

18+

Anna Efimenko

EIGHT KNOTS



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«Издательские решения»

Efimenko A.

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Hiding in a village cut off from the outside world, a pagan community has strict laws established by a druid, where disobedience is penalized by death. A young man, Pagey, an orphan raised by a beekeeper, lives a life according to the rules like every-one else until strangers appear in the village. The world ceases to be the same. Within a year, from Samhain to Samhain, Pagey changes, revealing and realizing macabre mysteries of this miniature 'Paradise' and the secret of his birth.

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Eight knots

Anna Efimenko

*Hangman, hangman, hold it a little while,
Think I see my friends coming,
Riding a many mile.
Friends, did you get some silver?
Did you get a little gold?
What did you bring me, my dear friends,
To keep me from the gallows pole?
I couldn't get no silver,
I couldn't get no gold,
You know that we're too damn poor
To keep you from the gallows pole.
Led Zeppelin. Gallows Pole*

*Translated by Olga Simpson
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He had to run fast.

How quickly he had to run now! By the river meander, at a sharp angle, accompanied by squelching of mud under his soles, the croaking of frogs coming from the marshes, into the wind, which brought nothing but fog.

He kept running, while broken glass, bent rusty nails, hawthorn, blackthorn prickles, and pine needles spilled out of his stretched pockets and discolored sleeves. Taking no heed, all he could think about was getting home as fast as possible.

Finally, the river realm ended. He approached a gently sloping hill where a modest house was topped up with a highly crafted carved bee on the front.

An apiary glimmered in the dark with nice wooden boxes, facing the East, the bee entrances were painted bright yellow. Swinging on a hook, an old creaking lantern touted to the verandah, luring home.

Gasping for breath, he went up onto the porch.

"Poor Hom!" it crossed his mind. It's too late, always too late, everlasting damn ex post facto.

Shaking himself down, flicking the occasional midges away unaffected by the cold autumn nights, he entered the house where he had lived for as long as he could remember. A beekeeper with long graying hair was sitting at the table turned pale when he saw his foster-son,

"What's the matter?"

"I'll be hanged, Lekki, definitely hanged..." the breathless young man could hardly find the right words, trying to overcome the horror.

Only now, the beekeeper could see his foster child properly in the dim light of a flickering candle. The scared, panting young man was covered with thorns and needles, sticking ominously out of his clothes. Burrs and countless dried thistles, shimmering with purple petals as if they were still alive tangled in his pitch black hair.

“Go to bed, now, you’re shaking!” the beekeeper commanded getting out of the table and added, “I’ll get her here. Let her carry all her magic potions, something’s weird about you.”

Long-haired Lekki was involved in beekeeping throughout his entire life. His parents had done the same, and it seemed that even the Lekki’s ancestors were one of those wild honey farmers, who got the honey inside the hollow tree or built hives using birch bark.

Lekki could never forget that same cold autumn night, when, according to legend, only the restless souls of the dead wander around the residential areas. At that time, a thirty-year-old beekeeper was attracted by an unexpected noise outside the window. Keeping in mind that it is dangerous to leave the house on the Night of the Dead, Lekki slightly opened the door and looked out. In a corner of the garden, between the two beehives, there was a basket with a swaddled baby inside, screaming and freezing cold. The beekeeper brought the basket into the house, warmed the baby and took him to live with him. Being orphaned at such an early age, Lekki took care of the foundling as best he could.

The villagers gossiped about the new inhabitant of the apiary, calling him a foundling. The most vicious children sometimes teased the baby, calling him a fairy cub¹. However, Lekki was always happy about this sudden apparition of a baby in his garden and answered back to all questioning,

“So, he will be my trusty assistant in the apiary!”

Many years have gone by since then, the community has developed and lived by its own rules. The Wheel of the Year was spinning nonstop, seasons changed, calendar festivities were celebrated with exuberant feasts and rituals around the campfire. The beekeeper’s foundling was growing up becoming a silent and quiet boy; then, black-haired and angular, he jumped into adolescence and then – into blooming, stormy youth. He liked neckerchiefs, lace ornaments and the smell of jasmine; age-related details changed him smoothly, harmoniously, until that very day before the autumn equinox, when he collapsed on the floor in front of Lekki repeating as if obsessed, “Now I will be hanged!”

The beekeeper carried him to bed, pulled off his damp boots, stuffed with rusty pins, and covered him with a coarse wool blanket. A little later, Lekki left the house and a couple of hours later, he came back together with the herb-woman who was hiding under the beekeeper’s net – the normal safety precaution against rumors. The herb-woman brought chamomile tea with mint and stayed all night at the foot of the boy’s bed while he was in his delirium.

Even in his dreams, the swamps odour haunted him and the executioner’s boots banged.

Lekki regretfully thought about his pupil; nothing left to keep him in this life any longer: he wasn’t interested in crafts, a non-local girl whom he used to go out in spring with had left the village, and his only confidant, a lanky snob named Hom was going to move to the cities for good.

Waking up, the young man could smell again that disturbing, swampy smell of dead leaves, like a harbinger of doom. Lekki and the herb-woman leaned over his bed looking like a married couple. He heard what they were talking about.

“I will help you to attract bees again,” the herb-woman assured the beekeeper, ticking off her graceful fingers and naming each plant. “We’ll take raspberries, mint, oregano, butter churned on the May Eve, and add digitalis.”

When a flower, which was called the great grass or the marigolds of the fairies by the locals, the young man realized that he was losing consciousness again. The herb-woman was still on it,

“We’ll place the mixture into the middle of a tree, and a new swarm will come to you quickly, you’ll see! You’ll live better than ever!”

“She promises him that everything will remain as before, or even better,” thought the beekeeper’s pupil gloomily, rolling under the shabby douvet. “But nothing will ever be the same again. The bees will not return, the summer is dead, our sun has set.”

¹ Fairy «fairy folk», «small folk» is a mythical creature in Celtic mythology (*hereinafter, author’s notes*).

A little later, waiting for the elders to go to breakfast, he got up and, gradually regaining control of himself, pulled out a chest from under the bench, put his simple belongings there and, stepping into the living room, solemnly declared to the herb-woman and the beekeeper,

“I’m leaving.”

After all, it all started with this idea about a year ago.

Chapter 1.

The Day of the Dead

October 31/November 1. Samhain

‘I’m leaving’, Pagey thought with indignation, waking up.

The dull autumn sun filtered through dense curtains to bestow a diffused light into the shabby damp room in the house on the hill. Lekki managed his income solely for the benefit of the apiary, so people who lived there were not up to luxury.

The bed creaked menacingly as Pagey’s legs got longer dangled in the air. Pagey rolled onto his back and stared at the cracked ceiling, which was covered with moldy streaks. There was the single decoration of the room hung above the headboard – a pair of rowan twigs tied with a red thread to ward off evil spells. The herb-woman had brought the rowan to him when she had lived at Lekki’s a long time ago. This, of course, could not remain a secret for the locals, and the herb-woman had to move back to her hut outside the village, in a birch grove by the river.

‘She’s gone, and I’m leaving,’ Pagey made up his mind again, wrapping up to the top of his head with the cover as if the bed might be his refuge.

But even this house could have been bearable, if not for the age-old commotion that surrounded the apiary making it some sort of an inn: villagers came in here without knocking, without any warning, traded with Lekki, groping about the rooms, here and there, blatantly, not being embarrassed at all, making Pagey always feel extremely annoyed.

And now the yard was crowded with people: they hurried to buy the last honey of the year, the beekeeper had available, before the long winter. The locals also looked at other products: wax candles, honey-candied nuts, vegetables and dried fruit.

“Our pumpkins are always bigger in comparison to what other people have!” Lekki was proudly boasting with his crop to someone outside.

A stout bearded man, dressed all in black put the beekeeper in his place,

“Not bigger than we do.”

Floor planks creaked in every way in the house as customers walked around the beekeeper’s house absolutely freely. A hunchbacked old man suddenly pulled back the curtain used as a false partition covering the entrance to Pagey’s chambers. As soon as he was confident that he took a wrong direction, muttered:

“No, I don’t see any honeycombs. You, lad, sleep, don’t mind me.”

And the curtain went down. There were no doors, except the front one, at Lekki’s house. Would anyone want to keep secrets here, or hide from anyone?

‘I’m getting out of here,’ he told himself for the third time, and jerked himself out of bed.

He got dressed in a rush, splashed icy water into his face from a chipped jug, and suddenly, a hideous grinding caught his attention. Someone started to scratch the window with a monstrous sound as if the glass itself could squeak. Turning around, the young man saw a miracle outside: a golden-haired young gentleman wrapped in a warm plaid scarf. The blond man’s head was crowned with heavy horns.

It was Hom, with oak branches upon his head, looking like antlers, he tapped them on the window, calling a friend outside.

“What a crown!” Pagey exclaimed with admiration, and climbing up onto the windowsill, jumped out through the window. The cold air cheered up his vanquishing slumber.

“Praise Cernunnos, an ancient God!” Hom ordered back in response with ostentatious strictness. “Praise the Wild Hunt, damn you!”

Hom arrived with his grandfather, who was currently scrutinizing the hives. The Hom's old man demanded honeycombs to be delivered to him on a weekly basis no later than four o'clock in the afternoon, although the village had no longer liked any hours, any days of the week, the calendar convenient throughout the rest of the world. But their village lived, measuring life through the births and deaths of the moons, daylight hours and inescapable changing of the agricultural seasons. Nevertheless, Hom's grandfather strictly observed the discipline of the former times established before communal and he expected the same from their countrymen.

Many years ago, Hom's grandfather, aka Mr. Kelly, a retired Royal marine, brought his grandson to his home. The parents, according to legend, were brutally killed during the invasion of aggressors from the South, and old Kelly managed to save only a newborn in a cradle, prudently hid away his service weapon. Moving to the village near the river meander, Mr Kelly lived together with his grandson and his stableman who was also ex-military, rough and rude, who was called the executioner by locals behind his back.

Hom was considered the smartest guy in the area. Word was when Hom was still a boy, the gods gave him nine magical nuts for inspiration and poetic knowledge² – that's why he grew up so wise and eloquent. And the handsomest boy, as well. Tall, well-built, fair-haired and freckled, he could hold a conversation on any subject, knew everything about everything, the world's history, wars and battles, great sovereigns and forgotten gods. Hom had a clue about Dante banished from Florence, and Pagey was never tired of hearing this story.

They lived in a village. The village was part of them. A landlord's lands, whom they, unlike other people in the Empire, didn't call a lord, but a druid, were leased to ordinary laborers. Lekki's apiary stood on the top of a hill. A salutary spring lurked nearby. Every festivity during the year, the community people celebrated with a big bonfire made at the foot of the hill, where they feasted around it, praised the gods, and performed ritual acts as antediluvian as the people themselves.

If you go further from the apiary and the bonfire, you can get to the boat river crossing. The locals were allowed to go to the other side, where the railway station was still functioning – it was convenient to go to the cities by train. However, no one from the community was particularly bothered about the cities: Just a generation ago, many, on the contrary, fled from the cities to grab a habitable patch, where the traditions of ancient ancestors would be revived with renewed vigor. No one had any desire to go to the railway station because, otherwise, they would have to pay a boatman – a man of ill repute, and to mingle in the company of the boatman was a flagrant disgrace for any self-respecting person. That was the reason why the station often stayed empty as the villagers rarely travelled to the cities.

The river meandered into long swamps further away from the river crossing. That's where Hom lived together with his grandfather and his assistant, the executioner. Before Woolf used to live with them, another child being left, a talented boy with delicate features also brought up by Mr. Kelly from the cities. It was said that Woolf was an orphan, and he could expect nothing in the future but alms on the porch. Pagey didn't remember much about him. But everyone in the village remembered the terrible morning shortly after the vernal equinox when the fishermen pulled Woolf's body out of the river. The guy drowned himself, stuffing his pockets with stones.

It was a really weird time. Growing up, Hom needed someone who could listen to him, a confidant, a soul mate, and he turned his attention to the dark-haired adopted son of the beekeeper, then a child. Hom used to bring Pagey books, paper, and pens, and even Hom's strict grandfather seemed satisfied with a new page in Hom's retinue.

Once at the dawn of time, Hom depicted himself as a brave knight – a defender. He scared away the kids who wanted whatever it was to put a piece of iron to Pagey's bed or even to set the boy on fire – it was believed that the changeling from the kingdom of fairies could be identified that way.

² Hazel is considered to be a tree of wisdom and poetry in Celtic folklore.

The inhuman child, according to legend, would have laughed all alone, and then the village would have been able to bring Pagey to light. Hom wouldn't let anyone near his younger friend and kicked his detractors sometimes even if he believed in it. Pagey was loyal and fully committed to Hom for this touching care and concern.

Until today, they had been inseparable.

Having passed along several allotments, the friends came to a small wasteland facing the druid's estate and several luxurious mansions that served as a dwelling for the druid's surroundings: managers, treasurers, suppliers. Hom sat on the wasteland next to Pagey, listing out loud treasures being kept by the druid in his mansion and some mysterious grimoires stored in the manor library.

However, both young men were surprised at that very moment to notice a few carts on the wasteland, where women of different ages were scurrying about trying to accommodate a temporary shelter. They all had short, coarse haircuts and strongly built figures. Their accent was clearly different from the locals. It was melodious, high, varied with a lot of tones.

Stopping, amazed Hom stared at the carts,

“Have you seen? Strangers, apparently.”

Pagey shrugged,

“They are probably traders, aren't they?”

“Unlikely. Trade is better in the cities.”

They stood silently for a moment, studying the intruders. Finally, Hom guessed,

“They are Gevers, bud. Eastern people who broke away from the majority because of religious differences. They are doomed to wander the earth like Gypsies or Jews. Haven't you read anything about them?”

Pagey shook his head baffled,

“Not really.”

Hom continued to inspect the wasteland being suspicious. Dwellings were hastily built near strings of carts, typical for nomads, a fireplace had already been set alight curling with smoke. He wondered what were these Gevers after at this place. Everyone knew for dozens of miles around that the village was kept on distance. They followed ancient customs and traditions here, they danced in the fields in spring and cajoled the spirits of the ancestors with red-cheeked apples and jugs full of milk with the onset of frosts. Everyone here played *by the rules*.

There was not a more fervent traditionalist than Hom. He was Kelly by blood – the grandson of a local elder, a retired military man. To this day, Mr. Kelly was the only one in the village who was allowed to keep guns at home – as Hom's grandfather was in charge of security.

And the safety was on. No letters, no correspondence – nothing like this was allowed to the locals. This was done primarily to protect them. Travelling to the cities wasn't prohibited, but to keep contacts with the cities was considered a betrayal.

“Who could call up outsiders here?” couldn't understand Hom, whose holiday mood had suddenly gone somewhere. A plaid scarf was scratching his neck, the antlers made of wooden branches looked silly, and he would like most of all to be in the house by the river meander, in his cozy room, with an interesting book and a mug of warmed wine in his hand.

Meanwhile, Pagey walked with certainty towards the Gevers' settlement. Still lost in thought, the blond man hurried after him.

A short chunky girl with cropped hair was hanging raggery on the rope, embroidered with sophisticated geometrical ornaments. She looked around and instinctively recoiled when she saw Hom with giant antlers-branches on his head. While pleased to note the scared look the fright of the newcomer, he suddenly shouted,

“Praise Cernunnos, an ancient God, strangers!”

“Hey, easy!” Pagey tapped his friend on the shoulder blades and called out to the Gevers, “Don't be scared! We're not so inhospitable as this stag is trying to tell you.”

“Aren’t you?” the girl screwed up her eyes in disbelief as she came closer. Pagey noted a silvery crescent-shaped pendant flashed on her neck. “Then what are you?”

Trying to smile as courteously as possible, the young man began to stand up for her,

“We are respectable people. Honest workers. We also have an apiary.”

“Speak for yourself!” Hom broke in. “Listen, miss, this guy has an apiary, and if you want some honey...”

The Crescent snorted in anger that made Pagey feel a burning shame previously unknown to him for his friend’s shocking manner. He mumbled,

“Shut up, Hom, please.”

“...just don’t get caught in the hive!” paying no attention, the fair-haired continued talking big.

The Crescent headed back to the carts leaving them without a farewell.

For a few moments, the friends watched fascinated as the heavy boots of the Gever girl lined with sturdy iron nails glimmered in the twilight. Finally Pagey exhaled,

“Why do you think her hair is short?”

His friend scratched his head lazily at the place where the branches were fastened,

“I’m sure all the Gevers have lice, and that’s why they have to crop their hair.”

In fact, Hom knew that this tribe was famous first and foremost for a complete matriarchy. The Gever women had a dominant position both in the tribe and in their own families. They were trained in martial arts and knew how to stand up for themselves as professional soldiers. The Gever women were famous for being educated, fearless and had a habit to express openly their own opinion. And they always carried daggers, hiding them in the tops of their rough boots.

All this made Hom crazy.

* * *

Lekki stored the remains of squeezed honeycombs in the barn – he kept them in a special barrel. The beekeeper used to take them out just before winter to the appropriate distance from the hives for each bee family to pick up the remains of the honey because they were not suitable for consumption. There was no point in keeping them any longer, either, otherwise mice would have been in the barn.

Now near the barn, a few hundred bees were hovering in the air – the population of all hives in Lekki’s apiary was involved in pocketing of unclaimed stuff belonging to nobody. Pagey knew this was the time he would never be bitten. After such a flight, the bees usually had to last through a long winter in the underground, but the frost wasn’t yet strong enough to put the hives away for good.

Having returned from the Gever wasteland, Hom and Pagey popped in for a while into the “Refectory to all” – a place established like a pub, where on November eve, all visitors were given a free drink and treated with roast potatoes sprinkled with salt and butter.

In addition to free food for the villagers, the pub landlady displayed treats outside the building, in the dark backyard – it was believed that this should appease the evil spirits that roamed freely on Samhain’s eve in the streets. Evil spirits were often accompanied by the dead according to legends, that’s why Hom left a cup of porridge and a glass of milk beside the house every year, treating the deceased Woolf.

Having asked the “Refectory to all” landlady to wrap some food to go for them, both friends came back to the apiary, where Pagey, sitting comfortably near the tiny fireplace and tossing a roasted potato in his palm hoping to cool it, turned to his friend,

“Tell me about Dante!”

Hom grinned. Looking like that the younger comrade had asked him to tell this story countless times before. Today, however, they were excited, the reason was on the arrival of strangers, so Hom was even glad to have something familiar, ordinary, and started,

“In exile, Dante stayed at the Scaligers, the ruling family of Verona. The poet was accommodated by Cangrande della Scala, a valiant knight, and autocrat. They say, he drank some water from the spring and died soon after that. But in fact, Cangrande was poisoned by the stuff made from the pollen of digitalis. Only a very experienced wizard herbalist could do that. After Cangrande della Scala died, his body was put into a marble tomb and placed over the church entrance. There it stands to this day, in the city of Verona. And there appeared two more arches carved – there lie the remains of other Scaligers, descendants of Cangrande being poisoned with digitalis.”

Pagey yawned,

“No, tell me about young Dante,”

His friend glanced at Pagey in defiance,

“Fine! Have it your way. The main source of inspiration and Dante’s changeless muse was the girl he saw at a young age in Florence. Her name was Beatrice.”

“Not Beatrice but Vita,” suddenly interrupted Pagey. “I heard her sister call to her at the carts. Lady Crescent. Her name is Vita.”

With these words, Hom suddenly noticed that the blue eyes of Pagey sparkled which he had never seen before. Of course, he interpreted it as a bad omen.

* * *

Later that night when Hom had gone home and Pagey expressed a desire to drop by to the herb-woman on holiday eve. The beekeeper tried to stop the young man telling the well-worn horror stories, “Remember, nights are getting darker and colder. The first frosts begin. No one should leave the house at this time, and it’s better not to open the door at all. No travelers should be allowed in to spend the night – they might be the dead causing death to those who let them in.”

But Pagey was pretty aware that Lekki would like himself to go to visit the one he had always loved. Except for lazy ones, everyone whispered about the herb-woman and the beekeeper in the village. Having no right to get married, they had no right even to appear together in public – otherwise, it would be *against the rules*. Nevertheless, they always found options – and the herb-woman always put on a beekeeper’s hat with a long meshed veil inconspicuously covering her face when she went down the hill and got back to her place behind the birch grove. They always found a chance to see each other. But today Lekki was too busy counting the profits for the sales day, so the young man went alone to the red-haired woodland sorceress. The villagers were wary of her and called her the Green woman. Nevertheless, they always came to her place for a cure for any ailment. They treated her like all the healers belonging to all peoples in the world, with the deepest awe and reverence, because common people could only explain the miraculous effect of herbs on the body by magic.

The herb-woman’s hut was actually outside the community lands, across the river, and beyond the birch grove – no one would ever risk planting birches in the village’s territory. The tree border, tree of the waters of Oblivion – as they used to say here about the birch, and Pagey had been seeing the silvery bark since his childhood to find the log cabin of a beautiful witch in woods, who was once close to Lekki and even stayed at their place in the apiary. The red-haired woman left the beekeeper when the threat being revealed became too obvious. Nevertheless, nothing prevented the herb-woman to keep a warm relationship with the beekeeper until today and feel the most tender affection for his foster child.

Pagey knocked on the door three times.

“Look who’s here!” the herb-woman smiled bringing him inside the house.

The young man breathed in a spicy warm air, placed on the fire, something was brewing in the cauldron. Unable to restrain his curiosity, he blurted right out of the gate,

“Why did the Gevers come here?”

The woman pretended not to know what he was talking about and uttered tranquilly,

“Sounds like they have been chased away from the previous place. Would you like a pie? Just your favorite left...”

But Pagey wasn't up to pies,

“Why are they being chased everywhere?”

“Because they are disobedient in the eyes of the authorities.”

“But who asked them to come down here?”

“Me,” the herb-woman replied calmly.

Sitting down on the bench that had already been chosen by a triple colored cat named Rosehip, Pagey thoughtfully rubbed the pet and frowned,

“You're not scared?”

“Who?”

“Him.”

“No,” laughed the herb-woman, stirring the contents in the cauldron over the fire. “I'm not afraid of him at all.”

“You know better,” Pagey replied somberly, growing dark more and more. “But if I were you, I'd tread carefully to argue with the druid.”

* * *

A few days later, the community gathered around a big bonfire near the river. Each festival of the Wheel of the Year was a node in public life, and so, it was another cold October, so, they all went outside to celebrate the black Samhain. Remembering the dead, remembering the past, wanting to confuse evil spirits and wicked fairies, the locals dressed up in weird clothes, painted their faces with soot, and even hid behind masks carved from pumpkins.

Hom arrived with his grandfather and the groom – the executioner. The boatman left the crossing and went to the bonfire, incessantly smoking cigarettes and sitting all alone a little distance from the bonfire. The blackberry family arrived at the festivity as a whole – the most successful married couple of entrepreneurs were together with their kids, all as one dressed in black. A few Gever women were here, too.

Pagey noticed Lady Crescent, and he was seized by an incredible joy.

“She's a Beauty,” uttered the young man with adoration, keeping a close eye on the Gever girl.

Hom made a face,

“You mean, this one? A Beauty? Come on. If there is a beauty here, it must be her,” and with those words, the fair-haired man pointed to the thin and sad blackberry wife standing with all her numerous offsprings.

“The blackberry wife?” Pagey was surprised. “She's old enough to be your mother!”

“You'd think that someone had ever been stopped,” Hom retorted.

“But she's married to the bearded man. They're wealthy. And it's wrong to think that.”

But his friend cut him off,

“Will you shut up, Pagey? It's wrong, you know, to drool over a dirty little Gypsy, and that's exactly what you're doing.”

“You shut up,” Pagey answered back light-heartedly and stood up to go and say hello to Vita.

But as soon as he went up to her, they all fell silent at the sound of a low voice, familiar to everyone here, which was loudly announcing,

“Let the new year begin. The spoke swung, the Wheel of the Year keeps on moving.”

The druid approached the bonfire and raised his long, powerful arms above the flames.

He was tall and lean, with clear cheekbones incised on his face – you thought, you could even cut yourself with these cheekbones. Throughout his appearance, there was something authoritarian, uncompromising. No wonder people treated the druid with great respect, brought gifts to each full

moon, paid the land rent promptly. Of course, the people tried to appease Mr. Kelly – but only because he was an old soldier and kept an eye on justice in the community. They obeyed the druid on some inner, intuitive level.

Slightly touching the gilt buttons on his luxurious dark blue coat, the druid began his message, alas, not with solemn speech,

“Before we start to celebrate the festivity, I ask each of you, who called the Gevers into our lands?”

The herb-woman stood up and having straightened her green dress, answered defiantly,

“Stop pretending you didn’t realize it was me.”

Dumfounded by such familiarity with the lord, people began to whisper in surprise, and the druid continued unperturbed,

“You know the rules established regarding our limited relationship with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, you broke them. You don’t belong in today’s ritual, let it be a lesson to you.”

The herb-woman waved her hand,

“I don’t even live on your property, take a chill.”

“Nevertheless, you called them on my land. Without my consent. Should you go back to *your territory?*”

Hom, the druid’s favorite, had been silently watching the proceedings, now stepped forward defiantly barking an order,

“Escort this woman to her house.”

Two burly men, the field workin’ people, came up to her, and she had no choice but to obey.

“I knew that this was going to happen,” Pagey thought sadly. “I warned her.”

Standing next to him, Vita stared at him in stony silence, dazed. Neither she nor Pagey could move.

The figure of the druid remained motionless by the fire. Now he was at the peak of his might and power: regal, tough, like a thousand-year-old stone.

Passing by him, the herb-woman muttered caustically,

“You are the same bastard, you’ve always been.”

The two men escorting her recoiled from the woman in horror. The druid seemed to ignore her rudeness, except looking even colder, and his already thin lips tightened into a narrow thread, without uttering a word in reply.

The community people watched silently as this strange woman, who was still full of unspeakable dignity, left their meeting, one of the most important holidays of the year, Samhain – a turning point for the winter.

Pagey turned to Vita and, spreading out his arms helplessly as if personally apologizing for the scene, gave an awkward smile,

“Welcome to our village.”

Chapter 2.

Winter solstice

December 21. Yule

On the winter solstice, Pagey suddenly began to badger for a new pair of shoes with lapels decorated with Arabic ornaments, buzzing about at the weavers' looms and didn't calm down until the "oriental" shoes were made to him by special order.

Prior to this, the guy was unpretentious in regards to his clothes: he was content with old Lekki's garments redrawn to his skinny shoulders and some other stuff that he inherited after Woolf had committed suicide. Pagey recalled that Hom brought stacks of shirts and pants of the deceased to the apiary, there were a few pairs of shoes among other things. So Pagey twisted the wheel of his life, dressed in worn rags of the drowned, and only now the idea suddenly sunk into his heart to wheedle out the fairy Arab shoes.

Lekki, though disliked squandering, went to the expense of shoes for his foster-son, and it was godly: to wear new clothes at night, when the sun was born again, was considered a good omen and promised prosperity in the coming year.

Tied soft leather laces and ratcheted down a colorful scarf around his chicken neck, making him a bit like a Gypsy, Pagey was convinced that his reflection in the mirror had very, very black hair, laid to one side too much, and happily headed to the carts of strangers.

The smoke coming out of the Gever tents was floating along the valley. Of course, the dark visaged lady Crescent was somewhere nearby.

"Hello," she said.

"Got a minute?"

They moved away from the wasteland, to a sparse spruce thicket. Sitting on a fallen tree, Pagey began to pick at the snow with the toe of his boot, wishing to demonstrate his new clothes to the girl once again.

"Do you fancy going to the fair? You can get there by train."

"To the cities? What will happen over there?"

"Oh, it should be fun. They go out to the fair for the whole neighborhood. They call it the Christmas market."

Vita snorted indifferently,

"You seem to be the first one I've ever met who's still impressed by the Christmas markets."

"It could be adventurous!" Pagey didn't give up.

Lady Crescent sighed with a smile,

"All right, only if it can really be an adventure."

"Wait a minute. Does it mean „Yes“? Does it mean you can go over there with me?"

"Of course, it means „Yes“, you dummy! When?"

"Tomorrow!" Pagey blurted out.

Getting lost with each other, they both didn't even notice Hom lurking behind the tree and listening to all of their simple dialogue. Of course, the blond man had no intention to follow anyone. He was just walking near the Gever tents every single day and see how the nomad women had settled, studying their life and habits, like exotic animals. "Knowledge is power!" Hom's grandfather taught him, the young Kelly clearly understood that it was necessary first to thoroughly study the selected object before you could obtain power over someone.

And act in a proper manner later.

* * *

“Half-past four again!” Mr. Kelly growled, moving forward the rusty clockface.

The old man always gave the impression of being impetuous, initially embittered as if waiting to be stabbed in the back. Once Pagey witnessed Mr. Kelly cursing like blazes a small, pretty like a fairy girl who lived next door, named Liz, just because she accidentally ran on his allotment playing with kids, and trampling the flower beds with her tiny shoes. Leaning over the girl like a thundercloud, Mr. Kelly was cursing, imprecations poured from his lips causing tears to appear on the girl’s long lashes.

Looking at the frowning old sod, Pagey remembered that, when he had been younger, he was amazed at how Hom managed to grow up so laughsome and cheery.

The Kellys had long lived at the river. A local foster nurse volunteered to help the old man with his grandson at first but the former soldier sent her back a week later, complaining “this rattle gives neither good, nor peace.” In general, being rejected, the foster nurse spread around all these rumors about the family of the military man being obstinate to a liberal lifestyle in the community. Rumors were generally supported by both Kellys – Senior and Junior. Hom had always been drawn up with a bright head, and his grandfather was feeding him science and wisdom. They both had no quiet contentment, no compromise.

“Is Hom at home, Mr. Kelly?” the young man decided to change the subject ignoring the sarcasm about him being late.

“Had the well dried up at the apiary?” the old man reciprocally ducked a question of his opponent. He was eloquently staring at Pagey’s stringy hair, black icicles getting into his eyes, “I’m not just asking products to be delivered within a certain time. I’ll have to clean it after you!”

With these words, Mr. Kelly pulled a blade of grass, which had come out of woodwork, out of a burlap bag and, headed to the house with a heavy sigh.

Pagey was left alone in the yard. Of course, only Hom could invite him to enter the house – Kelly Senior demonstrated his contempt too clearly. However, Hom was nowhere to be seen.

There was a small garden behind the man’s dwelling place, further the allotment bordered with a lopsided ugly shack which the assistant, the executioner inhabited. The village ended at the executioner’s house. Then came the marshes, the river, the birch grove, and then the herb-woman’s hut.

* * *

Passing the birches, Hom stared at the little hut with dislike. He always felt antipathy toward the most mysterious, the most rebellious inhabitant of the village. Local folks called her green woman or herb-woman, Hom once and for all called her the red witch and stuck with this nickname.

“Hey! I need something for insomnia!” he shouted.

“Aren’t you too young to ask me for a potion?” the herb-woman was amazed leaning out of the window.

Hom stamped his foot impatiently,

“You’re pretty aware that I have the druid’s written permission to demand any books, artifacts, and ingredients! It’s not my fault that everybody in the area has been born so stupid and the gods have endowed me with wit.”

“Okay, hold up,” the herb-woman replied wearily, heading to the wall with bundles of various plants being dried. “Where is lunar, sleepyhead? Lavender, mint... Here, take these. And get the hell out of here.”

With that, she slammed a wreath of dead purple flowers at his feet. Hom forced himself to calm down. He could definitely make her pick up the herbs and give them to him in a proper manner. As befits, with reverence. But he wasn’t up for arguments. He was interested in the result of the case,

that's why he quickly put the dried flowers into his inside pocket and left the red witch's lair without any thanks.

Back in the village, Hom went straight to the drugstore run by Angie, the head of the blackberry family's wife. The drugstore was located in the outbuilding of the mansion which belonged to the wealthiest family in the area. Inside and out, everything was redolent of the mourning solemnity and darksome romance: Windows curtained with tight black lace did not let in the light; wormwood was scattered on window sills and on the floor, and huge uncut pieces of black agate spotted everywhere, on the shelves among bottles of leeches and alcoholic tinctures.

Angie, the blackberry wife, stood behind the counter, busily counting coins and filling tight leather pokes. She was all in flatland gear, a tightly buttoned black dress, and her face, ash gray with fatigue and hard work with enormous dark shadows under her eyes.

When a bell jingled over the door being opened, the druggist's wife immediately raised her dark-haired head and saw Hom, then dryly uttered more to herself than to him,

"There you are."

Hom shrugged his shoulders,

"I just came from the red witch over the birches. She makes me sick."

One of the young blackberry daughters, who had been cleaning the shelves, decided to have a nice conversation with him,

"I like the herb-woman. I remember, she once gave me cuttings of a tree, and they instantly rooted in the garden."

The blackberry wife interrupted her daughter.

"Could you leave us alone with young Mr. Kelly?"

She didn't like gossip, and knew how difficult it was for customers to give the reason why they went to the store in front of strangers, so she waited until the girl went out of the outbuilding and decided to get straight to the point, "Well?! What was it you couldn't get from the herb-woman that you came here?"

"What does she have that you don't?" the blond answered a question with a question.

The woman in black took thought,

"A rejuvenating potion, for example. We certainly don't keep that. And the herb-woman is good at it, you can't take it away from her."

Hom shook his head in disapproval,

"That's pathetic. No, there is no need for any rejuvenating potion. Neither to your shop nor to yourself."

The hostess of the blackberry house suspiciously squinted,

"Don't tempt me, Hom Kelly. I'm twenty years older than you, and considering my intelligence, even thirty."

"Others would argue with you about my wit."

"Picking on me?"

Hom leaned forward and putting his elbows on the counter, he uttered blandly,

"I just want to say that you don't need a rejuvenating potion because each time I am tempted to kiss such a poetic cutie."

"*Poetic cutie?*" Angie was amazed, taking a step back. "Even my husband has never said that."

"Your husband sees nothing but profit, which takes up all of his thoughts."

But the blackberry wife did not like this statement,

"There you're wrong about the bearded man. He's a good man after all. He and the kids don't let me fall apart in the middle of all this glorious stuff good, which I've been fed up long ago."

"I still believe you deserve better."

However, Angie wasn't easy to talk to.

“You’re not going to get anything out of me with that sweet talk, so, you either tack about or empty your pockets and buy the product. Why have you come here, Hom?”

After a pause, the blond man dared to look straight into the woman’s eyes,

“Three drops of opium.”

“Are you crazy?!” the drugstore’s owner was outraged. “Your old man will make a fuss through the entire village.”

“He wouldn’t know. No one will know. Just be a good girl and do it for me. I know that you’re really kind and you’ll do it for me. I’d get you back for that.” With these words, Hom poured out a generous handful of golden coins onto the counter.

Seeing the money, the blackberry wife moved away from the counter annoyed. There was a small box on the highest shelf, next to the goat’s skull. That’s what Angie was trying to grab. Getting a tiny bottle out the velvet-covered box, she placed it on Hom’s open palm and knapped,

“And I do not see your face around here.”

“Don’t worry about a thing,” Hom assured her, and left the outbuilding, carrying a portion of the laudanum in his pocket along with the lavender and mint he had obtained from the herb-woman.

He didn’t turn around, he pretended not to hear the blackberry wife screaming after him, “Hom, you forgot your book! Come back!”

“If that rugged lady, with tired eyes and hair as black as all her outfits, starts reading what I have left under pretense of an accident, the matter is settled,” rejoiced young Kelly.

When he got to the apiary, Pagey had already finished his plate of lumpy porridge for dinner (Neither Lekki nor his adopted child didn’t have any culinary skills) and was getting ready for bed. Hom pretended to be surprised,

“Why are you going to bed so early?”

“We’re leaving to go to the fair together with Vita tomorrow morning.”

“Is that a date?” Hom was pulling a face. Naturally, no one could believe that the news was already known to him.

Pagey smiled mysteriously,

“It’s possible.”

“Great! Good luck tomorrow, then. But that doesn’t mean we can’t have a drink tonight, does it?”

How could Pagey say no to his senior companion? He didn’t want to. Having a couple of sips of wine with a strange taste appeared as if from nowhere, he tried to understand what Hom was saying and calmed down due to his friend’s voice getting into one monotonous sound. Half an hour later, Pagey slept like a dog on a blanket by the fire, snoring peacefully over the crackling of logs. When Lekki returned home and put his fosterling to bed, Hom was ready to leave and told the beekeeper in an apologetic way,

“Looks like he had a little bit too much.”

* * *

The December sun rose high and made the snow dazzling when the beekeeper who had finished collecting new hives in the shed came to wake Pagey up. The hated curtain-fence opened with a sharp movement,

“Hey, man, weren’t you going out today?”

Hardly awake, Pagey realized that the first train they were going to take to the fair had left a long time ago.

“Damn, damn,” the young man babbled, tossing and turning on the old mattress and trying to figure out what was going on.

His head ached as if it was clamped in a leaden band that tightened with every movement. Getting dressed on the go, shivering with cold, he grabbed a handful of coins that he kept in a broken clay cup, and, hastily saying goodbye to Lekki ran to the wasteland.

Vita was sitting on the same fallen tree smoking a long pipe. She laughed when she saw Pagey coming,

“Wasn’t expecting to see you here at this hour.”

“I overslept! For the first time in my life! I missed the train because I overslept. I’m so sorry, forgive me!”

The Gever girl shrugged,

“It’s okay. We’ll stay in the village.”

“What do you mean? We’ll catch the noon train. Will be at the fair within a few hours.”

“You sure?”

“You bet! Of course, I’m sure.”

He gave her his hand to help her to get down from the tree, but she waved him away impatiently. However, as they walked along the drifts towards the boat crossing site, Vita put Pagey’s hand into her glove, finely crafted of calfskin.

Squinting his eyes down, Pagey studied Vita’s glove. These Gevers looked so strange and unusual! It was obvious that the locals wore quite different mittens in winter which were woolen and prickly. Leather crafters kept their goods for shoes and clothing, no one would come to an idea to make a trifle like gloves out of leather.

And all of this made Vita even more beautiful and unreachable in the eyes of the young man.

But in his shame, he let her hand go out of his hand himself as soon as the boat crossing appeared behind the bare winter trees.

“We must be careful,” he warned lady Crescent. “We all play by the rules here, and won’t tolerate rules being broken.”

Vita looked at him blankly, but Pagey didn’t want to explain anything. He had enough for half of his life to contemplate Lekki and the herb-woman being suffered, the main *fornicators in the village*. He won’t allow anything like that himself. They need to be discreet for the time being, not to flicker in front of the locals, not to look like a couple. Otherwise... Pagey didn’t dare even think about that. *Everyone will see everything, everyone will know everything*. And he would not be able to speak to his interlocutress again.

The boatman was sitting on the dock cleaning the clock disassembled directly on his knee with a brush. Clock maintenance was his second job. Having spotted the young ones, the man narrowed his eyes with distrust,

“Where are you two going?”

“To the cities,” Vita cut off dryly.

“The two of you?” the boatman persisted.

Pagey began to make excuses,

“We’re just going shopping at the fair. Lekki is aware. And the others. We have to get to the train, and we’ll be back tonight.”

The boatman, putting the watch parts into his inside pocket, raised and began reluctantly to untie the rope from the dock,

“Well. After all, I have to make a living too. But if you get involved in something indecent, guy, I’m turning you over to the druid, you know.

“*Indecent!*” Pagey could hardly force himself to keep silent in response. There were loathsome rumors about the boatman. Old Kelly used the word “what” instead of “who” when he was talking about the boatman, thus dehumanizing, depriving of virtues, depriving of spirit. An item, not the individual – that’s how they tried to depict the boatman in the village.

However, despite his bad reputation, Pagey always admired the skills of this man to do the crossing and watchmaking business, Pagey also admired the boatman being sarcastic, making nearly incendiary remarks, and even his appearance. To tell the truth, Pagey was still hoping that his real father lived somewhere in the village, and the boatman was fit for this role. He looked like one of the blackberry family fraught with darkness with his clear marine blue eyes, and pale skin but there was always certain urban dandyism about the boatman: lighters, cigarette cases, cufflinks on the cuffs and watch guards always polished to a shine, leading from the vest pockets to ideally sewn buttons.

Yes, he perfectly fitted for the image of Pagey's nonexistent father, and the young man was too happy to think the story of his own origin every time he personally saw the boatman.

Meanwhile, the oars started splashing across the frozen water, cracking the thin ice.

* * *

The cities were crowded and filthy. The houses impended over the narrow streets, hiding the sun. People elbowed each other in the fair turmoil. Everything was decorated with green, red and white lanterns, symbols of Yule, called Christmas here, which remained the same everywhere.

However, during these days in the village, dairy and plow cattle was deliberately treated with tastier food, sometimes even bringing a real human meal to the barn. No one did anything like this in the cities, considering it silly superstitions and remnants of the past.

Pagey and Vita wandered around the trade rows for a while and decided to get a bite to eat.

"I think, I'll buy some garlic croutons," she said firmly.

Pagey snorted,

"What a choice!"

"What's wrong? Of course, it's not a good choice if you're going to kiss. But I'm not."

"Crushing defeat!" a young man falsely slapped himself on his forehead.

When the owner of the bakery, a disgruntled old woman with a long face asked what they were going to buy, Vita remained adamant,

"A double helping of garlic-flavored croutons please."

Unable to breathe, unable to react, unable even to blink, Pagey leaned back against the wall and, kept looking intently at Vita, he suddenly burst out laughing.

And they had croutons and drank ale, and snowflakes of the stunning beauty whirled behind the misted window of the bakery. When it was quite dark, the young couple moved back to the station hoping to catch the last train.

Halfway back home, Pagey had a secret he decided to share with Vita,

"I've got galipot. Resin from coniferous, plenty of them growing between the executioner's home, and the Hom's. I also have some beeswax from the apiary. Do you see the point?"

Vita shook her head blankly. Then the young man took a paper bag with a scattering of small black beads out of his pocket. He took out a bead, put it in his mouth, and chewed.

"You can order as many garlic croutons as you like. And you can kiss if you wish."

"How cunning you are!"

Having poured a few beads of galipot, Vita thoughtfully rolled them over the palm of her hand, which was warming inside the glove, and then asked,

"The herb-woman has told my sister in her letters that all the villagers deliberately keep away from the rest of the world. But you came freely to the cities today, didn't you?"

"That's right. The druid inherited the lands from the former lord, his father, and immediately started to build the community in the way it would have been thousands of years ago. I don't really care about any of this, but Hom used to say that if things had gone differently, we would have worshipped the one God and there would have been no bonfires and no drunken binges."

Having listened to the story, Vita nodded,

“It was this freethinking that instigated our people to settle at your place for a while.”

“How did you feel in other places?” Pagey asked.

“We were always free to do as we pleased. But good fortune to be free can be hard. You know. Women with guns and all that. My sister was once caught behind the marketplace in Avignon and her hair was cropped short. If you don’t want long hair, don’t have hair at all. The crowds rioted in the streets, pelting us with stones, apple cores, and spits. So, I’ve had a good beating.”

“But how?” the lad was amazed. “Why do you look so confident?”

“Well, combat childhood can tough up anyone.”

“I can see your point! You know,” he whispered. “Lekki found me as a baby, I was constantly taunted by villagers calling me a changeling brought by fairies. They threw matches at my back to see whether I would start laughing. Horror.”

The Gever girl patted him on his back trying to cheer up,

“We’ve both been through hardships. Well, the world can be merciless.”

Pagey still couldn’t believe his luck – how he, a paltry apprentice from the apiary, had suddenly met someone who *supported him*. Who shared his views and followed the same direction. However, he suddenly remembered something that made him seriously nervous,

“Hold on. You said that the herb-woman wrote a letter to your sister?”

“Yes. What’s wrong with that?”

“We’re banned to write letters.”

“What the hell is this?” Vita didn’t believe.

“Letters, telegrams, all printed materials are banned.”

“So, you can travel to the cities, but you can’t read newspapers from the cities or correspond with people from here, can you?”

“Something like that. The druid believes that the word written or printed has great power. And Mr. Kelly calls it, let me think, *propaganda*! “Propaganda of dogmatic monotheism and broken hearts.”

“Why broken hearts?”

“Because we are forbidden to be alone or often meet with those whom we are not engaged or not married.”

“This is a fine kettle of fish,” the girl said in a sepulchral voice.

They hadn’t been back to the topic of gender relations in the village any more.

They still managed to do the shopping at the fair before it closed up. Vita bought apple cider and Pagey got an impressive dried roses herbarium for no good reason.

On the way to the station, he pointed to the cider and herbarium trying to make an impression, and said trying to look smart,

“We’ve bought Venus plants, haven’t we? By the way, I know the Roman pantheon as well as ours! The apple tree belongs to Venus because its fruit is a symbol of motherhood and prosperity. A rose means a woman. A lady. Noble and beautiful,” saying these words, Pagey blushed crimson red and turned away.

Vita stepped closer and stretched out her hand to pull a strand of hair back from his face behind his flaming ear.

“Beautiful, you say?”

He stared at her, staggered by the intimacy of the gesture. No one ever touched his hair, cared about him to be attractive, demonstrated excessive tenderness. Lekki provided him shelter and home. Sometimes, the herb-woman visited them and clipped Pagey’s dark streaks making him look decent. Hom occasionally patted him on the top of his head – it was a playful gesture of being silly, a gesture of being in game. No man in the world dared to put his hair behind his ear like that.

Pagey was finally able to exhale,

“We should go back.”

The journey to the village was long and clinging to winter's chill. The train, for some reason, stopped at the Rotten field and did not move for more than an hour. With nothing better to do, Pagey and Vita were drinking tea in the dining car, cold and stale. Rose herbarium being bought at the fair shattered into small dried pieces and could not be restored.

This day subsequently threatened to become one of the happiest in their lives but so far neither the assistant to the beekeeper nor the Gever girl could not imagine anything like this.

* * *

As they were coming up to the village along the river, the boatman pointed sharply to the wild river bank covered with tall reeds.

“Come out here,” he said.

“But why?” Pagey began, but the man cut him off abruptly,

“She gets out here. She can't be noticed at the river crossing with you.”

Approaching the shore, he raised his oars. Pagey helped the girl to get out of the boat and without saying goodbye, just silently watched her sneak among dry reeds covered with hoarfrost and headed to her place at the wasteland.

Hom was already waiting for him near the crossing. Annoyed and cold, he walked up and down the pier. When he saw the boat, he could not stand up,

“There you are! Been looking all over for you. Lekki said you had left.”

“I'm not a baby, I can get back home on my own!” the young man snapped back stepping ashore.

“But I was worried about you crossing the river.”

“Don't be so silly.” Pagey began but immediately checked himself.

No one should speak of insidiousness of the river in the presence of Hom. Everyone was afraid to stir up memories of the drowned Woolf in him. Though so many years had passed, it seemed as if the ghost of the boy still followed his friend, and there was no escape from this chase.

The boatman, having finished his business and bolted the pier's fence, did not seem to be in any hurry. He just inspected a velvet bundle which he took from his inside pocket but immediately hid it back and silently watched the bickering of two village youths.

“Why is that pervert looking at us?” Hom growled and turned to the man, “Hey, mister, isn't it time you closed the crossing for tonight and go home?”

“I'm not in a hurry,” said the boatman carelessly, lighting another cigarette that flickered brightly in the winter darkness. “I still have to bring the watch being mended to the druid, so there's no hurry. The druid goes to bed late.”

Hom, leaning towards his friend, noticed ironically,

“Imagine: this low-down guy dares to go to the druid at the manor.”

Pagey did not like Hom's mood, so he toned down deciding to flatter the blond using the most surefire way – pretending to be in need for someone else's rhetoric and intelligence,

“Tell me about the winter night, smart man.”

Hom blushed. Clearing his throat, he put on a solemn face and started,

“At this time, the Sun-God is just being born. The sun is reborn from icy blackness because the day slowly begins to increase during these long winter nights. The darkness retreats to admit its complete defeat finally and everyone can witness the victory of the King Oak.”

“Does King Oak always win over the winter?”

The snow stopped crunching. They stopped in front of the hill. Hom nodded wrapping himself deeper in his plaid scarf,

“Always. And this year, I was chosen to be the King Oak.”

Pagey whistled in admiration. Ancient duel of two kings, Oak and Holly, was an important amusement in the village. In the summer, Holly won and pulled the outgoing year, in the winter the

victory went to King Oak and symbolized the revival of the sun. Two guys flaunted in straw and green branches usually clobber each other struggling to amuse those gathered around the campfire but the winner was still pre-ritual.

Last summer, Charlie, a miller's son, a bowlegged shortie was appointed on the role of King Holly, and he was so frantic about his victory that his friends made their jaws hurt with disgust.

So now Pagey was relaxed,

“Good news. Good luck! Get this clumsy idiot properly.”

Hom frantically stared at his friend,

“Aren't you going to the fire?”

“I promised my Vita...”

“*Promised my Vita!*” At these words, vomit came up to Hom's mouth.

“A girl from the outsiders' tribe? I don't want excuses!”

Junior spread his arms out,

“I can't, Hom. I promised.”

“Got it,” the young Kelly sharply nodded. “So that's whom you're trading me for.”

“I'm not trading you for anyone!”

A whistle of a locomotive, shrill and loud, like the death-cry of a Banshee³ from the marshes sounded far away across the river. Hom instantly perked up.

“What's the matter with you?” Pagey looked at him anxiously.

“Don't think that's the sound is so *promising?*”

But Pagey didn't know what he was after.

“Hom, it's just a train whistle. Sounds like a Banshee augural death to someone if you ask me.”

Hom seemed confused more than ever. Feeling uncomfortable to unnerve his friend, even more, Pagey gently placed a hand on his shoulder and smiled,

“Do you like the sound of a locomotive?”

But the fair-haired King Oak did not find it necessary to answer this ridiculous question, and they climbed the hill in silence for the rest of the way to the apiary.

* * *

Having smoked at least three cigarettes, the boatman finally made his way to the druid's estate. Having given his heavy coat to the butler and wheedled a cup of hot chocolate, he went without any delay to the study room of the lord of the local lands.

The boatman entered the room without knocking and greeted the druid,

“Sir! Fitzy!”

To do such a thing seemed unthinkable to the villagers. They were afraid of the druid, their lord and mentor, and they were careful not to approach the estate if not necessary, and they would never dream of getting into the druid's study without an invitation and some rules of decency.

The druid, however, seemed to be glad of this simplicity,

“Good evening, my friend! You look really cold beside the water. I'll order Milly now to serve tea.” The druid reached for the bell-rope to call for servants.

“No need, I already asked for the chocolate!” the boatman smiled.

The corners of his lips were dark red, weather-beaten in the cold. He started pacing along the wall, which nautical charts of various sizes and data were hanging on.

“Miss the sea?” the druid asked. “River is not enough for you?”

³ Banshee is a harbinger of death in Celtic folklore. According to legend, this mythical woman-mourner lives in the swamps. Banshee makes a shrill cry before someone should die, the one she mourns.

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