet's eyes. “And it is pretty long — we don't have enough time for it today.”

“I am not tired!” Anniet said quickly.

“But I might be,” John gave her a cheeky look, “you know, I am old after all...”

Anniet looked at him with suspicious eyes, not knowing if he was serious or laughing. It was challenging to say. He didn't look tired. But on the other hand, he might be, as there was some weariness in his face. So she didn't push her luck.

“Will you tell it to me tomorrow?” she asked with hope.

“I can tell it to you tomorrow,” he promised. “That is, if none of us is tired tomorrow.”

“I am definitely not going to be tired tomorrow,” Anniet promised to herself.

“So, shall we call it a day?” Old John suggested, “So we both could have a proper rest.”

“No, no, no!” Anniet disagreed again, “No, not yet. I still want to know a bit more about this story.”

“And what else would you like to hear?”

“What about the village? What about these machines? Why did they behave like this? Have they been fixed? And what is money and earning?”

“That's a lot of questions,” John laughed. “But let's see if I can answer them. Money is something that you should never encounter, as the King had banned it before you were born. Earning was a custom brought from the Old World and spreading at that time, when you had to earn before you could get anything. Even such essential things as food and clothing. Before you could get any food from me, you would have to do some work first, and just then, I would give you food. And money was helping to maintain this exchange. So both were banned by the King as they were spreading lots of unhappiness and fear. The village survived, at least for that time, despite the great

resistance from the residents to the new rules. When people's minds are set to self-destruct, it is extremely difficult to save them, basically you have to leave them no chance to make any movement in that direction. Machines didn't get fixed, as after investigation it turned out that they were set to work this way. At the very beginning, when it was introduced, it was using most of the energy of the villagers to power working machines, with just a little excess sent over in return. Then, with time, greed took over, so more and more energy was taken away. People didn't object to it as, one thing, they didn't know; another thing, they got used to it and became dependent, afraid to lose this strange lifestyle that was sending them to destruction. The machine behaved like this because the owners eventually set it to forcefully maintain the connection so they would not lose it in case people would realise that this connection was harming them. So the chain was set that if there were a sudden connection drop at one end, the other end would forcefully send strong energy to settle everything back to normal at the other end. Greed is constantly following humans and, despite the best efforts, it is growing at every opportunity given."

Where there is greed, there are those who benefit and those who suffer. And most of humanity seeks it as if their lives depended on it, despite most of them being on the suffering end. So after this incident, the King had to step in and forbid people from suiciding by allowing others to exploit them. The earning system was banned, and the operation of the machines was changed. Now you can use the machine if you have enough energy to operate it yourself, or through combined effort. You cannot use this energy unconsciously; in other words, others cannot use it from you. You have to be fully aware of what you are doing, and as soon as your thoughts and concentration are not on it anymore, you will be disconnected straight away. Most people cannot do it and find it easier simply to do tasks by themselves, so machines became unpopular, and you hardly ever see any around.

"Why do people do that?"

"Do what?"

"Put themselves in such strange lifestyles?"

"Mainly because of fear. Sometimes people take fear for motivation to do one thing or another, when in reality fear just closes other ways, leaving just one or two options open, and a person under fear simply doesn't see any other way."

"Blake's mum was so afraid to lose this connection..."

"She was indeed. The fear of losing it was much bigger than the fear of losing her own life."

"But really, what are people supposed to do? Is there a way out?"

"There is always a way out."

"So what were they supposed to do? Why would no one advise?"

"Oh, but they did receive advice. And from Rainee and later from the King's advisers. But it is up to people if they will follow the advice given."

"What did Rainee tell them?"

"I can follow the conversation they had that evening if you wish to hear."

"I wish, I wish," Anniet said, eagerly happy that this story would last for a little bit longer.

“Very well,” Old John smiled.

After the investigation was conducted and finished, the people of the town had mixed feelings about what had happened. On one hand, they were worrying for their future, on the other hand, they were happy to be saved. Worry was bigger than happiness, and everyone could see broken machines, but they could not see the damage done to themselves. But still, they gathered to talk about all that happened and to celebrate. They arranged everything to celebrate the coming of the King’s Army and even two princes and invited guests from other surrounding settlements, but by the time all was set, members of the King’s Army had left, taking Prince Ragnar and future King Angus with them, so Raineer got all the spotlight.

At that time, Raineer was a child and her thinking was very similar to yours. I see you wanting to object to it, and yes, at that time she had much more knowledge than you do right now, but knowledge and the way of thinking are not the same. A child can have all the knowledge in the world, still it is just a child, as it is not knowledge that makes people grow. So she was thinking in a very similar way, and after the day was over and everyone gathered around the campfire waiting for the meal, she asked openly.

“How did you lot get pulled into this affair at the very beginning?”

“???” People could not understand her question after they had already been explaining reasons all day to officers.

“No one can force a person to join such a union without the person willingly joining in. Later, it would probably be much easier to keep you all under control, as the power that this machine got from lots of people joining was really great. So my question is why such an idea even came up? What did you want from this deal from the very beginning?”

First, no one wanted to answer her, but because she wasn’t neither a scary officer nor any person of authority, they became more talkative.

“The main reason was to get more free time to do things we like while machines are doing our labour. They would manage to do more than we could at the same time, and we would have time to enjoy ourselves, to do things we like and dream of doing, but didn’t have time to achieve,” they finally explained.

“This still doesn’t make sense to me. Could you explain in more detail?” Raineer insisted, looking around until someone explained to her in more detail.

“Let’s say I want to travel in style. While travelling, to enjoy myself and to feel comfortable, to stay in places where I don’t have to do anything but relax, to eat and drink nice foods that I never tried before and that are cooked for me, to learn new things, to be able to buy things I see and like. To save enough money to do so would take a long time, and during the time, there are always some things that come up that require spending, and it becomes impossible to fulfil such a dream.”

“And how do these machines help at all?”

“Well, I can set a goal to save a certain amount, and until this goal is reached, do nothing else, just eat, sleep, and sell my energy. As I won’t be doing much, it means I won’t need to do many chores, so I don’t have to spend lots of time on myself, and I can recover energy faster and can sell more. Also, I can earn twice as much by selling energy than I would earn if working by myself.”

Rainee was lying leisurely on that little reclining chair with her hands under her head, staring at the night sky for a while. Warmth coming from the fire, burning just a few steps away, was stroking her side – it felt so nice and relaxing. After thinking for a while, she replied.

“I try to put all you just said into one picture, and it doesn’t fit.”

“What do you mean?”

“I try to break it into two or three pictures, but it is the same result. No matter how much I try, it seems to me that what you're saying is something that you heard or picked up from lots of different people. Even your dream itself.”

“What do you mean? It is a very simple example, everyone can understand it.” People around murmured in agreement. In their thoughts, they just started to remember that no matter how wise and strong this child looked to them, it was still just a child, so it was probably too complicated for a child to understand what living and working for a living was.

After a little while, Rainee spoke again.

“All evening I have felt very comfortable and relaxed,” many eyes turned to look at her and here she was — living proof of the words she just said: one leg on top of another, hands under her head, with a little kitten purring next to her side, a half-empty glass of freshly made juice on a table mat at a reach of her hand. Not a single person could doubt or deny the comment she just made.

“The drink you made for me is really exclusive — simple but very tasty.” She looked in the direction of the kitchen shed, where delicious smells were coming from, promising a nice treat for everyone. “By the smell I can feel, I really look forward to trying that dish — I have never tried it before, but it smells so nice — I cannot wait until it is cooked, and if the taste is at least half as good as the smell, I will definitely ask for the recipe to learn how to cook it.”

After a short pause, she kept talking deep in her thoughts:

“I am travelling. And so far on my journey, I haven’t spent a single coin. Not because I don’t have money, but simply because I didn’t have a chance to spend any...”

After saying it, she fell silent for a while, letting others understand her words. After a few minutes, someone asked: “All you say is true, but how is it related to the topic before?”

Rainee closed her eyes for a few moments. Again and again and again, the same thing was happening — either she wasn’t able to explain to others the simplest things, or others weren’t able to understand them. Sometimes she was thinking — maybe the things she was talking about were too simple? Maybe grownups are involved in lots of more complicated matters, and to see simple things wasn’t possible anymore...

She opened her eyes and sat up, so others could see and hear her better. She glanced at the little boy from the woods — he was staring at her with wide-open eyes, his body was all stiff, as if he just realised something and couldn’t believe it. She was sure that at least he managed to understand what she was trying to pass to others and thanked the heavens for that — if one person can understand, that means others can too; then there is nothing wrong with the idea, but she just needed to express herself better.

“To travel, and while travelling to enjoy yourself and to feel comfortable. To stay in places where you don’t have to do anything but relax. To eat and drink nice foods that you have never tried before, and that are cooked for you. That was a large part of your dream. Wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was...”

“How is this dream of yours different from what I am experiencing right now at this very same moment?”

Everyone around fell silent for a moment.

“Also, as an addition to your dream, I have many more benefits that you didn’t mention — one of them is that I meet so many new people, I even made new friends. Over and over I am finding the same truth — people are different in many ways, but also not. The kindness, the hospitality, the friendship, the gratitude and the willingness to help — it is all the same everywhere. One thing is for sure — anywhere I go, I never fail to find it in people around me, as long as I am willing to see it.”

No one dared to break the silence. Rainee lay back on the recliner and looked again at the stars.

“I have been travelling for a while, everywhere I go, people meet me with such hospitality. They make my stay comfy, they offer me food and drinks, they share with me so many stories, and they listen to the stories I tell them. They teach me so many new things, and every time I take a coin out of my pocket to pay, they get upset and ask me to put it back. I don’t even dare to offer these coins anymore. Why do I have to upset someone so nice and friendly towards me?”

After a while, she pressed on:

“To relax while doing nothing and to learn new things are opposites to each other. When you want to learn something, you have to practice while learning; you cannot relax and do nothing while practising. If you are not trying, then you are just observing, and that is not the same as learning; it is witnessing that some things can be done by someone, but you yourself do not learn them. Also, it is essential to understand that it is very nice to do something after relaxing, and it is extremely nice to relax after working hard. Then these opposite things allow us to experience the pleasures of both actions fully...”

Also, it feels nice when someone is doing things for you while you are relaxing, but also there is another feeling that is just as nice or even nicer — it is when you yourself are helping someone and making others happy... It is such a gift to make someone feel good and happy; it fills your heart with healthy pride and makes you feel so good. Even if someone would offer me pay to skip this part, I would have to refuse,” she giggled for a bit before continuing, “I guess that is why others are not taking my coins — not to ruin this nice feeling inside.

While travelling, it is not easy to carry many things with you, so you cannot buy many things, and to buy just a little, it is not that difficult to do a few jobs around to earn it, especially when it complies with the part about learning new things. Usually, you can get paid while learning something new, the more you learn, the more things you can do, and money never becomes an issue...”

People around were sitting in silence and deep in thought. Never mind that they already forgot thinking that this child was not able to understand what living and working for a living were. But

the things she was saying seemed so simple that it was hard to admit to oneself that it was so basic that it shouldn't need to be said to be understood, it should be effortless like breathing. Raine continued.

“So I am living now, at this very moment, most of your dream, and I didn't have to torture myself for god knows how long by only eating, sleeping, and selling energy to achieve it... Especially since after doing nothing for so long to save money, one definitely wouldn't be enjoying doing nothing but eating and sleeping while travelling, it would be more like a nightmare to do nothing again, after doing nothing for so long, just in a different place, wouldn't it be? So that is why I say it isn't a dream of one person — it looks to me like a combination of thoughts planted into your head by others.

For the part “travelling in style”, just such a saying tells that it isn't your dream, otherwise you would tell how you want to travel, instead of saying “in style”. One likes to travel on foot, one on a horse, one in a carriage, and the other on a ship or even on a dragon... Which of them is “in style”? Which style does the person themselves dream about? If one doesn't know it, then most likely the thought of travelling is alien to that person. If one prefers staying in a solitary room of a hotel, isolated from local surroundings, then it is definitely not a traveller's heart – it is most likely someone who really feels better at home in familiar surroundings. All this dream you told me feels like it's not yours but gathered from others. It is like the idea of a person who is really feeling good at home, in his own town or village. But was forced to abandon his own dreams about a cosy home and happy family, and was led to accept ideas of the person who enjoys travelling, also with added ideas of another who is enjoying buying and selling things, and also god knows what other ideas. In such a case, locking oneself out of the world for so long would be acceptable.

When there is no influence from others, people dream about something that makes them comfortable, and once the dream becomes clear, they make a move. A traveller will pack a bag and go to travel, a teacher will learn new things and start teaching, a merchant will travel with a purpose to get new things to bring to other places, a farmer will look after the land, a gardener will make his home his dream, and so on. One would sell his life and energy to others only under false influence. Otherwise, one would be living his life and using his energy to achieve his dreams...”

“...”

“What if one doesn't have any dreams?” someone asked after a long pause.

“Then it is one of the two,” Raine replied. “First, it might be that this person is actually living his dream without realising it. It would mean that a daily blessing of finding the right place on earth is taken over and hidden by daily duties.”

“Then how can you find it out? If you are living your dream without knowing?”

“Ask yourself a simple question and be honest with the answer. Don't hide that answer from yourself and don't try to change it or smooth it.”

“What simple question?”

“Are you happy?”

“...”

“That is?”

“Yep. Simple question, but people often complicate it. Are you happy doing your work? I am happy because I enjoy my work, is the answer. But, I am happy because I am paid well, is not answering the question about you being happy while doing the job. It is only answering that you are paid enough.

I am happy while doing my job, but I don't want to do it anymore because of too much pressure or too many demands. It means you are happy to do what you do, it is just the demands and pressure you don't like. Are you happy staying at home looking after children? Yes, it makes me feel happy to look after the children, indicates that you are happy. Yes, I am happy because it benefits my children, doesn't answer this question at all. And so on... People will think about so many ways to find an excuse for how happy they are in a place where they are unhappy... or where they convince themselves that they are happy just because they didn't find a happier place, or they are afraid to lose something.”

“... so how do you find the true answer?” was the main question lingering on people's minds.

“Look inside... If you tell the answer and it feels like a lie, then it is a lie. Then, instead of hiding it from yourself and twisting it, ask yourself why it feels like a lie and look for answers to the new questions. The answer is always inside yourself and never in other people. Happiness, too, is always inside yourself, not in other people. As in the example I said earlier, it feels nice to help other people. It doesn't feel nice because the other people are helped and have a better day or a better life. It feels nice because of the feeling inside of you. The point in helping others is to make you feel good and happy. If, after helping someone, your thoughts are like, “Well, he didn't really deserve it,” or “I hope he will return the favour,” or anything similar, and you don't have that incredibly nice feeling inside, then something went wrong in there. Same with happiness, if you don't feel happy doing something or living your life, then look for answers to why you do it then. Is there something shielding happiness, or have you not found your place yet?”

“What is the second? The second reason for not having your own dream?”

“The second is that you think your dream is wrong, and you believe in the opinion of others more than you believe in yourself or in your dream. It is difficult, as when you become convinced that your dream is out of line, too audacious, too strange, too anything, you lose it. Then, even after some time someone tells you that it is OK, you will find difficulty in believing it. And when you see someone doing it, someone living the dream that you didn't dare, you will feel angry, and might even fall into despair to see others happy in something where you didn't try.”

“How do you know that much?”

“The King told me.”

“So he educates you personally. That makes sense.”

“He educates everyone who wants to listen and even those who are not that keen. Just people don't listen, or even when they listen, they hear so little. They presume what the King should say, instead of listening and asking questions.”

“He isn't coming here to educate anyone...”

“Of course he isn't coming. If he were to come, all of you would just get too scared and would want him to leave. But he does educate. If you read books from his library, you will know much more than I do, as all is in there. And if that would not be enough, he would make sure that new information is sent your way as soon as you seek it.”

Rainee was slowly travelling through the forest. She was fully submerged in her thoughts and didn't pay much attention to her surroundings. She didn't even control her horse and allowed Aspen to choose a route and speed. The thoughts that occupied her so much were related to where she was going, but not on this trip, but in her life. It had been a good ten years now since she had been roaming the world on her own, rarely visiting home. Even those visits were not the real visits, as anyone would understand visiting. She would not travel home but instead would be taken there by members of the King's Army at times when their roads would meet. Her mother made arrangements that every time she was located and recognised by someone at the King's service, she would be taken back home for a brief visit and then taken back to the place she was picked up from. That way, Rainee's freedom wouldn't be affected, and her family would see her sometimes. At least that was what her mother thought.

It was a strange arrangement, but Rainee didn't fight it. So her mother was happy, and Rainee herself had a chance to see Angus and Ruffus time after time. This arrangement had a heavy toll on Ruffus, who wanted to come with her, but no one would take him, as he was told by his mother that if he wanted to go with Rainee, he had to find her himself, instead of being "delivered", then he would be able to travel with Rainee. Otherwise, it would not be fair if he were just taken and dropped there. And he believed it. Rainee found this rule very unfair to Ruffus, as such a task was unachievable to him and just made him seek something that otherwise he would never want. If not for this strange rule made up just for him, he probably would live a carefree child's life, while now he was trying to train himself into something he didn't want to be, just to satisfy his mother's unreasonable demand. Rainee herself could not take him with her as she didn't have a dragon, and members of the King's Army would not listen to her. She asked her father to do it, and he promised that he would as soon as Ruffus sought his help. Rainee found this suggestion very fair and reasonable, as it was Ruffus' life, and it was he who had to make a decision and seek help from those who were able to help him, instead of listening to those who were restraining him. But Ruffus never did. Instead, he put all his effort into resolving this task by himself and never sought his father's help. Still, nevertheless, it was very nice to see him time after time.

But in the past few weeks, Rainee felt a stronger and stronger wish to go back home. Not because she didn't like travelling any longer. No, she enjoyed it even more. But in addition to that, the feeling of wanting to make changes was growing bigger. To make changes not just in her own life but in the way things were understood around. When travelling, she could influence the lives of those she met, but even then, after leaving, all her teachings and advice were quickly fading. The more she lived, the less she could understand people's life choices and understandings. And with every day, she realised more and more that all they were lacking was a good education and guidance to understand more about life in general, instead of just being helped to achieve something.

The more she thought that way, the more she could see how much effort the King was putting into this task. However, people who were supposed to help him didn't understand most of the things themselves and would mainly curtail his efforts instead of helping. And the desire to get involved was growing daily until she realised that this wish was bigger than her desire to travel or even to discover more about herself and her own abilities.

So now Rainee was making her way back home. It wasn't home that was calling her, but she understood that the only place where she could make these changes was in the Capital, in the Royal Palace, at the King's side. And that's where she was heading. The thought of joining the King's

Army was still appalling, and she wasn't going to do so; the thought of returning to the King's Academy wasn't that attractive either. So she didn't even know yet what she would do on her return, but she was willing to find it out when she got there. However, she wasn't in a hurry and was allowing herself to take as much time as she wanted and maybe even more.

Then, in the blink of an eye, all changed. A loud, fierce scream broke the silence, and in no time, Rainee was galloping at full speed towards that sound that reached her. The sound never stopped, becoming more agonising and full of despair with each passing second, and she was urging Aspen to go faster and faster, reaching speeds never known to her before.

Surprisingly, this scream didn't disturb anyone else in the nature around, but her. Most of the people would not even understand what she meant by "scream" as there was as much silence in the forest as it could be, and all its daily life was disturbed only by the mad dash of Aspen's hoofs. However, for a person like Rainee, this scream was much louder than any sound made by the mouth.

No verbal sound could ever transmit such an agonising scream of a soul full of terror and despair.

Only people who have ever heard it will understand it, and Rainee was hearing one now, crisp and clear.

Soon they flew into an opening, and there she saw it – a canyon, in front of her, deep and wide with straight, steep walls of stone on both sides. She could hear an angry river raging like a storm at the bottom of the gorge. The other side of this abyss was much higher than this side. Trees of the forest were closing right to the edge of the cliff on that side, some trees even leaning across the edge down towards the abyss below, holding on with roots stuck in between stones. One of these trees was growing much lower than the others. A person was hanging from that tree with one hand holding onto the branch while with the other holding a black furry animal.

Both the person and the animal were very quiet, but the desperation could be felt even at this distance. This soundless, desperate plea for help was exactly what urged Rainee to rush towards this place.

The situation was dire – there was no foothold under these two. They were like a little live chain in the air, nowhere to land or to stand on. The person was looking up time after time, but it was obvious that he didn't have enough strength to pull himself up with one arm only.

Rainee's horse suddenly halted to a dead stop, not daring to come any closer to the edge of the deep opening in front of them. Without a second thought, Rainee jumped off and started to run as fast as she could towards the unlucky couple on the other side.

Rapidly, she was covering the distance towards her side of the canyon. She knew that just by herself, she would not be able to help those on the other side. She didn't have the strength of a Royal officer to jump such a distance, she didn't have a dragon that could carry her across to reach those in need.

However, the thought that all she would be able to do was just to approach this side of the ravine and then watch helplessly never even crossed her mind. Nor was there any shadow of doubt that the help she needed right now would come. She was here, at the time of need, which meant that she was the one to help. And she would receive all she needed to achieve this goal.

And sure enough, soon she felt that what she needed right now was approaching rapidly. Raineer looked over her shoulder, and here it was – high in the sky, a large winged creature was catching up with her.

Raineer was getting close to the person on the other side and could see now clearly what was happening. It was a little boy, much younger than her, who was desperately holding a medium-sized dog, or rather a large overgrown pup, clutching the skin of the dog's back badly with one hand, while holding himself to the branch of the tree with the other. The dog didn't panic or show any stress, even in this dangerous situation; he hung silently, with his head tilted up and kept looking at the boy who was holding him.

The boy was silent too, he didn't scream or shout for help, as if knowing that there was no one who could help them right now. He was very determined in his actions. However, at the same time, desperation, terror and helplessness were pouring out of him. For someone like Raineer, this scream was way louder than any sound one could make out with their lungs.

The situation was at a critical point – the small child was losing the strength he had. If he let go of the dog and held on to the branch with both hands, he might be able to save himself by pulling up onto the tree. However, all his attention was on the hand that was holding the dog, and the situation there was even worse, as the dog was slowly slipping out of his fingers. If he could adjust his grip or change the way he was holding, he might be able to hold on for a bit longer, but it wasn't possible to adjust anything and to his fear and distress, he was losing his grip no matter how hard he tried, and by now he was hardly clutching the dog's fur in his fist.

Raineer reached the edge of the cliff, she cleared her head, inhaled deeply and made a powerful jump forward and high into the air without slowing down. She was flying up for a few seconds, and then her body halted in the air at the moment when she had reached momentum before starting to fall down. Right at that moment, she saw and felt a feathery body under her feet and landed softly without crashing. A massive, oversized falcon was under her feet, carrying her forward towards her aim.

They didn't manage to reach the other side in time.

The boy lost the battle, the dog slipped out of his grip, leaving just a few black hairs in his fist, and fell into the abyss below. For the first time, the boy made a sound – a desperate, heartbreaking “Nooooo.....!” came out of his lungs as if his own life had just slipped out of his hands.

Seeing the dog slipping out of the boy's hand, Raineer leaned close to the bird and then again made a massive jump. This time not a light one, but pushing the bird down with all her might, while at the same time pushing herself up into a massive leap towards the screaming boy. In a split second, she and the bird flew in opposite directions. She gripped the branch of the hanging tree next to the boy, right at the moment when, in desperation for losing his dog, the boy lost all attention to what he was doing. His hand that was holding him to the tree lost all strength, and he was ready to fall down after his friend. At this very moment, a firm arm wrapped around his waist, and he was pulled back up by a person who suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

However, at that very moment, he was neither able to understand nor appreciate the miracle that just happened. All his attention, all his heart, was drawn down to the bottom of the canyon

where his furry companion had fallen. Heartbreaking sobbing and screaming were difficult to bear. The despair and pain that radiated out of him were even more unbearable than the screams.

“It’s alright, don’t be afraid and don’t cry, he is saved, no harm happened to him,” the calm and reassuring voice next to his ear brought him back to his senses. Just then, he realised that at this very moment, he wasn’t holding onto anything else but his face while covering his eyes full of tears. A gentle and fragile-looking arm wrapped around his waist was pressing him firmly against another person. In disbelief, he turned to see who was holding him. There was a young girl, hardly a teen yet, with one hand holding onto the same tree that he had let go just seconds ago and with another arm holding him safely pressed to her side. Seeing him coming back to his senses, the girl smiled at him and said again.

“You don’t have to be afraid anymore. I have you, and your dog is safe too. All is in the past now.” Seeing that he was staring at her with no response, with wide-open eyes, she smiled gently and added.

“If you weren’t so afraid, then you would be able to look around. Once you look around, awe would chase all the fear away, as the views from here are so outstandingly beautiful that there is no room for any other feeling left.”

The boy was still in shock from seeing another person next to him, but to hear such words in this perilous situation left him completely stunned.

To look around?... To look around where?...

Still, he obediently turned his head to inspect the surroundings. What he saw terrified him even more. Under them, a very long way down, there was a wide and angry river. The waters were flowing rapidly, making a violent sound. Stones were sticking out of the water here and there. The height was unbearable, and he was stuck in the middle of nowhere above this abyss, being held only by this scrawny, shabby tree that could give way at any minute. He froze to the core, seeing all of it, and a full realisation of the situation hit him.

The girl next to him sighed silently as if she had suddenly become sad and started to swing them forwards and backwards. “She is going to jump!!!” – frightening realisation cut through the boy’s mind. But there was nowhere to jump but down....! He started to struggle while trying to reach back to the tree to hold onto the branch. But he couldn’t reach it; all he could grab were a few twigs that didn’t support that much... But he wasn’t giving up, determination was radiating now from his heart again. The girl who was holding him stopped swinging and was quietly watching him. The very next second, a massive bird flew right under them and disappeared out of sight again.

The boy froze in disbelief, forgetting about his struggles for survival. The size of this massive hawk or falcon was enormous, and it just glided silently under their feet before flying away. And in his claws, this bird was carrying something black and furry... it was nothing else but the very same dog the boy was trying so desperately to save just moments ago!

Rainee was watching the boy and waiting for him to calm down so he would be able to listen to reason. She didn’t want to force him to do anything, nor to cause him more stress than he was already experiencing, but on the other hand, there was only a limited amount of time she could hold herself and the boy in this position. They just missed a chance to land on the falcon’s back. Once she jumped from the bird earlier to grab the boy, she also pushed the bird down to increase its speed to go after the falling dog, and sure enough, the dog was caught in the middle of the fall and was

now in a firm grip of this massive bird. The falcon made a round and came back to get her and the boy; however, she wasn't able to land on him safely without hurting the boy in her arms. So they would have to wait for a bit longer now. She was watching the boy. Fright, helplessness, determination, anger – what a strange composition of feelings was coming out of him at once.

She sighed again and moved her eyes from the boy to the scenery. It was so beautiful and magnificent... The angry river at the bottom, walls of stones rising steeply on both sides. The walls of the canyon were shiny with streaks of red and golden patterns, as if making some giant painting that doesn't make any sense. On the other side of the canyon, there was a meadow of flowers stretching to both sides as far as the eye could see.

Her darling unicorn was calmly grazing in the midst of these beautiful flowers. Then, after the blossoming field, there was a magnificent forest stretching far into the distance, and on the horizon, there were the tips of the mountains sticking out of the mist. Bright blue sky with a variety of clouds was crowning the view. Even for her as a mist chaser, such vast open views were outstanding. And a little person next to her didn't even want to spare a single look at it... He probably had never even seen anything similar to it in his life, but all he could see after looking around was only water and stones that could have ended his life. Nothing else...

Maybe it is really people themselves who unintentionally (or intentionally) created the mist so they would not have to see anything that is beautiful around them any longer? If so, such ignorance...

At that very moment Rainee felt how her arm holding onto the tree suddenly got weaker, making her aware of the weight it was holding for a while now. She giggled inside. Just for a split second, she thought badly about others, and her body reacted instantly.

Old John once told her that every time you believe a lie about others, or you express a bad thought about others or yourself, you will become weaker. Every time you trust in others, when this trust is true, every time you think or say nice things without expecting anything back, without exaggerating or lying in your thoughts or tongue, you will become stronger.

When someone is in need, and you genuinely try to help without a second thought, without anything in return, without a doubt if you should or should not, whether it is worth it or not, whether you will succeed or not, whether you are capable enough or not, at this very moment, the person is at their strongest. Strength and abilities they have would not depend any longer only on their own qualities, but on the current situation and one's heart, if that is not enough, then help will come to their aid. Always.

Just now she lingered on a thought and got a reaction – that means the thought was a lie or not true, which is more or less the same.

"Thank you," she thanked silently in her head, feeling really grateful towards any force that didn't allow her to think badly about others without making sure she understood what she was doing. Then she addressed the boy again.

"We cannot stay here like this for very long, the bird is coming for us again. It would be good to allow him to help us this time, but we have to do our bit too. We are very close to the cliff, and it makes it difficult for him to get close to us, also he cannot stop and wait until we land on his back, so it is best if we are already moving forward at the time of landing to stabilise ourselves." "Also,

so that we wouldn't hurt him or cause him pain." She thought, but she kept that thought to herself, realising that too much information would not do any good.

"Is he dead?" The boy asked, staring into nothingness.

"Dead...?" "How could the bird be dead and still be flying?" Raine thought for a moment, but straight away she knew it wasn't the bird the boy was asking about.

"You know the truth, but also you try to convince yourself that you don't know it, or that it might not be the truth after all," she replied. "If you asked a question once and the answer was given to you and you accepted it as the truth, why then doubt it over again or question it again?"

The boy looked at her in surprise at his mind being read aloud.

"You trusted me once in the past," Raine said, "would you trust me again this time?"

The boy understood that it wasn't about his dog anymore. He looked into her eyes, nodded his head, and let go of the twigs he was clinging to. Then he closed his eyes with the decision to trust the person next to him. It wasn't easy, so he kept muttering in his mind: "I will trust, I will trust."

He felt himself swinging again, once, twice and then flying first up and forward, then down... at least it should have been down, but instead his feet touched something soft and the next moment a gust of wind nearly ripped him off this feathery surface, but someone was faster than the wind, and forcefully pushed him down towards the feathers where he stayed crouched in a ball with his eyes still shut tightly.

Raine was half-kneeling and enjoying the moment. The wind that was brushing past her ears and scattering her hair. The speed, the breeze on her face, the feeling of power and freedom. The feeling of beauty, the seeing of beauty in the sky and in the surroundings. The beauty of being alive and capable, and full of vitality. You close your eyes, and you feel it – the power of the wind blowing in your face, the power of the creature under you flying steadily, your own strength and power pulsing inside, pulsing out of your own cage that people call the body, and joining that power of surroundings, the power of life... How can one not feel it? How can one not appreciate it?

However, the evidence of the opposite was straight in front of her – lying tense and quiet next to her knee. Eyes shut, fists clenched, body tense. Worrying about nothing else but his worries, feeling nothing but his fears, seeing nothing but darkness, and seeking nothing, as there is nothing to be seen through this darkness full of worries and fears...

Raine stretched her arm and pressed her palm on the boy's shoulder.

"Don't be afraid, you are safe now," she whispered quietly, more to herself than to the boy, but it seemed the boy did hear her.

He opened his eyes for a short moment but quickly shut them again as if trying to prevent himself from seeing something. Terror overcame him, and he pressed back to the "ground", or rather to the feathers of this giant bird.

Raine looked quietly at him for a few seconds, then gently slid her hand to the boy's back between his shoulder blades. She could feel his heart beating violently under her hand. Using her arm as a bridge, the fear, terror and worries crept from the boy into her heart too, but just for a moment, just for a heartbeat, and then they went even faster than they came, disappearing into nothingness.

Blake was lying curled in a small ball, but somehow he wasn't afraid anymore. Soft feathers were tickling his face, his arms, his ankles. The bird's moving muscles under these feathers were so calm, but also so powerful. Every time wings pushed through the air, he could feel strong movement under his side. It was so... calming and reassuring. Such strength... Wind that was scattering his hair didn't terrify him anymore; instead, it felt like hundreds of hands stroking him gently as if being happy to greet him. He felt... joy...?

Blake opened his eyes again, but this time there was no fear in them, only surprise. Rainee smiled at him and winked her eye while still keeping her hand on his back.

"Do you want to feel how wonderful the world is?" she asked.

Without waiting for an answer, she let some of her own feelings pass through her arm to the boy. Juuust a little, very very very tiny bit. She already knew by now that people either cannot handle it or do not like it or... any other reason is good...

But Blake didn't freak out as she expected, but kept watching her with wide-open, round eyes.

"Why wouldn't you look around for yourself? To see how beautiful it is around?" Rainee offered him after a few seconds.

Despite talking about the view, Rainee herself was watching the boy. Such an interesting character... She really wished with all her heart to help him. Such a personality hidden beneath, such strength was coming out of him right now, even if it was not known to him himself. That drop of feeling she shared didn't get rejected in the way everyone had done so far. Instead, it found a home inside this boy, as if it was meeting something that was already waiting for it, or awakened something that was already hiding there and wanted so badly to come out but just didn't know how.

If at this very moment this boy were to try to sign up for the Royal Army, every general would be fighting for him. How come then that just a few seconds ago, he was shrinking in fear? Extraordinary indeed.

Blake was watching the girl who saved him. He could remember now very well how they met for the first time and was glad to see her again. She was kneeling on one knee, her back straight, her hair fluttering in the wind; it seemed that gusts of the wind didn't have any effect on her. She was watching him with those big, clear green eyes. A voice echoed in his head – "Would you trust me?" "You trusted me once in the past, would you trust me again?" And he knew he would... He tried to chase that thought away, but other words, heard not so long ago, echoed in his head, "You asked a question once, and the answer was given"... That was it – he had his answer, and he would trust her. Just from the thought of trusting someone, goosebumps appeared on his arms. But he obediently tried to sit up to look around as suggested. To his surprise, Rainee didn't let him.

"Too windy, you don't have the balance or strength," she said.

He was looking at her with a question in his eyes, "What then do you want me to do?"

Instead of answering, Rainee lifted his little body by his shirt and flattened him on his belly, arms and legs spread, head close to the bird's head so he could still see something while lying down. "Like a little starfish," Rainee laughed to herself. Well, at least this way he could see something, and the wind would not take him. Never in her life would she have thought that it would leave such an impression on him.

Blake looked and looked and was breathing in and feeling. That little bit of feeling she shared with him increased multiple times and was rising with every clap of wings.

He was lying stretched on the back of this massive bird with his own hands opened and spread across as if he had wings too. The wind was blowing in his face. The speed was unbelievable... the strength was indescribable... He was feeling... free? He realised that he did feel free. Free, and happy, and powerful. Powerful to the stage that nothing could compare to him, that there was nothing in this world he wouldn't be able to do or achieve. He saw nothing around but the beauty... Yes, he understood now what she was trying to show him. It was so beautiful to be free, so beautiful to be powerful, so beautiful to be... invincible? Every time the bird moved its wings, he moved his hands in the same motion. Every time the bird was gliding, he had a feeling like he was supporting himself in the air.

First, he kept his eyes open, then he closed them and was just feeling the wind on his face, the power of the muscles under him. When the wings of the bird moved, his arms moved in unison. His body mimicked every movement of the bird's body. He even felt as if his own body grew to match this giant creature. No, more like this giant bird became his body. As if they would go faster when he tried to go faster, and they would turn when he wanted to turn... What if they tried to somersault? Why not – let's try and yep! They did it! They really did it! He opened his eyes, and he saw the sky and clouds. There was the earth somewhere too, but he didn't pay much attention to it. The speed, the strength... never in his life had he felt like this before. But he knew that something was missing, and yes, it was... His dog, his faithful friend... But at the same moment, his eyes landed on the ground, and here he was – running at full speed right under them. Not a step behind.

Then a thought came about that strange person who somehow helped him to feel this way... And as if on command, they turned to the side and there she was – on the ground too, waving at him. How is it that she and Deamon are on the ground and only he is still flying? Well, it didn't really matter. But had she seen how well he could somersault? He had to show her just in case she missed it. Here – he closed his hands/bird's wings and twisted once, and spread the wings again. Then twisted twice, then, laughing, did it three times. The ground was approaching rapidly, but he didn't care about it at all; he laughed and laughed and laughed in joy. The bird glided just a few inches away from the ground, slowed down, and then shot back into the sky after dropping Blake to the ground. He rolled a few times, still laughing, then stayed flat on his back with hands and arms spread to the sides, still full of joy and laughter, watching as this magnificent winged creature flew away until it disappeared from sight.

-Did you see it???!! He asked, looking at Rainee who came and sat next to him.

-I did!

-Did you see me?!!! Did you see how I flew, no, how we flew!...

-I did see it!!

-But it felt like it was me who was flying! Like I had wings! Ohhh, it was just unbelievable! I didn't dream or imagine it? Did I? You saw it too?

-I saw it! How did it feel? Rainee herself was no less happy than Blake was right now.

-It felt sooo good! It felt so fast, so so fast!! So strong, so free and open. I was free, as free as one can be, as the wind! I could do anything, anything I wanted. And it was so fun, oh, I still cannot fit into my chest, it feels like my body is too small for me. I feel so happy, I don't remember ever feeling so happy. Blake's eyes were shining, his breath was ragged, he lay stretched on the ground on his back, living in the moment. His big black dog was lying next to him. Blake rolled to his side, grabbed his dog and pressed him to his chest.

-This is the best day of my life, he declared, squeezing his furry friend in his embrace while at the same time looking at the sky with longing.

-Do you often do it? he asked, still looking at the sky.

Rainee was sitting next to him, hugging her bent knee.

"Do what?"

"Fly like this?"

"Like you just did? I have never done it."

"You didn't?!!! Why not? I thought that was what you tried to show me!"

"Maybe it was." Rainee couldn't stop smiling. She also lay down on the grass while looking at the sky. "I wanted to show you how wonderful life is, and I think you saw it."

"Yes! I did! I did!" Blake confirmed, still breathing with his full chest, more air than he had ever inhaled before.

Rainee didn't say anything anymore. What he "saw" wasn't exactly what she was trying to show him, but at the same time, it was. The beauty of life everyone must be seeing differently...

A long time passed until Blake could finally think about anything else apart from his flight. But slowly other thoughts started to get into his head that up until now was occupied only with the recent experience. With that, many questions started to pile into his head.

“So you came on this bird to save me?” he asked Rainee after fragments of today’s events started to connect into one picture.

“I came on Aspen,” Rainee replied, “and the bird came after.”

“Why did it come?”

“Because I wanted to help you and neither I nor Aspen can fly, so she came to help.”

“She?”

“I think the bird is a she. However, she never stays around for long enough for me to find out much more about her.”

“So it is your bird?” Blake asked in awe, thinking to himself that he would love to have such a bird of his own.

“She is not my bird, but she has come to my aid a few times before.”

“Why would she come to you if she is not your bird?” Blake could not understand.

“I don’t know,” Rainee admitted, “maybe because I needed help. But I like to think that she comes because she is my friend. When she comes, it feels like she is my friend. A very good friend.”

“I see,” Blake said, thinking that he would love to have such a friend. “How did you know that I was there?”

“I heard you shouting for help.”

“I didn’t shout for help,” Blake was confused by these words. He thought hard about what had happened and repeated with even more conviction, “I didn’t shout for help. I would have shouted if I had thought that there was anyone who could come and help me. But I was sure that there was no one.”

“Still, I heard you,” Rainee smiled, not knowing how to explain what it means for someone who doesn’t know what it is. “What happened? How did you end up like this?”

“I don’t really know,” Blake admitted. “We came too close to the edge, I slipped on some pebbles, Deamon came after me, and when all seemed okay, the ground under Deamon collapsed and he slid down. I caught him but was pulled down too and ended up hanging on that tree. Twice I thought I lost him, first when he fell, but I managed to catch him. And then when, no matter what, I could not pull him up.”

“You were very brave,” Rainee said with a soft smile, looking at him.

“No, I was scared all the time,” Blake disagreed, remembering the event.

“There is no bravery involved when you do things that you are not afraid of. Why would it? Why would you be brave while doing something that is not scary for you to do? Even if the whole world thinks you are brave, it doesn’t make any difference. You are brave only when you do things that you would rather not dare to do, but you find the courage to do it anyway. That is the only time when bravery is required. And you have been brave many times today.”

"I think it is you who has been brave," Blake disagreed. "How did you end up next to me?"

After listening to Rainee's short explanation, he was looking at her with more and more awe.

"You jumped before the bird came?!! From the cliff? What if he had not come in time or had missed you?"

"You overthink too much, that's why you don't see the full picture," Rainee disagreed, "I knew that she would come in time and she knew what I was doing, so it was easy for her to come in time. If I overthought and didn't know myself what the best way for me to act was, how would she know what I was going to do? Then it would be very difficult for her to help me as she would have to guess. And what would be the point for me to stop and wait till she lands, then get on her back and then fly to you when you would be already at the bottom? What would be the point even to do anything then? And still it would be much more difficult for her to land and go back into the air because of the size of her wings. And to make her do so just because I don't trust that she will catch me would not make any sense, if I don't trust her then why would I even bother to get on her? That would be a really brave thing to do. I don't think I am so brave."

"I think you are very brave, to come to the aid and jump into the abyss and then jump from the bird again... I don't think I would ever be able to do so," Blake was full of awe and not understanding how Rainee could call herself not brave after what she had done.

"If you think, then you will never dare to do. If you had thought before saving Deamon, you would never have saved him, as while thinking, you would have realised that there was no way you could save him."

"That's true," Blake agreed with a deep thought, "But you saved him, not me."

"It would never have happened if you had not held him as long as you did, so I guess we both saved him."

"Then being brave is to do things that you know you will not be able to do?"

"No!" Rainee strongly disagreed, "That is stupid, not brave. Once you know that you cannot do something, but choose to do it anyway, there is no other outcome than a failure. Unless someone saves you from such a suicide. But that is good on them, not on you."

"Then what is to be brave?"

"To be honest? I don't know." Rainee said openly, just now realising that she really didn't know what being brave is, "I constantly see people doing things that they are afraid to do. And while doing them, they don't see nor understand the surroundings and the influence of others who are involved, but they do it anyway, and ever so often they succeed. I think that's very brave. But they call me brave instead when I can see and understand the surroundings and I don't take such big risks as they do. Truth to be told, I never take these kinds of risks at all. I know how strong, how fast and how accurate the falcon is and I saw it coming, so I wasn't taking any risks, nor was I brave as I didn't do anything that was scary for me. You, on the other hand, did many things that were scary for you and you didn't have any understanding about it, but you trusted. Even when you were flying on her, you didn't know what she could do, but you trusted and tried and you succeeded. I think to trust someone is very brave, much braver than to be trusted by. Trust in other probably is the bravest thing one can ever do."

"Even if you were not afraid, you did many things where you could not succeed. Think what could have happened to you..."

"I don't like going into the "what could, or should happen" place." Rainee said, not letting him venture down that path. "It is a very strange place and very unpleasant. I don't go there myself and I don't like seeing others go there. I don't know how to help them come back once they go to that place, and no one is happy there."

"So you never do things that are new and you don't know what will happen?" Blake double checked.

"Oh but I love to do things that are new to me and that I don't know, or understand, or know what will happen. But to do what you love is not brave, is it?"

"For me it is," Blake said with a hidden longing in his voice, "for me it is the bravest thing in the world."

"Then maybe we both were brave today," Rainee didn't argue with this statement as after all maybe it was what was meant to be brave and she just didn't know it.

"So what now?" Blake asked after a little pause.

"Now? Now we will have to take you home. Do you live far away?"

"No," Blake said, "just about a two-hour walk. Will you come with me?"

"I can," Rainee agreed, "how did you end up on the other side?"

"I live on the other side."

"I see," Rainee said, "then it is going to be a bit longer walk than just two hours."

"Why?"

"Because we have to find a crossing to go over the canyon. We cannot climb here, it is too steep and the river is very fast. Even if we managed to climb the walls, it would be difficult to cross it. I will definitely come with you because you are very little and not used to travelling and I didn't see many people around, at least not on this side. It would be difficult for you to reach home by yourself."

"Why do we have to walk around?" Blake couldn't understand.

"Why?" now it was Rainee's time to be confused, "Didn't you say that you live on the other side? How else would we get there?"

"By flying," Blake said with a shine in his eyes.

Rainee looked around, not understanding what she was missing.

"How are we going to fly there?" She asked eventually.

"On your bird." Blake said, and it could be seen that he couldn't wait to experience it again.

"On my bird?" Rainee laughed at such a thought. "But it flew away."

"Can't you call it?"

"No, it doesn't listen to me."

"What do you mean it doesn't listen to you? I thought it is your bird."

"I already told you that it is not my bird, that it is my friend who comes to my aid when I am in need."

"But we need to go to the other side. No?" Blake could not understand.

“Yes, but we can walk. It doesn’t come for such reasons.”

It was obvious that Blake was very disappointed by what he was hearing and he tried to probe a bit further.

“Did you ever try to call it?”

“No. How would I call it?”

“I don’t know. By telling it that you need its help.”

“But it would be a lie, as I don’t really need her help. Why would she come to me when I am lying?”

“I see,” Blake said with open disappointment. It could be clearly seen that he wanted very badly to fly on it again and realising that it was not going to happen didn’t make him happy. “Good thing that you have a horse. Otherwise it would be a very long walk.”

“How far away is the crossing?” Rainee asked.

“I don’t know how far away, I have never been to this side. But it must be some distance as people would say it is too far to walk.”

“OK,” Rainee said, “then we had better start walking if it is that far.”

“What do you mean walking,” Blake was confused again, “don’t you mean riding?”

“No, I mean walking,” Rainee corrected him, “you probably forgot by now, but Aspen doesn’t like carrying other people and it would be very strange for me to ride while you are walking, so we both will walk.”

Blake felt speechless after hearing that.

“You have so many restrictions around yourself,” he finally said.

“Me?” Rainee could not understand. “How is it me who has restrictions?”

“Well, your friend bird doesn’t come to you when it doesn’t want to, your horse doesn’t carry more than one person even if you want...”

“But how does it make me restricted?” Rainee could not understand this kind of logic. “You don’t know any bird that would come to your aid and you don’t have any horse who would carry you around. And you think I am restricted?”

“But if you had a horse who could carry two people or a bird who would come to you all the time, then you would be more free to do what you want to do.”

“How is it a restriction? It doesn’t make any sense. If I had wings and could fly by myself, I would be even more free, but it doesn’t restrict me in any way now when I cannot do it.”

“I would make sure that the bird and horse that I have would listen to me and do what I want,” Blake said firmly.

“Then you would be very picky and could choose just from very few birds and horses,” Rainee laughed.

“Why?” Blake couldn’t understand.

“Well, it is obvious, isn’t it? If you would like to have a bird as a friend only if it listened to you all the time, then you would refuse all the birds who would listen to you sometimes, or even

most of the time. If there were one hundred birds that would want to be your friends, but only two who are willing to listen to you all the time, then you could have only two friends out of one hundred.”

“But that’s good, isn’t it?” Blake said happily. “It is much better to have two friends who listen to you, than one hundred who don’t?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Rainee said, “I don’t think so. At least not for me. If I had only friends who listen to me, then I would have to think about everything and if something happens, I would have to tell them what to do all the time. What if I did not know what to do? And anyway, why would friends even have to listen to what I say? That sounds like an army, not a friendship. I think friends should be allowed to do what they want to do, not what I say. If they are my friends and I need help, then they would come and help me because they want to help me, not because I tell them. Why would my bird come and help us now when we don’t even need any help? Why should Aspen feel unhappy while carrying you on her back, when you can walk yourself? I truly don’t understand this way of thinking.”

“But we will have to walk now a very long way round and it will take a few days until I can go back home.”

“So what? Do you have to be somewhere else? Do you have to do something?”

“Not really, but my mum will be worried,” Blake replied.

“Yes, that is not good,” Rainee agreed, “but there is never a way to make someone unhappy just to make another happy. If I saw a way how to stop your mum from worrying without making Aspen unhappy, I would. But I cannot see such a way. And even if I forced Aspen, she cannot fly, it would still take a day or two for you to go home and your mum would be worried anyway. So there would be two unhappy instead of one. No, actually three. As I would be very unhappy too, from knowing that I have done something to upset Aspen who loves me very much.”

Blake didn’t argue anymore because he too didn’t want to upset Aspen either and he definitely didn’t want to upset Rainee.

“Anyway, I thought that you wanted to travel,” Rainee said, remembering their first encounter. “Have you done so much travelling that you don’t want it anymore?”

“No,” Blake shook his head, “no, I haven’t done any.”

“Why?” Rainee asked with surprise.

“Because my mum wanted me to stay with her and I didn’t want to upset her. Isn’t it just the same as you not wanting to upset Aspen?”

“No, not really,” Rainee disagreed. “Aspen not carrying others doesn’t upset me, it upsets other people. But she is not other people’s horse, she is my horse, so other people getting upset over it makes no sense. So when Aspen doesn’t want to carry you around, it doesn’t upset either me or her. We both are friends and none of us gets upset and that’s how it should be. If you want to ride a horse, you should either get your own horse, or find some horse who would be happy to carry you. It is never good to force. If I forced Aspen to carry you, then me and Aspen would be upset. Why should I ever do that? But when you wanted to travel and your mum didn’t let you, you did get very upset. So for your mum to be happy, you had to become unhappy. For your mum to get what she wanted, you had to refuse what you wanted. And your mum didn’t even feel upset for upsetting you.

I don't understand this love. I think Angus is right, I think it is not that much love when for the sake of one to be happy other has to be unhappy. I love Aspen and I would never ask her to do something that makes her unhappy just because it would make me feel a bit better. If one day Aspen doesn't want to carry me either, then I will gladly walk next to her, why should I ever force my friend? Or expect her to do something for me. I am glad when she does and when she does, it makes her happy too. No, it is not the same. I think it is completely opposite.

It was obvious that Blake didn't understand all that was said, but he didn't say anything anymore on that subject.

"So we will have to walk?" he asked.

"Yes," Rainee confirmed.

"Where will we sleep?"

"I don't know yet."

"What will we eat?"

"I don't know yet."

"Aren't you worried about it?"

"Yes," Blake confirmed. "I am very worried. How can we prepare if we know nothing?"

"Last time when we met, you didn't have these worries about where to sleep and what to eat. You were ready to travel with us without preparing in advance. What happened to you?"

Blake was quiet for a long time before answering.

"I don't know what happened," he said honestly. "Probably I am not that brave anymore."

"You were not that brave last time either," Rainee disagreed, "that cannot be the case. It has been a long time since we saw each other. What have you been doing? Why didn't you grow?"

"You didn't grow too much either," Blake pointed out.

"Still I did," Rainee said, "to me now you look even smaller than last time. And your dog didn't grow up either."

"What happened to Angus and Ruffus?" Blake asked, not being able to answer any of these questions.

"Angus is growing up," Rainee said. "Soon he will finish the Royal Academy and will be leading the King's army."

"Wow!!!" Blake was truly amazed by Angus' achievements. "He must be very smart and strong."

"Yes, he is," Rainee couldn't argue, "he always was."

"Why are you not in the King's Academy? They wouldn't take girls?"

"Girls? What do you mean by that? Why wouldn't they take girls? Your head truly is full of the strangest ideas. I already learned everything the King's Academy could offer me so I didn't stay."

"So you finished it?" Blake looked at her with new eyes.

“And yes and no. I didn’t finish as I was supposed to finish, but there is nothing that they can teach me anymore. So they didn’t know what to do with me. To make everybody’s life easier I just left. Nobody minded.”

“I see,” it was obvious that Blake was confused but wouldn’t show it. “So Angus is still there? He still has a lot to learn when you already finished.”

“No, he doesn’t have anything to learn. But they wouldn’t let him go as they don’t want a future King to wander aimlessly, so they keep him in the Academy and are preparing him for the King’s Army. I don’t understand what there is to prepare, but nobody listens to me. Angus would have loved to come with me, but it would make an immense amount of people unhappy. He is similar to you and doesn’t want to upset them so he tries his best to do what he is asked to do.”

While talking, Rainee called Aspen, took a bag from her back, stroked her a few times and showed her to go off.

“Are you going to carry your bag?” Blake couldn’t understand.

“It is my bag, of course I am going to carry it,” Rainee was confused by his question.

“Why can’t Aspen carry it? Or she doesn’t like to carry your bag either?”

“It is my bag, not hers. Why should she be carrying it?”

“But she is a horse! She is supposed to carry things!”

“She is not supposed to do anything. Why would she be supposed to carry bags? Yes, she is a horse, but that’s why she doesn’t need any bag, nor anything from this bag. She doesn’t mind carrying my bag, but as we are going to walk, why should she stay close to us just to carry a bag? I am not injured so I can do it myself. Shall we go? Or do you need more time to rest?”

The more Blake was talking to her, the more he understood that he understood very little of what Rainee was saying. But he didn’t need any rest, nor did he have any bags to carry, so he just jumped to his feet and was ready to start their journey.

Both children left the meadow where they were landed by that mysterious bird that would come to Rainee’s aid, but would not listen to her. They walked across the meadow back to the canyon and spent some time there talking about which way should they go. Rainee didn’t know this place and Blake had lived on the other side for a while but didn’t travel a lot so he didn’t know too much either, but he was sure that there was no close crossing as people wouldn’t go to this side. So they both decided to turn right as it was down the hill and was easier to walk. That would mean that after crossing they would have to come back on the other side up the hill, but who knows what could happen by that time.

They were making their way down the hill while chatting with each other. The further they went, the more Blake understood that Rainee had a completely different point of view on everything around her, and it fascinated him more and more. At the same time, Rainee was thinking how different Blake was from the boy she remembered from all these years ago, and she didn't like this change too much.

"Why do you ask for permission all the time?" she asked eventually.

Blake didn't know what to say to it.

"How else would I know what I can do?" he asked finally.

"Strange," Rainee said, "I don't remember you asking for permission last time we met. On the contrary, you knew very well what you wanted, you just didn't know how to get it. Why do you need to know what you can do before doing it?"

"I don't know..." Blake said again.

"What happened to you in these years? Did someone bully you?"

"No," Blake said, "no, no one bullied me. My mum and I moved to this place not long after you left. You were right, the King's Army did help us to move. And we have been living here since. I think my mum is very happy here."

"What about you?"

"I don't know," Blake said again. "I must be. No one ever teases me."

"Have you made any friends?"

"Not good friends that I would like to be around all the time," after a while he added, "I often think about you three. It might sound very strange, but still, I think you, Angus and Ruffus were the best friends I ever had. I know that we spent only a day together, but when I think about what friends are, I always think about you. My mum says that it must be just my imagination, as it was an eventful day, and it got stuck in my head. She might be right."

"No, she is not," Rainee disagreed, "I remember you too, and I think we would have become very good friends if we had spent more time together. I liked you too and was always thinking about you as my little friend whom I would want to meet one day again. To see the person you had grown up into. It was very strange to find out that you didn't grow up at all, and you are even starting to forget what you truly want. But it could be expected after what happened to you."

"Nothing has happened to me," Blake disagreed. "I don't know why I am not growing. At first, my mum was very happy about it, but later she got worried. Now she tries to find a doctor, but nothing works. Do you know why it might be?"

Rainee wanted to say that she did, but then changed her mind. To herself, she was thinking that a mother's love is a very strange and tricky thing. They love so much, but also without any consideration. In her head, she could remember very clearly Blake's mum telling him that she likes him little and wants him to stay this way. Seemingly innocent words. It might be, but it all depends on under what circumstances they are told, and circumstances were not in Blake's favour. "How strange," she thought. Her mother loves Ruffus so much too, but she made Ruffus grow way too fast. She loves Angus even more, but would take every spare minute of his already complicated life for herself without even a second thought about what would be best for him if she were to put her own wishes aside. Now, Blake's mum had such a negative impact on him. Before, when he was not scared and overthinking, he was so brave, open and full of a wish for adventure. Now he wasn't

scared anymore, but some strange rules were binding him, and he didn't dare to do or say anything that might not be approved.

"Did your mum tell you that you have to behave in a way that others like?" she asked aloud.

"Yes," Blake said. At first, he could not understand the origin of this question, but then the answer became obvious, and he asked in return. "You don't like it?"

"What?" Rainee double-checked, not sure if Blake so easily understood the meaning behind her question.

"To do what others say," Blake said and clarified after, "I mean, when others do what they are told."

Well, he nailed it, Rainee thought, smiling at him.

"No, not really," she confirmed. "I think it doesn't make any sense. Why would someone be telling another person what they should do? Why would they not do it themselves and be happy about it? And allow anyone else to do what they want to do.

"Why do mothers train their children to be different instead of understanding who they truly are?" But she didn't say it aloud.

"Even mothers?" Blake asked as if reading her mind.

"Especially mothers," Rainee confirmed.

"My mother says that she has to teach me how to become a good person," Blake said after a while.

"Think for yourself, is there anything that she can do that you cannot?" After Blake shook his head, she continued, "Then what else can she teach you? No one can teach others what they don't know and what they are not. After that, all she could teach you is what she wants you to be. But then why do you have to become someone she wants you to be and not someone that you want to be yourself?"

"Did the King tell you that?" Blake asked after a pause.

"No," Rainee smiled to herself. "Surprisingly not. I understood it myself. He must have told me many things that led me to this understanding, but now it is something that I know myself. Do you like going out on your own with Deamon?"

"Yes!" Blake said with his eyes shining bright, "yes, I do. I cannot see my life without him."

"And who is telling you what you can do when you are on your own with Deamon?"

"No one tells me," Blake laughed, imagining Deamon telling him what he was supposed to do.

"Then how do you know?"

"I don't know. Maybe I just think about what my mum would tell me?"

"But do you really?"

Blake thought hard and had to agree that no, not really.

"I think I just do what I allow myself to do," he said finally.

"I think the same too," Rainee agreed, "that's probably why you like walking on your own just with Deamon. But that is not good either."

"Not good?" Blake was surprised again, "Then what is good?"

"Let's have a rule on this little trip," Rainee suggested. "Every time you are not sure if you can do something, you ask me."

"But isn't it what I am doing?" Blake was confused.

"But I didn't finish yet. Every time you think that you shouldn't do something, you ask me too. And every time you know that you shouldn't do something, you also ask me. Got it?"

Blake nodded his head in agreement.

"And then," Rainee continued, "before asking aloud, you hear the answer that "Yes, you can do it". And even more. That I think that you should do it. That I would like you to do it."

Hearing that, Blake laughed wholeheartedly at such a suggestion for some time.

"But wouldn't it mean that I should be doing all I want? Even things that I know are not good?"

"Isn't that how we're all supposed to live?" Rainee asked him with a grin.

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Even if I want to pull your ponytail?" Blake asked with a cheeky smile sneaking towards her.

"Even if you want to pull my ponytail," Rainee agreed.

"Why?"

"Because we are friends," Rainee said, "and that is what friends do, they do not forbid each other to do what they like."

With that, Blake stretched his hand to give Rainee's ponytail a slight pull as if trying to show her that he meant what he said. But to his surprise, his hand didn't grab a single hair as Rainee twisted her head swiftly, and he missed it. While laughing, he tried again and again, but with the same success.

"Hey!" he shouted eventually, "Keep still! I want to pull your ponytail! You said that I can do it!"

"I said that I will not forbid you to do anything you want," Rainee laughed in return, relentlessly avoiding every attempt. "I didn't say I will help you to misbehave, or will match my actions in accordance with what you want."

"Isn't that what friends do?" Blake asked, trying to pretend that he had given up so he could sneak up unnoticed.

"Allow themselves to be abused only because a friend wants? I don't think so." Rainee laughed, jumping to the side from Blake's sneak attack, "Or do what friends expect them to do? I don't think so either. You can do what you want, and I can do what I want."

"But that is so unfair!" Blake disagreed. "You are much stronger and faster than I am. If you wanted to hurt me, I would not have any means to defend myself!"

“But if I wanted to hurt you, then maybe I am not that good a friend after all, and you should be reconsidering why you call a friend someone who wants to hurt you. Especially if that friend is stronger than you and knows more.”

While talking, Blake never ceased to try to catch Rainee by her ponytail, but no matter how hard he tried, he never succeeded, and in no time, both children were dashing over stones and fallen logs, chasing each other without a single care in the world.

When night came, they made a camp next to a small stream of water making its way to the river at the canyon's bottom. They shared the little food that Rainee had and shared the same blanket to cover themselves from the night chill, as Rainee had only one and Blake had none.

When Rainee fell asleep, Blake silently turned towards her and carefully stretched his hand towards that so easily promised, but still unreachable ponytail. He touched it with his fingertips, but very, very gently, not to disturb Rainee's sleep. Then, satisfied with his victory, he lay down and fell asleep with the widest smile on his face that a human could possibly have.

Next morning, they started early, but the further they travelled, the more and more agitated Blake became. No matter how far they went, there were no signs of human settlements and all around, as far as the eye could see, was taken by wild nature. The forest was closing towards the cliff, leaving them less and less space, and it seemed that further in front, the forest would take over all the space, not leaving them any passage at all. But that wasn't what was weighing heavily on Blake's heart.

“But what will we eat today?” he finally voiced his worries.

Rainee looked at him with curious eyes. She knew that something was worrying him a lot, but didn't realise what it was.

“Do you have to eat every day?” she asked.

It was strange for him to be worried about it, as she knew that he was not hungry yet; that's why she never connected this worry with a lack of food.

“Don't you?” Blake asked with surprise.

“Not necessarily,” Rainee confirmed. “What would happen to you if you did not eat for a day?”

“I don't know,” Blake confessed, “I never tried it. I never even thought it was possible...”

“What? To go a day or two without food? Why wouldn't it be possible?” It was very strange to hear Blake saying that he doubted he would go without food for a day. Yes, he was skinny, but not to the degree that he would perish in a day or two. And it was strange for him to be worried so much despite never going hungry even for a day.

“My mum says that I have to eat every day. So I thought it was how it had to be. I didn't know that it could be any other way.” Blake still looked not entirely convinced.

Of course, he is afraid of hunger! It dawned on Rainee. How could she forget about it? It might look silly, but his mum was so worried about not being able to earn enough to provide enough food for herself and Blake that surely this worry was passed to Blake, and he is carrying it

as his own despite never going hungry for a day. Most likely, his mum was never short of food either, but such petty details as reality are not important for worry...

"What would you like to eat?" Rainee asked.

"Bread," Blake suggested.

"I don't think we will get any bread," Rainee said, "bread doesn't grow in the wild, and to make it requires a lot of work and input."

"Cheese?" Blake suggested.

"Same," Rainee said, "can you cook?" she asked, surprised at Blake's suggestions.

"I can," Blake confirmed, "my mum is a cook, so she taught me. But I cannot cook in the wild as I have neither a frying pan nor a saucepan. Nor do I have any ingredients."

"I see," Rainee said, "you are right, it is not easy to cook without a pan, but it is not easy to make cheese in the wild either. I doubt we will find an animal that would be willing to share milk with us, or would even have enough to share. Even if they did, making cheese takes time, so no cheese. What about some fruit? Do you like any?"

"I do," Blake confirmed, "but it is just a snack, not food." He stated firmly.

Rainee looked at him again with eyes full of curiosity. Snack... What a strange way of thinking. Surely, to live just on fruit for a long time might cause some issues, but to live on it for a few days was never a problem. What is she supposed to do with this newly found hungry friend of hers?

"What about steak?" Blake suggested.

"Steak as meat?" Rainee double-checked.

"Is there any other steak?"

"I don't know. How are you going to get your steak? What animal do you want to kill?"

"To kill... No, I don't want to kill any animal," Blake said in a slightly sad voice.

Want a steak but don't want to kill... How then to get that steak?

"I guess you don't want to kill any animal either?..." Blake double-checked.

"No, I don't want to kill any animal," Rainee confirmed, laughing inwardly to herself.

"I thought you might not want to. So no steak then..."

"Don't get too desperate," Rainee smiled at him, "if you want to eat meat, just don't want to kill, then we might find something."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there are loads of dead animals in the forest. It is just a matter of finding one fresh enough."

"But I don't want to eat a dead animal!" Blake disagreed strongly.

Now Rainee was truly confused...

"Then how do you want to eat your steak? From a live animal? As I don't know any other way to get meat, just from animals. And usually it is dead before you can get a steak..."

“Well, yes,” Blake was no less confused now than Rainee was, “I know you are right, but still... it has to be fresh.”

“But isn’t that what I said? That the difficulty is in finding a fresh one?”

“Yes, you did,” Blake could do nothing but agree.

“OK then, I will keep an eye out for it,” Rainee promised.

Blake could do nothing more than just agree. He didn’t know how one could keep an eye out for fresh dead animals in the forest, so he could not help.

A few hours passed, and he long ago forgot all about the promised steak when Rainee told him to be silent and follow her as quietly as he could. Blake didn’t argue and followed her lead. By now, they were already travelling in the forest, as there was no opening left next to the canyon.

Rainee was slowly walking forward and listening to something, while making sure that Blake was following. After a few minutes, she looked around, chose one tree and told Blake to climb into it, helping him to get to the bottom branches. When he was in the tree, Rainee lightly jumped into it too. Not very long after, they could hear some disturbance in the distance that was getting closer, then there was a turmoil not too far away from their hiding place, and a doe, followed closely by a pack of wolves, rushed past their hideout. By the time Blake could understand what had happened, all had disappeared out of sight again, but hadn’t gone too far, as it could be heard that wolves must have caught up with the doe, as there was a distant sound of struggle and growling.

“Is it fresh enough?” Rainee asked, looking at Blake for approval. But she couldn’t get any as Blake was sitting all frozen whilst holding onto the trunk of the tree. “Well, I don’t think we would get any fresher than this, so you wait here, and I will go and get you a steak.”

After saying that, Rainee jumped out of the tree and disappeared into the forest. Seeing her disappear out of view woke Blake up from his frozen state. Never before had he seen wolves hunting. In fact, he had never before seen wolves. People used to say that they were dangerous, but Rainee wasn’t afraid of them, so maybe they were not that dangerous after all. He jumped out of the tree and rushed towards the sound of growling, hoping to catch up with Rainee.

He didn’t have to walk far. The scene that opened up in front of him was very disturbing. The doe was lying on the ground with no signs of life left in it, and its skin was ripped open in a few places. The sight and smell of blood were very unpleasant, and under any other circumstances, Blake would probably turn around and leave. But now he couldn’t care too much about the bloody scene as all of his attention was occupied by Rainee, who was slowly walking towards the dead doe, and four wolves were slowly backing off from it. The wolves were not even growling any longer, instead they looked silently at Rainee and were walking back as if obeying some command.

When Rainee reached the dead doe, she took her knife out and cut a piece of meat from it. After doing so, she turned around and, without looking back at the wolves, walked away. Blake waited for a few seconds to see what would happen next, but nothing changed. The wolves were standing a good deal away, not showing any intent to return to their game. So he made up his mind and quickly ran to the doe while at the same time pulling his little foldable knife out of his pocket. He didn’t understand why, out of all this, Rainee cut only a small piece of meat when they were going to travel for a few days. He got on his knees and tried to cut a much larger lump. But he wasn’t very successful at it, as the sight of this dead and bleeding doe was terrifying, and the smell of blood and open guts was overwhelming. While trying to cut through that flesh, his hands got all

bloody, and he was getting a bit dizzy. Never before had he been so close to a dead animal, never mind trying to cut a piece of it.

He was so disoriented and submerged in what he was doing that he completely ignored everything that was around him, until suddenly someone yanked him from the ground and half-carried, half-pulled him away. Just then, he realised that ferocious growls were uncomfortably close and no matter that he and Rainee, who was dragging him after herself, were running very fast now, these growls were not left behind, but were getting closer instead. He looked over his shoulder and saw all four wolves chasing full speed after them. Strangely, but no matter how fast the wolves were, they were catching up very slowly. But still they were catching up! Now he was running! Rainee didn't have to drag him any longer. No! He was running very, very fast by himself! Blake didn't know before that he could run so fast! Luckily, the wolves didn't chase after them for a very long time, and eventually slowed down and stayed behind.

"What were you doing?" Rainee asked after they were finally allowed to stop. She still couldn't believe what just happened.

"I... I was getting a piece of meat," Blake managed to stammer out. He looked for Deamon and was relieved to see him not too far away.

"Why would you try to get a piece of meat? It didn't belong to you!" Rainee could not understand. "Why did you expect that they would just let you take it?"

"But they let you take it!" Blake pointed out.

"Yes, but I asked, and they agreed. Did you ask? It didn't look like you asked. Even if you did, you didn't get an agreement."

"Ask?" Blake was confused. "I didn't know you asked and got into an agreement. How do you ask?"

Rainee was still walking rapidly away, and Blake was following her.

"Gosh!" Rainee laughed at this situation, "I don't remember the last time I ran away like this. Probably never. You ask by connecting to the animal you want to ask something. If they accept the connection, then they listen to you."

"Then why didn't they listen to you any longer?"

"Because while chasing us away, they didn't want to connect anymore. Why did you want to get more meat? Are you really so hungry? You don't look that hungry to risk your life for a piece of meat."

"I thought we were going to travel for a few days, and you got only one small bit. What good is it? It is hardly enough for two of us to eat once."

"No, that is just for you," Rainee corrected him, "I don't eat meat. I never understood this strange habit that many people have. And why would you take more than for one meal? Didn't you say yourself that for you to eat it has to be fresh? If you carry it around for a day or longer, then it will no longer be that fresh. It will start to stink and will attract many flies, and you will have to throw it away after carrying it. It makes no sense."

Blake tried to argue back, but couldn't find any arguments against what she said. To his even greater distress, he realised that after walking a large round, they must be returning to the same place as he could hear the sound of wolves again, and it brought a lot of fright to him.

“We have to take my bag,” Rainee explained to him. And she was right, as they did leave her bag in the tree where they were hiding. “Besides, if you don’t try to steal from them, they will not come after you. Wolves are not like people; they don’t keep a grudge, nor do they care what we do as long as it doesn’t interfere with them. They already know that we came back, and they are keeping a close eye on us, not knowing if we will try to take their meal again. But they will not come after us for no reason. Why would they? They already have enough food, and they are tired after hunting the doe and chasing after us.”

“I was so scared!” Blake admitted after a while, when the wolves were left far behind, “I ran so fast that I didn’t even know that was possible until I did.” He added, finally laughing for the first time after being chased.

Rainee didn’t say anything but laughed together with him. She knew that Blake couldn’t run that fast by himself without her help, but didn’t say anything, as he would hardly be able to understand it anyway, and he had enough excitement for a day.

“But still, what are you going to eat?” Blake asked after they stopped at the small stream of water to wash the blood from their hands. Rainee’s hands were not that bad, but Blake was in a proper mess. “To be honest, after seeing how this meat looks on a dead animal, I don’t want it that much myself,” he admitted. “But we don’t have anything else.”

Rainee was about to say that she was not going to eat anything as she was not even hungry, but after hearing the second part, she changed her mind.

“I will show you,” she said.

The rest of the day, they spent walking through this seemingly never-ending forest, and Blake was already falling a little bit into despair that they might be walking in circles, but Rainee said they weren’t, and he chose to trust her. On the way, Rainee was picking up some plants, and when they stopped for a rest, she fished out of her bag a small saucepan and made them a tasty stew using the roots, mushrooms and plants she picked. Blake was very happy to accept it, and that piece of meat that Rainee got for him earlier in the day was left untouched and forgotten.

The following day, in the late afternoon, they finally left the forest and not long after that reached a small farm. After seeing two tired but happy children and a dog walking from a side where there wasn’t even any road, the owner of that place wouldn’t let them go any further before they got a proper rest. The next morning, he himself took them to the closest town in his chariot, and after leaving them, he was still waving for a long time, thinking to himself that these children were the most interesting people he had met in years.

The town was small but busy, with lots of travellers buzzing in and out, which promised a good chance to have a ride. No wonder it was busy – a wide and firm bridge over the river offered an easy crossing to the other side, which was close to impossible to cross before. Even the canyon lost its height here and wasn't either so deep or wide.

But before crossing that bridge, Rainee wanted to go to the market and showed Blake into the clothing shop.

"You will have to choose new clothes for yourself," she said after walking in.

"Me?" Blake was surprised. "Why would I need new clothes?"

He looked at himself thinking that, yes, he was a little bit dirty, but not overly too bad.

"Wouldn't new clothes get the same dirty before reaching home? And what would I do with these that I am wearing right now?"

"These will have to go to the bin," Rainee said, "unless you have someone smaller than you who would like to wear them."

"Your sister is right," the store owner said, "you definitely need a new outfit as this set you have outgrown a long time ago. You must like it very much to keep wearing it."

Blake was about to say that Rainee was not his sister, but after hearing the rest of what was said, turned around and ran to the mirror. What he saw surprised him but also made him happy.

"I grew up!" he exclaimed while still looking at himself with disbelief.

He was right. The trousers and jumper that a few days ago were even slightly too big for him, now were a few inches short. Also, just now he realised that the shirt also was really tight over his shoulders.

"I really grew up..." he said again, this time with more disbelief than joy in his voice.

"Yes, you did," Rainee confirmed, coming closer and standing next to him. "That's why you need new clothes. I doubt you will have a suitable set for yourself at home, so it would be good to change here, where all you need is available. Didn't you notice?"

"No," Blake confirmed, "I didn't notice. Did you?"

"It is difficult not to notice," Rainee laughed, looking at him in the mirror.

She was right, it was difficult not to notice bare ankles sticking out of too short trousers. Also, the difference in height between them wasn't that great any longer.

After recovering from the first shock, joy returned to Blake's face and he got into the task of choosing a new outfit with eagerness. He strictly refused any help from the store owner, as she was finding him very cute and was offering sweet and childish clothes. But Blake said no. He said that he was an adult now so he had to dress as an adult, by saying so he brought a lot of laughter from the store owner and Rainee, but no one argued with him any longer and he was left to choose to his own liking.

He got stuck only with the coat. In theory he didn't need a coat now as it was still just the beginning of autumn and it wasn't that cold, but still he chose to have one and got stuck on the colour. So he turned to Rainee for advice, showing her green and blue.

"I would choose black," she said, dismissing both options, "it would complement your eyes," she added.

"My mum says that black makes me look pale," Blake said, not being sure about this advice.

Rainee didn't answer as it wasn't a question so she had nothing to say to it.

"And also there is no black coat," Blake added, looking around.

After hearing that, Rainee walked to the other side of the shop, to the adult section, and brought back a black leather jacket with fur lining.

"You don't need a coat," she said. "It is really not that cold yet and you will have a hard time carrying it back home on such warm days. Even after you bring it home, do you really feel so cold in the winter time that you need a thick coat? Or is it your mum who thinks that you need one?"

Blake didn't answer to it. Rainee was right, it was his mum who insisted on him being wrapped up.

"But this one is too big," he pointed out, looking at the jacket in Rainee's arms.

"Not if you make some adjustments," Rainee said, helping him to put it on, "also, if you will be growing as fast as now, you will outgrow anything smaller before winter ends."

She rolled his sleeves and adjusted a few straps and sure, the jacket didn't look so big anymore. Fur on rolled sleeves matched fur on the collar and one would think that it was made intentionally like this. Blake looked really smart in this jacket, and the black colour truly suited him very nicely. His black, shiny eyes were looking even brighter, leaving the store owner sighing in adoration.

"I am definitely taking this one," Blake said firmly, looking at himself in the mirror, "in fact I am not taking it off."

"I thought you might say it," Rainee laughed, "but it is okay as it will not toast you as much as that other coat would have. I think it is very useful – can be used on cool summer days and also in the winter. Light and relatively warm."

After leaving the store, Rainee wanted to go straight to the other side of the river, but Blake disagreed so they had to stop for a second breakfast, as he said "while there was something edible around" and also get some food supplies for travelling. It made Rainee smile, but she didn't argue and let him be in charge.

Getting a ride proved to be a more difficult task than the children were expecting.

Not because there were not enough passing carriages and chariots, or that people would be unfriendly.

Many did stop and offer a lift, but after realising that Deamon would be coming together, offers were quickly withdrawn. And not because Deamon would misbehave. He just somehow had become... scary.

Why? It was difficult to say why. In the past three days he also had grown considerably and by now lost all that little cuteness of the puppy that he had before. If no one before thought him being cute, then now, looking back everyone would say that he was. People were simply afraid of him in such close proximity.

After many unsuccessful attempts, Blake stopped to have a better look at Deamon.

"What is going on with you? Why are you doing it?" he asked in a stern voice, "what is wrong with you? Can't you look a bit friendlier? You are scaring people."

"No, he is not," Rainee interrupted him even in a more strict voice than Blake was speaking. "It is you who doesn't understand what you are doing."

"What am I doing?" Blake didn't understand.

"You are harming your dog in the very same way as you yourself were harmed."

"How?"

"By telling him that what others want to see in him is more important than who he truly is."

"I don't understand you," Blake said honestly. "He is scaring people. Nobody wants to take us in."

"No, he is not scaring people. How is it him scaring anyone? He hasn't done anything, nor has he misbehaved in any way."

"But everyone is refusing to give us a ride just because they are afraid of Deamon. Isn't that true?"

"Of course it is true," Rainee couldn't deny it. "But how does it have anything to do with Deamon?"

"Because if he weren't with us, we would already be riding long time ago!"

"That is true too. But do you want to leave him behind just to have a ride? If that's what you want, we can do it. I am sure he will find a way home by himself."

"No!" Blake shook his hands in front of him. "I don't want it! I don't want it! Why would I want to upset him like this?"

"Then why don't you mind upsetting him in another way? Why is it him who has to change to make others less afraid when this fear has nothing to do with him? How is it him scaring anyone? I have never seen such a well-mannered dog in my life. If you know it, then why do you insist that he has to change to make others less afraid? It makes no sense. If people are afraid when Deamon does nothing to scare them, then it is they who have to change, not Deamon. How do you expect him to change? Don't you like him the way he is?"

"I like him very much the way he is."

"Are you afraid of him?"

"No, I am not afraid. I think he looks very cool," Blake said again while looking at Deamon with a smile.

"Then why do you want him to change to suit others?"

"I don't know what I was thinking," Blake said openly whilst hugging Deamon's neck in apology. "But still, how are we going to get a ride if Deamon will not change and people are afraid of him?"

"We will not. We will walk."

"But it would be much easier for us to have a ride..."

"For you, maybe. But not for Deamon and not for people who are afraid of him. Why does someone else have to change just to make your life easier? Isn't that what your mum did to you?"

Asked you to change so her life would be easier. Did it work? I will tell you that it didn't," Rainee added, seeing that Blake was clueless about what she was talking about. "She wanted you to stay little so you wouldn't leave her side, now she is looking for doctors to make you grow. She wanted you to behave in a way she thought was good, because she was afraid that if you were different people would not like you, but it didn't work as you still don't have any friends and it is not even possible for you to have friends as people don't know who you are as you are constantly trying to be someone that you are not. It is difficult to be different from what you truly are, that's why you don't like to be with people. She wanted to keep you at her side all the time to make you happy, but the only time you are truly happy is when you are away with Deamon, doing what you want, not what your mum wants. She tried to keep you at her side, keep you for herself, so she wouldn't lose you. But did it work? And no, it didn't work not because you nearly fell and she nearly lost you. She lost you a long time ago when you stopped doing what you want, in other words stopped being yourself. And she doesn't even see or understand it, despite that she is supposed to be the closest person to you, when you sacrificed so much by trying to make her happy... I don't understand this kind of love. I don't see any love in it, just neediness. When someone is praising and approving what they want to see in another, making them think that this is what love is. How could it be love? When you love someone, you give your love to them as they are, not tell them to change, and if they do, then you love them, and if they don't, then you get upset that your expectations were not met... Why would someone even expect something from others? Why do you expect others to change so it would be more convenient for you? Well, I understand why - you have been taught that this is how people who like each other do, and you changed yourself so much to satisfy this need. But still my question remains the same, why do you expect others to change so you could live easier? It is your life, so why do others have to change for it to get better? Do you think it will ever work? Wouldn't it put us in a truly sorry state that for us to live better others would have to change?"

Blake didn't reply to it but kept walking in silence. One would think that he got upset after this harsh talk, but in reality he was just deep in his thoughts. He would just stroke Deamon from time to time, who was always walking next to him.

While he was walking like this, a cart stopped by and the driver offered them a ride.

"No," Blake refused the offer, "my dog is very big and people think he is a bit scary. I don't want you to be afraid of him."

The driver looked at this large dog with red eyes next to the boy and it was obvious that the thought of this dog getting in his cart wasn't very appealing.

"Why don't you kids get in the very back and your dog then can run behind," he suggested after a good thought.

"What if he gets tired?" Blake wasn't convinced by this offer.

"If he gets tired then you can get him in, as long as he doesn't come to the front," the driver said after a short hesitation, "but he is a large and fit dog, there is no reason for him to get tired as my horse is not that fast either."

Blake's mood was uplifted a good deal after hearing that and he looked at Rainee for advice.

"We can try," Rainee suggested by that bringing an even bigger smile to Blake's face .

Deamon proved to be a very good runner and to keep up with the trotting horse didn't bring him any challenge.

Rainee and Blake were sitting at the very end of the cart with their legs hanging down. They didn't talk as both were deep in their thoughts. Nearly an hour passed until Blake finally spoke.

"Thank you for telling this to me," he said, not knowing how to better express himself.

"Thank you for hearing what I said," Rainee replied. "Not many do," she added after a short pause.

"What will you do after we reach my home?"

"I think I will go home too."

"How? You let your horse go?"

"She will find me. It never was a problem. And besides, you already know that to travel you don't need a horse."

"I like walking," Blake said again after a short silence.

"Me too," Rainee agreed.

"Then why are we in this cart?"

"I don't know," Rainee chuckled to this question.

"I thought that after bringing me home you would go travelling again and was going to ask you to take me with you," Blake said.

"Your mum will not agree."

"I know," Blake couldn't argue with it. "But still, I might want to go on my own..."

There was silence again.

"If we both are going home, maybe we could travel together for a bit longer now, while we can?" Blake suggested. "If we both like walking then maybe we could simply walk?"

"I don't mind," Rainee smiled back.

"Then how will we do it?"

"That's very easy," Rainee said, jumping down from the cart and pulling Blake together with her.

The driver felt this little stirring at the back and looked with fright over his shoulder, thinking that this scary dog got tired of running and jumped into his cart, and was surprised to see that it was his companions that left.

"Thank you for the ride," the children shouted to him while waving hands, "but we will walk from there."

The driver stopped his horse anyway as he knew that there were no nearby towns around but by the time he stopped and looked back, the children and their scary dog were gone from the road under the shade of the trees.

It did take them two and a half days of travelling until they reached the village where Blake was living. They didn't manage to get to it on foot, as the last part of the journey they did in a carriage. They were hijacked by Blake's neighbour, who was originally travelling in the opposite

direction, but upon seeing and recognising Blake turned around and would not listen to any refusal, neither about how they want to walk, nor how scary Deamon is. Apparently the whole village was looking for Blake for the past few days and by now, after conducting a search through all the area, with sorrow they pronounced him dead. So after finding him walking on the road, the man would not listen to any excuse and after getting both children and the dog into his carriage, set the horse to the gallop until they had reached Blake's home.

Rainee and Blake were standing side by side in a large pavilion and watching a large gathering of unfriendly people in the far distance.

They had reached Blake's home village only a few hours ago, but the welcome joy had already been disturbed.

When they came back, it was truly heartbreaking to see Blake's mum's reaction. Not only Blake, but everyone around had hugs and kisses, including Rainee. After the first excitement passed, curiosity took over, and with that, Rainee received a less friendly look as recognition had awakened some memories, and it was obvious that in Blake's mum's mind, the culprit in the disappearance of her son was found, and it had to be no one else but Rainee.

"So you met your old friend and went travelling?" she half stated, half asked Blake. "And didn't want to tell me because you were afraid I would not let you go? I guess it is my own fault for not allowing it last time... But still, it is not good to behave like this. You made me so worried I nearly died from sorrow. We all got worried. But never mind, what is in the past is in the past, just never do it again. Not in the way you did now. But come inside, you both must be really tired. Your name is Ren, isn't it? I am sure I remember it correctly. You haven't changed that much through the years. We will have to make a big party this evening for everyone in the village, but let's take a little rest and talk before. But you have grown up in these few days!" she spoke to Blake again, "And a good deal!"

Rainee didn't argue and walked inside, thinking to herself how often people get things completely wrong, but still they firmly believe that they got it right without even bothering to give a second thought about it. And the difference between how people feel and how they act struck her once more. She knew that Blake's mum didn't want her to come in, if anything, she wanted Rainee to leave and never come back as she strongly believed her to be a trouble maker. But instead of saying what she felt, Blake's mum opened the door and showed Rainee in. As usual under such circumstances, Rainee didn't know how to take it – to marvel over the strength or over the stubbornness and blindness of people. But once again, she thought to herself that she wouldn't ever like to behave like this and she would definitely not invite into her house anyone she didn't like, no matter if they had done good or bad.

But Blake's reaction was a very pleasant surprise. When his mum spoke, at first he was ready to argue, but then changed his mind and allowed his mum to speak as much as she wanted. That was way more mature than Rainee could have expected of him. In the state his mum was in now, people don't really hear what they are told, so to confront would be equal to arguing, which would probably lead to pointless accusations. His mum didn't ask any questions, so she didn't want yet to hear anything that would confront what she believed. And there was no one else around who could be misled by these inaccurate statements. So there was no need or reason to interrupt her as it would just bring further agitation. For Rainee, it was easy to do as she understood all the reasons. However, Blake on the other hand didn't know anything, but still he managed to compose himself and allowed his mum to talk to her heart's content, not paying much attention to the inaccuracy of her words, by it allowing her to ease her stress while talking.

By now Rainee knew how difficult it is to do for people, as most didn't understand that you could stay in your own truth unaffected by the misunderstanding of others. Even if that misunderstanding is aimed directly at you. For that, she was truly impressed with the inner shift that had taken place inside Blake in the past few days. He really had grown and not just in size. So the

lock that kept him frozen had been broken. It would be interesting to see where these new, open spaces would take him, whether it would be back to the prison or into the open waters. Blake's mum, on the other hand, was much affected by time and didn't look anything like the young and pretty woman she had met all these years ago. It couldn't be different, as the way she chose to live her life would not break her from regular standards, so there was no surprise to see her like this.

Once inside, excitement and stress slowly passed, and Blake's mum became willing to hear the other side, not only to be heard. Just then Blake told her what happened. It was interesting to listen to what he said, as he was mainly presenting events from Rainee's point of view, but also it was nothing even close to how Rainee saw it.

He told how he and Deamon slipped down the cliff and how Rainee somehow heard him and how she rushed to his aid. That when her horse didn't dare to come any closer, she ran and jumped into the canyon without a second thought and how her bird came and caught her in the middle of the air and then went after Deamon. And how Rainee, seeing that he was falling, left the safety of the bird's back just in time to save him from falling. And how he was scared to let go of the tree, and how Rainee patiently waited until he became brave enough, and how they landed on the back of the bird, and then how Rainee showed him how wonderful the world is and he saw it. And he flew, flew, flew. He flew like the wind, no, actually faster than the wind. While speaking about it, he couldn't sit and ran around the room with his hands wide spread until he finally fell down on the floor, reliving that moment with the widest smile on his face. Then he told how Rainee offered to take him back home and as her horse didn't want to carry Blake, she walked together with him. And how she fed him, and how she saved him from wolves, and how she taught him many things on the way back. He said that he probably grew up because he learned so much that all this knowledge didn't fit anymore in a small child and he had to grow up to get it all in. He told how people got afraid of Deamon as he had grown too and didn't want to give them a ride and how he realised that he didn't even want that ride as he really liked travelling and because Rainee was not travelling anymore but going back home, they chose to spend the rest of their trip walking and enjoying themselves.

So many things that he said weren't the truth, but Rainee didn't oppose it as it wasn't a lie either. Simply, he and she had different knowledge and saw what happened differently. If he knew as much as Rainee, he would see events in a different shade too, but he didn't, and just because of that, his understanding wasn't any lesser than hers. Besides, it was very interesting to listen to him.

In the middle of Blake's talk, Rainee started to get the feeling that she should go now. Like some other place was calling her, like she needed to be somewhere else. By now she already knew that this feeling led to something new and interesting, or somewhere where her help would be needed, but this time she chased it away as, first, she wanted to hear Blake's side of the story, and second, Blake's mum was having a firmer and firmer grip on her. And it was a real, physical grip, as while listening she moved closer to Rainee, first gave her a hug and now was sitting and firmly holding Rainee's arm with both hands, unconsciously pressing it harder and harder. By now all unfriendliness was gone and replaced with gratitude and awe. Rainee didn't know how to leave now, while being held like this, so she stayed.

Such an inner shift in Blake's mum was strange and alien to Rainee. Not unknown, as by now she had witnessed it countless times in many other people, but still it never stopped her from marvelling at it, nor could she understand it. Why would people value each other just by what they

think another did? It was so strange and so unstable. Why does the attitude towards her have to be only about her actions? As if people wouldn't even see a person behind these actions... Maybe they really don't see it? This thought was returning to Rainee's head more often lately than ever before, but she relentlessly chased it away. Surely it cannot be the truth! There has to be a different explanation for this reaction. Otherwise it would mean that people are valuing each other just by what they know about them. And that usually has nothing to do with another person at all. Like now. First Rainee was disliked for something she never did, now she is liked for something that doesn't represent the truth either. What if Blake told his mum that many of these teachings he received were about how to recognise the abuse he is receiving from his mum? Would his mum dislike Rainee again? And what if someone would come and enlighten her that the major shift this little trip had on Blake has little to do with what he is telling right now, and it will be irreversible, as it was plain open and obvious now, despite not being known either to Blake or to his mum. The prisoner broke free. And no matter what direction he will choose from now on, it is highly unlikely he will ever return back to the prison. Even if he would choose to do so, it would be on completely different terms as way too many invisible strings had been broken. It was funny to compare a mother's love to a prison, but Rainee couldn't think of a better match, as that's how it felt and that's how it was. If Blake's mum realised how much she had lost in these few days, it would horrify her. Would she dislike Rainee for that? Or maybe even hate her? And if she would, then Rainee wouldn't even be able to say that she hasn't done anything. On the contrary, it happened exactly because of Rainee. And it didn't fall into the could or should category as it had already happened, no matter that it is not yet known to others. It couldn't be helped – stolen life doesn't benefit the one who stole it, just cripples the one it was stolen from. And no matter how it is done, by evil intentions or by love. So the sooner the life is returned to its rightful owner, the less both sides will suffer. That much Rainee already knew.

While all these thoughts were going through Rainee's head, that urging feeling inside was getting stronger, but she chose not to listen to it. She didn't ignore it completely and at the same time while listening to Blake she was also paying a lot of her attention to outside, but there was nothing unusual happening, at least nothing that would require her attention.

"Did you really jump into the canyon?" Blake's mum asked, looking at Rainee after Blake finished his story.

"No," Rainee smiled at her, "I jumped on a bird. There would be no point for me to jump into the canyon as I would just fall down. But I understand why Blake said I did, as it is the way he sees it. From the side, it might look like I jumped into a canyon, but not for me as I could see the bigger picture and knew that the bird would be under me when I needed it."

"But how could you know it? How did that bird even come to your aid?"

"Help will always come when you ask for it," Rainee answered without a shade of doubt or room for dispute.

"How can you be so sure?" Blake's mum could not understand.

"Because that's how it is, that's how The One created the world and it cannot be any other way."

“Help doesn’t always come to us...” the woman didn’t want to argue with this strange girl who, in her eyes, performed a miracle while saving her son, but couldn’t agree with this statement wholeheartedly.

“Because most people are ignoring the help offered and expect something that they want to receive instead. It is not how it works.”

And that was where they got interrupted. Rainee jumped to her feet and left faster than the other two could react. Blake ran after her and his mum followed behind.

That’s how they ended up at this pavilion on the very outskirts of this village.

Everyone else was running in the opposite direction in fear and terror and Rainee came just in time to slash the arrows following the slowest villagers. By the time Blake and his mum reached the pavilion, all they could see was just Rainee with a sword in her hand and a cloud of black dust surrounding her. Also, there were a dozen of strange-looking people dashing away at full speed.

“Mist creatures...” Blake’s mum whispered upon seeing them and slumped into the chair.

After the initial shock passed, she jumped back to her feet, grabbed Blake by the hand and waved to Rainee to follow.

“Come!” she said in an urging voice, “we have to leave now.”

Seeing that Rainee didn’t listen, she took her by the hand too, but to her own surprise found out that the girl was immovable, to pull a stone statue would be much easier than her.

Rainee wasn’t going to obey. She ignored her inner voice for way too long today and she was not going to repeat this mistake again, and this voice was strong and firm – this is the place where she should be, where she wants to be. It is difficult to explain this “voice” to others as many understand it as some sort of command, which it is not. It simply indicates where you would like to be if all details that are unknown to you were known. If all that you don’t know about the situation suddenly became clear and known and you could make a decision based on facts, you would choose to go to the place where that inner voice was calling you while the reasons why you would choose to be here are unknown to you. Some might call it intuition, just much stronger and much more accurate.

Rainee wasn’t going to ignore this voice any longer, definitely not in favour of somebody’s fears.

“You go,” she said, “I will stay and see how things will escalate. It would be best if you could find some hiding place and stay there. To leave the village might be even more unsafe now than to stay in it. But if you choose to leave, don’t stay either on the path or close to it and don’t retreat in groups. It would just draw attention to you.”

Blake’s mum was about to say something but then changed her mind and chose not to argue anymore with this strange girl whose coming had brought such a turmoil into their peaceful life again. So she turned around ready to leave when she felt Blake’s hand slipping from her hold.

“Come,” she said firmly, stopping in her tracks again, “we have to leave now!”

But Blake was already standing next to Rainee and didn’t show any signs of obedience. On the contrary, he just waved his hands in front of him.

“No, I am not going. I will stay with Ren, but you go. We will find you later after all this is finished.”

Poor woman had enough and couldn't cope with it anymore. She wasn't going to argue with these children and just walked closer to take Blake in her arms and carry him away, but didn't succeed as Blake vigorously hid himself behind Rainee and no matter how much his mum tried to catch him she could not succeed.

“Come! We don't have time to play,” she urged him and seeing that her efforts were in vain turned towards Rainee for help. “Could you help me to catch him?!” she half pleaded, half commanded.

“He doesn't want to go,” Rainee said in a calm voice. She didn't help Blake to hide but wasn't going to help in catching him either.

She wasn't even sure that to run or to hide would be much safer than to stay here. Right now she could sense fear and terror spreading from a different direction than this attack just came. Rainee wasn't sure who was spreading this terror and if it was related to this attack, but she wasn't going to investigate. Right now she knew that the best place for her to be is here, so she will stay. And she was not in a condition to advise others as she simply didn't know what is best for them, so everyone should act as they feel is best for them. If Blake wants to stay, then she is not going either to encourage him or oppose his decision.

“But you should go,” she said, seeing that Blake's mum was left speechless after her reply she added. “You don't want to stay, so there is no reason for you to be here. Blake is right, we will find you after all is finished.”

“I really don't understand you!” Blake's mum exploded. She really could not. How could someone say that she should go into hiding and leave her son behind. Is this girl even a human to say such a thing? She must be completely devoid of any love, sympathy and understanding! “What does it have to do with what he wants? He is too little to understand the danger we are in!”

“Age doesn't make this understanding any broader,” Rainee thought to herself but didn't say it aloud. In her eyes, no one understood the severity of the situation. People from the mist don't attack settlements at random. At least she had never heard about it. And when an attack is launched, it doesn't come in the shape of a few people. If the King's Army will not make it in time, it is highly unlikely running or hiding will save anyone.

As a confirmation of her words, screams and shouts of sorrow came from the village, startling Blake's mum even more. In no time, news was brought that a few people had just reached the village fleeing sudden attacks on a nearby town and more were coming in hopes to escape in this direction, and news that an attack had just come from this direction too was devastating, and that was what had raised screams and shouts. If Rainee had not interfered, the fleeing people would have been met by the very same foe that they were running from.

Hearing that there is a warrior who had stopped the attack, a hope was born in people's hearts and they started to pile into the pavilion. Realisation that this “warrior” was a small skinny teenager girl killed this hope in no time. Panic had taken over and people started to scatter, not knowing what actions to take and what direction to go.

During all this pandemonium, understanding of the situation hit both Blake and his mum. Both got scared to the core, but still Blake wanted to stay and his mum wanted to leave, but

eventually both stayed as despite all his mum's pleas and efforts she wasn't able either to convince him to go or catch him to take him away. So eventually she just slumped down in a chair in the farthest corner of the pavilion, prepared for the worst while Blake stayed next to Rainee prepared for the best.

Rainee didn't give any advice as even if she did, no one would listen to her anyway. All this turmoil and indecisiveness were alien to her. Not because she was not afraid or because she knew the outcome of events that so suddenly engulfed this place and everyone in it.

It's just these mismatches between actions people wanted to take and were taking struck her once more. Why people would behave like this she could not understand.

If you want to run, then you run, don't leave any doubt in between you and the action your heart dictates you to take. Run the best you can. Not fuelled by fear, but because that is the best course of action you see. What is there to be ashamed of? If you are stopped by shame from taking the action you know is best to take, then you will neither do it well nor will you be useful anywhere else. If you run without a shame, from your heart, most likely you will succeed as full effort is never undervalued or unappreciated in this world, no matter what direction it is taken. If your heart dictates you to hide, then hide and be the best at it. And you will be the best at it if you do it from the heart. And you will succeed. If your heart dictates you to help others – then help others.

But if your heart dictates you to hide but instead you try to help others, then you are going nowhere and will benefit no one and most likely someone will have to come and save you and people you try to help or all of you will perish. If instead you do what you truly want to do, then most likely you would not need saving and those who save would have one less saving on their hands. Or if you are so desperate to help others while all your heart wants is to take a different action, then at least honour it and help them in the same way as your heart dictates – if you want to hide, then hide others with you. It will never be to the same success as fully following your heart but at least you don't dishonour it completely, as by doing so you will just bring more trouble to yourself and to those around you. Why people would honour one action above another Rainee could not understand. What is the point of pretending?

Same as with Blake's mum. With all her heart she wanted to go and hide somewhere, where no one could find her until safety returns. And she was free to do so and she would probably succeed. But she stayed here just because Blake didn't want to go with her... Why?... Rainee already knew the answer she would be given if she asked aloud. Because of love. Because of care for another. But what love and what care was it? If you love, you want to stay with those you love, not to keep them for yourself... If you love, you empower those you love, not subdue them to your own will... If you care, you make sure that the subject of your care receives what they want, why instead push on them what you want and on top of this abuse to tell them that it is because it is best for them... How can it be best for them if they don't want it? Isn't it just simply saying that what you want for them is best and what they truly want is not important or even brings pain to those who "suffer" from these wishes when in reality all that they do is just pursue their own likings without any consideration for the other side.

Blake wanted to stay, his mum wanted to leave. But she stayed because he didn't leave with her and now, if something happens to her while here, Blake would take it directly as his fault and would have a very hard time getting over that self-blame, when in reality there would be not a smidgen of his fault in it, as he repeatedly asked his mum to go promising to find her after. He was

already blamed so many times for being stubborn when in reality the one who was stubborn and unreasonable was his mum.

Rainee didn't know the reasons why Blake wanted to stay – she could only guess but it was obvious that this decision was somehow related to her. There was only one way to find out and she chose to use this way.

“Why do you want to stay?” she asked in a silent voice.

“Because you are my friend and you are staying. So I will stay too,” Blake said firmly. “If I go to hide, I will not know what happens to you. Besides, you said that help will always come to those who ask.

“Yes, I did,” Rainee smiled fondly at him.

“Even in such situations?”

“Even in such situations.”

“Then all will be good,” Blake said, full of trust and reassurance.

“It cannot be any other way,” Rainee smiled at him again, thinking to herself that the “good” he thinks and she thinks might be very different.

By saying “good” Blake probably was hoping that all would return to what it was before. Rainee didn't think that way, as events are brought to bring change. But she strongly believed that where this change will take them will be a good place. In fact a better place than it was up until now. Maybe very different, but still no less “good” no matter where they will end up.

That's how they stood here and watched this gathering in the distance. And it didn't promise anything good.

“Wouldn't it be a good time to ask for help?” Blake asked.

“Yes it would be, and it is,” Rainee gave him a short glance supported with a warm smile.

She returned her look back to the distance. There were more than a hundred people in the crowd now and they didn't look either friendly or like travellers. They were not progressing towards the village anymore but stood quietly and waited for something or someone. Rainee would like it way more if they would simply attack. That would be more or less random and defence from such an attack would be much easier. But it wasn't the case and all she could do was just to watch and observe.

Soon more people arrived, among them there were a few riders. One in the middle looked particularly disturbing as even from here you could see that he had more than two arms. Everyone in that crowd parted for the riders to give them way and seemingly waited for commands.

The four-armed rider was looking intensely towards this pavilion and Rainee could feel his gaze upon her going right through as if checking her not only from outside, but from inside too.

“Should we call for help now?” Blake asked again with trepidation.

“I already did,” Rainee answered.

“When are they coming?” Blake eagerly asked. “Can they be quick not to arrive late?”

“Who?”

“The helpers.”

She looked back at him first with confusion but soon confusion on her face changed back to a smile.

“I don’t know if someone will come. It is not a message to someone. I don’t have the means or ability to summon someone directly, also I don’t have the authority to tell someone to come when I want and even if I did, these people would have to be very close to come in time – even the King’s Army cannot appear instantly on call.

“But you said you asked for help!!” Blake’s voice sounded all panicky now.

“Yes I did. I assessed the situation and after realising that there were not many chances that these people would leave without trying to harm us and there also were not many possible outcomes where we would be able to withstand an attack if one came, and look, it is already coming, so I asked for help.”

“But that means you just wished someone would come and help us! You didn’t ask directly anyone. What if no one will come?!”

“Help always comes when you need it and ask for it. Never forget it and never doubt it. Only doubt can stop you from asking loud enough.”

“But what if no one comes?!”

“Help doesn’t always come in a person’s shape. If you want to see a human helping you, then you should ask for it in the first place. But remember I already told you, the more specific and picky you are, the more complicated it is for the world to fulfil your request. Help can come as a being or as an event, or as an outburst of strength, or as a lucky accident, or even as a gust of wind that brings sand into your opponent’s eyes. (Or yours, if that is the help that you need),” the last bit wasn’t told aloud, it just flickered in her mind.

“But look how many of them are coming! What can wind or luck do? And what if there will be no wind, and luck would be on their side? What if no one else will come either?!!” Blake didn’t look that confident anymore and tears started to roll down his cheeks. He ducked to the ground to hug his dog for support and comfort. “I don’t want to die, I don’t want Deamon to die, I don’t want my mum to die.... And you said yourself that you don’t see any options to defeat all of them by yourself. What if you need a person’s help and no one will come?!”

“Then there is no one in this world more suitable for the situation than people who are already here... If no help will come, then there is no one capable or strong enough to provide you with the help you need...” She didn’t look back at Blake anymore but was looking directly at the 15-20 people approaching. First they were walking quickly towards them, then they started to run in a charge.

“They have come! Help has come!!” a voice from behind made her turn around.

A handful of strong, young people, armed with swords, approached from the village. All with eyes of steel and determination on their faces. Killing intent was rising from them together with some swear words: “damn demons”, “send these killers to hell” and similar...

Very determined, very angry and furious. One could see that they had enough of the mist people. One as sensitive as Rainee was, could feel the pain also... In fact, lots of pain, the pain of loss and despair. And thirst for revenge. Following these people, men from the village also came as

if inspired by these young men, and also driven by fear of losing their homes and the lives of people they loved.

Blake looked overjoyed. He finally relaxed a bit and rose back to his feet.

“It worked! They have come! The help really came!”

“This isn’t help...” Rainee said quietly more to herself than to anyone else. “This is a disaster...”

But there was no time left to explain herself. Mist people were just a few steps away and she swung her sword.

“You, little wretched thing! You have a truly outrageous attitude! What have we done to get such stinky treatment?!” A young buff man all covered in blood was exploding with anger while leaning over a young girl not even half of his size. The girl didn’t argue with him but didn’t explain herself either. She just sheathed her sword and was listening to the accusations with a calm look on her face.

“Let her be,” another man tried to calm down his friend. “It is plainly open that she has no shame. Picking like this among those who are fighting on the same side. So young and already so wicked. Let’s go! A new attack will come at any time and I don’t want to spend the time left in the company of this wretched child.”

He might be trying to calm down his friend but it didn’t work as he himself was trembling from rage no lesser than his friend. However, no matter how harsh the words were, they didn’t find any response from the girl who was accused. Seeing that all words were just sliding by, both men walked off to join the rest of their companions. There were not that many left as from all the group that joined the fight hardly a few minutes ago, only a few were still alive and able to stand.

The scene around was hideous, the place, so calm and peaceful not so long ago, now resembled a horror story. The pavilion was wrecked, covered in blood, black dust and dead bodies. Those who were injured were feeling even worse with every minute passing, raising the suspicion that on top of the injuries there must be some sort of poison that had entered their bodies and was destroying them now from within.

“Why did you do it?” Blake asked quietly. During the fight he was hiding under the table while clutching to his dog. He would have stayed there despite the fact that the attack had stopped for now, however the treatment Rainee received was so harsh that he could not leave her alone. As soon as those men walked away, he left his hideout and took Rainee by hand in hopes of providing her some support. But he too could not understand her actions.

“Did what?” Rainee asked, pressing his hand harder in encouragement.

“Why didn’t you help them?”

What he said was true. When the attack started, it became plainly open that Rainee’s skills in fighting were way more superior to anyone else’s on the defending side. Her speed was incredible and every attacker cut by her sword would turn into black dust, leaving neither a dead body nor blood behind. She was skilfully protecting every villager that came to defend and hardly any of them were injured. Also, if given a chance, she would cut attackers before the villagers’ swords would touch them, so hardly any of them shed any blood. However, she did not protect anyone from the group who came to help, nor did she stop them from killing the foe.

“I did help them,” Rainee replied to Blake’s question, “I just didn’t want to join them.”

“I do not understand you,” Blake said truthfully. “They did come to help us...”

“They didn’t come to help us. They came to kill people from the mist. And they wanted to do it at any cost, even if it would claim their own lives. They came for revenge, they came in search of those who they hold responsible for their pain and loss. I helped them by not interfering with their goals and allowing them to do what they wanted to do. But I could not join them. I don’t want to be filled with so much rage, anguish and pain. So there is not much else I could do.

“But you helped people from our village,” Blake pointed out.

“They didn’t want to kill or be killed, they are just afraid. One day you too will see that different people in the same crowd, taking the same actions, have different wishes and goals, and to respect these wishes you have to treat everyone differently. Even if they don’t understand it themselves.”

“But why don’t they understand it themselves?” Blake could not understand. It was plainly obvious that people who had come to their aid thought about themselves differently.

“Who knows,” Rainee shrugged her shoulders. “The world is a mysterious place and what is clear to one another might not understand, or even not hear or see.”

By now these few mist people who managed to retreat had joined the rest of their group and everyone was on standby. Unfortunately, that group didn’t get much smaller despite the heavy defeat they suffered, as more numbers were joining. Their attack was launched in three waves, each greater in numbers than the previous one, but still, they didn’t manage to get through and the defence held the ground.

“Will they leave now?” Blake asked with hope. “Have they seen that we are strong enough to defend and will go away?”

Rainee just squeezed his hand harder again before letting it go.

“You had better go and stay behind for now,” she said again with a soft smile.

Blake didn’t have to be told why, as he was already seeing that the hopes he had were shattered to pieces. A new attack was coming, this time in a completely different manner. No reckless charging. Instead, it was led by three riders at the very front with others following in a triangle. Riders were steadily picking up speed, bringing everyone who followed on foot in a fast charge again, just this time very oriented, very precise.

Heavily armoured large horses were getting closer and didn’t show any intention to stop, but were about to charge straight into the pavilion, threatening to trample everyone on their way, when suddenly, at the very last moment, they turned to the side and sped away.

Surprise on the riders’ faces disclosed that this move was neither intended nor expected, however the reaction of the leader was much faster than this surprise manoeuvre and while his comrades were trying to retain control of their horses and were carried away, he lightly jumped off the dashing away horse, without even a tumble, with only the words “wretched witch”.

Without any hesitation, he walked towards the pavilion with his eyes locked on Rainee, pulling out two swords from the sides and a massive axe from behind his back. At the size of two men and with a double amount of arms, he looked so intimidating that shivers went through the backs of the defenders and everyone involuntarily stepped back. Rainee stayed where she was, just stretched her arm to the side and a shiny sword collected itself into her hand out of nowhere. The difference in size and armoury between her and the approaching man was so great that she resembled more a little bird than an opponent. It didn’t fool the attacker. He had already observed her skills and didn’t underestimate them, but it didn’t make him either worried or cautious either. On the contrary, he looked like someone who had come to claim victory from a worthy opponent. But just worthy, not equal. All his posture was displaying superiority and confidence without even a shred of doubt about who would leave victorious. When he reached the railing surrounding the pavilion, he leaped over it without any effort as if this enormous body were as weightless as a feather.

That very same moment, a sharp cry sounded in the sky, drawing everyone's attention and with a flash of light, a silver sword fell down, spinning and curving in its fall, as if drawn into the pavilion by some invisible force, and, nearly cutting the leader of the attackers on its way, landed into Rainee's hand. The four-armed creature jumped to the side just in time to miss it.

This sight had taken everyone by surprise but didn't stop the four-armed warrior who launched himself on Rainee with full force. Reinforcement of a new sword was a big help to Rainee. Now, even when at a big disadvantage, she was able to stop the attack from both swords and had to avoid only the axe and the free hand of the attacker that tried to grab her by the throat at any opportunity given.

Rainee didn't have a single chance to attack, all she could do was to defend herself and avoid never-ending blows that were falling non-stop and didn't give her a single moment of respite. But even in such a dire situation, time after time she was managing to save those who were in an even worse position. By now mist people were swarming into the pavilion and Rainee's silver sword, that she received so timely in such a miraculous way, would obediently leave her hand just in time to aid those whose defences were broken, before returning back just in time to shield Rainee herself from blows that she was receiving.

It horrified Blake who understood that every time she would let go of that sword Rainee was putting herself in such a disadvantage that if she kept doing so, this fight would not last too long and it would not be Rainee who would come out of it victorious. Frozen in fear, he didn't even notice one of the mist people coming directly for him. But it didn't slip unnoticed by another pair of eyes. A loud growl sounded before this attack was met by the large white fangs of a massive black animal. Deamon, looking more like a bear than a dog, had hurled himself on the attacker, turning him into a cloud of black dust in no time. Until the understanding of what just happened reached Blake's mind, another attacker was sent to dust and then another and one more. It was plainly open that there was no reaching this little boy without going first through that vicious animal who was so swift and fast that no attacks would reach him, so mist people left the boy alone, as anyway he was not presenting any threat to them.

Once more Rainee's sword left her hand to stop a fatal blow to a villager, once more it returned back to her just in time to block a fatal blow that was landing on her. Seeing that, something cracked in Blake and he was about to shout "get him" to Deamon, pointing at one of the intruders, fearing that if nothing changed then Rainee would try to help again. But no shout was needed. Deamon obeyed faster than any words could leave Blake's mouth. At the size of a grown-up man, Deamon's jaws were so large that they could easily bite the head off a person, and he was doing just that without a single consideration. The sight would have been truly horrifying, but he didn't leave headless bodies or a trail of blood behind. Every attacker he would sink his teeth into was turning into black dust just the same as from Rainee's sword. Nevertheless, panic was set and this time on the attacking side.

Seeing this opportunity, Blake diverted Deamon towards the four-armed warrior in hopes of giving a helping hand to Rainee. Deamon obeyed instantly and was already just a few strides away, when with the corner of his eye, Blake saw one of the attackers going for his mum, who didn't participate in this fight and was slumped unconscious in a chair. When he noticed it, the attacker was already one step away and there was no one around to block this attack. All in horror, he mentally screamed to Deamon to save his mum, forgetting about anything else around, but it was in vain as no matter how fast Deamon was, he was too far away and also already speeding in a different direction. Before this realisation even reached Blake's mind, a silver flash flickered in front of his eyes and Rainee's sword nailed the attacker. Instead of a fatal blow, a cluster of black sandy dust was falling over the senseless woman's body now.

And then all had stopped.

Not because mist people had halted. Simply, there was no one to attack anymore and only clouds of black dust were surrounding everyone and falling to the ground as far as the eye could see.

People were standing bewildered, looking aimlessly around, not being able either to think clearly or to take in what had just happened. A loud flapping noise came from the front of the pavilion. Those who were fast enough to look saw a large silver bird suddenly launching from the ground, rapidly rising into the sky until it disappeared from sight, leaving only a cloud of disturbed black dust drifting in the air.

A couple of minutes had passed, black dust had settled to the ground, giving this place a sight of wasteland or a black desert. The wrecked roof and rails of the pavilion, and dead bodies with pools of blood, topped up this sight, filling every heart with heaviness that prevented them from bursting with joy and happiness over such an unexpected victory.

Slowly, people started to look for those who were injured, but surprisingly there were no injured or wounded. There were either dead bodies or healthy people who were touching themselves in surprise, fully confident that they were covered in bruises or cuts not so long ago.

Rainee was nowhere in sight. Out of all people, only she had disappeared together with the attackers.

And then the black dust surrounding them was disturbed again, risen and swept away by multiple gusts of wind from the wings of landing dragons. The King's Army had come.

After all was finished, all the surroundings were checked and cleared, the head officer of the King's Army returned to the pavilion to enquire about what had happened before they had come. The villagers were very eager to tell the story. They interrupted each other, some trying to be accurate to the story, others exaggerating to make it more horrifying. This was unnecessary, as it already was the most horrible thing they had seen and experienced so far in the years they had lived.

More officers arrived at the pavilion. They looked around the mess and damage that was done during the attack. The medical team had already finished looking for living among the casualties and was putting dead local people on one side and dead intruders on the other.

There was no need for any medical help for those who stayed alive. At least not the kind of help that front-line medics could provide. An unconscious woman was in a chair next to the wall, and the nurse turned to her to see how she could be helped. In the middle of broken furniture and pieces of a half-collapsed roof stood a young boy, apparently unharmed physically, but he must be in deep shock, as his spaced-out gaze was staring at nothing, or rather something that only he could see. A massive black dog was sitting next to him. When the nurse tried to get the boy's attention, he abruptly pushed her away. As he wasn't injured, the nurse just stroked his head and let him be. No one else approached the boy. Maybe because there was nothing they could do to help him, or maybe because they were a bit afraid of that big animal sitting next to the boy and closely observing everyone who would come any closer.

"There was a gust of wind, and in a moment, everything around had turned into black dust, including the girl." One of the villagers was finishing a report about what had happened. "Then a big bird appeared out of nowhere on the floor. He flapped his wings, scattering all the dust around, and flew away. Straight after that, you guys came. That's all, honest god's truth. All the rest you have seen yourselves."

"No!" There was a sharp objection to this.

Everyone turned around to look at who was talking. The boy in the middle of the room seemed to have finally come out of his stagnation and was staring angrily at them.

"No?" The villager asked in a confused voice. "What do you mean by 'no'?"

"No, what you said is not god's honest truth!!" The boy shouted in a deep voice. "Why would you say that at all? Why would you say that she turned into dust?!! How dare you say that she got dusted the same as these evil creatures?!!!"

Now, the boy was standing facing them with his fists clenched tightly to the sides, leaning in the direction of the others. All his body was representing living anger, eyebrows knitted, body shaking. But his voice, slightly raised, was still very calm, very deep and didn't sound like a boy's voice. That was even scarier than if he had been shouting and kicking. He even looked a bit taller than before. The black dog, which until now was sitting at his side, had also risen to his feet, staring at everyone unfriendly. The picture of these two standing now could have been described as a "rising danger", and no one dared to say anything more.

Suddenly, the woman's voice came from aside:

"Blake. What are you saying, and who made you so angry?" It was his mother asking. She regained consciousness just about now and was surprised to see her usually timid son standing in the middle of the room, all by himself, in such an angry and aggressive posture.

"I am sorry, mum, but I will not allow anyone to blemish her name," he replied slowly. "Not after all that she has done for me, what she has done for us." He turned back to the villagers, "How dare you say that she has turned into dust! Isn't it implying that she was one of them? How dare you even have a trace of thought about it, after all she has done for us?!"

"I didn't blemish her, and I didn't say she was one of them, and obviously she wasn't, but that doesn't change the fact that she disappeared together with others." Poor Blake's neighbour was doing his best to justify himself, turning around for help to others, but suddenly, there was no one who wanted to back him up or speak in his place. No one wanted to say anything bad about the girl, but there also wasn't anything else to say.

The tension in the pavilion was at its peak, and people were slowly moving back to shield themselves behind the officers. The picture was peculiar, there was one angry boy, and a bunch of armed adults were backing off in fear. But who would blame them, when remembering how that black furry devil, standing at the boy's side just a few minutes ago, was biting the heads off anyone who dared to approach this boy.

"Blake, please calm down. You make everyone nervous." His mother pleaded apprehensively.

"But they are telling lies!!!" Blake's voice trembled, and he finally broke into tears and fell down to his knees on the floor. "Why would they even say that?!... Why would they?..." All aggression was gone, and he was sobbing now from pain that no one else could understand.

One of the officers couldn't watch it anymore and came forward. Without paying any attention to the dog, he picked up the crying boy from the floor and, while holding him in a tender embrace, walked across the room where he put Blake on the table and sat himself down next to him. Deamon quietly followed them and quietly lay down.

"Would you like to tell your own version of the story?" The officer asked. "Did you see it differently?"

Of course, I saw it differently. Blake replied, "Why would anyone even say that this is what happened?"

"Because the world is a mysterious place, and what is obvious to one, another might not understand or, in some cases, not even hear or see."

After this reply, Blake's eyes widened as he remembered someone else, not so long ago, saying to him something very similar. Seeing his reaction, the officer asked:

"I see it is not the first time you have heard this phrase. Did she tell you that before?"

Blake nodded his head.

"Then, please, can you tell me what happened to that girl?"

"King took her."

All around became quiet. A simple answer to a simple question... But the simplicity of the words and the weight of those same words didn't match that much.

"How do you know it was King?" The officer kept questioning.

"It was obvious."

"Have you seen King before?"

“No, never.”

“Then how do you know it was King? Did anything happen to make you think this way?”

“No, nothing happened to make me think that way; it was just obvious. When you look at the King, you know it is the King. I didn’t understand it before, but I understand it now. But I cannot explain it.”

The officers exchanged looks with each other. People started to murmur between themselves in disapproval, but were silenced with a hand gesture from the head officer.

“Would you like to tell us in detail how it happened?” The questioning man turned back to the child. His face didn’t show any disapproval, and his eyes were full of encouragement and interest.

“Yes, I can.” Blake said, happy that someone wanted to hear what really happened. “After Raineer threw her sword to save my mum, she got stabbed in the back by a four-armed monster sword...” He choked on his own tears, remembering that terrifying moment. “Then he lifted that sword with Raineer and swung his axe towards her head with the other hand. But he was very, very slow at doing it, and at that moment King came riding his dragon. He swung his sword once, and every single monster turned into dust at once. He caught Raineer in the middle of the air and turned around to leave. Then he looked at me, straight into my eyes, and flew away. Then you all came. I don’t know if she is still alive, if she survived that stabbing, but she didn’t turn into dust... She is not made of dust... There was so much blood after she got stabbed... I...” but he could not finish as the tears again were rolling down his face and throat, making him stop in the middle of a sentence.

The officer embraced him over his shoulders and pressed him down to his chest, holding him close until Blake could speak again.

“She asked for help... I asked for help... But no one came, just some troublemakers who could not help even themselves... She said if you ask for help, then help will always come. But no one came...”

“The** King came,” the officer replied quietly.

“I am not sure he came in time... But I was here, I could save her... I should have saved her... I... I just didn’t think, didn’t realise that it was me who was that help she was asking for, that help that we were asking for... I just thought I was the one who was to be saved... And instead of seeing what I could do, I was hiding all this time...”

“It is not your fault.” The officer replied. Hearing that, Blake pushed himself free of his hug.

“But how is it not my fault? I was here! I didn’t need to come, I was already here. I could just do something... How is it not my fault?” After a moment of silence, he continued, “No one else but King has come, and even King himself might be late... Does it mean that there is no one else on earth to save her when she is in need but King? Not a single soul?”

“That is not how it works,” the officer replied, but his voice wasn’t overly confident.

The head officer approached them.

“There is no such thing as King coming too late. King either comes on time, or he doesn’t come,” he said in an indisputable voice. “From what you say, it is obvious he came for the girl. What was her name?”

“Ren,” Blake replied with his eyes full of returned hope, locked on this officer. “Do you think he saved her?”

“I have no doubt that he saved her, otherwise why would he come? Did you see King’s dragon? Can you describe him?”

“Yes, like a colourless, sleek lizard with two small arms and no legs. He was greenish, but not as green as he was supposed to be. It is difficult to describe the colour as it was shimmering like water and seemed more colourless than green. I have seen King’s paintings, and his dragon doesn’t look anything like he does in these paintings.”

The officers exchanged looks again.

“Was King’s dragon moving fast?” the head officer asked again.

“Not overly,” the boy replied. “Good thing the monster froze, otherwise King would have nothing to save...”

Everyone was silent for a while, then the villagers started to whisper to each other:

“Have you seen any of this sort?” but everyone just shook their heads.

Before the boy became angry again, the head officer raised his hand, and everyone fell silent again. Then he explained in a quiet voice.

“When King’s Dragon turns this liquid green, it is not easy to see him. In fact, only a few people have had the privilege of ever seeing it throughout history.” Then he turned back to Blake. “It is not that the monster froze in his movement, but ‘Flash of Lightning’, as King’s dragon is called in this form, moves too fast for anyone to see. To see it, one needs either the King’s permission or special abilities, which can rarely be obtained even through lifetime training.” He waited a bit until the weight of his words had sunk into people before continuing. “The fact that you have seen it means either one or the other: either King wanted you to see him, or you have these special abilities. One way or the other, I think it is a sign that you have a talent that has now been recognised. Would you like to come to Royal City with us so you could undergo proper training and choose the way in life that would suit the abilities you have?”

No one expected such a twist to this event. After a short silence, a woman’s voice sounded:

“But officer, I don’t want to object to you, but there must be a mistake. Blake doesn’t have such remarkable abilities. He is a very good and kind-hearted child, maybe even too kind. He is very timid, he doesn’t like to be around other people. If you took him to Royal City, where it is so busy all the time, he would not feel comfortable.”

“I do understand your concerns about my offer to your son, but I can reassure you that it wasn’t made lightly. Evidence speaks for itself, and as my friend told me before, the world is a mysterious place. Sometimes, the most ordinary people appear to be the most extraordinary, and for their closest family and friends, it is most difficult to recognise it. My offer for your boy remains valid, and it is entirely up to him alone to accept it or to decline it.”

“I will go.” This reply came from Blake’s mouth and was unexpected for everyone who knew him. “I will go. I want to learn to be useful. I want to find out what I am good at. I want to learn to fight, so no one ever has to save me again.”

“That’s the spirit,” the head officer smiled. “If you want to learn combat skills, it is even better, as with the attitude you demonstrated earlier, it would do you good to undergo full training. Would you like to go now with us or to arrive later?”

“I will go with you now, I have nothing to wait for.”

“Very good!” the head officer praised with an even bigger smile, “off you go to pack your things then. We will be leaving very shortly.”

Blake jumped to his feet and ran out of the pavilion without a second thought.

His mum got up too and wanted to follow, but nearly fell down as she was still too dizzy. The head officer supported her just in time.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “there is no danger around any more and with so much eagerness, he will be ready and back in no time. I am sure he lived here long enough to find his way back.” He added as a joke while seating Blake’s mum at the table for a short chat.

But his joke proved to be very untimely as Blake never found his way back. After he failed to return, a proper search was conducted, but with no results. People saw him leaving the pavilion and dashing down the street, and that was the last time he was ever seen for many years. This mystery still lingers among people, as with the King’s Army surrounding the village, it was not possible for him to leave it unseen, and with so many trained officers around, he could not have been harmed without anyone noticing. This event was so peculiar that even General Jason was called in for help, but even he could not resolve this mystery. After failed attempts, everybody’s eyes landed on King, but he never helped with this issue. To Blake’s mum’s direct letter pleading for help, he answered that he could not help with this issue as the path Blake had chosen had little to do with him or with her and only The One himself could provide her with a more accurate answer. With that, nothing else could be done. Blake’s mum tried to learn communications with The One, but was not accepted to school, and she didn’t dare to ask for King’s help to get into it. When you don’t dare to do something, your journey in that direction is over until you dare again, or find another way to reach your goal. It never happened in this story, and Blake’s mum gave up her search. King’s letter indirectly implied that Blake was still alive, and she lived in hope that he would return one day, but years were passing, and he was not returning.

“Until one day he did,” Anniet said.

“Until one day he did,” Old John confirmed.

“And you will still not tell me what happened to him and where he went?” Anniet probed again with a secret hope that maybe something had changed and she would be rewarded with this piece of information for being persistent and daring to ask.

“It is very admirable that you are very brave and try so hard,” Old John laughed at her, “but headbutting a wall in the same place with some effort will more likely give you a headache instead of breaking the wall. I will not say what happened to him because it is not my story to tell, and I was told directly not to interfere.”

“But you told so many things about him!”

“Because Rainee asked me to share with you all that she knows if you ask. All that I told you about Blake is what Rainee knew about him at the time, so even my talking about Blake is still

telling her story as this story without Blake in it would be very strange. Blake asked not to share what I know about him, but he never countered Rainee's request to share all that she knows."

"But Rainee knows what has happened to him!"

"Now she knows."

"Isn't it you telling what she knows?"

"Very smart attempt," Old John praised again, "never restrain yourself from these attempts, even if they prove fruitless ever so often, it widens your perspective. But no, it is not the same. What she knows is from Blake telling her in private conversations that were never disclosed to anyone else, it might not be a secret, but it is not public either. It is not Rainee's story as she didn't live or experience it. Blake's sharing didn't develop into any events that would become a part of Rainee's life experience, except for hearing it from Blake. It was never spoken in an open circle where this knowledge could have been either ignored or forgotten or twisted. It simply was never shared. So, no, it is still entirely Blake's story, Blake's life experience, and to find out about it, you will have to exercise your bravery in a different direction. Either by asking him directly, or asking people who have participated in this part of his life and weren't directly asked not to disclose it, or by asking someone who knows about it, let's say Rainee herself."

"Failed," Anniet laughed inwardly to herself. Oh, never mind, at least she tried and wasn't even scolded for that. God knows when she would dare to ask about it directly from Blake, if ever at all. There were so many different things floating in between them now that conversations about where he had been seemed very unlikely for the foreseeable future. When she didn't know who he was, asking such a thing would have been so simple, and she wondered if this simplicity would ever return to their relationship. The possibility of it ever happening didn't seem very realistic, at least she could not see it. But she will try. She will have to speak with him when he comes back to find out where their relationship stands now. The mere thought of it was giving her goosebumps and shivers down her spine. To stay not knowing was so tempting as when you don't know, you can still hold on to the hope. What hope? She didn't know, she didn't dare or want even to think about it.

"And then he returned," Anniet said aloud, returning to the story.

It was the third time that she asked Old John to tell it. She knew that she should be using this opportunity to learn new things from such a teacher in a bit different way than asking him to retell the same stories over and over again. But she couldn't help it. Even today, she came to this place full of the intention to ask and learn something sensible, something wise, but all these good intentions were gone with dusts, and she ended up listening to the very same story that fascinated her so much. And instead of laughing at her or schooling her, John actually reworded it by adding some extra small details, small events to it that he didn't speak about before. Like pulling Rainee by her ponytail while she was sleeping! How cheeky was that! It made Anniet smile just thinking about it.

"And then he returned," Old John confirmed.

"Can you tell me about that again?"

"There is not much to tell."

"You always say that! But still, I would like to hear."

“Very well,” Old John didn’t argue. “As you already know, Rainee’s inauguration brought enormous turmoil and excitement. Nobody knew what had happened, nobody could understand if there were some new rules unknown to them. And if that was going to be how commanding positions were going to be appointed. King didn’t explain anything. At that time, he was less active than he is now and not that much interested in what was going on around him.”

“Why was King less active?” Anniet interrupted. That was something new that she hadn’t heard before.

“Who knows what is going on in King’s head,” John replied, “personally, I think he was simply bored. He had left the ruling of the country to his ministers and generals and would seldom interfere with their decisions. So, a presumption was made that maybe he just didn’t want to appoint officers by himself any more and had come up with a new strategy.”

“Was it true?”

“No, it wasn’t, and soon everyone understood that their presumptions were wrong. But at that time, it wasn’t clear, and the rules of inauguration were instantly adapted to the situation. New recruits were divided into two sections: worthy and average. And those who were considered to be worthy were called forward one by one in hopes of seeing a similar sight to what had happened when Rainee stepped forward.”

“And King didn’t mind?”

“One day, you will find that King doesn’t mind many things.”

“I always thought that he was almighty and his word was final.” Anniet wondered at what she was hearing.

“Yes, indeed. But those who are truly powerful don’t need to prove their power on a regular basis, so they are not afraid to let others do what they want, as it doesn’t present any threat or disorder. Only those who have no power unless others agree and obey them would try to hold everything and everyone in a firm grip in fear and the realisation that as soon as someone slips from this grip, the power they have will decrease.”

“I see,” Anniet tried bravely to face something that she didn’t understand completely, “so King is not afraid to lose power over others.”

“Not in the slightest,” Old John confirmed with a smile. “So on that day, he didn’t interfere either. Nobody asked him anything directly, so he allowed others to work things out by themselves.”

“And then?”

“And then? And then happened what you already know. Several most appraised candidates to the King’s Army came in front of the King to be inaugurated, and nothing special happened. The term “nothing special” is not very accurate here, as among these people were some truly outstanding personalities who got very high positions that on any other day would be highly valued and prized. However, that day was not any other day, and what everyone hoped for didn’t happen. No one else received uniforms out of nowhere, nor were they promoted to the very highest ranking by a general’s cape appearing on their shoulders out of nowhere.”

“And then?” Anniet asked impatiently, paying no attention to the fact that she already knew what had happened then.

“Then the ceremony was about to move to the rest of the candidates, where all had to be inaugurated at the same time, as nothing special was expected of them. But it was interrupted, as the great hall’s doors suddenly opened, and a young man walked in, dressed in casual daily clothes. He walked in, accompanied by a large black shaggy dog. It was an unheard-of event that someone would come like this, unexpected and unannounced, into the middle of such a ceremony, as in those days, only those who were selected and approved could attend this ceremony, no matter if you were watching it or participating. No one had ever seen this man, so he definitely wasn’t either selected or approved. While everyone was staring at him in shock, he looked around, examining the crowd with his black eyes. These eyes slid by everyone, leaving the impression that he saw right through that person but found no interest to spare his look for any longer than a split moment. His eyes stopped for some time at the newly-born Rainbow General and then landed on King, who was watching him with more interest than anyone had seen in King for many years.

Without a single word, this man strolled straight to the King without paying any attention to anyone else any more. King asked him if he had come here because he wanted to serve under his command. And to everyone’s outrage, he said that no, he neither wants nor intends to serve under King, he came here to serve under Rainee’s command.

An uproar of dissatisfaction came after hearing such a reply, but King lifted his hand, and everyone went silent.

“If you can be General Rainee’s subordinate, it will depend on the rank you will receive,” King said in a calm and warm voice. “But still, in any case, General Rainee is serving directly under my command, and anyone who wants to join her ranks will automatically be under my orders, no matter if you want it or not. Do these conditions suit you?”

“As there is no other option, they do suit me,” Blake answered honestly, bringing a wide smile to King’s face and horror to everyone else’s.

As all the rest were completely dazed by this entrance and conversation, King had to keep questioning by himself.

“Do you agree that after joining my service, your life, time and effort will firstly belong to me and only then to you?”

“Yes,” Blake answered firmly.

“Do you understand that if at any point in your life you choose to leave my servitude, all authority and benefits you gain by joining it might be taken away, no matter if you agree or not?”

“Yes,” Blake said without hesitation.

“Do you know that by joining my service, you are agreeing to unconditionally obey orders of anyone who is above you in ranking, as well as mine.”

A little cloud of displeasure came across Blake’s face upon hearing this condition, but he didn’t hesitate even for a moment.

“Yes,” was his firm answer.

“Do you want to receive King’s gift upon joining this service?” King asked.

“No,” Blake said without hesitation.

All this questioning nearly made poor Chamberlain faint as all of it was his part to ask, but by the time he recovered from shock, it was already too late to take over.

“Very well,” King said, standing up and putting his hand on Blake’s shoulder in a friendly, welcoming gesture, “take your stand, general, and welcome to the family.”

Blake slightly inclined his head in agreement and walked to stand next to Rainee. Everyone parted in front of him, allowing a lot of respectful space. It was difficult to say why. Was it because of the black intimidating oversized animal with red eyes walking at his side, or because of how King had treated him as an equal, or because of the black powerful aura radiating from his very person, or because of the general's cape that was covering his shoulders after appearing in the very same manner as not so long ago it had appeared on Rainee’s shoulders. Different in colour but nevertheless bringing to the person wearing it the same indisputable authority.

If, after Rainee got promoted to general in such a way, the whole place exploded with congratulations and awe, after Blake’s inauguration, everyone got as silent as death itself.

“Should we continue?” King asked. He was sitting in his chair with his elbows on the armrests, fingertips closed together and shining eyes, looking more like a child who just got a present he badly desired, than a ruler of the country.

Even after this prompting, it took a long time until the ceremony was recommenced.

After the inauguration was over, a proper investigation was conducted to find out who this newly born general was and how he got here. But these efforts brought back very little benefit. He didn’t walk through the front door, in fact, he wasn’t spotted by anyone at all and came directly to the heart of the palace. So he must have used extremely powerful magic to be able to perform such an entrance. Even with strong magic, one would have to conduct proper research and do a lot of planning to make such an unheard-of entrance. He must have done it to show his superiority over others. And the way he spoke to King! As if he were equal. He never even bowed to the King, neither before the inauguration, nor after. All that made it plain and obvious that he had come to conquer, and lots of resistance started to build in people's hearts. He will have to be shown his place, no matter what ranking he got! And the colour he had chosen for his cape! So intimidating! Anyone standing close to him was blending into nothingness and becoming somehow invisible.

Everyone, but the Rainbow General. Her colours were radiating even stronger in his presence, like a bright rainbow in a very dark night. A sight that no one had ever seen before.

A sight that no one had ever seen before.

After finishing, Old John leaned back in his chair with his arms behind his head and was watching Annet, who was silently sitting on a swing, all deep in her thoughts.

“Am I wasting your time?” she asked eventually.

“How come you got such an impression about me?”

“I don’t know. You know so much and you can teach so many things and instead of using the time you offer me wisely, I just make you tell me some old stories over and over again. I probably will regret it later when you are nowhere around to share with me what you know.”

That was true. It was the third day that she was spending in Old John's company and so far she hadn't learned anything. Well, she learned a lot but not something that would be considered "learned".

"There is never a better time to do what you want than now," Old John laughed. "Do you want to hear or learn from me anything other than you are hearing and learning right now?"

"Not really," Anniet had to admit, "that's the problem."

"Wouldn't you then later regret that instead of listening to something you like to hear, you would listen to something that doesn't even bring any interest to you, and then, when I am not around, you would realise that you have missed the opportunity to have a good time and exchanged it for some boring lessons, that might be beneficial or might not?"

His words brought a fond smile to Anniet's face and warmth to her heart.

"You always manage to say things in a way that makes me happier," she confessed. "Is that why Rainee asked you to look after me? To make me happier?"

"No," Old John replied, and before Anniet could go down the trail that led to thinking that after all Rainee's intention was for her to learn something useful, he added, "she asked me to stay with you because she loves you."

"Oh," that was all Anniet could say, shaken so suddenly off the responsibility-for-proper-education tree.

They were staying in this very strange pavilion resembling more a greenhouse than a pavilion, but still it was made just of wood and flowers. It was strange to use the word flowers for building material but nevertheless all this place made an impression that flowers are what it is made from. Even the wood used for building felt more like live trees than logs and planks.

Annet didn't know that flowers could thrive like this while in the shade, but that's how it was here. This place was surrounded by very tall ancient trees that didn't share the sunlight with anything or anyone who was under their shadow, but nevertheless, all around was flourishing. Even this swing she was sitting on was made from living vines hanging from the ceiling, and it was also covered in flowers. She didn't even try to preserve them any more, as it was not possible to make a single movement without stepping on or squashing some. Old John was staying in the large and mysterious building behind the pavilion that looked just the same, alive, flourishing with greenery.

This morning, she decided to leave her apartment, which had become her sanctuary for the last two days. She wasn't sure how to find John, but remembered what he said on their first day: "When you want to see me, look for me, and I will find you." Very simple but very strange instructions for meeting. But it worked! She walked in a seemingly random direction and ended up here, where he was already waiting for her outside.

This place was so beautiful but so quiet and deserted of people. John explained to her that long ago, this used to be the King's residence and was designed by the King himself, but his wife didn't approve of this place as she didn't like to stay in the shade of trees all the time, also she believed that children would need daylight to be healthy.

And as it was mainly she who would stay at home, as the King himself would spend most of the time away, the royal residence was moved closer to the palace, and eventually buildings were

merged, and that's how the King's residence was moved to the palace, and this old building was left without a true purpose.

Despite its beauty, not many would come here as it is way too close to the King's residence, and when he is at home, his presence can be felt very strongly here, so no one wants to stay here for good. It is not suitable for training purposes and is way too beautiful, and it carries too much history to be used as a storage place.

It was used a lot by the King's children as a playground when they were little, and Ruffus lived here for some time before becoming a general, but now it was mainly empty. Old John would stay here on his visits as he finds this place very attractive, and the presence of the King doesn't bother him.

Anniel couldn't disagree with him and also thought that this place was very nice, much nicer than anything she had ever seen before. King probably wasn't at home as she didn't feel any presence, whatever it was supposed to mean. So she stayed here all day listening to John's stories and feeling as happy as a little child who doesn't have to think about a single worry in the world. No, in fact, she could not remember herself ever feeling like this.

"I didn't know that Blake was met with resistance and opposition," she finally said after regurgitating what she had heard, "I always thought that he had come and taken his place... No, actually, I didn't think even that, I didn't think about it at all. So did they show him his place?"

"I think so."

"Really?" Anniel was truly surprised. She could not imagine General Blake being bossed and pushed around, but then again, maybe in the past he was different.

"Well, his place was a general's place, and that's where he was forced to stay despite all his opposition and tantrums."

"Now I am truly lost," Anniel laughed at his words. "How can anyone be bossed into being a general?"

"It all depends on what you want, doesn't it? And Blake didn't join King's Army to be a general."

"So what did he come for?"

"To be under Rainee's command."

"And? What's the problem?"

"The problem is that generals don't serve other generals. Generals are not under anyone else's but the King's command. So Blake wasn't happy. When he found out that, because of the high ranking he acquired, he could not join Rainee's division, he requested a demotion."

"And what position did he receive then?"

"General's."

"But he was already a general..."

"Yes, indeed. That's why he could not receive anything else. If he were appointed general by the King, then sure enough, the King could take away what he had given and give something else.

But it wasn't the case. He brought the general's status with himself and no one can take from you what you already are. As soon as he joined King's Army, he became a general, to lose this status, he had to leave King's Army. But by doing so, he would lose the right to be in Rainee's division anyway."

"So what did he do?"

"He threw a tantrum," John laughed.

"And what happened then?"

"Well, a tantruming general is a scary sight, so people got scared. They asked King to reprimand him as no one else could."

"And what did King do?"

"King? He left."

"What do you mean by 'left'?"

"He stood up and walked off."

"No way..." Anniet couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"But what else could he do?" John laughed again. "Now, Blake was a commanding officer, and those who wanted him to be restrained were under Blake's command. To restrain a commanding officer would mean to go against any rule, sensible or insensible. You are given a higher rank to have a command over those who are below you, not vice versa. How can a general lead if those who are under his command could reprimand him? It would bring true chaos. Maybe Blake wasn't commanding at that time, but nevertheless, why should it be King's worry how he treats his subordinates? If King thought that Blake was incapable of dealing with his position, then he could strip him of his title by kicking him out of his service. If he thought that Blake was capable of leading his army, then it wouldn't be very encouraging to reprimand him on the very first day. What authority would he have then? So he just left, leaving everyone to figure out their new positions by themselves."

"And what happened then?"

"Then? Everyone slowly or rapidly dispersed, leaving their newly born general on his own. What else can you do when someone stronger than you is rampaging? That is also a very good lesson for those in power. The strength you have might be great, and no one can take it away from you, but no one has to stay with you either. If you are inconsiderate of others, then why should others consider you? And a general on his own is a very lonely general. It is not that Blake cared that much about it then, or maybe he doesn't care about it too much even now, but facts don't change, no matter whether he cares about it or not."

- So everyone left?

"Not entirely. Rainee didn't leave, nor did Angus. They were not afraid of him. And not because of equality in strength, but because they saw a person in distress under a general flaring with fury. When you see a person behind anger, it is difficult to leave that person. People who don't understand this action admire it a lot, call it many names like bravery, true friendship and so on. They try to mimic it, praise it over other actions and say that this is the best way to act. By doing so, they bring a lot of misunderstanding and damage. When you don't see the true person under expressed anger, then by staying, you can offer nothing else but fear, and can receive nothing else

but abuse. You cannot force or talk yourself into seeing it, and pretence is powerless too. In that case, no matter how close that person is to you, the best action would be to leave and return when the anger is not there any more. Otherwise, you just convert yourself into an absorbing sponge for this anger and reinforce the belief in the angry person that he has a right to be angry, and you have a responsibility to absorb that anger. Very damaging. But when you see the true person under anger, then this anger will never bring you any damage, as it is simply not important, or even not existent. You don't absorb it as you don't see it, and all that you feel for that person is true compassion, which you don't have to fake, or force upon yourself a wish to help. I believe you already experienced it yourself, but just didn't convert this experience into a logical explanation. And I must say it is difficult to explain it in words. So Rainee and Angus stayed and helped Blake to break through. Ruffus stayed for his own motives. The Prime Minister stayed, despite trembling in fear, just to show Blake that he is not afraid, not realising that in the distress Blake was in, he could not care less about the plays of power in a ruling government. General Jason stayed, he was not afraid, nor did he care too much for Blake, he was just annoyed that this immature person would have to be his colleague now, or so he thought at that time, and stayed to observe and learn more. A few more people stayed, mainly to test their own bravery."

"And what happened then?"

"Then Rainee asked Blake to stop trashing the place and come with her, and he instantly agreed. That's how the myths or legends were born, saying that nobody else but the Rainbow General has power over this dark and angry general, who does not bow to or obey even the King himself, as the King doesn't have any power over him. And that only the Rainbow General's word is last, and he would obey it without fail." While telling this part, John was laughing to himself.

"Is it true?"

"Does it sound true to you?"

Annet shook her head in response.

"None of the people's beliefs are the truth. It cannot be. They are two different substances – truth is truth, so it cannot be a belief. And belief is belief, so it cannot be the truth. Very often, beliefs are based on truth, that's why they have such a strong grip on people. Truth is a very, very powerful substance, and just a drop of it in an otherwise fake belief strengthens that belief enormously. But still, it is just a belief. To see truth, you have to let go of all beliefs because, as I said earlier, belief is not truth, it can only be based on truth, and while you hold to it, replacing truth with belief, truth is invisible to you. No, what people believe is not the truth, but it has a droplet of truth in it. The King has as much power over Blake as over any other person. But people know very little about the King to understand his actions. No, you will not find much darkness in Blake, however anger is a very dark emotion, and he is, how should I say... unsatisfied with his position from the very first day he received it. No, Rainee doesn't have any power over him, apart from that which friendship brings. But isn't friendship one of the most powerful bonds? And no, Rainee's word is never final for Blake, it doesn't matter that this impression was strengthened immensely through the years, and sometimes even Blake himself believes it. If that were the case, he would not have put himself in a very similar situation later in the day in an annual meeting, after Rainee had already asked him not to do it once.

But the day is already coming to an end, and as I am put in charge not only of your education but also over your well-being, I am afraid I have been neglecting my duties and might be found unworthy of ever performing such a task again. Should I order dinner to be delivered here, or would you fancy to go for a short walk to see the available options?”

The thought of going to look around was very attractive. The thought of going to be looked at was very appalling... What should she do?

All her insights were saying – hide. Stay where there are not too many spectators as long as possible. But how long can she hide? Hide from whom? She cannot hide from everyone. Also, on the day when she will have to come out in the open, there might be no one with her, and it would be even more unpleasant to be on her own.

“I want to go for a walk,” Anniet said after consideration. “Will you come with me?” she asked with a little bit of concern in her voice.

“I would be a poor guide if I didn’t,” Old John smiled, standing up. “I know just the place you might like, and it is not too far away.”

The further they walked, the more Anniet was coming out of her shell.

Their little trip turned out to be much nicer than Anniet had pictured in her head. The evening was nice and quiet, everyone was occupied with their own business and didn’t pay too much attention to them. Within the Royal palace walls, life was not what Anniet expected it to be. She expected to see the same crowds as on her first day and all yards to be jammed with people.

It wasn't the case. The place was buzzing with life, but in the same way as any other busy place on earth.

And Old John was right, he was much more popular than she. Why would she even wonder about it or expect it to be otherwise? But this attention didn’t bother him at all.

Many people greeted him, and many people looked at her, but apart from exchanging greetings, Old John never stopped to talk with anyone. Many curious glances followed them, but it didn’t feel like staring or judging.

So with every minute passing, this strange guard Anniet was keeping up against the outer world was gradually fading and she was feeling more and more like herself again.

With it, interest returned, and instead of going to find a dining place, they ended up having a proper tour across the Royal grounds before eventually heading towards the large gates leading to the city.

Well, it should be called a gateway or an archway more than city gates, as there was just a large arched passage in between houses.

At the height of the tallest buildings and even more spacious in width, this archway was really magnificent and impressive. What otherwise would be just some sort of tunnel between houses, because of its impressive size and crafted frame of extreme beauty, was transformed into an impressive-sized archway that could be seen from any direction. But there were no doors or gates that could be opened or closed.

The city gates captivated Annet's attention more than anything else. But not because of their indisputable beauty. She was examining them from afar and eventually shared the core of her interest with Old John.

"Raine said that Blake lives above the city gates. Was she talking about these gates?" she asked, trying to understand how one could live above gates.

She knew that Blake could turn himself into a flying creature, but surely he could not just live on top of a gate as a bird.

Old John smiled more at her thoughts than at her question.

"Yes," he said, "General Blake lives above these gates. There is a very large room above these gates. If you look to the right and left of the centre, you will see a window on each side. It slipped by your eyes just because we are still some distance away, and it is also very high, so it might look to you as a small window or ornament, but it is not. It is a full-size window of his apartment. It is not really an apartment as it is just a large single room, and long ago it was used as a restroom by workers of the palace. But Blake claimed that place as his own. I cannot blame the boy. The views up there must be outstanding, and those who wanted nothing else from him except to annoy him, have to think twice if they want to come up just for the sake of doing it. Shall we go and have a look?"

Annet shook her head vigorously. No way she would be sneaking around Blake's place while he was away.

"Why not?" John asked. "Didn't you use to visit his place while you lived at School?"

"Yes, I did," Annet could do nothing but agree, "But it is not the same."

"How come?"

"At School, he wasn't a general..."

"I cannot agree with this statement," Old John disagreed. "It has been more than a century since he has become general and there wasn't a single day since that he was stripped of this title. So no, you are not right. While living at School he was a general, same as he is now."

Annet wanted to object but couldn't come up with any reasonably strong argument. Everyone kept telling her that Anthony and Blake are the same, and in her mind, she understood it herself. However, it didn't feel that way no matter how logical it sounded. With a fond forlornness, she thought about that little cottage where they met, still she would not dare to barge uninvited into his apartment here. Still, it was strange to hear that other people were experiencing fear of visiting him too. Surely they cannot suffer from the same reasons as she did as everyone here knew that Blake was General Blake.

"Would people be afraid that Blake might push them down if they aggravated him too much?" That was all that Annet could come up with. She could not imagine either Anthony or Blake doing so, but still that was a single reason she could think of.

Old John tried to conceal his laughter, but not with his best success. In fact, to no success at all.

"Your instincts are right," he said after a good laugh, "but your deduction was very poor. No, I don't think Blake would push anyone down, no matter how irritating they were. However, he didn't make it too easy to access his place. Those who are trained can get to it easily, but they would not

do it as they know better than to disturb him when he doesn't want to be seen. And those who can do only a little would need a lot of courage to climb these narrow and steep stairs that lead to his place."

While talking, he showed her the construction that truly looked more like a collection of ladders than stairs to the general's place.

"So he doesn't like to be disturbed by others?"

"He spends very little time there, and on top of that, he can hear all the troubles and commotions going around. If he chooses not to interfere, then there is no need to bother him, as it is highly unlikely he would interfere anyway. But I think you know yourself very well how little he interferes with what people do."

"Sometimes I think he is bored around others."

"Sometimes I think the same."

"Did people upset him so much that he doesn't want to stay in their company?"

"I think they did."

"How?"

"That's what you will have to ask him yourself."

Anniel didn't even try to probe it any longer as she already knew there would be no success.

"He used to like spending time with me," she said in a silent voice. "At least I think he used to like," she thought to herself.

"He did, didn't he?" Old John smiled at that statement, neither confirming nor denying it.

After passing through the city gates, they emerged into a completely different environment.

The open grounds around the palace were gone and replaced with the heavily built-up centre of the city. Streets were wide and sidewalks spacious. But there were as many houses squashed in as there possibly could be. It was as if everyone wanted to live as close to the palace as possible, and only the wall around the Royal grounds was drawing a line and telling them to stop. Even the wall itself was very peculiar, made not of stone but of houses, strengthening the impression that people wanted to live as close as possible – up until the very border.

"It really looks like entering a different place!" Anniel wondered while looking around.

"I cannot argue about it," John agreed. "That's why both places now have different names. You must have heard both of them: Royal City and Capital. Most people think it is the same place under two different names, and to some degree it is, at least for those who have never seen this place with their own eyes. But those who come and see the difference will never mix them up. We just left Royal City and walked into Capital."

"I see..." Never before had Anniel heard that Capital and Royal City are not the same. "Why then is it called Capital?"

There was no need to ask why it is called Royal City as it was plain obvious.

"This name came from the Old World," John explained. "In the Old World, it is not even the name of the city, as it carries a different meaning. There they have many kings, and each King has a

piece of land, some very big, some very small. But you probably know that. What you don't know is that sometimes in that land ruled by one King, there can be more than one city, and the most important city, where all ruling people live, is called the Capital in addition to its name. I am sure this city at the very beginning had a name too, but it has been millennia since anyone used any other name than Capital. So other names became unneeded. And as there is only one King in our world, we need only one Capital, so there is no mixing up."

"So if the King were to move to live in a different city, that other place would be Capital."

"Indeed, it would," John confirmed, "but there is no reason to dwell on it as it would not happen. Even if he wanted to do so, there is a restriction that forbids the King to make such a move. Under this restriction, the King could spend most of his time somewhere else, but all leadership would still be coming from here. So while in theory, yes, it could happen, in reality, it is not going to happen."

"I thought the King doesn't have any restrictions," now Anniet was completely puzzled.

"And that's where you are wrong, together with the rest of the society. The King's power is given to the current King, and it provides him with immense power beyond what you could even imagine. But still, this power is given to him and by accepting it, in addition to all benefits, he accepts all the limitations that power brings. To go over these limitations, he would have to outgrow that power. In other words, his personal strength would have to become greater than the one he is carrying now, and then he would be able to ignore the rules that the King's power imposes on him. I must say it would be incredibly difficult to do."

"Even for the King?"

"Especially for the King. While everyone else doesn't know or have a taste of what it is, they still can seek and reach for it, and it is possible to achieve. However, the King has no need to try to achieve it, as he can already have it at his disposal. And I must tell you it is close to impossible to seek to learn something that you already can do, as it defies any logic available to humans."

"What limitations does the King have?"

"That is something I cannot tell."

"You don't know?"

"If I know, then I cannot reach that knowledge, and it becomes equal to not knowing. But one limitation you already witnessed yourself."

"Did I?" Anniet was confused.

"Indeed, you did. The King himself told us openly that it has been many years since he wanted to enter the School, but succeeded only recently. Isn't it a restriction? When you want something but cannot get it?"

"It must be," Anniet agreed, walking through the door that John opened for her.

They had entered a spacious, half-empty dining hall. Anniet looked around with surprise.

"It looks like home..." she said, not knowing what to think.

It truly looked like a dining hall in the town next to the place where she grew up. She had been there only a few times, but there was no mistake, it looked so alike that she wasn't even sure that this was not some kind of trick and this door wasn't some magical device that transferred them.

“There is no such magical device,” Old John said to her unspoken question, “If it is possible to make one like this, then nobody has yet come up with the idea of how to do it. I wanted to take you here to show that, despite the world being a very vast place, it is also the same. Sometimes you can go only a short distance and end up in completely different surroundings, sometimes you can travel an immense distance and will find that nothing really has changed that much.”

“But how is it even possible?” Anniet asked, allowing herself to be led to the table.

The interior and spacing looked so familiar that she was even looking around searching for familiar faces. But every eye she met belonged to a complete stranger.

Even the menu looked very similar. She was completely bewildered.

Old John looked very pleased with himself, and while he tried to play it that there was nothing unusual, his eyes could not stop laughing.

“You knew that this place would be familiar to me!” Anniet confronted him openly, leaving no room to escape.

“I must admit I did,” he confirmed.

“But how?”

“That's a privilege of being a long-time traveller and knowing many places.”

“No, I mean how it is possible for such a place to be here, in Capital.”

“Oh, that. Well, that's the easy part. About three decades ago, the keeper of the place you knew left the tavern to his successor before moving to Capital. But here he felt homesick, so eventually he opened this place. It became pretty successful as, despite its simplicity, it is comfortable, and meals are tasty. So it was left unchanged for years, despite the fact that its original owner is not with us any longer.”

Hearing that, Anniet felt some strange fear leaving and her eyes stopped examining surrounding faces.

“Happy to stay?” John asked. And after seeing Anniet's smiling face, called a waiter.

“I must be such a rabbit-heart,” Anniet laughed at her own behaviour, “It is so nice to be here, in a familiar place. I don't even know what I was afraid of.”

“It would be difficult to learn courage if facing only things that don't challenge you.”

“So that is what Rainee wanted me to learn...”

“A little bit of bravery doesn't hurt anyone,” John laughed. “Also, sometimes I follow my own wishes, not only the wishes of others. But no, I didn't bring you here to learn some bravery. I brought you here so you could see that life is much simpler, and what might seem far away in fact is not. And also I thought you would like it here.”

“And I do,” Anniet thought to herself, but didn't bring it up anymore.

The surroundings were familiar, food was nice, and the atmosphere was friendly. Even the looks that were piercing her back gradually faded.

Annet chose a seat facing a window deliberately, so if anyone wanted to look at her, she would not know or be disturbed by it. But it didn't work. At least not from the beginning. Strangely,

every time someone would look at her, she could physically feel this look on her back. She didn't know if that was just her imagination, and she chose not to probe about it. If that was a part of her new life, then there was nothing she could do about it.

With time passing, the attention she was giving to what was going on behind her in the hall was slowly fading, and involuntarily, the conversation returned back to Blake. Just how much space in her thoughts was he taking that she could not think about anything else... Oh well, never mind. Forbidding herself to do so didn't work anyway.

"So he doesn't like to be disturbed?"

"That's a tricky statement that opens many ways to be misled and basically none to see the truth behind the answer. Let me say it like this. None of us likes to be disturbed, and Blake is, let's say, less bothered about it than most of us."

"Even you?"

"I like your questions, they always make one stop and think inwardly. No, I am not the best match for comparison. Didn't you yourself say not that long ago that I know nothing about myself, so to be disturbed and know more about others brightens my day. Blake doesn't suffer from this impediment as he is very much involved in his own life to give it away for others. So no, not to that degree. But still, he is much more open to others than most."

"He moved to live somewhere up next to the sky with not even stairs to reach him! How does it match being open and inviting to others? I don't understand how it could be a resting room before... One would have to be very tired to be brave enough to climb all these ladders only to have a rest. But wouldn't it be a little bit too dangerous to do so when you are so tired?"

"True, it would be a bit disturbing. But luckily it wasn't the case. There used to be a wide and beautifully made staircase. But as it was not needed here any longer, it was dismantled and used in many different places."

"Why?"

"Because it is not good practice to waste good material and a piece of art somewhere where there is no need for it. Blake doesn't need stairs, nor do people who visit him sometimes while he is off duty. So he ordered the dismantling of these stairs, and it freed a lot of room and was useful in other places. For those who still would want to come to see him, he arranged these small stairs that you call ladders."

"He didn't make it easy to reach him."

"Why would he make it easy for those who wanted to come to tell him something he didn't want to hear? I think he did it only because he was young and naive at that time. If he were to do it now he would not bother with it, nor would he encourage people to behave abusively. But at that time he didn't fully understand what a general's duties are and thought that it was his duty to look after people and make sure that they are happy."

"Isn't that what generals do?"

"It might be what they do, but not because that would be their duty."

"So what is a duty of a general?"

"To be honest? Their duty is to do what they want to do. And the better a general is at it, the stronger his position becomes, to the point that nothing can shake him from it, be it cataclysm or the end of the world."

"So, in other words, they don't have any duties?"

"You can say so. But I can reassure you that no duty will ever bind you to your occupation as strongly as doing what you like and what you want."

"So what does Blake want?"

"To look after others."

"..... It doesn't feel that way. Well, yes, I know what you mean and if I were to look at it from my point of view, from how he was treating me then, you are absolutely right. But he never showed any interest in looking after anyone else."

"But didn't he? Or maybe you think so only because you have a set of rules about what looking after others is? And any action that doesn't follow these rules for you will look like not caring at all. But that is the strength of the general. They don't follow rules set by others. In fact, they don't even follow their own rules, as any rule is binding and restricting. The more restrictions you place, the less movement you have. The less you can do of what you like and what you wish to do. And also, I must say that it is difficult to look after someone when they don't want to be looked after. If you try to do so, then most likely the people you are looking after will feel very restricted. As Blake's point of view on life and freedom is very different from that of society, they get scared every time he wants to help them. And he refuses to waste his energy performing acts that help no one and only make an impression that something was done."

"It never felt restrictive when he was looking after me," Anniet said with a fond smile on her face.

"And that's why he was able to do so. Now imagine how you would feel if he had not stepped aside at the time when you became afraid of him? Wouldn't it feel like something very pressurising instead of something nice? I am very glad that you met him now, when he is more mature. If it had happened at the time when he had just become general, he might have done just that. Or maybe not, who knows. But still I am happy that we will never need to find it out."

"I don't really know what I would want more," Anniet smiled to herself, trying to imagine Blake behaving the same way as Anthony after being disclosed as a general.

"And until the day you make a decision, you will have enough space for yourself to figure out what you want and where you stand. And what is more important to you, and what you want to do with it. To respect others' wishes is a beautiful craft, and Blake mastered it very well by this day."

"But he wasn't like this at the time when he was inaugurated?"

"No, not at all. He was already well advanced in many areas, but still, knowledge and strengths deepens with practice and experience. He was very young then and had little experience."

"But he was already powerful enough to make such an entrance?"

"Oh yes, don't take it the wrong way. You are absolutely right, he was already very powerful. It is not a general's position that made him powerful. He got that position because of his strength."

“So what happened after in the story?”

“I thought we finished it? No?”

“Of course, we did not.” Annet strongly disagreed. “All that you said was that everyone got scared because he got upset. And the same happened later in a meeting. What meeting was it? And why did Blake get upset again?”

“At those times, there used to be meetings after each inauguration. They would be held after the ceremony to establish positions and plans of action for the next year-round. To arrange responsibilities and appoint divisions.

Usually, these meetings used to be just a briefing as all was already planned and arranged in advance, prior to the inauguration, with very few adjustments needed. That year, however, was different. Two people were unexpectedly promoted to generals from the very start of their careers, and all planning was ruined. Everyone expected Rainee to go high in ranking, and there were even speculations that the King might promote her to general, but not many supported these speculations, as even Prince Angus received his general status only in his third year after joining the King's Army. This time, King's promotion was not even needed as Rainee's position came naturally. What to do with that bandit and usurper, that's how many were calling Blake at that moment, nobody knew. However, to the meeting they had come prepared to withstand anything that Blake would throw at them. And if he was not happy about the situation, it was he who had to leave, not them. The meeting was held to establish the structure of the organisation, and Blake was now a part of that organisation, no matter if he liked it or not. He could either comply with the rules or leave. I can see you are eager to hear more, but I am not venturing down that path as there is nothing that you could learn from hearing it, nor anything that would be of your interest if you already know what they spoke about. You will have to trust me on that, as I am going to be relentless,” saying that, Old John put on a very strict and serious face that was so fake and didn't suit him at all and made Annet laugh.

“Why?” she asked.

“Plays of power while trying to impose yourself on others, or restrict others so you could have things your way, is never a good environment to learn. It teaches nothing, just how to weasel your way in and out of a place that you cannot get to otherwise. And as naturally you don't have any interest in it, I am not going to introduce it to you by unintentionally implying that you are missing something and have to educate yourself more that way. Please don't. Later it takes ages to get out of it.”

“Then how will I know what happened next?”

“But I can tell you what happened next. All escalated to the point where Blake firmly requested demotion, no matter what position. Many were eager to do so, but this wish could not be granted as nobody promoted him, so nobody could demote him. Seeing that all was going downhill rapidly, Rainee asked if she could make a request and if this request would be taken into consideration. She spoke directly to the King, who, in those days, rarely participated in these kinds of debates and was snoozing in his chair. By that day, he was so devoid of interest in the affairs going on in those meetings that he never even sat at a table with everyone, or at least that was what people thought was the reason why he would not sit with everyone else. So his chair was further away on the raised platform, while everyone else was seated at the long table below. Truth be told,

that day he wasn't snoozing and watched with interest, but still didn't involve himself in any of the debates and arguments. When Rainee asked him directly, the answer she received was: 'Only the King can deny speech to you, only equally raised brothers and sisters might question you.' Everyone fell silent as nobody understood what kind of reply that was. Seeing the confusion, the King said that yes, she can make requests and propositions at any time, and they will never go unnoticed because of the place she is occupying right now. But he also suggested considering what impact her request could have on others for the very same reason – the position she is occupying right now. Would it bring more conflict, or would it remedy the situation?"

Then Rainee suggested postponing this meeting for a few days, or at least until tomorrow, to give everyone some extra time to calm down and reconsider the plan of action, as she thought it was not wise to approve a plan for a year in advance when everyone is so hotheaded. This proposition was met with fierce resistance, claiming that this is how it has been for years, and there is no reason for it to be any different this time either. The King asked if anyone would support Rainee's suggestion. Only General Angus said he would. When asked why, he pointed out that today's circumstances were different and could not be compared to past years. Events that had happened today could not be predicted or planned for, so all plans that were ready had to be reconsidered anew.

As circumstances were different, regular actions would not make any sense, so he strongly agreed with Rainee's proposition. The King asked if anyone disagreed with Angus's statement, and this time no one could, not because they would not dare to oppose, but because what he said was plain obvious and made sense, and to oppose it would be equal to opposing logic. So Rainee happily stood up and called the end of the meeting and invited everyone to come back tomorrow. Surprisingly, this time no one either objected or hesitated, but stood up instantly and left in a very organised order. Only the King, Rainee, Angus and Blake were left in the meeting hall. That was the first time when Rainee truly understood the power of her position that the King had mentioned before.

Meanwhile, Blake didn't understand anything at that time. However, the words that Rainee told him later that night made a big impact on him, made a major breakthrough and put an end to all this pandemonium.

"What did she say?"

"Truth, that's why it worked. She said that no matter what he thinks now, for his quest, he could not be placed in a better position even if he tried. If he were assigned a lower ranking, he would not be able to stay with her at these kinds of meetings to provide support when no one else is willing to support her. Because he would not have enough power to do so. He would be accountable to others, and those who are above him in ranking would be able to tell him where to be and what to do, whereas now he is accountable only to the King. That even if his wish were to be granted and he were assigned to her division, under her command, as he had initially planned, he wouldn't be able to stay next to her all the time, as there are times and places where only the highest-ranked officers are permitted in and he wouldn't be one of them then. How then would he be able to look after her and protect her if he himself cannot be where he wants? In daily life, there are difficult or even dangerous situations, and sometimes help is needed, but there will always be someone to help. In a place where help is needed from the strongest, only the strongest would be able to help, and if he willingly demoted himself from such a place, then he would not be one of them. That right now he

is burning with anger and thrashing in a rage only because he doesn't recognise the gift he was given and takes it either as a burden or as a restriction."

If he were to think with a bit more of an open mind, he would understand that nothing happens without a reason. If he looked back into his life, he would see that all events that happened and that seemed random, difficult to understand or even unpleasant were like a preparation for something good that followed after, and just a lack of understanding prevented him from seeing the wider picture. Why should now be different? How many times in the past has Blake refused to take a path opened for him, and it ended up in a long detour that would bring him to the very same place where he already could have been if he had taken that shortcut offered.

Was he really seeing the path that was opened for him now so clearly that he was willing to refuse it and take a diversion again? Things in the world don't stop and wait while someone is detouring around. What he would find now in the place that is offered to him and what he would find later, after finding a passage back to it again, will be completely different. Does he really want to exchange the unknown offered now for a different unknown that he will find in a place he wants to exchange this offer with?

"So, Blake reconsidered?"

"Yup, he did."

"He agreed to assume the position offered to him."

"Yes, and embraced it with all his heart."

"So, the following day, he came prepared and took his rightfully earned position?"

"And yes, and no. There is no mistake in your statement, however, what you imagine when saying it and what happened aren't the same. The following day, when everyone came to the meeting room, they found different rules. The door was closed, and no one could enter before the King came in. The room was rearranged. King's seat now was at one end of the long table, a clear indication that he was intending to be more involved. But not only that.

His chair used to be on a raised platform. Now this raised area was wider and larger, and part of the long table was on this rise, looming over the rest of the seats. Maybe not too high, just a few inches, but still it was above. Nobody knew how to behave, what the new rules were, where to sit, as the old order was swept away just like that.

The King encouraged them not to worry too much and to choose a seat where everyone feels most comfortable. Angus walked straight to the raised area to the right side of the table. Rainee followed Angus, and Blake followed Rainee. Angus offered the seat closest to the King to Rainee, knowing how much affection she has for him. But Rainee declined this offer. Partially because she always looked at Angus as the future King, partially because she knew that Blake wanted to be next to her, and she herself wanted to be next to Angus. So she didn't have any doubt about where her place was. So Angus took a seat closest to the King, Rainee sat next to him and Blake next to Rainee. That is the order they maintain to this day, as you have seen in the ceremony at School.

"What about Ruffus?"

"Ruffus had to sit much further. He wasn't a general at that point."

"So only generals could sit next to the King?"

“And yes and no. Only the generals could take this seat, but it turned out that not all generals could do it. Not because they were forbidden. Simply, they could not find enough inner peace, strength and support for themselves to take this seat. As later the King explained, to avoid meaningless debates about rankings, the order from now on was very simple – those who are closest to him have the highest rankings. Those who are with him at the same level will work with him at the same level, and no matter what title they have, they will obey only the King and no one else. While everyone else, regardless of the title held, would be under their direct command. Not because the rules have been changed. From yesterday's obedience to Rainee's command, everyone already had a taste of it. The rules were already present yesterday, no matter that not many could understand them yet. He chose this way of seating so everyone could understand their place and stop disputing it, as there is nothing that can be disputed. He offered to swap the seats for everyone who was not happy with where they sat. Many people tried to take a seat at the same level as the King but couldn't do it; many swapped the seats around in some agreement. However, no matter what agreement was made, one could agree just to take a seat further from the King, but not closer. In other words, they could willingly demote themselves in favour of another, but those whom they tried to put in front of themselves could not get any closer to the King. The Prime Minister wasn't happy with the situation as he didn't want to be so plainly far away from the King. Then he came up with an idea and took the place at the other end of the table. Many praised this move as to most it looked like the Prime Minister was nearly equal to the King.”

“Was it?”

“How could it be? The King clearly said that those who sit closest to him will have higher rankings, in other words, the most power and support from the King. Not many understand that it is not they who support the King but the King who supports them. So, by making this choice, the Prime Minister chose the furthest possible seat from the King. All the rest is just play and pretence based on twisted understandings.

Blake was offered to step down too. By doing so, his general title would be suspended by the King, purposely placing limitations on him. But Blake declined this offer, which he had sought with all his might just yesterday. By doing so, he brought even more disapproval upon himself for being double-faced, but it didn't touch him or infect him. By now, he had chosen the path he wanted to walk and had understood that to stay on this path, he would have to stop paying any attention to people's likes or dislikes. And I must say it did only good for him.”

Anniel was looking at these so-called stairs in front of her. They were so steep and narrow. No wonder that not many would dare to climb them. Her heart was pounding just at the thought of what she was about to do, and the heights she was to face had little to do with it.

After that evening in the dining hall with Old John, her life changed a good deal. It was a proper shocker to find out that her private conversation with John wasn't that private. After turning around to leave, she realised that the place was jammed with people now. Everyone had moved closer, some even standing right behind her, to hear better what John was saying. He obviously knew it, as despite his age, there was nothing wrong with his eyesight, but it didn't stop him from sharing all he knew about Blake and Rainee's lives. And people were so curious and even said thanks to them for sharing such interesting information. Of course, they did. Probably all that they heard was as new and interesting to them as it was to her. But it still didn't make it any easier on her.

She spent the rest of that night going through and examining everything she had spoken about, making sure that she didn't disclose aloud anything related to her feelings for Blake. It was already early in the morning when she was finally satisfied and came to the conclusion that all that had to be hidden was still hidden and nothing had surfaced by accident.

With that conclusion came such a sadness that it could not be ignored any longer. The obvious became so plainly open that she simply had no means to ignore it any longer.

She didn't want to hide it. She never wanted to, and she still didn't want it. So, what if people will find out about it and will judge it? All it somehow became unimportant. Like that night when she was sick, and Blake came. She still wasn't sure if he came, or if it was just her hallucinating. But still, she didn't want to hide how she felt any longer, neither from others nor from herself nor from him.

And that's why she came here.

It had been two weeks since she last saw him. These two weeks were very eventful, and after allowing herself to accept what she truly wanted, no matter if she could get it or not, life became so much easier, and time spent with Old John had taken a different turn. Instead of staying locked inside and dwelling on old stories, they spent most of the time exploring and even training.

But yesterday he left. Without even saying goodbye...

Rainee said that she shouldn't be upset about it as it was how he usually left. Also, she should not be upset or blame herself when she realised that she didn't even miss him. At first, Anniel didn't understand what Rainee was talking about, but then realisation struck that she was right! Anniel truly didn't miss Old John at all... As if this time spent together had not even mattered. If not for the forewarning Rainee gave her, Anniel would definitely have gone into self-blame mode, as she had such a good time with Old John! How could it not count?! But luckily, Rainee was here and guided her through this confusion, directing her to remember more about what he taught instead of time spent together, and it worked. That way, she could remember him much better.

That's right. Rainee came back at some point last night, and they spent all day together. Blake also came back, but she hadn't seen him. And that empty space in her heart dimmed the joy upon seeing her friend again. It only strengthened the inner resolve to speak with Blake at the first

opportunity given. However, this opportunity wasn't given as he never came to see her during the day.

That's why she had come to this place.

Anniel inhaled deeply before getting up this ladder.

So many thoughts were buzzing at the back of her mind, suggesting many “better” options than the one she had chosen to take. She couldn't argue with any of them as all were logical. Way more logical than the trail of thoughts she was following.

She didn't even know what she expected, but deep inside she knew that it was way more than any reason she had come up with so far. About a negative outcome, she didn't dare even to think, as it was so unbearable that she was afraid that it would easily break that little reserve of strength she still had to carry her forward.

“He really didn't make it easy for intruders to reach him,” Anniel thought while trying not to look down as her heart was already racing too fast and this extra pressure might be just too much for it.

Intruder... Was that really who she was? Better not to think about it either.

Anniет stopped at the door. Doubt was taking over her, pressuring her harder with each step, strengthening a thought in her head, “Should I even be coming here?” Isn’t it intruding into somebody’s life without invitation... So many thoughts were reasoning against her coming that she was slightly amazed at herself that, despite all odds, she was still standing here and not running away. She lifted her hand to knock on the door but stopped before making a sound. Instead, she slowly put that hand on a door handle, pressing it down and carefully pushing on it. The door gave way without any resistance. She walked into the room and closed the door behind, pressing on it with her back. The handle clutch made a silent “clang” noise, placing itself back in its lock.

The room was one big open space with everything one needed for living. The kitchen, sitting room, and bedroom were all in the same room. There were no lights or candles lit, but it wasn’t too dark either, as a fire burning soundlessly in a large fireplace was illuminating the room. Light also came through the very large windows on both sides of the room, one side with a view of the city, the other towards the palace.

Blake was standing at the side of the window with the city view. The lights of the streets mixed with the light from the fireplace, casting golden shades of light and shadows on his face. He didn’t show any sign of acknowledgment that he had heard her entering. He was dressed in a simple white shirt that was tucked into black trousers at the front and hung loose out at the back. A few top buttons of his shirt were undone, exposing his neck and part of his chest. It was so strange to see him dressed in a different colour than black, but it suited him nicely. Blake was leaning with one shoulder against the wall, with his hands in his pockets, and was looking at the busy streets of the city in front of him.

Anniет stood very silently, with her back pressed to the door as if making sure that she would not escape, and watched him for some time. He was so beautiful and simple – just an ordinary handsome man. Not the fierce and fearless legend of the kingdom. How she would wish that it would be truth.. That there would be no legendary general in between her and the man standing by the window. How she would wish that they were still at the School, where life was so straightforward and simple.

People say that he watches over this city day and night, so the people of the kingdom can be safe... Is it because they see him standing like this, next to the window, and looking at the scenery? It doesn’t look to her like he is watching over the people of the city.. She doesn’t think he even sees the city right now. More likely, his eyes are seeing something that his heart wants to see, and, if anything, he is looking a bit lonely...

Anniет couldn’t stand there any longer. She walked across the room and stood in front of him. He calmly moved his eyes from the window to her face without being surprised at all that she was here. Of course, he had heard her entering; she had not a single doubt about it. He had probably heard her much earlier than she reached his door.

They stood like this, looking at each other for a very long time. He didn’t say anything, and she didn’t know what to say either. Every time she wanted to speak, what she wanted to say either

seemed inappropriate, or silly, or too dull. She was starting to feel all panicky now – honestly, what could she do, what could she say to explain why she had come...

Probably sensing her discomfort, he straightened himself up and stepped forward, minimising the distance between them. Then, while still looking into her eyes, he pulled one hand out of his pocket and slowly placed his palm on her chest, right on her heart.

Strange feelings started to flow over her, bringing so many chaotic thoughts. A wave of warm, loving feelings clashed with fear and doubt, bringing proper chaos to her head.. She couldn't cope with this anymore and asked, "What is this?"

These are the feelings you have for me," answered Blake. "I sent them back to your heart.

She was a great deal confused by it. No, it could not be true. She knew very well what she was feeling; it wasn't anything like this chaos. Was it? She felt so much love for him that it almost hurt; she was just afraid that he didn't want this kind of feeling and also that it was not good to feel this way towards someone who was of such high status. That someone as simple as she was might not be a suitable match for someone like him. She was just afraid that he might not understand how she really felt about him and would push her aside for one reason or another.

While these thoughts were crossing her mind, realisation crept over her that the chaos she was receiving right at this very moment, via his hand right into her heart, was indeed a bundle of what she actually felt. She didn't know, she didn't realise that it all came in one mix. That the reasons for feelings and thoughts are left behind. Unnoticed, unseen, and only feelings are radiating as blistering chaos.

With this realisation, fear increased drastically in the mix she was receiving, to the degree that hardly anything else could be felt at all.

Seeing that tears had started to roll down her cheeks, Blake removed his hand from her heart, gently brushed away those tears, and put his hand back into his pocket.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you," he said in a deep, calm voice.

Hurt her? How on earth was he hurting her when it was she who was badgering him constantly with these chaotic and unfair feelings? How had he ever deserved it? And here she was, afraid that she might be radiating too much love and affection... Maybe there was a lot of love and affection, but under the blanket of this fear, they could hardly be felt at all.

"Why are you afraid of me?" Blake asked, as if understanding what was going on in her mind. "I am never afraid of you, so why are you afraid of me?"

That was simply too much; she could not hold it in anymore. Annet circled her arms around him in the strongest embrace and buried her face in his chest. She was not afraid of him; not for a single moment or second had she ever been afraid of the person standing in front of her. All this fear was based on possibilities, probabilities, and other things that were not even real.

He embraced her back, pressing her to his chest, but didn't try to stop her crying or to comfort her in any other way. He was simply here for her, with her. Calm, gentle, attentive, full of compassion, as he had always been.

"I am not afraid of you," she finally said after calming down a little. "I am afraid of the Black General, of the Shadow from the sky, of the Dark prince."

"Why?" he asked calmly.

“Because I don’t know him,” she replied.

After a short silence, Blake spoke again. “If you are afraid of names, then don’t use them. They were given by people who have nothing to do with me and have neither met me nor spoken to me. And if you are afraid of the person, then it is me. I am that person, as I always have been and still am. Are you afraid of me right now?”

“What a silly question,” she thought. If anything, if she had to describe the safest place in the world, that place would be this very moment, in the arms of this very person.

“When I am on duty, I don’t fall under some sort of spell, I am not losing my mind, I am not under some influence. My morals and standards don’t change just because I was ordered to do something. I don’t know how others are, but for me it doesn’t matter if I am on duty or not – if something is within what I think is right, I will act upon it; if not, I will not join it with my actions. The general’s title was given to me; I didn’t ask for it, and I do not treasure it. It is true that while in service, my life belongs first to the King and kingdom, and only then to me, but it doesn’t mean that it changes who I am. The King can either have me as I am, or, if that is not good enough, he can let me go. All it means is that I have less time for myself, that I cannot be in the places I would want to be otherwise, but it doesn’t mean that I become someone different and can return back to myself only when out of duty.”

His words sounded a bit confusing at first, but the more he spoke, the more sense they made. How could she be so silly... Of course, he didn’t change. She could feel her fears starting to drain away, as if their foundation had been removed and there was nothing left for them to hold on to.

“So what would happen if the King or someone else would say that I am not good enough for you?” she asked.

“But that simply doesn’t make any sense,” Blake sounded a bit confused. “What difference does it make to anyone what I do in my own time with my own life? If anyone would come and say to you that I am not good enough for you, would it really affect you that badly?”

“No, it wouldn’t,” she thought. “It really doesn’t make much sense when you put it that way...”

She felt so light and at ease now, as if some terrible inner battle she had been fighting forever had suddenly simply disappeared, as if it had never even existed. All she could feel was relaxation, relief, and tiredness. All the worries floated away, taking the rest of her senses with them, and a pleasant darkness came over her.

She didn’t know how much time had passed before her senses started to come back. The situation she found herself in was somehow very familiar. She was sitting on somebody’s lap, in the cradle of a gentle embrace, with her head resting on that person’s shoulder, and she could feel the warmth of the other person’s body, so unfamiliar and so nice. Before she realised where she was, a voice came from above her head:

“You really can sleep anywhere, at any time,” Blake’s voice was nothing but gentle, with a little laughter added to it. “I don’t know if I should be impressed or worried.”

OMG! She really had just fallen asleep in his embrace again! How could she? What a shame! The thoughts started to creep over her, starting to shrink her into a small ball filled with shame and self-blame. “Stop,” she said to herself at that very moment. “No, I don’t want to go there again. I have been there, I have seen how it feels, and I am simply not going back.” Clarity started to come back to her head. “What was I thinking just now! Thank god I fell asleep. If I hadn’t, then I would have missed an opportunity to wake up in these arms!”

And it was so good to be right here where she was. No, she wouldn’t change it for anything in the world, and she definitely doesn’t care if he already knows it. In fact, she hopes that he already knows, as it will spare her from saying it aloud.

“That’s my girl,” said Blake, landing a soft kiss on the top of her head. She smiled to herself and stayed in this position for a bit longer before finally opening her eyes.

Blake was sitting on the sofa in front of the fire, with one leg bent under him and her sitting on his lap. He must have carried her here after she lost consciousness. She remembered all that had happened before. Thank god she had decided not to be ashamed of anything anymore in front of this man, because remembering what he had felt from her on her arrival wasn’t anything to be proud of. She had come wanting to tell him that she loved him, and all that he could feel from her was a bunch of fear. How extraordinary... She really wanted to learn this skill of reading feelings. She would really love to know what he was feeling right now.

“Hungry,” came an answer to her thoughts, with laughter accompanying it. She laughed back too before shifting herself from his lap and curling up in a corner of the sofa.

Blake stretched his arms and legs first and then stood up and walked towards the kitchen end to look through the cupboards. Anniet was watching him and thinking to herself – how long had she slept? As she too actually felt very hungry.

“No good,” Blake said after looking into a few cupboards and finally giving up. “I wasn’t planning to stay here, so I didn’t bring anything useful with me. Shops are also closed, so we will have to improvise.”

“How long did I sleep?” Anniet finally asked. When she came, it was still early evening.

“A while,” Blake answered. Then he added in a serious voice, but with a sparkle in his eyes, “You really have to watch out. If all this mess with Rainee’s and Angus’s identities comes out, then people will get very suspicious about others too and will surely make you related in one way or another to the Sleeping Dragon.”

“Okay, okay, I will watch out,” Anniet laughed. “But what will we do now?”

“I have an idea, but there are some complications.”

“What idea, and how is it complicated?”

“There is another place where I stay sometimes, and I would like to show it to you, but it is not possible to get there on foot. I possibly could carry you, but that is where things get complicated. My dragon, as you know, is different from others. When I use it, I become a part of it.”

“I know, I have seen it,” Anniet answered. “What is the complication? You cannot carry another person?”

"I could, but I don't have hands to carry anyone..." Blake answered after a bit of hesitation. "Ren once even laughed at me, saying that for the purpose I have chosen for my life, my dragon is the most useless."

"How come?" Now Anniet was really curious. "What did she say?"

"She said that if my purpose is to protect her at any time, how can I not have hands when I am flying? If one day she were falling out of the sky, I wouldn't even be able to catch her. All I would be able to do is just help her to crash-land in disgrace at the very best..."

"..... She really said that? Oh gosh, she is really something," Anniet couldn't stop laughing after imagining that scene. Two top generals crash-landing on top of each other like pancakes.

"Later, I thought about it and how inconvenient it is, and tried to modify my dragon, but it wouldn't change the slightest bit, so eventually I gave up."

"Could you carry me on your back?" Anniet asked.

"I could, but I could not support you in any way."

"It is alright, I can hold on by myself."

"What if you fall asleep?" Blake asked, half joking.

"Ha ha ha. Let's do it." Anniet stood up, full of excitement to be in the air with him. What sleep was he talking about! It was actually like a dream come true.

Blake wasn't entirely convinced about it, but Anniet was so excited that she couldn't wait any longer.

"Come, come, let's do it," she urged him, getting herself up on a chair so she could climb on his shoulders. All fear was gone by now, and all that she could see in him again was the same man she had met all these months ago, just with extra abilities.

"Okay, but make sure you hold tight," said Blake, encouraged by her enthusiasm. He walked to the chair that Anniet was standing on and turned his back. "If we crash-land, it is going to be not just painful and undignified, but we will also have to walk back on foot."

She pressed herself to his back and hugged his neck tightly, putting her cheek against his ear. "You think too much. Don't worry, I will not let you go."

"Okay then, here we go." Blake opened a window and stepped out of it. There was a free fall for a second, and then the sound of big flapping wings, and they both shot up into the sky. Anniet cried out with excitement. It felt much better than she had ever imagined.

"I am glad you are not scared," Blake said, finally over his concerns. They glided above the empty streets of the Capital city. Blake made a big circle around it and over the palace too. Anniet was looking over his shoulder in amazement. She didn't say anything, just held onto his neck, wishing that this would last forever.

After circling over the city a couple of times, Blake turned towards the darkness of the countryside. He flew sometimes high in the sky, sometimes low to the ground. When flying over a big lake, all the reflections of the stars in the water made them feel like they had been sandwiched by the night sky from above and from below. It seemed that Blake was enjoying himself too.

After having some fun, he finally turned towards the dark wall of the mountains and landed on the steep cliff, putting Anniet down. She was so happy that she didn't even look around at first, and only after Blake pulled her closer to him when she nearly tripped over did she realise how high they were. It felt like they were standing in the middle of the sky itself, with stars so close that she even stretched her arm, trying to see if she could touch them. And so many stars! Everywhere she looked, there was just sky lit with these small diamonds. Just behind them was the mountain, like a massive wall. She looked at this beauty with awe.

"It is truly beautiful," she said aloud while looking at the stars.

"Yes, indeed it is," Blake smiled. Only he wasn't looking at the stars, but at that small, beautiful girl who, for some reason unknown to him, had entered his life with such an all-destroying force that she herself probably didn't even understand. Anniet finally sensed his intense gaze and looked back at him with a big smile. They stood like this, smiling at each other under the night sky. Then Blake pulled her closer, encircling his arm around her waist. He looked for a long time at her beautiful face and bright eyes, then lifted one hand and pressed it against her chest, the same as he had done before. Anniet felt some new, unfamiliar feelings entering her. Very full, very wide, like a never-ending ocean, they flooded her, making her realise that she was just way too small to contain all of it. She knew these feelings were not hers this time, as she had never felt like this in her entire life. He was just giving her what she had asked for before. She wanted to know what he felt, and he was letting her feel it now. There was not a trace of fear or doubt. The only thing that she knew right now was that he felt that she was beautiful beyond her understanding, and that he was grateful to the brim for her being here with him, and there was so much love and kindness in him that her body wasn't able to absorb it all. Without a second thought, she lifted herself onto her tiptoes, encircled his neck, pulled his face to hers, and gently kissed his lips. His hand left her chest and joined the other hand to press her closer to his own body, while his lips eagerly answered the kiss offered.

When short of breath, she finally let go of his neck, pulling herself away, and he reluctantly allowed her to do so.

"I am glad you are with me," he said gently, while holding her in an embrace with one hand and stroking her cheek and neck with the other. Her hands slid from his chest around his back, down and up again, finding a way under his untucked shirt and feeling his bare, cool body.

"Please don't fall asleep now," Blake whispered, with a bit of despair in his voice that made her giggle.

"I won't," she replied, stretching herself up again for another kiss.

The strong gust of cold wind reminded them where they were. It made Anniet shiver a little bit and have another look around.

"You said you come here sometimes. Do you come here to escape others?"

"You could say so."

"It is a really wonderful place, but a little cold and draughty... What do you do here?"

"One could say I live here," he smiled, "but I would say I just spend time here when there is nothing else to do."

Annet looked around again, trying to picture living alone on a windy cliff in the mountains. It wasn't an easy task. Maybe if you set up a camp around a fire and it was not raining, then it

wouldn't be too bad. In the daytime, the view must be something to behold. But he said he lived here...

"Will you stay here with me?" he asked, embracing her more tightly.

"I will stay with you here or anywhere," Anniet answered. "But what can we do now?"

"Firstly, we could go and find something to eat. I am starving, and I think you are too," answered Blake, taking her by the hand and carefully leading her away from the edge of the cliff. "Watch your step; it is way too dark for a first visit."

After walking several steps, Blake made a twisting gesture with his hand, and a small flame appeared on his palm. He lifted it to his mouth and blew it. The little flame flew away rapidly, on its way igniting two lampposts, and the surroundings were illuminated at last. Just now, Anniet realised that there was a passage through some sort of garden, one could say, and on the left of this passage stood a little cottage, and the path itself was leading somewhere further to the right. The little light turned to the cottage, entered it through the open window, and disappeared inside for a short while. Soon, the light came out again, as the fireplace inside the cottage was lit.

Anniet stood a bit frozen, looking at that cottage. The magic she had just seen was truly good, but she was more stunned at the sight of the cottage itself. So familiar that it even squeezed her airways, and she couldn't breathe for a while.

"You can laugh at me for being sentimental, but I missed my School cottage so badly that I built a replica here," Blake explained, while looking more at her than at the cottage.

"I really don't know how you do it," Anniet said in awe. "You say your magic is very small, but you have been back to this place for only a very short time, and you managed to do this. It is truly astonishing."

The little cottage in front of them was exactly the same as the one Blake had been living in at the School, and she had visited it so many times that sometimes it felt more homely to her than her own place. Blake had come back to the city the same day as she, and they had spent that day and night together. The next day, he was sent away and returned only yesterday, so realistically, he had only a few hours to build this cottage, and he did it so well, with so much detail – truly spectacular.

"You are misunderstanding," Blake explained while taking her inside. "I had a very long time to build it. Many years ago, I came to the Royal City straight to the recruiting ceremony uninvited, and no one knew how I got there. And I didn't bother to explain it to anyone. But the reality is, a few years before that, there was an incident, or should I rather say a series of incidents, that allowed me to meet Ren for the second time, and she nearly got killed trying to save me."

Anniet knew straight away what incidents he was talking about, as she had already heard it from Old John. Blake paused for a bit, as if sensing that she knew much more than he expected.

"Very well," he said. "I see the old man kept himself busy by talking. I presume that's what Ren asked him to do, so it would be hard to expect anything else. But did he tell you where I went after Ren was taken away by the King?"

"No," Anniet answered. "He just said that you were invited to join the Royal Academy and disappeared on your way to get things ready."

By now, they had entered the cottage. It was very similar to the cottage at the School, with just few adjustments.

"I disappeared because the School kidnapped me," Blake laughed.

"What do you mean, kidnapped you?"

"Exactly that. It hijacked me. I ran to pack up my things, and instead of reaching my house, I reached the School's gates. The School opened a student's door for me, and I was led to live in the very same cottage that, on my second arrival, a teacher gifted me to stay in."

Anniel looked at him with disbelief and amazement when all the dots started to connect.

"So you were invited to the School," she said eventually. "I would never, ever have thought about it."

"I wouldn't call it an invitation. When you are invited, you can choose either to go or not, and also leave when you want. I called it kidnapping and imprisonment." Blake laughed at the memory of himself in those days. "There were no other students and no teachers, just me and the headmaster. Poor woman didn't know what to do with me. I was thrashing and shouting and throwing tantrums, saying that I wanted to leave this place, demanding justice, shouting that I had to go to the Academy. In my heart then, I realised that if Ren was in trouble, there was not a single person other than the King himself that could get her out of it, and I wanted so badly to become someone who actually would be able at least to support her to the end. This desire was so strong that it actually burned me physically; I was getting sick and in pain. And on top of that, I thought that the only place where I could reach my goal was the Royal Academy. And I was already accepted to it, and all that was standing between my dreams coming true was that damn School that kidnapped me right at the time of glory and locked me in without a single chance to get out."

He sat Anniel on the sofa and walked to the cupboards, just this time with more success, as the cupboards in this house were much fuller than in the previous one – clear evidence of where the owner spent more time.

Blake was preparing a meal and smiling to himself at those distant memories that seemed so funny now but, at that time, had given him so much grief.

Anniel was trying to imagine all this scene he had just described, thinking to herself that the lives of these people were really extraordinary, full of the strangest stories.

"So you stayed in this School just with the headmaster? How long did you stay there?"

"Yes, just me and the headmaster most of the time. Then, when I started to learn things, Old John would pop in and out from time to time. I stayed there for about twenty summers, I think, but I'm not sure, as I finally lost track of counting."

"Twenty years!!! That's a lot! How did the headmaster not recognise you then?"

"It has nothing to do with her. It is just that Ren put that blasted spell on me, and everyone would not recognise me and would forget straight away after seeing me. First, I thought it was the King who did it and was very mad about it, but then I realised that the King himself was subdued by that spell, as I could feel him searching for me but never being able to see or find me. To confirm it, I even stood facing him, and watched the King going right past me. So I realised that it wasn't him after all."

"Why would Rainee do it to you, and how did she do it so that it affected even the King?" Anniel was astonished by what she had just heard.

“That, my love, you will have to ask your friend Rainee, because I don’t know the answer.” Blake brought the sandwiches and hot drinks to the table and, before sitting down, kissed her on the top of her head. Upon hearing “my love,” Anniet for a moment forgot about all that they were talking about. When he sat down, she shuffled herself to his side and curled up next to him under his arm. He hugged her with one arm, while with the other he pulled the sandwiches onto his knees so they finally could have some food.

The story he was telling was way too interesting to be put aside for too long, so Anniet probed again.

“If you disliked the School so much, why didn’t you simply leave?”

“I tried, but it wouldn’t let me out,” Blake laughed again.

“How can it be?” Anniet didn’t understand. “All you have to do is go to the front gates and walk away. And that is if the School doesn’t kick you out before that.”

What she was saying was true. Usually, it was the School that requested people to leave the premises by simply opening a portal back to the world, and one wouldn’t even think that they were leaving, but rather walking on a regular path and ending up back in the common world. That meant that all this person could get from the School had already been given. But if someone wanted to leave before that, all they had to do was walk through the front gates, and they would leave.

“Every time I walked through the gates, I would walk for some time until I reached the same gates again, and the headmaster would meet me again,” said Blake. “It is rather peculiar when I think about it now.”

“So what did you do?”

“Well, I threw as many tantrums as I could, I broke as many things as I could break, and I even tried to burn that damn place, but nothing worked. Everything restored itself.”

“Do you know why you were locked in that School?” Anniet was confused because she had never even considered such a possibility. The place always felt so nice and friendly. How could it become a prison for a child? At least now she knew why the headmaster called Blake a “pain in the undercarriage.”

“Now I know,” answered Blake, “but then I knew or understood nothing. I had only one thought in my mind – I wanted to become someone strong enough to protect Ren when she needed help. I didn’t want to be that helpless child anymore, always needing help and support. By then, she had already saved me a few times, and I had met her only twice. She was so extraordinary; she never asked for help from anyone and helped everyone, and the only time when she needed help, I was there and, surprisingly, against all odds, I was able to do it, but I didn’t, and she got stabbed in front of my eyes just because I doubted, or rather didn’t believe, that one can value another’s life over one’s own.”

Blake’s face got darker over these memories, his eyes colder, and she could see now the person that people called the Prince of Darkness. But somehow, for her, he didn’t look so dark, as all she could see was just the pain under this coldness.

“To this day, I am grateful to the King for two things from that moment. The first, obviously, is for saving Ren. It doesn’t matter that he didn’t do it for me; it doesn’t make my gratitude any smaller. And the second is that he allowed me to see that she was saved. I know by now that it

wasn't my ability to see his Flash of Lightning. He used it after I joined the ranks, and I couldn't see it, so that means that at that time the King granted me the ability to see what was happening. If he hadn't, I would probably have gone mad, and god knows where I would have ended up."

"What did you see?" Anniet asked.

"You probably already heard that story from Old John."

"Yes, but he didn't know what you saw happening," objected Anniet.

"No one knows what Old John knows, keep that in mind. You want my version of that moment? Very well then. When I was done with crying and hiding and finally realised that Deamon was able to bite through any intruder without much trouble, and that they would turn to dust at his bite, for the first time I felt a real connection to him, and I realised that he would do all and everything I tell him to do. I tried, and he did obey, chewing the one that was closest to us. Then I decided to help Ren, who was in a really difficult situation. All was good; Deamon grabbed few of them. Then I was about to direct him to the four-armed warrior, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw that one of them was getting to my mum, and instantly I diverted Deamon from the four-handed one to save my mum. It was not possible. No matter how fast he was, he couldn't get there in time across the room, so it was useless even to try, and Ren also was in no better situation. So the action I had taken helped no one. I abandoned Ren in an attempt to save my mum, but the reality is, Deamon was close enough to help Ren but too far to help my mum, so I withdrew him from where help was possible and sent him where he could do nothing. But Ren wasn't so ignorant as I was. She saw what was happening, and she threw her sword straight at the attacker, just in time to stop him. But at the same moment, the other sword came out of her chest..."

Blake closed his eyes at this distant, but still so alive, memory.

"The four-handed stabbed her from behind at the moment she threw her sword, and his other hand, with an axe, was landing to chop her in half. I could see all this in slow motion – first the sword coming out of her chest and lifting her up, then blood coming out of her mouth, then the axe landing towards her shoulder. I could see it very very slowly, but I could do nothing, as I wasn't able to move, and no one else seemed to be moving either. At that moment, he came. Riding a green, lizard-like dragon. He swung his sword once, and every single one of the invaders disintegrated into dust. At the speed everything was moving, this dust didn't even fall down but stayed in the shape of people. Then he gently pulled Rainee's body from the sword that was still piercing her. You should have seen the care he did it with. With so much gentleness... Up until then I didn't even even knew what true care looks like. Then he turned around and flew back to where he came from. When passing by me, the King looked straight into my eyes with a calm and questioning look. I will never forget either the scene when Ren nearly lost her life because of one wrong decision I made, or that look of the King."

Blake paused for a short time before continuing. "Then everything came back to normal speed, but the madness was over. There was no one left to fight, only sandy dust falling all over the ground. And then I heard how people were telling officers that Ren too had turned into dust. I couldn't cope with it, so I had to speak up. And all the rest you already know."

He kept quiet for a while, then put the now-empty plate on the table and reached for the hot drinks, gave one to Anniet and kept one for himself, before sitting back in that pleasant comfort of her company.

“Is there anything else you would like to know?” he asked, putting his arm back around her.

“Of course there is,” she said eagerly. “You never finished about the School and how you finally broke out of it.”

“Oh yes, okay, here we go. Where did I stop?”

“You were breaking and burning the School and trying to run away.”

“That’s right. So weeks were passing by, and nothing changed much, just my teacher was getting more and more anxious and maybe even a little depressed. She tried to explain to me that this place was not a prison, that there must be something that I needed from it if I was being sent over and over back to it. According to her, every time I left through the gates, the School would let me go. But because of what I wanted to do in my life, the best option for me was to go through the School, so it would call me back again.

Surely, I didn’t believe her. In fact, I didn’t even try to understand or listen. All I understood was that it shouldn’t be a prison, and this place was keeping me here for supposedly my best interests. It was obvious by that time, even in the ignorant state I was in then, that the place was full of magic, and despite being just a place, it was also somehow alive on its own. So as threatening the headmaster didn’t do any good, nor did threatening the School itself, I drew the last “trick” from my sleeve.

I threatened the School with my own life. If this place was supposed to do only good for me, then, if I had either to die or to leave, it surely would have to let me leave. So I announced that aloud and ran to the mountains, got to the top of the very same cliff where Rainee liked to sit, and jumped down without a second thought.”

“No way!” Annet was terrified. “What did you expect to achieve?”

“Well, the headmaster had told me so many times that when the School thinks that it cannot help me in any way anymore, it will open a portal back to the real world. So I presume I was expecting such a portal to open. I don’t even remember. Rather, most likely, I wasn’t even thinking that much. I know for sure I didn’t want to die and didn’t even consider that this action, because of my stupidity, could end up in death. I think The One is protecting stupid and ignorant children with his highest might.”

“So what happened? Where did you fall?”

“Well, I never fell, I flew,” answered Blake, this time with a smile on his face. “That was the first time I could use my wings.”

They stayed in silence for a little while, Blake drawn back into this pleasant memory, and Annet trying to picture this story in her head – a child so determined to get what he wanted at any cost. Even to this extreme.

“Why do you think it happened? Do you think if I wanted to fly and jumped, I would get wings too?”

“I think you would be flattened at the bottom, bringing the first casualty to the School’s history,” Blake laughed. “Please never jump off the cliff with a desire to fly before you can actually fly. If you cannot fly jumping from a chair or a table, then jumping from somewhere higher would not make any difference, just the consequences would be fatal.”

“But then why wasn’t it fatal for you?”

“I think there was a combination of factors. First, the School itself is a magical place that is gifted to people to achieve what they truly want. Second, that cliff is even more special. I cannot tell you how, but if you could feel its energy, it feels like god itself was sitting at the place that Ren liked to sit. The feeling is not possible to describe, but the world from there looks completely different. Third, I didn’t jump to fly, I didn’t jump to die, I didn’t even jump to threaten. I simply knew at that very moment, in that very space, what I wanted, and I thought I had found the way. As I said just now, I believe god is looking after people the most when they act in innocent ignorance. If I were to jump with the thought that he has to give me something because I jumped, he would not. You can ask for the same while standing on the ground; why ask for it while threatening your life at the same moment?”

“For me, it was an eye-opening moment,” he continued his story. “From that moment, I finally and truly understood that I was sent there for the very same reason that I was asking for all this time. If you think about it, it was so obvious. What was the point of me going to study in the Royal Academy when the teachers there are even of lower ranks than the King’s officers who didn’t make it in time to save Ren, or me, or my mum? Only the King himself made it in time. So, if I wanted to be better than all these officers combined, how could they teach me? They couldn’t teach me more than they knew, so it wasn’t the place for me to begin with. I remember crash-landing in the middle of the central square and crying myself to sleep, terrified of my own blindness. Poor headmaster, I doubt any of her students have ever given her so much grief, and I hope none ever will. She must have brought me back to her office from that square where I passed out.”

There, he stopped his story again to finish his drink.

Anniet drained her cup too and asked eagerly.

“And then?”

“And then? And then I started to study. There were so many books about everything, not just about science, but also about magic, about how to connect to your inner self, how to connect to The One, how to breathe, how to feel, how to listen, how to fight, the reasons for doing all that, and any other subject you can think of. There are even books about what qualities you need to develop to be chosen by the King’s powers. You want to be King? Go and study.”

Anniet felt a little bit ashamed now that she had used that library so little.

“There is no need for shame there. People don’t learn only because knowledge is available. They are drawn only to the subjects that they are interested in; all the rest is still open and available to use if they choose to, but it is not common to do so, even if pointed out by others. I was drawn to many things, as if allowed to choose the path I wanted to take. I tried to learn it all at the beginning, then I understood that it is not possible to learn and remember it all. That was a bit of a shock to me. But The One is very close there, and if you allow him to lead you, he will show you the best way. So I was taught how to understand, instead of remember. And in that way, you can learn much more. When I was stuck on martial arts, as there was no one to practise with, Old John came, as if requested for my assistance. After that, I tried to cheat and learned that it didn’t work. I tried to say that I couldn’t understand one thing or another on my own and that I needed a teacher, but nothing would happen. And only after I really put all the effort I had into getting all I wanted from the resources already available to me would Old John come to correct me, or show me new ways.”

“But why does it have to be like this?” Anniet wondered. “Wouldn’t it be much easier and faster for you to learn with a teacher at a hand?”

“It might well be, but we all have different destinies, different goals, different abilities, and we have to be taught different things. For me, in that way, I learned a fundamental universal truth: that all that I need at this very moment is always at the tips of my fingers. All I have to do is stretch an arm and take it, instead of waiting until someone else comes and hands it to me. To accept is alright, but to wait in expectation is not. The moment things I really need are out of my own reach, help will be provided, and if it doesn’t come, there are only two options: first, I am sitting in a tantrum, imagining that the things I want are different from the things I can get, or there is no one in this world strong enough to help me, and despite what I am thinking, I am still the best option to be in this place. Ren was trying to tell me this years ago, but then, despite her best efforts, I didn’t understand the smallest bit of what she was saying. I might be very stubborn, or it has to come this way, not by someone telling you, but by understanding it yourself.”

Blake turned towards Anniet and ran his hand over her cheek, down her neck, in a gentle stroke before continuing. “Now I don’t fight life anymore, because I know that it is bringing me the best that I can get from it. All I have to do is just see what is coming my way, accept it, and appreciate it.”

She could feel his deep gaze going straight through her heart, right to her soul. He lifted her chin, leaned forward, and kissed her again, first gently, then with more and more passion, and she happily answered the kiss. He pulled himself away from her lips while still gently holding her face and still looking directly into her eyes.

“Will you stay with me?” he asked in a deep voice.

“Yes, I will,” Anniet heard her own voice as if from a distance.

“I mean not just tonight. Would you stay in my life? Would you agree to become a part of it, and would you allow me to become a part of yours?” Then he added with a slightly sad smile, “As long as you feel comfortable with me overshadowing all of it.”

“Didn’t it already happen?” Anniet wondered. How did it happen that when he could go through most of her feelings and thoughts as if they were his own, he still didn’t understand it yet? So she said, “From my side, you are already a part of my life as much as you want to be in it, and it is difficult for me to imagine my life without you in it.”

“This is what I wanted to hear aloud,” Blake smiled, pulling her close for another kiss, only this time they didn’t feel any need to limit themselves there.

It was well into the morning, and Anniet was lying in the bed in Blake’s embrace, watching him sleep. She was looking at him breathing peacefully while, at the same time, his hand was still keeping a tight grip around her chest and his head was resting on her shoulder. Somehow, she knew that at her smallest movement he would wake up, so she was lying very still and just watching him.

Cold, arrogant, and full of himself... What baloney... And how had people got so wrong in describing him? She had never even known a more sensitive and caring person in her entire life. Anthony, whom she had met at the School, was not the slightest bit different from this general sleeping next to her. Of course, he wasn’t, because it was the same person, just under a different

name. She has to remember never to trust any stories about anyone anymore before meeting someone in person and knowing them better. Let people talk; she doesn't want to take any part in it anymore.

She was looking at his black hair spreading over his wide and muscular shoulders, his beautiful back lifting slowly up and down with every inhale, and was fighting the urge to run her fingers down the curve of his spine. She thought that to see him sleeping like this was a rare occasion, as, to be honest, she had never seen him sleeping before. At some point, she even thought he didn't need sleep. So she decided to stay still and just keep enjoying this moment of peace and tranquillity.

But what do you know, as soon as her thoughts drifted somewhere else, her hand completely disobeyed her decision, and she felt her fingers gently sliding down from his shoulders to the bottom of his back.

Well, she had done it... He didn't flinch or move at all, and his breathing didn't change, but she knew he wasn't sleeping any longer. What a pity, she thought, at the same time travelling with her palm back up his back and gently caressing his hair. She could feel on her skin that he had started to smile and naturally smiled back. Then she slid a bit lower in the bed to match his face with her own. He lifted up his body weight to allow her that movement and pressed back down when she stopped. They looked at each other for a while, smiling like this for no apparent reason, before closing their lips together again.

Next morning, after breakfast, or rather late lunch, Blake asked, "Would you like to go for a swim?"

He was standing barefoot and topless by the sink, just finished washing dishes. She had tried to help him but was carried back to the armchair, where she stayed obediently, dressed just in his light cotton shirt. She thought now that this was a tactical move to put on this shirt. It was not just much looser and lighter than her clothes, but also left Blake no other option than to stay with his bare upper half, and now she could enjoy looking at him.

Blake smiled and shook his head as if in disbelief in response to these thoughts. She was used to it by now, that she didn't have to talk for her thoughts to reach him, but it was even better that she didn't have to worry about what to say and what to keep for herself.

Swimming sounded pretty attractive, and she stood up, going to get her clothes, but he stopped her, saying, "No need, there is no one else here". That brought her memories back to where they were. Of course, how could she forget that they literally flew up here like birds, or rather, he did the flying and she did the riding.

"Let's go then," she said, walking to the door, and Blake followed behind. When they came out, the sun was still high up, shining right on them, and it was pleasantly warm. She looked again at the cottage in bewilderment, at how similar it was to the one she knew from School. Blake took her by the hand.

"Want to look around first?" he asked, and she nodded back.

He took her back the same way as they came yesterday. The view was astonishing. The rock they were standing on was sticking out into the air from this steep, high cliff. Beneath them was nothing, and at the bottom of this nothing was a big lake surrounded by forests, but it was so far

down that it was difficult to see any details. Further on, there were farmers' fields, and beyond them, a few roads leading to the city in the far distance.

"Is that the Capital?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Can you see it?" Suddenly, she remembered that night when Blake was flying away and Rainee enchanted her with some supreme seeing. She was wondering if Blake had the same vision.

"Yes, I can see it," answered Blake, hugging her from behind, and she could again experience the same magical eyesight – no matter how far things were, if they were not covered by objects, everything could be seen down to the smallest detail, as if it were very close. Truly magical... So he could watch the city even from here. She suddenly wondered if this was what the people of the city meant when they said he watched over them.

"Don't pay any attention to them," he said, "not to what they say nor to what they think. Let them be left to their own devices. All they do is just invent stories and then believe in them themselves – truly remarkable, but not in a good way. Let's go," he added, leading her again along that little passage, but walking past the cottage and walking further to the right.

After walking for a bit, they started to hear running water. Soon, they reached a wide opening with a large pool in it. A stream of water was running from the mountain wall, making its way right into that pool, filling it with crystal-clear water, and when the pool was overflowing, water would leave it from an opening to the side, continuing its way down the cliff. It was difficult to say if this pool was natural. If it was, then someone had definitely added to it

"This is truly nice," Anniet said, quickly dropping the shirt down and stepping into the pool. She expected the water to be cold and was pleasantly surprised that it actually was nice and warm, as warm as a bath at home. "Wow, that's truly remarkable. How is it that water in a mountain is so warm?"

"Just a few experiments with natural resources a bit higher up," Blake replied, while submerging himself in the water too.

They swam to the farther side, where the water was leaving the pool. The view from there was also astonishing in a different way. This part was in a niche of the mountain, and all one could see was just walls of stone and sides of the mountain covered with flowers and greenery. Water was running down the mountain in a few places, making a very soothing sound. This place could not be seen from the land, only if someone climbed above them or onto the other mountain on the other side of the rift. Anniet looked down where the water was falling, and it actually made a small waterfall before hitting the stones several meters beneath.

"This place is really secluded," Anniet said.

"Built for relaxation," Blake answered, hugging her and playfully pulling her under the water.

It was a very unusual feeling to be kissing like this underwater. Nice, but also a little bit scary to be held like this by Blake's strong arms. This fear started to grow, and panic took over and brought with it thoughts of drowning. Instantly, she was short of air. To her own surprise, at the very same moment, her face was out of the water, just in time to breathe freely.

Anniet laughed at herself for getting so scared and felt regret for worrying so much for no reason. If she hadn't, then she would have been able to stay underwater for much longer. It felt so

good to be kissed like this while submerged under the surface. Like being in a completely different world, enclosed from every side. Before she could even think ‘never mind,’ she was pulled underwater again, this time much deeper.

Instantly, fear returned, despite her trying to fight it back. With fear, panic and the need for air came back too. And at the very moment when she wanted to breathe, she was back on the surface again.

It happened over and over, countless times, until finally she got tired of being afraid, and all her attention slowly returned to Blake’s kissing lips that never, even for a second, stopped wandering over her body. Feeling her attention returning to him brought a smile to Blake’s face, and this smile brought happiness to Anniet’s heart. And that was the end of her worries.

Underwater or above water, she simply didn’t think and didn’t care. She was breathing whenever she needed a breath, and there wasn’t a single time that Blake would fail to bring her back to the surface in time.

It even gave Anniet the impression that she could breathe underwater, or that water would move away, allowing her to breathe. It brought a lot of wonder to her scattered mind, but soon even that became completely irrelevant and not important, as it made no difference to the moment. At some point, the tickling water from a waterfall running from her neck down her back added to Blake’s hands and lips, enhancing this overwhelming feeling that was taking over her.

All the voices telling her that this is not how the world works, not how love is supposed to be, were simply too quiet to break through these extraordinary sensations her body was going through right now, and soon even Blake himself became less central.

Right now, Anniet felt like life was revolving only around her, and everything that was happening in this life was for one purpose — to make her happy and bring as much joy and pleasure as she possibly could handle.

When her body got exhausted and some sanity returned to her mind, at first she was terrified at such a way of feeling, but seeing Blake’s shining eyes and happy face, she chose not to dwell on it any longer, and life suddenly became a beautiful place again.

One bank of the pool was deliberately shaped into sloping sand seats, and that’s where they eventually settled down.

She still wasn’t sure about the experience she had just been through, thinking that it might not be very good to feel that way. Well, there was nothing wrong with the word “good”, as it did feel incredibly good, to the point that she was even afraid to dwell too much on it, so it wouldn’t take over her again, as she wasn’t sure that it was appropriate to feel so self-centred. Wasn’t it way too selfish?

"Thank you." Blake interrupted her thoughts, pressing her harder to his side and nuzzling into her hair.

"For what?"

"For letting me make you happy."

Was it him who was supposed to say thanks...?

"Yes." Blake’s indisputable voice cut through her thoughts, leaving no room for doubt. "It makes me happy when you feel this way. The more, the better."

And that was it. No room left for disagreement. It would be silly to fight it if it made them both happy and no one unhappy.

That's how they spent time, enjoying warm water, singing birds, and each other's company.

As time passed, Anniel's curiosity about Blake's past returned.

"You know, you still didn't finish your story yesterday."

"What story?" Blake asked.

"The one from School."

"Didn't I? I thought I did. What else would you like to know?"

"How did you manage to leave in the end?"

"Oh, that. Nothing special. The School ejected me same as everyone else when it was done with me." Blake laughed. "I didn't even have time to say my thanks and goodbyes to my teacher."

"And where did you end up when the School opened a portal for you?"

"That bit is pretty good. It spat me out right in the Royal Palace, in a recruiting ceremony. I opened the door to walk into a library and ended up walking through the door into the ceremony hall, just as the most promising recruits were being called one by one. In fact, Ren had already been before me and, as I found out later, made a massive ruckus there, and then, when they were ready for the next candidate, I walked in through the door.

Good thing I recognised the place and what was going on from John's stories. I saw Ren standing in the line of the new recruits with her beautiful rainbow cloak, realised that she had joined the King's Army, and walked straight to the King. Because if she was in the King's Army, I wanted to be there too, so I could serve under her command. She recognised me despite me looking much older, and I think the King recognised me too. Everyone else was whispering, asking who I was, how I got in here, and similar, but no one dared to make an open fuss in front of the King.

So next thing I know, I was asked to confirm that I wanted to serve under the King's command. I said I wanted to serve under Ren's command. What else could I say? To serve the King was never my dream. That answer brought an outburst of displeasure from most. But the King silenced them and said it would depend on my rank if I could serve under Ren, and because Ren was serving directly under him, everyone who joined her division would anyway be first submitted to the King's authority.

He asked if this suited me. I said it did. Then he asked if I am asking for the King's gift. I said no, because I wanted no gifts from the King or anyone else. And then, next moment, puff, and I was standing there all dressed posh in black, with an overgrown Deamon by my side and everyone bowing to me. The King said, "Take your stand, General." I stood next to Ren, and that is where I still stand today, as long as I am allowed to do so."

Anniel listened to this side of the story, bewildered. The story of how he became a general was one of the most outstanding events in inauguration history, and here he told it just like that. Nothing planned, nothing expected, just an open heart to take the most of the situations he was dropped into.

"I know people like to talk about it as if I used some incredible magic to get there and was trying to show the King that he had no power over me and so on," Blake said, as if answering her thoughts, "but the reality is completely different. I didn't use any magic. I was just dropped there without any warning, and I didn't mean any disrespect to the King. I just said what I was thinking,

explaining what I had come for and what my goals were. All else is just a fabrication of people who don't want to know the truth. That is why I say not to listen to them, as they talk nonsense all the time and try to sell it as the truth and, what is most surprising, always find someone willing to believe it."

While they were relaxed like this, with their legs floating in the water and their backs resting on this soft sandy bank, a silvery hawk flew down right from the sky and landed on the edge of the pool. Anniet first thought it had come for a drink and kept quiet not to spook it away, but the hawk was just sitting there, looking at them. After watching it for some time, Anniet thought it was rather unusual — there were many more birds around, she could hear them and see them, but this one was way too brave.

"Is it your pet?" she turned to Blake, thinking maybe it was a domesticated hawk.

"No, it is definitely not my pet," Blake laughed. "Knowing how bad-tempered this creature can be, I wouldn't dare to call her a pet at all."

Then he turned towards the bird and addressed it directly.

"She is here with me and safe. No harm will come to her — don't worry."

As if content with this answer, the bird flapped its wings and shot into the sky, then somersaulted in the air and came back down to the pool, soaring above the water with its wings slightly touching the water's surface. Then it got back to the sky and disappeared behind the wall of the mountain.

"What was it?" Anniet was curious now. "This hawk's flying style is very similar to yours."

"You might be right, but there is not much wonder in it, as you could call her my flying teacher." Blake answered, moving his eyes from the sky to Anniet. "It was Silver. Ren must be worried about you, so she sent it to find you."

"That was Ren's dragon? The same one who nearly burned us all to ashes at the School?"

"I told you that she might be very bad-tempered," Blake laughed.

"How did she know that I was here with you? Did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her, but she had a hunch."

"I thought dragons were supposed to stay on the owner's body when not in use?"

"They don't have to, but because they would take too much room and would cause too much hassle, there is a rule not to let dragons loose at any time. Think for yourself how the place would look with 500 soldiers and their dragons in a training yard. So it is an ancient custom to keep them away. And somehow this rule has become pushed to the extreme of prohibiting dragons from being loose. I think that is not right, but never mind about it.

Ren is different. She never accepted the King's gift. From what we knew before, she was not even supposed to have a dragon. But she did. So everyone believes that the King gifted the dragon to her anyway. But as it turned out from the information Ren brought from the Living Library, the whole concept of the King's gift was faulty from the beginning — a complete misunderstanding.

So Ren's dragon is not locked to only one shape. From what we know now, she is not a shape-shifting dragon, but simply hasn't decided yet what shape she wants to be. So she usually just runs around in any shape she wants. The funny thing is that most people still don't know about it."

"You use your dragon in the Palace," Anniet pointed out.

"Yes," confirmed Blake. "They don't know what to do with me either, so they stay away. For one, I don't believe in this custom becoming a rule. I think it should still be just common sense, not a "must". Second, my wings are my wings. If I have legs, I can walk, so if I have wings, I can fly. And again, they don't fully understand that Deamon is my dragon, as I too never accepted the King's gift. Deamon came with me to the inauguration ceremony and didn't change a lot, so they are not sure. And third, there is no one to enforce this rule on me — Ren won't do it, and the King wouldn't. Angus wouldn't do it even if he had authority, so all everyone else can do is just eat their anger."

"You are so cold when talking about other people," Anniet said. "Do you disdain them? You think them lesser?"

Blake laid himself down in the water for a short time, then sat up before talking.

"No, I do not disdain them, and I don't think they are lesser. I disdain what they are trying to present, or should I say, pretend to be, according to the situation. Also, the way they try to control others in an attempt to present themselves as having better value.

If you want to become better at something, then the only person you need to work on is yourself. If you make others kneel to look taller, then you are not taller at all. Everyone else is just kneeling. What does it have to do with you being taller?

It is difficult to explain. When you cannot see the difference between what one is and what one acts to be, it is impossible to understand. I walked into the School without this ability and walked out with it, so the difference was immense."

"Did you learn it in School?"

"Yes, I thought I didn't succeed, as the only people I could test it on were the headmaster and Old John. From what I know now, the headmaster is one of the rare people who shows the world her true self, and Old John is impossible to understand."

"Would you teach me?" Anniet asked carefully.

"I can teach you anything I know, as long as you're interested in it," Blake said, turning towards her and giving her a kiss. "But let's go home. It is getting a bit cold now."

In the late evening, they were sitting on the edge of the cliff. They had just finished their supper right here under the open sky, and now Anniet was sitting on the very edge, dangling her legs down and enjoying the view and the company.

The view was perfect — the city lit up with evening lights and lots of smaller settlements around it were complementing the darkness of the woodland beneath them, and a sky full of stars covered it all from above.

The company was even better. Blake was holding her from behind in his embrace, as if making sure she would not slide down and disappear into the darkness. With his head on her shoulder, she could feel every breath he exhaled on her neck and cheek. She knew he knew she liked it, and it made them both happy.

There was a question in her head that she had wanted to ask for some time now, but just didn't know how, and Blake wasn't helping her with it either, as if not knowing what was bothering her, so she finally asked.

During all those months we spent at School, you never treated me like this. What has changed now?"

It was true. She never hid that she liked him, and he had always been very friendly, attentive, and responsive to her, but never indicated that he might like her more than just as a close friend. She accepted it, as she was happy with this friendship, and she must admit she never said aloud that the feelings she had might be of different kind. But knowing him now, he must have sensed it long ago, but never made any indication about it until now, when they had come to the Capital.

She could feel him smiling at this question that she finally squeezed out.

"It would have been a lie," he answered.

"What lie?" she asked, not understanding.

"A lie to accept your love or offer my own," he said. "You had those feelings for Anthony, and I could not tell you who I really was. To offer my love to you under a false life would have been wrong. Even if I had lived that way for the rest of my life, it still would not have been truly me.

I would not lie to you, nor could I speak the truth. I could feel the bond between you and me, but only from my side was it true, as it was from me to you. From your side, it could not be true, as it was from you to Anthony, not to the full me. A relationship like this would be based on a lie."

"What would you have done if I had confessed my feelings to you then?" she asked.

"Truth be told, I don't know," he answered. "I often thought about it, as any action available to me would have been a lie and eventually would have brought pain to you. There are no "white lies", as people call them. Every lie will bring pain at some point to the one it was told to. If I lie to you, that means I hurt you, and it will bring you pain sooner or later.

The only way I could see was to leave my past behind, never to return to it, to become a different person, not just pretend to be one. To do it would mean that even if the way to my past became available again, I would not take it, as there would be no such person left."

"Is such a thing even possible?"

"Yes, it is. And for a short time, I thought that life was taking me in that direction, just to realise that, despite all that I thought before, I do like and value myself as I am now, and even the lifestyle I am living.

And then your bond with Ren strengthened immensely, and I understood it could not be the case. For me to stay with you would mean cutting all ties to that part of life where Ren was central. It could not be done while she was becoming central in your life."

She was quiet for a while, thinking how complicated that time must have been for him, and then asked teasingly.

"So you would deny me this handsome body of yours?"

"Body? As in sex? You can have my body whenever you want. It belongs to you the same as to me." He changed his position, lying himself down on his back on the very edge to put his head on her lap. Her brain knew that if he fell, he could fly back, but it didn't help, and she unconsciously held tight onto him so he would not slide off.

He smiled at this action, picked up her hand, kissed her palm, and placed it back where it was.

"Sex on its own, without love, means nothing to me," he spoke again. "Been there, done that, and I pray the Lord helps me from ever experiencing it again. How detached one has to be from oneself to even bear it, never mind enjoy it."

A slight shiver ran down his body, as if he was trying to shake something very unpleasant away.

Anniel was speechless for a while. She had never heard anyone talking like this before. Especially when they had been doing this so much for the past twenty-four hours, and she thought it felt really good. She hadn't realised that he was feeling completely different about it... In reality, she thought that he enjoyed it very much too. She could not understand it, and she definitely would not dare to ask about it.

"How come that you have such strong feelings about this?" she asked eventually.

"Let me first answer your real question, so it will not linger around, bringing disturbance to your heart," Blake answered, looking into her eyes from below. "I have enjoyed every moment I spent with you. Sex was just an extra layer, an extra bonus, you could say. I liked it very much and hope it will keep happening."

He sat himself up to run his fingers through her hair and kissed her before lying back on her lap with his face towards the sky.

"About the question you voiced aloud," he said, "it's a chain of events, you could say. I somehow managed to lead myself astray by trying to be "normal" — that is, trying to act as most

people do, as surely if something makes everyone happy, that means it has to be a good thing. Right?

Especially when, after I was appointed general and became famous amongst people, there was hardly a woman who wouldn't want to get into some sort of relationship with me. I didn't know very much then, I didn't mind having some fun, and I didn't mind looking for love. Ren and Angus always looked so happy to me, so I wanted to experience it too.

So I plunged myself into some sort of nightmare. Thank god Ren fished me out of it." He made a little laughing sound to himself that didn't sound happy at all. "I presume I can add this one to the many times when she has saved me. I am starting to think maybe I am following her so she would not miss an opportunity to save my sorry life over and over again.

Anyway, all I learned was that people are very strange creatures. They always think and feel one thing but say something completely different, and it is not because they don't know. If you bring it up with them, they will deny it as if their lives depend on it. You know, they would rather kill than tell the truth or hear the truth about themselves.

So first I learned that sex is some ominous thing, where a woman wants to be with someone she imagines me to be and expects me to behave by some guidebook that is not even known to me. And if I obey, then I get a "treat". If I disagree, then she adds some extra lines to that book and then expects me to behave by that updated book. What a tragedy.

A suit in a shop with a tag on it is allowed more personality than people would allow me to have when I am with them.

Then Ren told me that I brought all this on myself, as I should look for love, not for sex. I tried and realised that there is no such thing as love. It is just compromises and agreements, and if being loved means belonging to someone, then it didn't sound right to me. I told Ren I really didn't understand how she could cope with this torture."

"So how did she save you?" Anniet asked quietly.

"She took me away under some minor mission for a few months, where there was no one around, just me, her, Angus, and Ruffus. And we actually did nothing for days and days and days. All the mud that had piled up inside me started to wash off somehow, and then she let me feel some of her feelings towards Angus.

Don't know how she does it — to share past feelings is not the same as to share what is happening right now. She shared how she felt about him, and it was not a sudden passion thing, not a belonging as some sort of attribute or combined force, but one life with one and only person. Doesn't matter if that person is near or away. Doesn't even matter if you have ever met this person, it still exists.

She said it was easy for her because Angus was always in her life, so she never had a single doubt where she belonged. She never needed to try to find someone, as he was never missing from her life, and sex or no sex doesn't really even make a difference."

"As it's all about love that is only for that person and is not possible to share with someone else. She said it is like two pieces of one thing broken in half — when you have one half, you can try to match it with a different piece by adding some glue and filling. It will stick for the time being,

but with your real second half, all filling and glue and any other mess has to be removed, and when both sides are bare, with no pretence or lies in between, they will match perfectly.

It cannot match with anyone else without all that filling added.

'That is the main difference,' she said then. 'If someone is trying to match you by trying to change to fit you somehow, or if you are trying to change because otherwise you don't fit together, then this will bring only destruction. If it is your second half, then it will create an untrue mess in between that will make your bond weaker. Or if it is not your second half, it will glue you somewhere you don't belong. One way or another, it is wrong, as in the mess of this, you lose yourself. If you want a true relationship, always be yourself, even if other people don't like it or even hate it — your second half will love you that way.'

He fell silent before continuing again.

"Then I stopped caring about what other people thought about me and realised how easy it became to live like this. Why do I need them in my life if they want only some imaginary figure? They can have their own tales and stories, turning them into legends, and I will live my life as I like it to be.

For the first ten or so years, I was on the lookout for my second half, but never found anyone. Then, at some point, I thought to myself, maybe she simply passed away and is not living in this world anymore. I asked The One directly, 'Is my second half living on earth?' And the answer was crisp and clear — 'No.' Then I asked if she exist at all, and he said yes. I asked if I could connect to her while I am on earth and she is not, and he said no. I asked if I would be able to meet her when we both are on the other side, and he said yes. So I didn't have any doubts anymore and gave up on trying to become a family man for good."

He was looking at the stars with a smile playing on his face for a few minutes, and Anniet was watching him, trying to unravel all this incredible information that was presented to her.

"And then?" she asked finally.

"And then?" he asked, looking back at her. "And then, one late night, when everything looked grim and out of hand, a young little lady came knocking on my door because she couldn't find her home and was hoping I could help her find it."

He took his hand from under his head and pressed it to her cheek fondly.

"I really couldn't find it," Anniet said, laughing while leaning into his hand that was gently stroking her face.

Blake stood up and helped Anniet to stand up too. He hugged her, pulling her firmly against him before speaking again.

"But I think you found it very well, as I believe your home is with me, and The One led you to it by the shortest route."

He gave her a short kiss before lifting her in his arms and turning to the cottage.

"So you think I am your second half?" Anniet asked curiously.

"No, I don't think so," Blake said. "I know it. I am not saying you have to take my word for it, and it will not upset me in the slightest if you don't. You can travel the world to get more experience and find it yourself. On my part, I will just wait until you come back to me in this life or another, because I don't have any doubt about it."

"I don't want to travel by myself anywhere," Anniet quickly denied that offer. "I was wondering how The One could tell you that your second half had passed away when I am very much alive. I didn't know he could get things wrong."

"The One never gets things wrong. It is just us, with our presumptions, misunderstanding the answers," Blake replied with a smile. "I asked if you were in this world, and he said no. It never crossed my mind that it was because you hadn't been born yet. The day you entered my cottage, I knew exactly who you were. I didn't know anything about your life up to that day, but I knew that my search was over. Until you came, I didn't even know that I was still searching."

He laughed, entering the house.

"Is that too much for you to handle?" he asked.

"No," Anniet replied, "but I just completely realised how far away from the truth all the tales about you are. Everyone calls you cold, with a heart of stone, when you are simply just a softie."

"Hope it is not too disappointing," Blake said, putting her down on the bed.

"I thought you didn't like sex," Anniet smiled at him.

"Me too," Blake replied, getting on the bed too and leaning over her, "but I have made new discoveries and had a change of heart."

Rainee stood by the window, waiting until Silver came back. She already knew where Annet had gone. She could see, hear, and feel all her dragon could, so she was waiting not for a reply, but for Silver herself.

It wasn't necessary, as Silver would find her anywhere, and never before would it have occurred to Rainee to stand and wait for her to come back. But never before had she known what it meant to live without Silver. What real loss means, one could understand only after losing something. To get Silver back was as close to a miracle as Rainee could imagine.

She stretched her hand for Silver to land, but of course Silver didn't pay any attention to her fondness and landed on the sofa, turning back into the kitten. Rainee shook her head, walked to that little ball of fur, picked it up, and pressed her to her chest.

"I love you so much, you know," she said to the kitten. "I just want to hug you. Stop fighting."

But the kitten didn't seem to want any cuddles and was fighting back hard with her tiny little claws. She stopped only after Rainee put her down in defeat.

"So, okay, what should I do now?" Rainee addressed herself.

It was a strange feeling to be here and to have spare time on her hands that she didn't have to share between duties and people. She was having difficulty remembering what she did when there was nothing to do. She would go to see Angus or the King at such an opportunity, but Angus wasn't here, and she was still having inner issues towards the King, so she didn't want to face him unless she had to.

"Library," she decided and turned to the door. Silver jumped on her shoulder straight away, nuzzling against her ear.

"You little traitor. When I want some cuddles, I cannot get any, but I have to cope with your affection at any time you want."

Despite her harsh words, her tone and tenderness towards the little creature were obviously different.

In the library, she thought what an enormous task she had in front of her, to update all the outdated and false information that was presented here and that didn't match the truth she had found on her travels. She ran her eyes through the shelves, reminding herself what subject had what information, and piled several books in two piles. One pile for incomplete, another for lies.

Then she sat down to do some writing, wondering what the best option would be. Modern typing was much faster, but she did not really like it, while handwriting would take a very long time.

"Okay, neither then," she said to herself.

She thought about what she wanted to write and in what words to describe it, and placed her hand over the book. Words started to appear on the empty pages, and in just a couple of minutes, several pages were written that way.

The downside of writing this way was that she had to read everything she had written and fix the mistakes, as this type of writing required enormous concentration, and any additional thought that would cross her mind at the moment of imprinting information would be printed too.

And recently, her head was always occupied with too many side thoughts. If she did not read through it after each attempt, she might end up with a very peculiar book containing parts of unrelated information based on her inner thoughts. It had never been a problem before, but recently she had been dragged into lots of secrets and worries, so she had to be mindful of what she was printing.

After a couple of hours of work, she heard someone entering the library and walking towards her. A lieutenant from the Royal Academy had come looking for her. After Rainee acknowledged him, he explained what he had come for.

"General Blake was assigned to duty this morning, but he never showed up. And it is not possible to reach him through any communication."

"Assigned by whom?" Rainee asked in confusion.

"By General Gerald," the lieutenant reported.

"General Gerald doesn't have the authority to assign any duties to General Blake," said Rainee. "How did this misunderstanding happen?"

She could sense the lieutenant's discomfort as he stood there with trepidation, not knowing what to say.

"Inform General Gerald that I myself will fill in the times assigned to General Blake for three days, starting today, to dispel any confusion. He can use this time to rearrange the timetables into the right order. Inform General Gerald that he is forgiven this time, as there wasn't much time for him to adjust to the changes," said Rainee. "Was General Gerald acting on his own initiative?"

Again, there was no answer to her question. She lifted her eyes from the book to the lieutenant. At once, he snapped out of that uncertainty and reported that it was a joint decision of several officers, counsellors, and a few ministers. "I see," said Rainee, as she finished reading what she had just written in the book and being pleased with herself for not making any mistakes. She closed her book and put it aside.

"Let the Cabinet of Officers and the Cabinet of Ministers know that in three days, I will be presenting an educational class about ranks and order in the Royal Quarters for new recruits. I have just decided to expand this class and make it compulsory for everyone who is not sure or has forgotten about rankings, responsibilities, and influence."

She stood up from the chair.

"In other words, everyone who holds any rank, and everyone who doesn't know, is not sure, or has forgotten how ranking works, must attend. What class was Blake assigned to today, and what time?"

"It is an advanced sword mastery class in the Willow Pavilion, and it already should have started."

"Then I will see you there shortly," she said. A silver light flashed, and she was gone from the lieutenant's sight.

She was taken by Silver to the Royal Academy's Willow Pavilion in no time. This place hadn't changed that much during the month of her absence — everyone on the upper levels fighting for power, trying to reinforce their authority over others, making coalitions, riding over each other's heads...

Just this time, she didn't feel so tolerant, and she definitely didn't feel that the King alone should be responsible for all this nest of snakes at his place.

On arrival to the Academy, her outfit changed on its own, endowing her with a glamorous General's suit with a shimmering rainbow cloak falling down her shoulders and reflecting these colours all around her, so that even the air around her was coloured in them, leaving the impression that the rainbow itself was surrounding her person.

As she entered, all students stood up in straight lines, pulling themselves taller, standing straighter.

"*One would say what remarkable discipline,*" she thought bitterly to herself, and felt how much she already missed School classes, where students would say what they thought and not what they expected others wanted them to say. Where students would act as they thought appropriate or according to the present situation, not because someone at some point told them that this is how everyone has to behave. Where students would come to classes because they wanted to learn something and would stay only if they found it interesting, not because they had to finish a set course same for everyone just because someone made a decision that this is what everyone has to know.

What a falsehood this place was. She couldn't say it had become one, because it had always been the same for as long as she remembered. She knew there had to come a change, or this place had to collapse, but how to start it and where to finish, she wasn't sure.

On the third day, as promised, she assembled an educational class. She called it a class, but it was held outside in the stadium, as no classroom could hold as many people as had come.

She knew that not all of them had come of their own will. She knew that there was lots of plotting to “show the status and importance” of some individuals by simply ignoring her call. Alas, it could not be helped, as it was an education about ranking that they had to learn one way or another, so it was best to do it from the first day. So she pulled rank, and everyone was here.

It was not that she physically forced them to come. On the other hand, there wasn't any other expression for it. Simply, in the King's service, ranking was very simple and undeniable — when your rank was higher, a lower-ranked person could disobey you only if you yourself allowed it.

Everyone knew it. But as the King extremely rarely would exercise it, and she herself or Angus never used it, and Blake couldn't ever be bothered to use it, while Ruffus didn't even understand why someone should do what he wants when others didn't want it, the true understanding of this power was lost.

Everyone was taking it as some old dogma and doctrines that didn't apply to today's lives and were passed from generation to generation just as some old relic.

It felt strange that she, of all people, was reminding others what it was, after so many years of explaining to everyone that there was absolute equality in the Royal Quarters, including the Academy. Some people might think her a hypocrite, but both truths didn't oppose each other, they just completed each other — to reach a higher rank was open for everyone, and there was no voting or limited seats or some secret methods, and all depended on one's own abilities and strength.

The trouble started when some people who had good skills in certain areas, but not so great in others, started to make coalitions to fill in each other's gaps. What at first looked like a good idea ended up with them thinking that they combined together had reached a higher rank as a group and started ordering people around of their own accord or thinking.

These groups weren't that equal anymore, because not everyone could join them freely and leave freely. To join, you needed approval from already existing members, and if you left, suddenly, from being pretty powerful, you became a bit useless, as on your own, you were not that strong.

The situation had continued like this for many years. Two cabinets had even been created: one for military rankings, which seemed more or less reasonable, but only on the surface, and one for ministers, which was a complete mess.

At some point, the whole ministers' cabinet decided to elect one person to represent them all and speak in their name, called the Prime Minister, and now everyone thought that this elected person was the second person after the King. The King never agreed or disagreed with it. He said if people chose to give up their own will to someone, it was their own choice to stay in the dust for the rest of their lives, and he was neither opposing it nor supporting it.

Rainee could never understand this mess or this way of thinking, and worked hard to keep proper order in the Royal City. And people would listen to her and do their best because she loved them, and to some degree, they loved her too in return.

The only place where she wasn't that powerful was the ministers' cabinet because of that strange inner hierarchy, but even there, she was liked very much by most.

Now she could see that, in her absence, the ministers' cabinet had started pulling some high-ranking officers from the military cabinet into their circle, trying to spread their influence over the whole place.

She knew the King could dissolve it at any time. But she also knew he had no wish to spare energy on it, as long as it did not affect the lives of his citizens.

The cabinet of ministers now thought they were at the very top of power, and Rainee and Blake's coming back out of the blue must have been a big blow. So straight away, they made a few small plots to show the place for "these two relics", as they called them in secret.

Members of the ministers' cabinet were happy for them to hold the frontline. But in the Palace, the cabinet of ministers was eager to obey only the King and order everyone else.

If that had been at least close to the truth, the King might have taken some action, but as it was just fiction — an imagination of his subordinates — he couldn't be bothered to get into it.

The King had complete and unquestionable control over everybody's lives. The more control you have, the less need you feel to exercise it. It is meaningless to push your control over someone whose life is already completely under your control, just as it is meaningless to try to control someone over whom you have no control at all. In Rainee's eyes, the ministers' cabinet belonged to the second case. By themselves, they couldn't control anything, so instead, they made people believe that they could, and people took it for granted and obeyed.

She always thought it was wrong, but now, after staying away for nearly two years, coming back made her see that she could not stand it any longer, not even for a single day. She had given them three days not because she needed to prepare, but because she wanted them to prepare for the fight at their very best. To make them realise that, in the end, it meant nothing at all.

She felt really sorry for the current Prime Minister. He really was a man with potential. But now he was wasting his life and energy trying to be greater than he was instead of becoming that great person.

She knew that behind her back he called her "the fox who was assuming the power of the tiger." The tiger, presumably, was the King. What a strange way of thinking. If the tiger had no power — or rather, if the King had no power — there would be no need for the lifestyle they were living now. In fact, there would not even be this world.

She thought the Prime Minister's life could be described as "the fox who was assuming the power of the rabbits." That led nowhere at all, except to becoming a rabbit yourself.

Oh well, never mind. If things could not be put straight, then at least they had to be moved out of this dead spot.

When she stepped in front of the gathered crowd, she could feel anger and displeasure flowing towards her. No wonder. Some people had planned to ignore her order completely, but when the time came, instead of doing so, they simply came here as ordered. There was no escaping it, and that was one of the abilities of a higher rank.

She presented a massive but simple sign for everyone to see. She enchanted it so everyone, no matter how far they were, could see every detail, and once they saw it, they would remember.

On the sign, there were three columns: one for the ministers' house, one for the military house, and one for the household of the Royal Quarters.

In her eyes, the column of ministers was useless and not truly existing, as it didn't have any reason to be there, but people were already used to it, so she kept it.

At the top, all three columns joined under one umbrella, with the King above them all. In the middle of that umbrella, three names were written — Angus, Blake, and her own.

Then below, there was another line above all three columns, with a few names in it that included the five generals. One of them was Ruffus. General Gerald was also included in this line.

Under that, the columns separated and didn't join in any other place. A few top ranks had titles and names listed. The positions below didn't have names, as there were too many to fit.

The first two columns were easy to understand. The military column was ranked from Major at the top to Academy students at the bottom. The household was easy too — from the King's advisers down to the labour workers. These two columns never mingled with each other.

The military column was the easiest, from high rank to low, only splitting at the bottom, where Academy students and new recruits had the same rights despite occupying unrelated positions.

The household column was more difficult, as there were many positions that did not rank above one another. They were in the same column, but they could not command or tell each other what to do. Of course, they could ask for favours and give favours themselves at any time, of their own free will. In the case of disagreement, the person who outranked both sides would make the decision, and that decision would be final.

The columns didn't mingle — a Major, no matter how unquestionable his authority was in the military column, didn't have direct authority over a cook, who was at the bottom of the household column. A Major could ask a cook for something, but with the same chance of success as the cook could ask a Major to do something — goodwill and cooperation were always important. But in the case that the cook chose to disobey, the Major wouldn't have any power to make him obey.

The same worked the other way around — the King's advisor didn't have any direct authority over a newbie in the military.

The ministers' column was a bit different. It had the Prime Minister at the top, ministers under him, then their subordinates, and then ordinary members. In this table, everyone who had joined the house of ministers was listed according to their rank within that house, and each name was traced back to their real position in either the military or household column.

There was no such occupation as just a minister or just a Prime Minister. Each and every person who wanted to serve under the King was assigned personal duties. And these duties were either in the household column or in the military column. There was no such duty as a member of the ministers' cabinet.

The absurdity of the situation could be seen from the very top — General Gerald, who in his personal ranking was listed on the third line from the top and had authority over everyone in the military and household columns, while having only four people above him, was at the bottom of the ministers' cabinet, as he was only a member. So he was under the Prime Minister, ministers, and the subordinates of the ministers.

As he had probably joined only recently, his status so far was just that of a member. So according to this, one of the brightest and strongest people should be accountable to god knows how many, when in reality, this general could command any of them, including the Prime Minister, with the will of his thought.

Rainee could feel his displeasure at having this situation displayed so openly, but she could not help it — it was his own decision to put himself in such a position.

Because the columns were separate and did not cross into one another, none of the members of the cabinet of ministers had any authority over anyone listed in the military or household columns, unless that person had willingly joined the cabinet of ministers. Or unless a member of the ministers' cabinet was actually higher at a personal level in one of the other two columns. Let's say the Prime Minister didn't have any authority over a gardener unless the gardener willingly joined the house of ministers, becoming a member.

Rainee had summoned everyone for today's lesson. Only the King, Angus, and Blake were not present. Also, she didn't invite Ruffus, but he came anyway. There were lots of people who weren't present because of their direct duties. They were outside of the Palace, but each and every one of them was seeing and hearing this information right now, no matter how far away they were.

That was the status of true rank — one orders, another obeys. If she tells them to see and hear, then not being here is not an excuse. They will see and hear.

She explained this subject in a very basic and logical way that any child, not just new recruits, could easily understand. And just from looking at the sign she made, there was no room for doubt where everyone stood.

And Rainee could feel lots of understanding rising, confusion clearing, and gratitude coming her way.

But there was another part of the crowd that wasn't happy. People who had been at the Royal Quarters for a long time weren't happy to be summoned to this, as they thought, baby class, and they thought it was an insult to be explained such basic things. They already knew all that, so why should they listen to it from scratch again? Well, because knowing and acting upon it didn't match.

When Rainee reached the ministers' column in her lesson, she could feel lots of opposition, and she knew there would be lots of interruptions. However, she didn't want to be interrupted, and everyone here was lower in rank than she was, so they all just stood quietly and listened.

"Never in my life did I think I would have to come to this," she thought to herself, but calmly finished the subject before asking:

"Any questions?"

A few people raised their hands. She noted the order and pointed at the first person to raise a hand. She could feel the stabbing of angry eyes, as many wanted to ask questions, but she didn't allow anyone to talk without being selected.

People who wanted to ask didn't hesitate to raise a hand and didn't even intend to talk without being asked. People who wanted to oppose or complain, or just simply talk, didn't want to raise a hand because they wanted to just talk, so they could do nothing now.

"Why don't the three columns interact? Are people not allowed to communicate with each other unless they are in the same column?"

"No, that is not true," Rainee answered. "People are welcome to communicate with anyone, no matter what status, what rank, or what column. Please separate these things in your mind and never, ever mix up ranking authority and communication.

Anyone is allowed to ask anyone for anything, and the other side is free to either agree or disagree with what they are asked. One column is not better than another, so people are very much encouraged to make friends, acquaintances, and bonds, no matter what column they are in or where they stand within it. That has nothing to do with ranking, and today's lesson is only about ranking, nothing else."

"So what is the difference?"

"The difference is very simple. If you are higher in rank and have authority, you can either ask or order. When you are lower in rank, you can only ask. When you are asked to do something, you can disobey, disagree, suggest a compromise, or simply ignore it — entirely up to you. When you are ordered, you don't have the ability to disobey — you do it."

"Then how come some people are above others in one column or below others in another?" came the question.

"In the King's ranking, there are only two columns, and not a single soul has a second place in them. This is the order. But over time, people wanted to add one more group. The King didn't forbid it as long as everything else was in place and it didn't cause much misunderstanding."

"So how does ranking work with three groups then?"

"The King's laws apply only to the two groups and overrule anything else. In the military and household groups, order is set by the King's authority. For me to exercise it, I don't need any permission from anyone who is below my rank or on the same rank as me.

The third column, as you can see, is marked in a different colour because different rules apply in it. In this group, to have authority over someone, that someone has to willingly submit themselves to it.

A very simple example — General Gerald agreed to listen to the Chancellor and ministers by his own free will. Every time the Chancellor and ministers want something from him, they have to ask, and he can agree to it. On the other hand, when General Gerald wants anything from the Chancellor and ministers, he can choose to either ask and accept whatever answer he receives, or tell and be obeyed."

"But it doesn't make any sense then," the next selected person said. "What the point even have a third group then?"

"I cannot tell you what the point is, simply because I cannot see any," Raine answered bluntly.

"Then what authority do people in the third group have, and over whom?"

"Let's define the word authority first," said Raine, "as we are calling two different things by the same word. Everyone who entered the King's service agreed to the King's unconditional authority. In other words, from that day, they are denied the option to disobey" *"As if they ever even had such an option"*, she thought to herself but didn't say it aloud.

This agreement is final and non-negotiable. And ranking in the first two groups is according to the King's laws, so upon entering the King's service, each and every one of us here handed over the right to disobey a higher-ranked officer. It is entirely up to the officer whether to exercise their authority or not. Once exercised, it cannot be disobeyed."

She could see that most people did not truly understand what that meant. So she lifted her hand and, at the same moment, removed the restriction that stopped everyone from speaking without permission. The stadium instantly became like a buzzing beehive, everyone throwing questions into the air without waiting for answers. Then she lowered the same hand, and silence fell over the stadium. She did not need to move her hand, but she wanted to make the timing obvious to everyone.

"This was an example of how this place would look without me exercising my authority, and how it looks when I pull rank."

The place was already silent, but she knew that at this moment, most people would be silent without any rank or authority reinforced.

General Gerald lifted his hand, and Rainee pointed at him.

"I presume I am a big reason for this lesson on discipline," he said, to which Rainee didn't answer. "Then how come we all are here, but General Blake isn't? I understand that General Angus is travelling, but General Blake is on duty and present, yet he wasn't summoned here today."

"I don't have authority over General Blake," Rainee answered.

There was silence again for a good while. Everyone knew that General Blake was her most loyal subordinate, always at her side, never disobeying, and to hear now this simple answer — "*I don't have authority over him*" — was a bit of a shock to everyone. By the table, they could see that they both were on the same level, but no one expected it to be so straightforward.

"Then what if I want him to do something?" General Gerald asked.

"You ask him and respect his choice," was her answer.

"But in that case, who has authority over him? Is there anyone who can order him?"

"The King does," Rainee answered calmly. "At any time you are not happy with General Blake's behaviour, or you want him to do something he disagrees with, you ask the King to discipline him."

Another silence within silence. Everyone knew that this general didn't listen to the King, just to the Rainbow General, and the King never did anything about it... So really, the answer was that no one had authority over him.

The Chancellor lifted his arm, and Rainee pointed at him, finally allowing him to talk.

"Isn't this like some sort of tyranny? When one has to obey another without the ability to refuse?"

"Yes, you can call it that," Rainee answered calmly, "and there have been times when we had tyrants in the King's place. Thanks to our King, we are blessed to live in different times, but nevertheless, the power of the King doesn't share its might — the King's decision is final and unquestionable."

"I am not talking about the King. I gladly obey the King's orders.. But you are not the King. Why should we listen to you unconditionally?"

"Because I speak under the King's authority," Rainee said.

"But how do we know that the King has authorised you? You just pulled your high rank to gather us all here and force us to accept your point of view. As far as I can see, the King might not even have anything to do with it. Even the other generals are not here, so how would we know you are not just brainwashing us?"

Just now, you are telling us that General Blake doesn't obey your commands, when we all know it is not the truth, so how many more lies are you feeding us? And why is he not here?"

Rainee knew he was going to be troublesome, but this was just stupid. But before she could answer, everybody's eyes turned to the ground to her left. She didn't have to turn around to see what they were staring at.

"*Such a show-off,*" she thought to herself.

And she was right. At her side, a massive black hound with glowing red eyes was climbing out of the ground. First they saw his head, then with each step he took, he was rising out of the ground like a demon rising from the underworld. One step, two, three, four, and he was standing at Rainee's side in his full height.

A second later, a huge black bird dived at full speed down from the sky, swept close to the ground, and landed on two feet. The next thing everyone could see was a person dressed in black standing next to her. His black hair was framing a handsome face and his dark eyes watched the gathered crowd with a sarcastic look.

He was wearing a cape similar to Rainee's, but this cape emitted only one colour, and it was black as the darkest night. The two of them standing next to each other really made an impression of a rainbow at night.

The man in black gallantly bowed to Rainee before asking:

"Can I be at your service in any way?"

"Not really," Rainee answered simply, not falling into this trap. She hadn't gathered these people here to cause any disputes, and she definitely didn't want Blake to embarrass himself by getting into a pointless argument with the cabinet of ministers in front of everyone.

"Lesson on ranking and discipline, nearly finished."

"Permission to interfere?" he asked in a low voice, but in such a way that everyone could hear, while looking straight at her face.

"Granted," answered Rainee, while to herself she thought, "*And here we go.*"

The man in black bowed again to her and turned to the crowd. He didn't say anything, but everyone suddenly dropped to one knee with their heads down.

"A little homework for this class," the man in black said in the same deep but loud voice.

"Study the subject presented today until you fully understand it and there are no misinterpretations or misunderstandings left about it. Every day when the subject is not fully understood, deepen your knowledge by reading more about it and seeking help from those who understand.

Every evening of each day when the subject hasn't been fully learned, write the true reasons why it is difficult for you to understand this simple truth, and start the following morning by reading these reasons and finding a way to let them go of your life, until today's subject is fully learned. Any questions?"

A few hands went up. The man in black pointed at one.

"How will I know that I have fully understood and don't have any misinterpretations left?"

"The power of the King will let you know. Any other questions?"

"How will I recognise the power of the King?"

The man in black didn't answer that question but asked instead,

"Any sensible questions? No? All dismissed."

After he said it, every one stood up and left the stadium in perfect order.

There was only one woman left standing, watching in disbelief what she had just seen. It was Anniet. She and Blake had come back to the city just before Rainee's class, because Blake said she should listen to some important information being presented..

She was really grateful to attend this class, as she could finally fully understand what it really meant to be in the King's service.

She couldn't feel any force or restraint coming from Rainee during the class, but then again, she hadn't wanted to interrupt her in any way. And when Blake arrived, she thought it looked so cool. She loved it.

And then everyone dropped down and stayed down in front of him. That was a bit of a shock. She could hear in her head him saying "kneel" before everyone knelt, but she didn't see a real reason to fall on her knees just because someone told her to, unless there was a reason.

Then she thought maybe there was a reason. Maybe it was some sort of training, and she was considering kneeling too, but then she looked at Blake standing on the stage, dressed all in black, with his face calm and a small smile playing on his lips.

He looked at her, and the smile grew a bit bigger for a second, and then he spoke about homework and told everyone to scram. Then everyone left.

"Ruffus, stay," Rainee said in a low voice, but Ruffus heard her and came back.

"Why are you obeying him?" Rainee asked. "Honestly, why would you kneel when he tells you to kneel and leave when he tells you to leave?"

"I don't know," Ruffus answered. "I like him. Blake looks so cool when he does this kind of stuff, and it makes me happy to do what Blake says."

Rainee shook her head in half laughter, half disbelief.

Blake smiled at Ruffus, walked to pull him into a one-arm embrace around the neck, while ruffling Ruffus's hair with the other hand, before letting him go. No one else except Anniet saw it, as everyone was engaged in their own thoughts about the homework presented.

Annet walked closer to these three, not knowing what she should do. She felt complicated. How could the same man be so gentle and open-hearted for the last days, when now he looked completely different? What should she do? How should she behave? What part of him didn't she understand? What part was not real?

Rainee jumped off the platform and walked to her to greet her with a warm embrace.

"Don't you worry about that flamboyant act. You understand him perfectly. In fact, you have seen right through him. Otherwise, why didn't you drop to your knees like everyone else? He is all real. You either have to get used to him or kick him out of your life. You never know

what he will pull out of his sleeve, what nonsense he will say or do. So it is best just to be open for any surprise that comes your way."

"He is not like that when people are not around," said Anniet in disbelief.

"I know," Rainee answered. "He has some sort of people phobia."

"He wasn't like this at School."

"Because no one was paying him any attention, so he didn't have to push them away. Do you have any plans for this evening?"

"I guess I will have to do homework as ordered. No?"

"Yes, absolutely. After he pulled this prank, everyone will have to do homework until they get everything right. Lucky for you, we can help you. What part was confusing for you? What didn't you understand?"

"I don't know. It all seemed super easy and clear. I will have to think about what I didn't understand."

"No, it doesn't work that way. The order was clear and simple — do homework if you didn't understand. If you understood everything, why would you do homework? Don't be like Ruffus. Don't flatter him."

"Then how do you know when the power of the King is happy?"

"Is the power of the King bothering you?"

"I don't know what it is, so no, it is not bothering me..."

"Then all is done, and don't worry about it at all. The power of the King is always with you, and when it bothers you, you will know. If it is not bothering and nagging you, then it is letting you know that you are all good and free to do whatever you want."

Annet looked over her shoulder at Blake, who was following them just a step behind, seemingly not upset in the slightest for being completely ignored and talked over.

At the exit gates, a tall middle-aged man in a neat uniform was waiting for them. Annet recognised him as the same person who had wanted to discipline Blake for some reason, yet at Blake's arrival, he had knelt with everyone else, despite being listed at the very top of the ranking.

"General Gerald," Rainee acknowledged him with a warm smile.

"Lady Rainee," the General answered in return, omitting her General's title.

Annet wasn't sure about this encounter, as she didn't think it would bring anything good. This man was first insulted by Rainee showing his ridiculous status on the rankings board, then disciplining him in front of everyone, and as if this weren't enough, then Blake came and nailed him to the ground with everyone else. Probably, he was looking for some payback now. Wouldn't it be better, instead of harassing them, to go and study a bit more on the ranking subject, so as not to cause any more embarrassment to himself?

Meanwhile, after exchanging his greetings with Blake and Ruffus, General Gerald's eyes settled on Anniet. He watched her for a bit with a look full of delighted interest before talking.

"And my strong guess is that you are Lady Anniet," he said.

"No, I am not a lady," she answered immediately.

She tried to imagine herself as a lady, walking around in a glamorous dress with her hands one over the other in front of herself... Or maybe her hands should be at her sides... Actually, where do ladies keep their hands? They definitely can't do much with them, as everything has to be in a proper ladylike pose... Gosh, maybe not.

Or maybe it is a fair, beautiful lady who sits all fragile and delicate by the window and waits for her lover to arrive on horseback? The picture of Blake coming on his black horse drifted before her eyes, bringing a smile to her face. Yes, he really did look good, but she was not going to sit at that window, so better to delete this image too.

The third image drifted in as Rainee interacting with people, wielding a sword, riding a horse herself, and not waiting for anyone and not caring where to put her hands. Many people called her lady too. If so, Anniet herself wouldn't mind being this kind of lady at all. Or, in fact, she would even like it very much...

Lost in her thoughts, Anniet noticed something wrong. It was quiet all around her, and General Gerald was still standing, looking at her and smiling. Had she missed something? Was she expected to say something? What could she say? She hardly knew this man. In fact, she didn't know him at all.

If anything, he looked like a very nice man, not just good-looking and with excellent manners, but also very warm inside. If they were at any other place, she would offer him her friendship and support, and would explain that there was no reason to be cross with Rainee or Blake. What they did, they did for good reasons.

She maybe didn't know these reasons herself, but she didn't have the slightest doubt in her heart that every action Rainee and Blake took was to help, and if he just knew them, he surely would understand it himself...

But maybe he did know them? In fact, if you thought about it, he should know them better than she did, as he must have known them for much longer than she had. Anyway, why was he still looking at her like this?

Then it dawned on her — maybe he was waiting not for Rainee and Blake, but for her? But what might he need from her? Maybe he wanted to assign her to the Academy?

Aaaa, she wasn't sure she wanted to go and stand in line all day and learn things that didn't interest her, just to finish it. She must admit, she loved to spar with Rainee, but that was just a lot of fun. If she was good with a sword, it didn't mean she wanted to join the army.

But then again, if she did, she could go together with Blake and Rainee on their missions. In fact, how long would it take to finish that damn Academy? Did she have to ask to join, or did they just send generals to collect people from the street?

"At any rate, I will just wait, and maybe he will talk eventually, so I don't have to guess," Anniet finally decided.

"Please don't be alarmed, my lady," General Gerald finally spoke. "I was waiting to greet my friends I haven't seen for a long time, but I couldn't just walk by you."

Then he turned to Blake and said, "Congratulations, General Blake. What a character. You never cease to impress me. I cannot stop myself from envying you every time we meet."

Then he turned his eyes back to Anniet before continuing. "No, we do not collect people from the street, but if at any point you choose to become one of our students, it would be a great honour for me to show you around."

OMG!! Anniet thought to herself. This man can read my mind the same way Blake can...

She stood a bit lost at first, then started to laugh inwardly. What could she possibly do about it? Never mind, she would just have to get used to it. She couldn't hold it in anymore, and the inner laughter broke out as a big smile. Rainee couldn't hold her laughter in anymore either.

"I wouldn't say my skills are at the same level as General Blake's, but your thoughts and feelings are so open and all over the place that it is difficult not to hear them, and so different from what we usually hear here that it is difficult not to stop for a minute to enjoy them," General Gerald kept talking. "But you are right about a few things. I definitely have embarrassed myself a good deal by my own actions, but thank god I don't need to go and study this subject. If I did, I would seriously consider resignation.

And I agree that it was a big favour from Lady Rainee to bring it up. This is why I am here to express my gratitude."

He bowed first to Rainee and then to Blake.

"I am in your debt again. I will not say that I will repay you one day, as by now it is not likely to happen, but nevertheless, please accept my thanks. Things here without you weren't the same, Lady Rainee. I am glad you found your way back. And it was nice to meet you in person, Lady Anniet."

Then he said his goodbyes and left.

"That was a really strange conversation," Anniet thought. *"The man spoke on his own, everyone else kept quiet, but somehow it was a conversation nevertheless. I probably have to get used to it here, where people can converse via thoughts."*

"Not really," Blake interrupted her thoughts. "Don't pay much attention to him minimising his abilities. There aren't that many people who can read thoughts and feelings, even in this place. As I said before, to do so, you are required to be open both ways — to read someone's thoughts, you have to be open for others to read yours; to feel somebody's feelings, you have to be willing for others to feel yours.

Most people here are not willing to share what they carry inside, so they try to shut themselves and hide. Funny enough, the only thing they are shutting off is their own abilities, as their own thoughts are still open like a book to anyone who is not locked up. It is kind of

the same as blocking your own ears and expecting others not to hear what you are saying just because you cannot hear it anymore."

"But what did he mean by saying that my thoughts are all over the place? Can you think somehow more quietly?"

"Yes," Blake answered, but didn't say any more on this subject.

"Can you teach me?" Anniet insisted.

Blake looked at her with a slightly sad smile before answering, "Unwillingly."

So he could teach her, but was not willing to do so. Wonder why that was, Anniet thought. Was it because he didn't want to be a teacher, or he didn't want her to learn it?

"He doesn't want you to learn it," this time it was Ruffus who answered. "I don't want you to learn it either."

"Why?" Now Anniet really wanted to know.

"Because you feel so many nice things," Ruffus answered in a simple manner, "especially about Blake, but about others too, and about me, and about Ren, and even about Gerald."

"???" That was really confusing, and she didn't know what to say anymore.

"And also, it would be much easier for you to talk to the King this way," Rainee added. "I am sure that this isn't of much interest to Blake, as he doesn't want you to talk to the King or anyone else, but nevertheless, the more closed you are, the more difficult it is to stay next to the King. People have to train very hard to get to the level of openness you are at right now."

"How come?" She was very curious to know why Blake didn't want her to talk with anyone, but she would ask that of Blake himself, so this question was about the King.

"One of the most crushing things when you are close to the King is that you cannot hide who you really are, what you really think, what you really want, or what you really feel. And it becomes obvious to you. It is the same feeling as if all your darkest secrets and the bits you hide inside were taken out and put on display for everyone, in fact, for the whole world. Standing naked in front of everyone would be nothing in comparison. The more comfortable you are with everyone knowing what you feel and what you think, the easier it is to be by the King. An open heart, they call it."

"And is it really known to the whole world?"

"No, it is just a feeling. As Blake said, there are just very few people really want to listen.. Anyway, gentlemen and lady, what should we do now?"

"Can you hear what the King is thinking or feeling?" Anniet didn't want to let go.

"No, I cannot hear or feel anything unless the King specifically gives me permission. That is the same as ranking — when you are higher, the ones that didn't reach your level don't have any authority over you unless you give them permission. What should we do now? Anyone want to go to town for dinner? I haven't been in a pub since we came back."

"I haven't been in a pub since you were gone," Ruffus complained. "I don't even remember what an evening out feels like.."

Blake was standing without showing any interest either way.

"I don't mind going to the pub," Annet said. "I have been to town only a couple of times with Old John when you were out. I liked it."

Three wanted to go, one was silent, so they set off for the Palace gates, crossed the same exit with Blake's apartment above the gates, and left for town.

After a fairly long walk, they ended up in a large but cosy pub. It was an old building made from logs, which made it stand out from the other buildings, mainly made from stone.

Inside, there was a big open area on the ground floor. On one side, you could use wide, open wooden stairs to get to the second floor with an open balcony. On the other side, the ceiling was high, creating a large open space.

Many solid wooden tables were placed around both floors, but not too jammed together, with lots of space for people to walk, dance, and for children to run around.

While walking through the city, people looked at them and clapped upon seeing their three generals, but they did not bother them too much. At the beginning, children were running towards Rainee, but soon stopped and were watching more from a distance. Annet wondered why that was, then looked and saw Blake's overgrown Deamon following them. Children were afraid of him and didn't come closer anymore.

When they arrived at the pub, their table was already ready, and the pub itself was crowded with people. Deamon was left outside not to scare people. Annet thought it was rather unfair on him, as he had always been so calm and friendly, but she couldn't do anything about it.

They were seated at a well-made table with a curved bench around it instead of chairs. The bench was very comfortable, with soft padding and extra cushions. It was very large and could easily hold four other people, but no one else came to join them.

The boys were seated in the middle, according to Rainee, to stop Blake from scaring people and to stop Ruffus from running away to play with children... Annet was a bit speechless after such an explanation. So she and Rainee took the flanks.

The pub was very busy, but while they were eating, no one disturbed them.

After they finished meal, the owner brought each of them a pint of beer. Annet wasn't sure about it, but decided to try, only to find out that it wasn't beer after all, but some slightly sweet drink she had never tasted before — and actually very tasty.

After a while, sounds in the pub got more and more quiet. Everyone had gathered around as if waiting for something. Children were sitting on the floor, adults at the tables. Annet wasn't sure what they were waiting for, but it was clear that all attention was on them.

Not long after, children started to clap their hands, soon joined by adults, and in no time, the whole pub was applauding them. A few voices shouted, "Story! Story!" and soon they were

joined by others. Within a few minutes, all that could be heard was just the sound of clapping hands and chanting, "Story!"

Blake was completely ignoring them. Ruffus joined the crowd, slapping his powerful palm on the table and shouting, "Story!"

Rainee was looking over the people and smiling. Then she lifted her hand, and all this tremendous noise stopped.

"Okay, okay," she said. "What story would you like to hear?"

It dawned then on Annet that all these people had gathered here to listen to storytelling, not too different from School, around the campfire, when Blake would start to tell stories to the children and end up having a large audience around him.

But from what she saw now, Blake didn't show any signs of getting ready to talk, and nobody expected to hear any story from him. It was rather Rainee who had everyone's attention.

"Where have you been?"

"What did you see when you were away?"

"Where is Prince Angus?"

Similar questions started to pile up from every direction at once. and everywhere at the same time. It was simply not possible to answer anything, because everyone was talking. So Rainee sat quietly and didn't even try to say anything.

The noise finally started to calm down. One of the little girls, who was sitting on the floor with other children close to their table, asked:

"Who is this new lady sitting with you?"

As the noise was quieting down, her question was heard crisp and clear, and Annet felt dozens of eyes landing on her little self.

"This is my new friend," Rainee finally spoke. "We met at an ancient magical School that I entered while travelling. We became very good friends, so I offered her to come with me here to the Capital, and she agreed."

"If she is your friend, how come she is sitting with Mister Shadow?" the girl asked again.

And every glance now fell not just on Annet, but also on Blake, who was sitting relaxed next to her, minding his own business.

After feeling this deluge of eyes on him, Blake lifted his head and cast a glance around the audience. Most of the adults quickly lowered their eyes. Kids on the other hand, were not affected that much and were waiting for an answer.

"The thing is that this time, when going away, I didn't tell Mister Shadow that I was leaving," Rainee explained, "so Mister Shadow became very bad-tempered and set out on a journey to find me."

There were a lot of giggles among the children and hidden smiles among the adults, indicating that there was no doubt that this scenario was accurate.

Meanwhile, Rainee continued, "It took a long time until he finally caught up with me, so by that time, he wasn't even Mister Shadow anymore, but Mister Blackness of the Night."

At hearing this, the giggles grew louder and the hidden smiles wider.

"But then a miracle happened. As soon as my new friend is close by, Mister Shadow becomes Mister Gentleman. He smiles, he talks, and he is not scaring people around him anymore. So now, having learned about the mystical powers of this young girl, I try to keep her close to Mister Shadow, so he can be nice and friendly instead of being grumpy and scary."

"...."

Everybody's eyes fell on Blake again.

"He still doesn't look that nice or friendly..." could be read on people's faces.

"He still doesn't smile or talk," the girl replied in a loud whisper.

"Because he keeps a close eye on all of you so you don't upset her or take up too much of her attention," Rainee replied in the same stage whisper, mimicking the girl's tone. "He cares for her a lot and definitely doesn't like to share."

Anniel couldn't hold it back any longer. She turned around to look at this "hoarding dragon" sitting behind her. Blake was sitting in a relaxed pose and watching the crowd with calm eyes. With one arm resting on the back of the bench and a calm expression on his face, he looked nothing of the sort you would imagine after hearing this conversation.

If anything, he looked so strong and warm. Maybe a little bit bored. But to scare people? What nonsense. People could feel safe and sound next to him. Wasn't that the reason why everyone, despite their own talk, loved him to bits and pieces? Blake was right — people could be very strange.

Blake allowed her to examine him for a little while before looking back at her. When their eyes met, he smiled softly at her.

"Just simply too nice," Anniel thought to herself, lowering her eyes and turning away with a smile on her face too.

This exchange of smiles didn't go unnoticed.

"Why is he like this?" the girl asked again.

Rainee showed her to come closer and then whispered something in her ear. The girl's eyes, which up until now had looked concerned, lit up, as if she finally understood something after this secret was revealed to her. She said, "Oh, I see," and ran back to her place.

The girl who was sitting next to her whispered something in her ear and got a silent answer. And soon the whole floor was buzzing silently with children passing this secret information to each other.

Anniel was wondering what Rainee had told them. Ruffus was clearly thinking about the same thing too and was nagging Rainee to tell him, or let him go so he could find it out among the children. None of his pleas got a positive answer, so he finally gave it up in despair.

It was clear that the adults were very interested to hear it too, but didn't dare to go and question the children in front of Rainee.

Anniel looked at Blake, wondering if he knew what they were whispering about, but he didn't look concerned and just smiled encouragingly. After all the buzzing calmed down, Anniel realised that all these little eyes were on her again... She smiled, not sure what to say. Obviously, if she told them that Blake was not like this, no one would believe her, so she just kept silently smiling and waiting until this interest drifted away — surely it couldn't last for very long.

"Are you in love with the Black General too?" one girl finally asked aloud.

Anniel hadn't been eating or drinking anything for a while now, but she managed to choke on something anyway.

Was that what Rainee told them? Was she in love too? That meant Rainee had told that girl that Blake was in love with her... Millions of thoughts flooded her mind. Did Blake already know what Rainee had told them? She had to fight herself very hard not to turn around to look at him.

But the question was addressed directly to her. And it was a very simple and straightforward question. Was she in love with Blake? There were only two ways left. She could either tell the truth aloud or lie and weasel her way out. The choice was very easy to make.

"Yes, I believe I am," she said in as calm and ordinary a voice as she could possibly muster.

She could hear now adults starting to whisper among themselves. "Oh well, it could not be helped," she thought, still not entirely sure she had said the right thing. But to be honest, she was in love with the man sitting behind her and didn't want to hide it anymore. Whether it was good or appropriate to say it aloud here, in front of everyone, she wasn't sure.

The next minute, she could feel a strong arm encircling her waist and pulling her closer to the owner of that arm. It felt like confirmation that no matter what she said, she wasn't on her own. She was really grateful for this timely reassurance.

"Aren't you afraid that he will feed your heart to Deamon?" a different girl asked.

Anniel could read from their faces some sort of fear and even strange awe, as if she were very brave, daring to go to some dangerous place. Honestly, what were they talking about? What reputation did Blake have amongst these people?

This time, she turned back to look at Blake, just to find that his face now was really, really close to her, right next to her shoulder, and by turning around, she nearly touched it with her own face. She looked into his eyes for a few seconds before turning back.

It was one of two things — either she was blind, or all these people were. She was pretty sure there was nothing wrong with her own eyesight, so it must be them — never mind the numbers.

"No, I don't think he would feed my heart to Deamon," she answered aloud. "In any case, it is my heart to gift to anyone I choose, and when it is gifted, it is up to the person I gave it to to

decide what to do with it. Anyway, I believe if General Blake didn't want my heart anymore, he would return it to me instead of feeding it to Deamon."

She felt Blake move even closer behind her and could feel her back pressed to his chest now, and his head just above her own, as if with all his posture he was saying to others, "That's enough." But children are not so worried about indirect signs of warning, so they didn't pay too much attention.

"But what would you do if Deamon came?" the question came from one of the boys.

"If Deamon came?" Anniet was even more confused now. "I would stroke him, I think."

Then she thought to herself, maybe they were talking about something other than Blake's dog? That would make more sense. But then what were they talking about?

At the same time, fear spread over the faces of the people in front of her. Some children started to scream and even ran to hide behind their parents. Anniet wasn't sure what had just happened. It couldn't be because of anything she had said... And then she saw Deamon stepping out from under their table.

They were really afraid of him, and the Deamon that the children had spoken of was definitely this Deamon.

She was wondering if Blake had called him just to confirm to her that there was no mistake, or if he just wanted to chase the children away. Or both.

Deamon laid himself down imposingly in front of the table, one front paw over the other, his head held high as he looked at the crowd. Anniet could feel the fear coming from the crowd. She thought that was just ridiculous — Deamon was such a nice dog with such clever eyes, and always so obedient. How had he deserved such a reputation?

She stood up from Blake's embrace, walked to Deamon, and sat down on the floor next to him in just like the children were sitting.

"Deamon is very well-mannered and very gentle-natured," she explained to the children, whilst stroking the dog's head and scratching his chin.

"He has such big teeth," one boy said.

"Only because his head is big. If you were a dog with a head this size,, your teeth would be just as big," Anniet answered.

Seeing how she wasn't afraid of this "monster", the children got a bit braver.

"Can I stroke him too?" a boy asked.

"You will still have to ask his owner, as Deamon is not my dog, but I am sure he wouldn't mind," Anniet answered with confidence.

The boy looked at Blake, who finally spoke for the first time this evening.

"Deamon cannot stand fear, lying, or pretence. If anyone brings any of it close to him, he will devour it."

All outstretched hands were pulled back, and looks transferred from Blake back to Anniet.

"That's right," Anniet said. "He definitely doesn't like these things, but I don't like them either, so even if he devoured my fears and lies, I would only be grateful for it. But when I look at Deamon, I don't see any reason to fear him, as he has such clever eyes and a silky coat."

While talking, she was running her fingers through that silky fur in long and gentle strokes. Deamon looked at her and finally gave up, dropping on his side and opening his belly for more pets.

"I think he is beautiful," Anniet continued, "and that is not a lie. What is there to lie about, and what is there to be afraid of? He is a gorgeous, gentle giant with beautiful eyes, a very smooth coat, and such strong paws. He is very well trained, very loyal, and very loving. For me, it is not possible to be afraid of him."

"Not anymore and never again," Anniet thought to herself, but didn't voice it aloud.

As if hypnotized by her words, the children were looking at Deamon with completely different eyes, pushing themselves closer instead of shrinking aside. Finally, a few of them stretched out their hands to touch his fur, just to find that despite looking shaggy, it was in fact very smooth and silky to the touch.

Encouraged by this discovery, the children got more and more brave, and soon Anniet felt that there wasn't enough room left for her, so she retreated back to Blake, who got her back in his arms, pressing her to his chest, and said silently.

"Years of reputation ruined in five minutes."

His words were harsh, but his gestures were nothing but gentle. Anniet thought to herself that usually what Blake said matched very well with what he did.

"Was this reputation built by you?" she asked.

"By me? No, not by any means. I told you, they just keep inventing things and selling them as the truth. Over the years, they haven't learned anything else but their own stories. What does it have to do with me? I don't even talk to them."

Anniet thought how extremely unfair it was, but she couldn't figure out to whom — to Blake, for being mistreated like this, or to other people, who didn't have a chance to truly meet such a nice person as Blake really was.

Meanwhile, more and more children tried to touch Deamon, who was extremely patient and tolerant with everyone who managed to get to him, but it was clear that not everyone who wanted to could do it. Some children tried to get close but would start to cry in fear. Some of them would give up straight away, some would rage in anger and try again, some would succeed after a few tries, and some would not, no matter how much they tried.

Whilst Deamon was entertaining the children, one of the adults spoke.

"Lady Ren, would you be able to tell us more about why you left in such a way that made us believe that you had died, and what you had seen while travelling?"

"Sure," Rainee said.

And she told them the story of her journeys over the past several months. She left lots of details aside, but also was very careful not to lie or mislead.

She told them how she got very sick and survived only with the King's help, but even with his help, it took a long time to recover. How after healing, she needed more time for herself, so she left the city to travel for a while. How after travelling for weeks, she visited an ancient monastery hidden from everyone by mist, and only the strange sound of an invisible bell helped her to find it.

How through that place, she found a way to another mystical place that she thought to be some sort of temple, but it appeared to be a Living Library. It was called living because all teachings, all stories there were written not in books, but in memories hidden in tapestries, and how one would be able to relive an event as if witnessing it themselves.

How she learned a lot about Kings of the past and even about the first King. She even retold the story of how King Jonathan created this world they all were living in now. How finally, she left, only to find her way to that mysterious School that was hidden away from the worries of the world. And how she was teaching there for some time until the King himself came to get her and General Blake and to tell them that their time off was over and they were called back to duty.

By the time she finished, it was way past midnight.

Some children were already sleeping on the floor, a few using Deamon as a cushion. The whole pub was jammed with people, taking up all possible space, not caring whether they were sitting or standing. More would probably have come, but there simply wasn't any room left.

After Rainee finished, people were still not satisfied and kept asking:

"What about Prince Angus?"

"What happened at the Palace before you got sick?"

"There are rumours that Silver got mad at School. What happened there?"

"Can you tell more stories from the Living Library about old times?"

But Rainee was firm. She said that those stories would have to wait for another time.

Then she stood up, followed by Blake, Annet, and Ruffus. Deamon quietly sank into the ground, just to resurface further away, so his leaving wouldn't disturb the sleep of the children around him. The owner of the pub squeezed himself through the crowd to let Rainee and her company out through the back door.

On the way back to the Palace, people were still watching them but didn't disturb them, so they reached the Palace gates without any incidents.

While walking through the gates under Blake's apartment, Annet was hoping that Blake would offer her to stay with him, but he didn't. In fact, he didn't stop there himself, but walked with them to the Palace.

At the Palace, Ruffus bid them goodnight and left for his place. Blake first walked Rainee to her apartment and then Anniet to hers. On the way, Anniet was thinking that she really didn't want him to leave. But she didn't know what the rules were in this place. Did she have to live in the apartment given to her, or could she move into Blake's place if he wouldn't mind? She would have to find out about it.

When they reached Anniet's apartment, Blake didn't stay at the door to wish her good night, but walked in and closed the door behind him. He didn't show any signs of leaving anytime soon. Just then, Anniet suddenly remembered that, in fact, it was Blake's apartment, not hers, and Rainee had asked her to stay in it just because Blake never lived here. She was speechless for a bit, looking at Blake before asking.

"Will you stay here with me?"

"Yes," was the short and firm answer.

"Tonight?"

"Always when I am in the Capital."

Anniel smiled and walked close to him.

"Rainee said you dislike this place."

"Things have changed," he answered while brushing her hair with his fingers. "If this nest of snakes is good enough for you, it definitely suits me too."

"Won't we get into trouble? Are there any rules and regulations here?"

"About what? I am the ruler of my own life, and I believe you are too. What does it have to do with anyone else?"

It definitely made sense. He had lived here for years, so he must know the rules. And in fact, she couldn't care less either. Everything was unfolding maybe very fast, but definitely to her liking.

"Is what Rainee said in the pub true?" she asked.

"Yes, what she said is true because she never lies," Blake laughed, "but which particular part are you referring to?"

"What she said about you," Anniet said, "that you act differently around me and that you are not willing to share me with others because you are in love with me?"

"That must be true," he smiled. "I don't know how differently I act with others when you are around, because I don't have to put up with myself, so I cannot tell the difference. But I am definitely in love with you and don't have the slightest desire to share you with anyone."

He bent down and kissed her while, at the same time, peeling off both their clothes. Then he picked her up and carried her to the shower. She watched him obediently while he washed and then dried her and himself. After finishing, he picked her back up in his arms to take her to bed.

"I can walk, you know," she reminded him gently.

"I am well aware of it," he replied, "but it doesn't mean that I cannot carry you."

While holding her effortlessly in one arm, with the other, he lifted the bed covers, tucked her in, and lay down next to her, encircling her with his arms and pressing her firmly to his chest.

She felt completely weightless in his arms and wondered just how strong he really was.

"Very strong," he said, kissing the top of her head. "Now sleep. It has been a long day, and you need some rest."

She tried to protest at first, but her heavy eyelids wouldn't listen to her anymore, and she finally realised how truly tired she was.

"What about you?" she asked, for some reason thinking that he wasn't tired at all.

"I don't need sleep that much anymore," he replied, tightening his embrace.

"Then what will you do?" she asked before finally giving up to these heavy eyelids and allowing slumber to take over her body.

"I will keep you company," he answered mainly to himself. He watched her with a smile, feeling her breath on his chest becoming deep and steady.

In the late morning, Annet was sitting in the corner of the sofa, watching Blake make breakfast for them. She knew he had spent all night by her side, guarding her... She woke up in the same loving embrace, as if she had only slept for a few minutes, but it already was morning.

He was pampering her in every possible way. Every wish she would express — no, it didn't even have to be expressed, just thought about — he would register and fulfil. While she, on the other hand, was just doing nothing. And it made her feel somewhat unhappy about herself. Surely there should be something that she could do for him too. She just couldn't think of anything. She decided to do a bit better from now on and start somehow to repay all this extraordinary kindness and attention he was giving her.

They had breakfast together, chatting about everything and nothing, simply having a good time together.

After breakfast was over, Blake sat closer and looked into her eyes before asking:

"What would you like me to do for you?"

"Eh?" she was confused. "What do you mean by that?"

"I really would like to do something for you," he repeated. "Ask anything. Anything at all, and I will do it. It would make me happy to make you happy."

"I am as happy as a person can possibly be," she answered, still feeling a little surprised by this question. "You already do so much for me."

"Do I?" Now it was Blake's time to be surprised. "I haven't done anything for you since we met. Ever since you came into my life, all I do is just enjoy myself. I just do what I want all

the time. I really would like to do something for you now, something that would make you happy."

"There is nothing you can do to make me happier than I am now," Anniet answered honestly. "I don't want you to do anything for me. To be with you, as you are, makes me the happiest person on the planet, and it is the greatest gift. There is nothing you could do to make it better — please don't try, as it will just complicate things."

"Is this really how you feel? I can change to your liking if you ask. Is there anywhere I could improve, or change who I am or how I behave for you? Please let me know, and I will do it."

Only at this thought, Anniet had a terrifying spasm in her stomach. For the first time since she had been with Blake, she felt that things could go really, really wrong.

"No," she said quickly. "No, no, no, please, whatever you do, don't change anything of what you are. What a horrible thought!" She could feel tears coming to her eyes. "Please, if you could do one thing for me, then don't try to change into anything you might think is better for me! No, I don't need it! I love you as you are. I don't want you to become someone else just because you think it would suit me better."

This thought was really giving her a fright. She couldn't hold back anymore and hugged his neck tightly whilst repeating, "Please don't change for me. I don't need it, I don't want it."

He hugged her back and moved her legs across so she was sitting again in his lap, as a few times before, and held her like that in his embrace while her tears rolled down his neck and chest. After a good while, she finally calmed down. He fished a handkerchief from somewhere and handed it to her while saying:

"I am sorry I hurt you."

She didn't say anything back, just cleaned her eyes and nose. Every time she thought back to what he said, a new tremble would start, and nausea would climb up her throat as if she had eaten rotten fish.

"Sorry, I don't know what came over me," she tried to explain herself.

"I know," he said quietly.

"You do? What was it?" she was interested to know. "Did you know that what you said would have such an effect on me?"

"I had a feeling it might happen, and I am sorry you had to go through it."

"But what was it? You didn't say anything bad. In fact, I thought you were very kind and sincere."

"I was very sincere. And I was ready and committed to make any changes you would ask for. That's why you felt it this way — when something has a true possibility of becoming reality, it feels real."

"I don't want you to change," she repeated quickly.

"I thought you might not want it. I was selfish and a bit cruel for letting you experience it, but I wanted you to know how it feels to be on the other side, and I didn't know any other way. I am really sorry for hurting you."

Anniel fell silent. To know how it feels to be on the other side. Was this how he was feeling then? But she didn't offer to do anything for him or to change herself to suit him better... Or did she?

The more she thought, the more she understood that she had been doing it constantly, even today while he was making breakfast. And she didn't even share it with him. She just decided to "become better" for him on her own, without even asking if he wanted that version of better...

The more she thought, the more she curled into a small ball. Was she really hurting him often like this without even realising?

"I really didn't realise..." she said quietly.

"I know you didn't," he replied while embracing her. "You cannot understand unless you feel it. I will just say your own words back to you — please, if you want to do something for me, then don't try to change into anything you might think is better for me. I don't need it. I love you as you are. I don't want you to become someone else just because you think it would suit me better."

They sat like this for a while, both thinking about what had just happened. Then Blake continued.

"Now you have witnessed a part of me that I would really like to change, not for you, not for anyone else, but for myself. I keep hurting others when I try to help them."

"It doesn't hurt anymore," she said, "and I would rather be in a bit of pain than sit in the dark."

"There is always a way to do things without harming, but the knowledge of how to do it evades me. I can either act, bringing some sort of destruction, or let it be without bringing things up."

"I am really grateful that you brought it up."

"I do believe it. However, for deliberately hurting someone, there always will be consequences, no matter the intention. This is a universal law — one cannot avoid it. Same as a lie. A lie will always lead to pain. And hurt will always lead to fear. It is inexorable."

"No, don't think that way!" Anniel could feel that he was much more stressed about the situation, in fact, much more than she was. "I am not afraid of you! Not even in the slightest. You know that it is true."

She stroked his hair repeatedly, not knowing what to do.

"I know," he smiled back at her, kissing her again on the palm. "But you are unsure now of yourself and your actions, which isn't any better."

"Why are you so harsh on yourself?" She was touched to the core by his sensitivity.

Yes, she must admit, she was now afraid of what her good intentions might bring into reality, but to be honest, this feeling had not appeared just now. It was always deep inside, it was just stirred up a bit. And actually, it was a good thing that it had been stirred up, since it had surfaced, it could be fished out and leave for good, instead of sitting in the depths of the soul.

That second, Old John's words came back from her memory: "There is only one person in the whole world he is angry with and cannot forgive, and that is himself." The words sounded very clear in her mind, and she could understand them very well now.

Blake clearly "heard" it too, as he knitted his eyebrows and tightened his lips at that thought.

"The old man talks too much. I clearly told him to keep away from me."

This angry reaction to such a minor thing somehow broke the tension and panic in Anniet's heart. She relaxed and started laughing, putting her fingers into his hair and pulling his face close to hers.

"You are really something, you know." She gently ran her thumbs over these knitted eyebrows and looked into his eyes before talking again. "You are angry with yourself? Never mind, I love you this way too, all the same. You cannot forgive yourself? Very well, then let me tell you, I forgive you. Not only for now, but for all you have done before and cannot let go of. I am absolutely sure that there isn't a single soul on earth or beyond that wouldn't have forgiven you yet, even in the unlikely event that you did cause some harm. So that means it is only you left. So, on the authority given by you yourself, as your second half, I am forgiving my first half for all the wrong, unjust, and shameful things he has ever done. Here you are, free to start from scratch from now."

And she kissed him on the nose before embracing him around his chest and pressing her head to his shoulder.

She could feel him become speechless for the first time since they met.

That made her even more amused and pleased with herself. He could be angry with himself as long as he wanted. She actually thought this tantrum of his was kind of cute. She could feel him shaking his head in disbelief before embracing her back, and thought to herself, "I have been strictly encouraged to be myself, so too bad for you, as it is you, not me, who has to put up with it then. And I know that you can hear it."

He started to chuckle at this before saying,

"It cannot be helped, I guess."

"Can you teach me?" she asked on impulse.

"To teach you what? To be angry?"

"No. To read minds."

"There is no such thing as mind reading, no matter how much it seems like that. It is feeling another person. And I am teaching you the fastest possible way."

"Are you? How? When?"

"When? Every day," he said. "How? By the simplest technique — answering your every thought without waiting for you to speak. Openly reading your mind."

"How can it help me to feel what you feel?"

"In the most natural way," he explained. "To read someone's mind, you have to feel someone's feelings. Thoughts rise out of feelings, so they can manifest in your head the same way as in the person's head to whom these feelings belong."

Unconsciously, we always feel people around us. We just don't understand what feelings are ours and what belongs to others. And especially, we get confused when most of the feelings are denied and refused as soon as they surface, or some are refused to be admitted even when they are in the open. For example, when someone hates you but smiles and says nice things to you.

So eventually, this ability to feel others gets distorted, rejected, and switches itself off. To start to use it properly, firstly, you have to recognise and accept every feeling you have yourself. As with every other object, the only place you can start, or rather, the only place you can work on, is yourself. Everything else comes as a bonus.

Once you know very well what is yours, then it becomes very clear what isn't. And everything that is not yours obviously belongs to someone else. And then it is just a matter of time and practice to match people with feelings and thoughts popping out of these feelings."

"And how does openly reading my mind help me?"

"Well, the mind is a very obedient tool — if you tell it that others can hear only what you say verbally, it takes it for granted and makes it a reality for you. But when people start to talk to your thoughts, it flashes through the mind that this is not the case, so by itself, without you putting any effort in, it starts to analyse what is happening, and the mind becomes aware that your thoughts are open for everyone. And that becomes your new reality, and your body starts adjusting to it without your permission.

Feelings are faster than thoughts. Sometimes I can answer what you are going to think before you think about it, because I know what thoughts will come from your feelings before you know it yourself, as my mind has become a bit faster after all these years.

So unconsciously, your mind is realising that not only your thoughts, but also your feelings are open to everyone. And not only the feelings that you allow, but also those that you do not allow to come to the surface. So gradually, a day should come when you know yourself at all levels just from people talking to you, without you using words."

Anni was thinking about what she had just heard, trying to make at least some sense of it.

"What do you mean by feelings I do not allow to surface?"

"There are some things we deny to ourselves and, let's say, push back down before they breach the surface where they could manifest into thought, before they reach our consciousness. We don't even know we have them. Let's say mine has to be something about anger, not being able to forgive myself. Old John is not the first who pointed it out to me, don't worry, but even if it were just him, the old man is always right, so he doesn't need any

confirmation from others. You know, they do match each other badly, Old John and Ren — it is difficult to live with someone who is always right."

"Okay, let's not escape the subject," Anniet pulled him back. "You cannot feel anger and forgiveness? That isn't really true, as I have seen you angry, and you are one of the fastest people to forgive I have ever met. So that cannot be entirely true."

"No, I can feel anger," he chuckled again. "What I cannot feel is what I am angry about and what I cannot forgive myself for. That is pushed down."

"Well, that's easy," she said. "You are angry about not being able to repay your imaginary 'debts', and you cannot forgive yourself for missing opportunities to do so by making the wrong decision when such an opportunity came. You probably blame yourself for being too slow to think and too weak for not being able to create more opportunities."

None of this thinking is true, and you love truth too much to allow such nonsense to surface. Is it even possible to repay this kind of "debt" when only you see it? Isn't it an unreachable goal when every time you succeed, you see it as nothing more than normal, and every time you don't, you take it as failure?"

"...."

There was a long silence after that. Anniet was thinking that she really didn't know herself where all these thoughts had come from, but it seemed so obvious at that moment that she simply spoke it aloud. Now she was thinking, what the hell had she been saying? She still thought that what she had said was obvious, but doubt rose that she might be wrong, as complicated things could not be so simple.

"Your training must be coming along very well," Blake finally spoke. "Don't fall for doubt, as it will slow it down. It is exactly how it works. You simply know, and doubt can only cast a shadow on the things you know and cannot do any good."

Then he stood up and stretched his legs and arms before talking again.

"I have had enough of these riddles and of this place too, for now. Ren is not in town today, let's us get some fresh air too. Fancy a ride?" He smiled, turning his back to her.

"I thought you were going to leave me," she said with relief, jumping happily to her feet.

"You will have to work harder to get it right every time, and somehow, you will have to start to trust me, preferably all the time," he smiled at her.

"How come you didn't go with Rainee?" Anniet asked, getting on his back and hugging his neck.

"She left on Silver," Blake answered, walking to the window. "If she wanted me to come with her, she would have let me know. And if she didn't want me to come with her, I couldn't catch up with Silver if she was at full speed, so it would be pointless to try."

He swung his leg over, and they fell down first before taking to the sky.

Anniel was looking at the city streets below, at the same time feeling Blake's muscles under her body and thinking how grateful she was for this morning, as no matter how strangely things unfolded, it had brought her closer to him than the last few days together had.

Until now, despite herself, she had been feeling some gap between them, as she still felt him somehow superior to her. Now that gap either had disappeared or had become much narrower for reasons not known to her. And she couldn't care less what those reasons were, as it didn't really matter — she got even closer to him than she was before, and that was all that mattered.

And she would trust him and would know him eventually, and any feeling against it was welcome to surface, so it could be pulled out instead of being plunged back down to cause more troubles.

"Deamon is not with us," she said with concern, noticing that there was no black dog under them.

"Don't worry, he is here, just running underground, as I want neither to scare people on the streets nor to draw unnecessary attention to us," Blake replied, turning his head towards her and kissing the corner of her lips. "Today we are having our last free day. Tomorrow I will have to start training and spend some time with new recruits. So hold on tight, don't let me go, and let's have some fun."

She tightened her hold on his neck and also crossed her legs around his waist, and he shot to the clouds at an unbelievable speed, making her heart burst with joy.