



Vi Kors

# The Mist and the Lightning

Part 1

СОДЕРЖИТ  
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ  
БРАНЬ

18+

# Ви Корс

# The Mist and the Lightning. Part I

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## **Аннотация**

The English version of the first book in The Mist and the Lightning series. They are not offspring of Hell; they just lived nearby... Arel Chig is a fallen prince, the only one who dares to break the rules in a society separated by race, language and origin. When he meets Nikto, a strange man of many secrets, Arel's life is going to change.

Содержит нецензурную брань.

*They are not offspring of Hell; they just lived nearby...*

*Arel Chig is a fallen prince, the only one who dares to break the rules in a society separated by race, language and origin. When he meets Nikto, a strange man of many secrets, Arel's life is going to change.*

## **Part 1**

This story actually happened in a different reality (a different dimension, a parallel world); you can call it whatever you like, whatever you used to, whatever is convenient for you. Its essence will not change with that. All characters in the story exist and interact just like we exist and interact in our world. Only their names, the names of the gods, peoples and territories are not authentic; they just express the basic meaning the characters put into them.

<sup>1</sup> Nikto is translated as 'Nobody'

<sup>2</sup> Orel is translated as 'Eagle'

<sup>3</sup> Lis is translated as 'Fox'

<sup>4</sup> Tolsty is translated as 'Fat'

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Encounter**

"So, are you going to start talking at last?" Orel asked.

"Give me my dr... 'restorer', and I'll tell you everything!"

"Too many conditions, don't you think?"

"Really, it's the first time I see something like that." Tol shook his head. "He must be bonkers."

"I shit care if he's bonkers or not," Orel yelled, "he has to answer. Because we need it. And he will talk. What's your name, again?"

"Nikto."

"Right. We know it. Your real name?"

"I don't know! It is real!"

Orel, Lis, Enriki and Tol exchanged glances.

"Waste of time," Tol said. "We'll kill him but he won't talk."

"Shut up, you idiot," Orel growled.

"I think it is not our business at all..." Lis started cautiously.

"It is our business, Lis. Listen to me and don't interrupt," Orel made a pause. "Please."

"I need a restorer or I'll die," Nikto said.

"Yeah? Or maybe you'll finally go over the edge with the drug."

"No, I won't. I used 'black water' for two years, now I need just the plain one... but often. In my bag..."

"Huh? Two years of 'black water'? You're dead, man! Nobody quits 'black water', you're crazy!"

"That's why he hangs around with the Unclean," Enriki

intervened. "That bitch, your girlfriend, she gives you this shit, right? You're a disgrace for humans!"

"I need a shot." Nikto's voice was barely audible.

"Fuck you. Die," Tol said. Orel glared at him. "Sorry, Arel," he hastened. "I just can't stand this piece of dirt."

Nikto awkwardly shook his shaggy head, trying to toss disobedient strands of hair away from his face and look at the people standing over him but it didn't work. In the beginning they had made him kneel at the wooden post, and now he was sitting on his heels in front of them, leaning against the post somewhat lopsidedly. His arms were twisted behind his back, wrists locked in steel cuffs around the post and raised up. The chain of the cuffs was fixed on the hook too high, almost disjuncting his arms, not letting him straighten his back.

"Hey, Nikto." Orel sighed. "Let's make a deal. You answer our questions honestly, and we give you a shot."

Nikto finally managed to turn his head and look up at Orel.

"Why are you breaking me? Aren't you a prince, a free lord from the Upper City? We are from different worlds. Our ways never cross. You have no personal interest in me. Whose order do you follow when you interrogate me? I didn't know a prince could serve someone. Who orders you? The king's secret police?"

Orel's face twitched.

"It doesn't concern you." He raised Nikto's chin higher with the tip on his boot making him screw his eyes shut with pain in his twisted arms. "I'm asking questions here, not you."

"Make him kiss your boot, Arel! Show this dirty half-blood who he's talking to!" Tol shouted claspng Nikto's head in his huge palms. "Here, Arel, kick his mug!"

"Tol, enough," Lis said.

"Just look at it, Arel!" Tol's hand in a leather glove made Nikto open his mouth showing his long, inhuman fangs. "And claws! On his fingers! He's a shitty, dirty half-blood! And the tattoos on his cheeks!" Tol squeezed Nikto's face. "Just look at it! The letters of the Unclean. Like something's written on his face!"

Orel met Nikto's gaze. Nikto's face was nothing like crude, irregular faces of the Unclean. The man also didn't look like a commoner; he could easily be called handsome if not for a scar that crossed his forehead and the whole right side of his face, tearing his cheek so deep that it seemed a little more and one could see his molars.

"Leave him be," Orel ordered. "Nikto, if you don't want any more problems, answer my questions, okay?"

"Okay, okay! Ask your questions! I didn't quit 'water' to die like that, in front of a bunch of idiots who don't even know what they want!"

"Easy, man!"

"I was set up!"

"I've never heard anyone speak Black like that," Enriki shook his head. "I barely can figure out what he says."

"He uses correct words," Lis said, "but what a nasty voice he has."

"What's your name?"

"Again? Fuck! All right, all right! It's Nik. Nik."

"How can you prove it?"

"People who know me can say."

"Where are you from?"

"I came to the city from the west."

"Did you live in the local outpost in the west, on the border with the lands of the Unclean?"

"Yes."

"Did you fight them?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"They captured me. They addicted me to black water. Since then I depend on them."

"Do you follow their orders?"

"Yes."

"What orders?"

"Orders? Ah... well... kill people. Eliminate. Rob."

"Bastard! I'll kill him!" Tol bellowed. Orel stopped him not letting him hit Nikto.

"Calm down, Tol. Calm down."

"What do you think of our king, Nik?" Enriki asked.

"He's a shit!"

Lis laughed.

"I've had enough of it. That's utter bullshit."

"Did you conspire with the Unclean against the king?" Orel

continued.

"No. They don't trust me enough for that. Too bad."

"Orel," Lis said. "He lies. He says what we want to hear."

"I'm not sure I want to hear exactly that, Lis."

"I need my drug."

"Don't give him any, Arel, let this disgrace for humans die!"

"Give him his drug he calls a restorer," Lis said.

Nikto's eyes closed.

"Hey..." Orel shook him worriedly. "Don't you dare, I haven't finished with you!"

"He's losing it, Orel, I told you so!" Lis shouted. "If he dies now, your stupidity will be to blame! What shall we do then?"

"My stupidity? Don't you dare talk to me like that! I'm a prince, I'm your lord!"

"Orel, Lis, please, not now," Enriki begged. "The client won't forgive us if he dies. We need him alive. Lis, give him a shot, you know how. Where is his bag?"

"Enriki, take off his bracelets! Hurry!" Lis got a flat box made of black wood from Nikto's bag. "Move faster, you! Unchain him!"

Enriki unlocked the cuffs and pulled on Nikto's arm trying to take off the bracelets. Nikto followed the pull and fell onto his side.

"Oooh, idiot! Stop pulling! Open them! They must be locked!" Lis rushed to Nikto lying on the floor, unclasped several silver bracelets that covered Nikto's arm from wrist to elbow. His

arm under the bracelets was wrapped in the strips of black cloth.

"Fuck! Cut the cloth!"

Enriki followed the order as soon as he could – and froze looking down. Lis also halted.

"Where do I have to stick the needle? The other arm, quickly!"

"I don't feel his pulse," Enriki said quietly. Tol came up to them and snorted.

"Yeah, he wasn't lying about 'black water', it's the only thing that corrodes veins like that."

"The other arm is just the same," Lis said.

"He gets what he deserves," Tol summarized.

"No, stick it somewhere else," Orel begged nervously. "His neck..."

"His collar is too wide, Arel, and I can't take it off."

"His leg. Lis, do it for me!"

"For us," Enriki corrected Orel.

"I'll stick it into his groin," Lis said. "Strip him."

"A nice tattoo," Tol smirked looking at Nikto's tattooed thigh.

"He really seems to be from the west," Orel said thoughtfully.

"Okay, he should revive now." Lis took Nikto's wrist to check the pulse. "This tattoo on his arm, the brand of the Unclean – it is the emblem of the western community. If I'm not mistaken."

"Yeah, he has too many tattoos for a plainsman. He's from the west," Orel confirmed.

"Then he was captured, as he said?" Enriki asked. "They disfigured him and addicted him to black water, just as he said?"

"I still don't trust him," Lis said. "He looks more like a mercenary than a slave."

"Maybe they made him join them," Enriki suggested.

"I see only one thing," Tol interfered. "He's into the Unclean up to his ears."

"And what the fuck is that..." Suddenly Lis rushed to the chimney, heated the blade of his knife in the fire and quickly pressed it to the inner side of Nikto's wrist.

The heat revealed a hidden sign, as if a crimson flame ran over a twisted monogram.

"Wow! Nice!" Tol admired the view. "What is it?"

"It's a hidden brand of the Red, idiot," Orel explained. "Lis, how did you notice it?"

"Maybe it's because I also have one," Lis smiled. "He could've been their captive, or he could've worked for them."

"The last thing we need," Enriki exhaled.

"I knew he wasn't telling the truth," Lis said.

"What truth?" Enriki asked. "So far everything we see confirms his tale. He said he needed the drug because he used 'water' for two years, and I bet it's true. I've seen arms like that, only of dead men, though."

"Yeah, me too," Orel nodded.

"He has a brand of the Unclean slave; they addicted him to 'water' and mutilated his face," Tol summarized.

"Yes, it fits," Orel said thoughtfully.

"The Unclean know that a man with such a face won't ever be

a full-righted member of our society," Enriki said.

"I think he's quite handsome," Lis said.

"Oh, why don't you get yourself decorations like that then?"

Tol laughed.

Lis glared at him. "Shut up, Tol!"

"If someone gets such a wound in a battle," Orel continued musing, "no matter how heavy it is, he can use a medicine, 'sama', for example. It heals without a trace then. And if he didn't do it, it means they didn't let him. I think so."

He bent over Nikto, examining him.

"And there are many small tiny cuts, as if he were slashed. But they are all healed."

Lis squatted near to him.

"Orel, look at those scars at his ear. It looks like his ear was cut off. And then a new one adhered."

"He's been through a lot," Enriki said.

"Well, the Red also cut off ears," Lis said. "Ears and fingers."

They looked at Nikto's hand that missed its ring finger.

"Bad luck for him," Tol said. "It seems we'll find out more about him from his body than he would've told us. Let's strip him! While he's out of it."

"So, both the Unclean and the Red were breaking him" Orel mused aloud.

"And so were we," Lis added.

"And why would everyone need him, this nobody from the west," Tol muttered stripping Nikto.

"That's the thing. It's not so simple." Lis lit a cigarette and took a nervous drag. "I wouldn't mess into it, I told you from the beginning! Orel, do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Oh, I'm happy."

"Nah," Tol said, "if they maim you, addict to black water, and the rest of it, you won't care about nothing, you'll just want to stay alive!"

"Look, he's trying to restore," Enriki noticed.

"Yes, this guy claws for his life," Lis agreed looking at Nikto's strong muscular body.

"But he doesn't look like a terribly lucky warrior to me," Enriki shook his head.

"No. Too lucky, to my mind," Orel said. "That arrow hit his heart, didn't it?" He pointed at the oval scar on Nikto's chest.

"A lethal wound," Lis said.

"And this one, on his side. The scar is quite recent."

"He has nine lives," Tol snorted.

"And a bunch of problems as well," Orel added. "I'm quitting."

"Are you crazy?" Enriki stared at him. "What are you thinking of?"

"I'm not breaking him any more," Orel said firmly. "I've had enough."

"Do you know what it means for us? What if he really is a conspirator?"

Nikto shifted, rising somewhat, tossed his hair away from

his face and looked over himself: waist-naked, his pants pulled down.

"Did you want to fuck me?" he asked in surprise.

It was like a signal for everyone. Tol bent over cackling, and all the others looked at Nikto and laughed.

"Come here, have a drink," Tol said to Nikto quite friendly.

"Yes, Nik or whatever, really, have a drink with us," Orel agreed.

Nikto got up, clasped his heavy belt, walked up to the table and made a few gulps from a glass.

"May I dress?" he asked.

"Yes, we let you go," Orel said.

Walking back to the pole, Nikto started gathering his scattered possessions.

"Fuck, why did you cut the bandages?"

"Wanted to give you a shot quicker," Orel explained.  
"Should've told us your veins are shit dead."

He called for a servant and told him to bring new bandages.

"You are skillful," Enriki said watching Nikto wrap his arms in a few seconds.

"Who stuck the needle?" Nikto asked gloomily.

"I did," Lis smiled.

"Thanks," Nikto thought for a moment, "Lis."

Lis laughed. "Aren't you happy? I did my best."

"Oh yes. There was no other place, was there?"

"Well, you'll just have to stay away from your Unclean bitch

for a couple weeks," Lis shrugged, "big deal."

Nikto gave him a glance but kept quiet. He was picking up his bracelets from the floor and habitually locking them on his arms with a soft click. When he reached for one of the bracelets behind the post, his long blonde hair fell on the side, baring his back that was completely covered in lash scars.

Friends looked at each other.

"One cool back you have," Lis said.

"Ah, so that's what you wanted to see," Nikto said. "Stripped me, looked at my scars? And now do you let me go because you see I'm a warrior like you?"

"Sit down," Orel said.

Nikto sat down at the table and finished his wine. Tol gave him a cigarette. Nikto glanced at him.

"Thank you." He smoked, leaning against the tall back of the chair. His hand with a missing finger pushed away his hair, revealing the scar crossing his forehead. He examined Tol, Lis, Orel and Enriki with sharp eyes.

"It is not long till the morning," Orel said. "The gates will be open soon, and you will be able to leave the Upper City."

"And what about your job?" Nikto smiled wryly. The disfigured side of his face didn't move.

"Not the first problem of ours. And not the last one," Orel answered. "Not your concern, too."

"You're not so stupid as you seemed at first," Nikto said.

"All right, don't try to play smart," Lis interfered. "We're

letting you go – be happy."

Nikto shook his head.

"I am." He walked up to his bag on the floor, picked up his cloak.

"You've ruined my cloak." He looked around. "And what about my mask?"

"Mask?"

"Yes, mask. Black, made of that hard... mm..." he stumbled trying to find the right word, "stuff. I don't know how it's called in your language."

"Who took off his mask? Tol, you did! Where is it?"

"Arel, I... I tossed it to the chimney," Tol said somewhat guiltily. "I was so pissed off!"

"Shi-i-it!" Nikto squeezed his temples with his palms. "Cloak is torn. Mask is burnt! Any patrol will stop me when I look like that!"

"All right, I'll give you my cloak and my mask," Orel tried to settle it. "And you'll walk out of the Upper City without a problem."

"Without a problem! I don't have the right to be in the Upper City at all!"

"I know," Orel smiled.

"See ya," Nikto walked to the door.

"Wait," Orel reached for him. "I'll see you off to the door and give you your weapon. It's upstairs."

His friends exchanged glances but didn't say anything.

"As you wish," Nikto muttered.

In the dim light of the dungeon his face crossed with a scar looked frightening. Half-paralyzed, it seemed lifeless, more fitting for a dead man than a living being able to bitch about ruined things.

They walked up from the dungeon to the ground floor.

"Here is your sword," Orel lowered his eyes avoiding Nikto's gaze. The servant brought a cloak and a mask.

"My slave will bring them back," Nikto said.

"Never mind, they are yours."

"Fine," Nikto wrapped the cloak around himself. A moment before pulling up the hood he stopped and looked at Orel. Nikto's eyes were grey and cold. "Something else?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Nik was never your name, was it?"

Nikto's lips curved in a resemblance of smile.

"Never before."

"And you've never lived in the local outpost."

"Just for a short while."

"And you're not the slave of the Unclean and you don't follow their orders."

Nikto was smiling. "You're very persistent, prince Arel. Farewell."

He pulled up the hood and walked out of the castle. Orel followed him with his eyes.

"No," he said quietly. "Not farewell."

## **Chapter 2**

### **Conversation with Mark**

"So, Lis was right," Orel said. "You also know Nikto."

"Yes, I do." Mark met Orel's gaze. "If you see him once, you won't forget, right?"

Orel looked away, got up and walked to the window. He looked through it not saying anything, with his arms crossed on his chest. Mark also kept silent, watching Orel as if calculating something in his mind. Then he said:

"I think it'll work for you!"

Orel looked back.

"I nearly killed him!"

Mark shrugged. "So what? Me too."

"Yes? And what?"

"Nothing. We're friends now."

Orel walked back to the table.

"A strange friendship – between a friend of the Unclean and someone who fights them," he said.

"He helped me like no one else," Mark's eyes flashed with an unhealthy sparkle, his fingers twitched nervously. "Thanks to him I created a real hell for the Unclean in the west! How we killed them! How we killed them, Orel, if only you could see it. If only any of those fat townsmen could see it! We slashed them!

Hanged them! Burned them! Tore them apart. We razed their houses to the ground. We chased them to the very mountains, freed the outpost and many people..." Mark stopped suddenly.

"I see you are a real warrior. A rare thing in our times," Orel said.

"Nikto is a warrior, too."

"I know, figured that out. But he's a warrior of the Unclean."

"You can stop worrying about it. Yes, he is a warrior of the Unclean but he isn't their ally. More than that, I think he hates them."

"Why is he with them then?"

"The cities of the Unclean accept him as a warrior, hold him as an equal and even higher than many of them. And humans don't accept him."

"But you? Haven't you accepted him?"

"I have but he can't team up with me, the Unclean will kill him for that."

"And can he team up with me?"

"Yes, he can. You don't interfere in the business of the Unclean. If you make Nikto your friend, the Unclean will be your friends, too. Your power will multiply, and I heard, prince Arel, your state of affairs is horrible now."

"Perhaps it is, but I don't want to become a toy of the Unclean for the sake of that power! My independence is my strength."

"Not a toy. But having an ally won't hurt you."

"Do I hear it from you? You who fight them to death? I can't

believe my ears."

Mark shrugged. "To each their own."

"And that girlfriend of his. That perfect sample of a non-human! She'll cut the throat of anyone who dares harm her precious. I hope you haven't seen that monster."

"I brought her to him from the west."

"What?"

Mark laughed.

"Her name is Amba. I brought her from the west."

"Why?"

"It just happened."

"Can you tell me?"

"Why not? I see he's got to your heart, I know you too well. You'll be a nice pair. New times are coming to the City, together you'll be formidable."

"I haven't decided anything yet."

"Oh, you have."

"Well, it doesn't mean he'll agree."

"He will. Nikto is attracted to humans. And you are from the upper society, rich, noble – exactly what he needs."

"Then tell me what you know of him!"

"Destiny brought us together in the far west. My squadron attacked a caravan of a slave trader. He sold them in village markets. One of those slaves was Nikto. We freed them all and hanged the trader. Many of the men we had freed joined us. We took the ill ones to our camp. The first one who noticed

Nikto was an old warlock from my suite. He told me: 'I feel he's dangerous, Mark, we should get rid of him.' I just laughed – but I was stricken with the color of Nikto's hair. At first I took him for an old man, his face was hidden behind a black mask. I asked the slaves who joined us: 'Who's that old man?' They said: 'We don't know. He was picked up on the road.' He was very ill, never said anything, and the slaves didn't see his face. But the servants of the slave trader who had seen Nikto's face begged not to take him along. They told their master such a slave would bring bad luck. But the slave trader didn't listen to them. Then I took off his mask and saw a young man who had no undamaged place on his face. He was cut in a way that even my experienced warriors were shocked. I saw the traces from 'black water' on his arms, the collar, the wounds from chains, tattoos of the Unclean and I figured out he managed to escape.

"I couldn't miss such a chance! We treated him, healed his wounds. In exchange I asked him to tell me everything he knew. At first he kept silent. And had he not wanted to help us, he wouldn't have said a word, no matter what we'd do to him. I raised my sword over his head several times, and he didn't even flinch, as if he didn't fear death but on the contrary, desired it. But I couldn't kill him. I got to love him. He was so young yet so tortured. At some moment I understood that I'd just let him go, and it was when the warlock told me Nikto was ready to tell us everything he knew. The old warlock said: 'He's reading our thoughts,' and I think it was true. Nikto understood what I

thought of him, what I felt. It was his way to thank me. The warlock and all the Unclean called and keep calling him 'son of the Devil' but I don't believe it. Could a son of the Devil respond to kindness like that? Only later I understood what he'd done for me. He'd been so far west as no one else had.

"He drafted the layouts of farms and villages of the Unclean, told about their outposts and other things. Without him I wouldn't have had triumphed! I asked him if he'd follow me but he refused. Then I promised to avenge him, avenge everything that'd been done to him.

"He said to me: 'What the Unclean did to me is nothing in comparison with what others had done before them.' I said: 'They slashed your face.' He said: 'I did it myself.'

"He said it so seriously that I felt uneasy. And I didn't ask him anything else.

"We parted. I went to the west and he, to the east. Bidding farewell I warned him that the Unclean would get him sooner or later, to punish him for betrayal. He just smiled. He probably knew what he was doing.

"That woman – Amba – he described her to me, said she was his owner and asked not to torture her but to kill her quickly. But she is very cunning and when I killed all her family, she wrote to me asking to take her to Nikto to the city, and then no Unclean in the city would harm me.

"She wrote about Nikto: 'I hear him, he needs me.' And I took her along. When we arrived to the city, Nikto came and took her

away. And the king of the Unclean didn't do anything to me, or to my people, or to Nikto, or to her. You know they even respect Nikto for avenging his humiliation and fear him. The Unclean from the city don't particularly like their western congeners at all. But I think Nikto is a human being, he needs to live among humans, he suffers living with aliens."

"What you told me is terrible," Orel said. "That Unclean knows that because of him all her family was killed. And she still loves him as if nothing happened?"

"Yes, they are like that." Mark laughed. "She's even proud of him, and she doesn't care shit about her family. Well, is it enough for you? You can ask him about the rest."

Orel sighed.

"My people are absolutely against him."

"You know what?" Mark smiled. "Take them tomorrow night to the Lower Coliseum. Nikto will be there, and when they see him fighting, they will beg you to take him on the team!"

"What would I do without you, Mark!" Orel's eyes flashed with joy.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Agreement**

"He isn't coming," Enriki said.

"He will come," Orel argued.

"If I were him, I wouldn't come," Enriki said. "Definitely."

"But you are not him!" Orel stabbed Enriki's chest with his finger in annoyance. "You are not."

"All right." Enriki raised his hands. "Fine."

A servant brought a tray with wine, bowed and started putting glasses on the table.

"He's here," Lis said quietly; from his place he could clearly see the entrance. Everyone froze.

"Is it really him?" Orel asked.

"I swear. He has your cloak and he's coming right up here," Lis whispered looking down at his glass quickly.

"Get out," Orel hissed at the servant who dropped the tray and disappeared in a moment. Nikto came up to them.

"Hello."

"Hi. Take a seat." Orel pointed at the chair on the opposite side of the table, in the corner.

The tables here were separated by high walls. Tol got up to let Nikto in. Nikto glanced at Tol and took the offered place without saying a word. When he pushed off the hood and let the cloak slip from his shoulders. Nikto's blonde hair fell onto his forehead, and he shoved it aside with a familiar gesture of his fingerless hand. The only difference was that they had seen his scar then and now his face was hidden behind a black mask.

"You can take your mask off," Orel said. "It's our place, feel at home here. Besides, it'll be difficult for me to talk to you without seeing your face."

"Fine." Nikto removed his mask.

"Care for a drink?" Orel put a glass in front of him. "I think you know what we called you for."

"No." Nikto took the glass and leaned back in the chair.

"No?" Orel was slightly surprised.

"The Unclean gave me a note with time and place."

"But did you figure out it was from us?"

"No. But when I saw you, I did."

"You've come to a meeting without knowing whom you'll meet?" Enriki asked in surprise. "It's not reasonable."

Nikto smiled.

"The note was not from you but from my friend, I was going to see him. When I saw you, I understood you found me with his help."

"Yes, that's right," Orel said. "It was Mark who helped us. And I'll tell you something for you to see that we are frank about it. Before meeting you we gathered some information on you. And..."

It seemed to Orel Nikto was smiling. But his lips didn't curve, just his eyes sparkled as if laughing. At that moment Orel recalled Mark's words: 'Nikto is reading our thoughts, and I think it is true, he understood what I thought of him.'

"But you likely know that," he said in confusion.

"No, I don't. I haven't seen Mark for a long while, just got that note. But I can imagine what he told you of me."

"Nothing bad, I can assure you!"

"Well, prince, I don't mind him calling me for a meeting with

you – as well as sharing his impressions on me. Let's be done with this topic and talk about business. What is it you want?"

"We want... well, I think you know what!"

"Again you say I know. No, I don't. How can I know if you haven't said anything?" Nikto put down his glass. "We want from you guess-what. It could've been funny if it were not coming from you. You know, prince, I start regretting I've come."

He got up but Tol blocked his way.

"Nikto, wait, we wanted to invite you on our team. Haven't you read our thoughts?"

Orel grabbed his head in horror. "To-o-ol!"

"Well said," Lis added.

"Read your thoughts?" Nikto sat down again suddenly laughing. Orel raised his head. "Did Mark tell you that?"

"Yes."

"I can't read thoughts."

"You can't?" Tol muttered in disappointment.

"Did you want me to help you trick rich guys? Too bad, it won't work out, you're mistaken." Nikto finished his wine. "Well, it was nice to see you."

"Nikto, wait, you have to understand..." Orel started. It seemed his resolution returned to him.

"I understand, no problem."

"But it doesn't mean our offer is cancelled."

"Really? Why would you need a man who cannot read thoughts?"

"Nikto, stop teasing us. We need you as a warrior, not as a warlock."

"Both would be better," Tol muttered under his breath.

"You can just stay with us for a while," Orel said. "If our cooperation doesn't work, you'll leave."

Nikto looked at Orel and his eyes didn't sparkle mischievously any more.

"I'm not such a good warrior as you think," he said. "Otherwise I wouldn't have so many scars."

"Let us judge that," Orel said. He took another glass from the tray left by the servant and put it in front of Nikto.

Nikto was silent.

"We own several streets of the Upper and the Lower city. We also take some orders from clients, sometimes think of something ourselves."

"If you join us, you won't have to do dirty jobs for the Unclean," Tol said with enthusiasm.

"To-o-ol, shut up," Orel hissed.

"Let's imagine I didn't hear that," Nikto said.

"No one thinks your job is dirty," Orel said.

"I'd rather not prove anything here and now," Nikto said. "I'm in a good mood today."

"Shit, do I have to apologize again?" Tol mumbled in resentment. "Okay, okay, my fault," he sighed. He clearly was afraid of angering Nikto but Nikto seemed not to care about his apologies.

"I think four of you are enough," Nikto said. "You found each other a long time ago and I will be excessive."

"No, you're wrong," Orel smiled. "There are not just four of us, that is, now we are four. It is all that is left from my team that used to be big... a while ago."

"So, you're recruiting new people. And what happened to the old ones, if you don't mind telling?"

"I don't mind," Orel smiled. "They were killed. I don't think it'd scare you away. Two of them were ambushed half a year ago, two died of wounds. We had two girls, too, I regret losing them the most. And there are some who are not dead but are not with us now. Toby is a captive with our rivals. Squint-Eye is in prison."

"I've never heard a more sorrowful story," Nikto said, and everyone laughed. "Fine, but what do you think of my connection with the Unclean?"

"You have to choose: either you stay with us and dedicate your life to our problems, or return to them and forget us."

There was silence; everyone waited for Nikto's reply.

"I need a probation period," he said at last. "I'm not sure I can live among humans but I don't mind the idea."

"Will two months be enough for you to figure it out?"

"Yes."

"But no Unclean during this time, not even one! If you manage, it means it'll work for us."

"And what is my role in your game?"

"Just like ours. I'm the boss but we decide everything together,

you will have the vote like the others, and the right to your share of profit. You'll get rich soon, will be able to buy lands and slaves."

"And me being a slave myself doesn't trouble you, does it?"

"You're not born a slave, it means you're not a slave."

"But other people don't think so, they will despise you for associating with me. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. The Upper City is closed for me."

"Well, as you see we're opening it for you. Now it depends on you if you have enough courage to enter it."

"I do. But if you decide everything together, I would like to know what Lis, Enriki and Tol think of me. I know you've discussed it and decided – and yet."

"All right, Enriki, what will you say?"

"I'll say we need an experienced man, and you suit us."

"And I'll say," Lis sighed, "that I was against you but I'm in a minority. But as for the opinion of the society, I don't care, for sure."

"Me too," Orel said.

Nikto laughed. "Oh well, I see you don't care about anything but Tol doesn't think so, it seems."

"No, I don't!"

"To-o-ol!"

"No, Orel, wait. I want to have a say, too. I care! I hate it when people laugh at my face and say that Orel's group is a pathetic bunch of idiots and it's just a matter of time to finish them off.

I'm going to return us our former respect. And Nikto will help us to scare them all shitless!"

"Ooh. Tol! What are you thinking? What is this trash in your head?" Orel sighed hopelessly.

"Just forbid him to open his mouth at all," Lis said, annoyed.

"You keep your mouth shut, you redhead half-blood!" Tol retorted.

"How can I scare them?" Nikto asked. "Can you explain me?"

"Yes, I can!" Tol said defiantly. "And stop confusing me, shut your mouth, shut your mouth! Everyone knows WHO his father is!"

Everyone froze but Nikto stayed sitting calmly and his expression didn't change.

"You're gonna to get bitten," Lis said.

"Damn you," Nikto said and then looked at Tol with a smirk.

"And you are not afraid, are you?"

"I am," Tol said. "But now you're our friend, so, he won't harm us."

"But maybe it's better to stay away from such friends?"

"Maybe it's better – but I like to risk, and it's a good chance to test my luck! And I'm sure you won't be at disadvantage either. You have to join us. I'm speaking straight, I can't come up with clever speeches like Orel. Will you join us?"

"I will," Nikto said.

"Well, Tol, today is your day," Lis said.

"Let's toast. For all of us!" Enriki raised his glass.

They drank some wine and lit cigarettes.

"Can you read and write?" Tol asked Nikto after a while.

"Yes," Nikto said; he smoked leaning against the back of the chair, as usual. The scar crossing his face seemed black in the dim light.

"Human language? Or Unclean?"

"Both. And Red too."

"Cool!" Tol was surprised. "But do you write like you speak?"

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm, a little incorrectly, you're speaking not quite like we do. Same words but somehow another feeling."

"I think Tol means accent," Lis said. "You speak with an accent yourself, Tol."

"Me? You're kidding."

Everyone laughed.

"Do I write with an accent?" Nikto smiled. "No, Tol, I write better than I speak."

"And I speak better," Tol said and everyone laughed again. "Lis is lying about me having an accent! Do you see me having an accent, Nikto?"

"No, I don't."

"See?" he turned to Lis showing him a fist. "Don't you dare kid me."

"You have a south-western accent," Lis said. "Don't you remember where you're from?"

"Okay, I remember but you also remember watching your

mouth."

"All right, all right," Lis shook his head.

"And can you count, do you know book-keeping?" Tol asked Nikto again.

"I can."

"Look at him, he can do anything!"

"I heard you're good with maps," Lis said.

Nikto glanced at him.

"Yes, quite so," he said slowly, his eyes not leaving Lis's face.

"And you can even draw them," Lis said standing Nikto's gaze.

"Hey, Lis," Orel said, "do you need a map?"

"No," Lis lowered his gaze obeying Orel's words.

"And can you play cards?" Tol brightened. "Like Snap, or Rummy, or..."

Nikto looked at Tol.

"I can. I can play cards, Tol. I'll leave you broke in a moment."

"We'll see!" Tol bellowed. It looked like he enjoyed this little quarrel to no end.

"And do you like human women?" he asked Nikto again.

Nikto looked at Orel who was smiling.

"I like women," Nikto said.

"Me too," Tol said happily. "Do you prefer blondes or brunettes?"

"Oh, I don't know, I like them all."

"Yes! Me too. But Orel says it can't be, that one has to have, what's that called, preferences."

"Maybe but I don't care."

"Obviously," Lis muttered. But Nikto didn't answer his dig.

"You're really a cool guy!" Tol slapped Nikto's shoulder. "Not a shithead as I thought at first!"

"To-o-ol!" Orel moaned, for the countless time this night, and everyone laughed.

## **Chapter 4**

### **In the Castle**

They left through the backdoor of 'Backara' and walked straight to the backyard, five dark figures blending into the darkness of the night.

Slaves guarding the horses rushed to them and bowed. The slaves were not deceived with thick black leather of the cloaks, they knew who was coming. Horses snorted, stepping from one hoof to the other, sensing their masters' approach.

Orel tossed a small coin to the chief of the slaves who knelt bowing in gratitude. Other slaves also knelt following his lead. They knew it was not just any customers but their masters.

"Get off!" Orel waved his hand impatiently.

The slave grabbed the coin and backed away without raising his head, to his shelter behind the stables. Others followed him soundlessly.

Orel walked up to the horses and untied his beautiful horse.

"Are you astride?" he asked Nikto.

"Yes, of course. It would've taken me three hours to walk here from the Unclean District."

"Where did you leave it?"

"Nearby. Two quarters away from here."

"Did you leave it alone?" Tol asked.

"Him. I have a stallion. No, of course not. My servant is watching over him."

"Is your servant one of the Unclean?"

"Yes."

"Can I look at him?"

"Tol, don't you have anything better to do?" Orel asked. He patted his horse, pressed his mask to its nose. "Let's go, my dear."

Holding their horses by the bridle they walked to the place where Nikto left his stallion. It was quiet around, just from 'Backara' one could hear soft music and sometimes bursts of female laughter.

Despite limping, Nikto walked quickly and with confidence, easily finding his way in the dark streets. Suddenly he stopped. Orel nearly ran into him from behind.

"Fuck, Nikto!" he growled softly. Nikto looked back quickly, laughed glancing at Orel.

"I left my stallion here."

And at once there was soft clattering from the darkness, and the horse came up straight to Nikto.

"Where is the Unclean?" Tol asked.

Nikto made a hissing sound. A black silhouette emerged from

the darkness near the wall, approached his master.

"What do you want from him?" Nikto asked Tol.

"I want him to show his face."

"No," Orel said. "It's just unhealthy curiosity. You're not a child, Tol. Nikto, I order you to send your slave away."

Nikto quietly said a few words in the language of the Unclean and the servant again disappeared in the darkness without saying a word.

"I know what you said to him," Lis said. "You told him to go home, right?"

"Yes, something like that."

"You were not speaking 'true' Unclean to him but some adapted version."

"The Unclean in the city understand only it." Nikto mounted his stallion making him rear.

"Let's go," Orel commanded spurring his beautiful horse and led the way along the street. The others followed him.

They had to take a roundabout way to reach the gates of the Upper City that were always opened for Orel. The Upper City was full of lights and people as always, they had to slow down a little but Orel knew how to avoid the most crowded streets and squares.

He directed the horse into narrow, empty streets and soon they were ascending the city tier after tier.

It was quiet around Orel's castle. He looked back, the riders stopped and turned their horses.

A beautiful and sublime view lay in front of them.

Far below, the night city spread in its magnitude, piercing the sky with spears of sharp towers that lined the fortress wall looking like a thin snake. The downtown sparkled with colorful lights, life there didn't stop for a moment, unlike in the Lower City that had only its main streets lit. Torch fires glimmered over the Coliseum but farther the city was drowning in the dark, its contours merging into blackness. One couldn't see where it ended; just separate, distant lights flickering here and there proved that there was a city somewhere in this night, this quietness. The city that was not asleep.

"I hate this city," Orel said. "It's too small for me!"

Everyone laughed because the city in front of them was enormous.

"I see the lights in the quarters of the Unclean. What are they doing now?" he asked Nikto.

"Some dirty things, likely," Nikto said. "Can they even do anything but dirty things?"

The group of friends laughed again.

"No, I mean it. Many times I looked at their neighborhoods from here and they always have lights at night. I thought the Unclean didn't need so much light."

"They don't need light at all. They work," Nikto said, "and they will be working throughout the night, in their workshops and forges. It's the light of their ovens."

"Let's go," Orel said, turning his horse and riding to the castle.

The bridge was down, a servant was hastily opening the gates. The watchman on the tower had given him a signal that the master was coming. The square in front of the main entrance was lit brightly.

"Orel, why do you never raise your bridge?" Enriki asked.

"What for?" Orel said. "Let anyone who cares come, and we'll deal with them."

Tol cackled in approval.

"Wow! What a horse you have!" Orel was looking at Nikto's stallion in the bright light of torches. The stallion stepped from one hoof to another impatiently and snorted: he wanted to continue his gallop. Nikto pushed off the hood of his cloak and took off his mask. He smiled from his horse barely keeping the stallion in place.

Orel dismounted and passed his beautiful horse to the servant, then reached his hand to the muzzle of Nikto's black stallion. The horse raised its lip and bared its teeth, growling and showing sharp fangs.

Orel withdrew his hand quickly.

"Is he Unclean?"

"Yes."

The stallion reared and Nikto shouted at him in the language of the Unclean, striking him with a lash. The stallion danced under him.

"He is wild," Lis said. "He won't tear our horses, will he?"

"And our servants as well," Enriki said.

"Is he eating meat?" Tol asked.

Nikto tossed his head pushing away his hair.

"Yes."

He jumped down quickly, put his palm onto the stallion's muzzle and whispered a few words. The horse calmed down immediately, as if falling asleep. Nikto turned to the group of friends, they took off their masks and watched him with interest.

"Here, he won't harm anyone now."

"He's out of it! Just like that! I can't believe my eyes," Tol said.

"I'll have him kept separately from others and locked up, just in case," Orel said.

The servant was afraid to come up.

"Hey, what are you standing there?" Orel said. "Take the horse, do you have any shame left?"

The servant, paper-white, slowly pulled the Unclean horse who obediently followed him.

"How much does such a beast cost?" Orel asked. "Thirty thousand, I bet."

"Why are you so rich?" Tol got curious.

"I'm fighting for money," Nikto said. "And the stallion is a gift."

"Welcome to the castle of the prince Arel Chig!" Orel made an inviting gesture.

They walked up the stairs and the servants opened massive carved doors for them.

"Not like the first time, is it?" Orel said to Nikto. Nikto

glanced at him.

"Yes," he said simply.

"Hey, Nikto, can you make someone else's horse fall asleep?" Lis asked. Nikto stopped at the entrance.

"Lis, what's bugging you?"

"Tell me." Lis met Nikto's grey eyes with his yellow eyes and didn't look away.

"Yes, I can pacify a horse."

"Only your own horse? Or any horse? Or maybe not only a horse?"

"No." Nikto almost hissed it. He was speaking slowly, carefully choosing every word, and because of it his accent and a distorted timbre of his voice were even more pronounced, revealing his alien nature.

"No. It is only my horse I can pacify. I trained him like that. No one else."

Servants were pressing to the walls in terror, and the friends were silent and looked at Nikto.

"What's wrong, Lis?" Now Nikto was talking calmly. "Two hours ago you were sure I could read someone else's thoughts and you were not afraid of it. And now you're implying that I'm going to hypnotize you. Why didn't I hypnotize you when you killed my friend Lamy then? When you were beating and abusing my Unclean? When you nearly killed me!"

"Why indeed," Lis said; he was very pale.

Nikto squeezed his temples with his palms.

"Enough of it, enough," he whispered. "You wanted me to be with you, you voted, you came to an agreement with me. I am what I am, and if you're going to suspect me in every little thing, I'd better leave now."

"No!" Orel exclaimed. "You're not leaving! Lis will leave if he decides to say anything else."

He gave Lis an expressive look.

"I don't like magic tricks," Lis said. "If he is a warlock, I'd like him to admit it now."

"Lis, he lived among the Unclean, his horse is an Unclean, he hangs around with them, he's used to it. No magic here," Enriki said.

"Do you even care how Nikto talks to his horse," Tol said.

"If you're going to pick on Nikto because of small things, you'd better leave, Lis," Orel said.

"I won't say another word," Lis promised. "What are we standing here for?"

He turned away and started climbing the stairs. Orel touched Nikto's hand.

"Let's go," he smiled. "You've scared my servants shitless."

Nikto didn't answer. He walked up to the wide stairs and followed Orel holding the rails. They entered the central hall of the castle, huge, gloomy and empty. Servants rushed around to aid them.

"Welcome to the table," Orel said, "the dinner will be ready in a moment."

He pointed at the big table in the left, higher part of the hall. A few steep stairs led to the table.

Nikto took out his sword and walked up the stairs leaning onto it. Orel looked at him in surprise.

"Do you always do it like that?"

"Sometimes."

Orel sat at the table and pointed at the chair on the left of him. "You're sitting here." Nikto sat down silently.

"Can't you walk up the stairs without a prop?" Orel asked.

"I can't – now."

"And what if we have to fight on the stairs..." Orel started but kept silent after looking at Nikto's face.

They sat down, everyone taking his place. Enriki and Lis sat on the right from Orel, on the left side, opposite to them, Nikto and Tol were sitting. Behind Orel's back there was a narrow stairs going to the second floor.

Servants were laying the table hastily.

"Enough, enough of it!" Orel snapped at them. "Get out! And don't you hang around here or on the arcade!"

They stayed alone in the huge hall.

"Treat yourself, Nikto," Orel said. "You'll like what my cooks do. Everyone likes."

"But Nikto is not everyone," Enriki said.

"Ooh, I've just realized how hungry I am," Tol said grabbing his plate. The friends laughed.

"Don't pay attention," Orel said. "We're laughing because he

always says that, no matter how many times a day he eats."

"He is always hungry," Enriki said.

"Yeah, that's true," Tol said with his mouth stuffed.

"Hey, Tol, we haven't had a drink for our new agreement yet,"

Orel raised his goblet.

"Huh? I think we have, when we agreed," Tol said without blinking.

"Fine, stop eating, let's drink for the beginning of our joint business," Orel reached his goblet over the table and everyone joined him raising their goblets.

"Now, pour yourself what you want, without servants. We are of easy manners here, even though I am a prince," Orel said. "What do you think about telling us a little of yourself?" he asked Nikto.

Nikto who didn't expect this question clasped his throat choking and barely managed to swallow.

"Oh gods, you'll kill him with your questions!" Tol said chuckling. The others laughed, too.

"Aah, he's really feeling bad, poor guy."

Nikto rose from the table, sat down on the stairs and coughed, turning away from them.

"Orel, slap his back!" They were dying with laughter. Finally, after clearing his throat, Nikto came back to them. Orel looked at him smiling.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, sorry."

"No, I'm sorry, I chose a bad time for asking, you didn't expect it..."

"You're fucking bonkers, man!" Tol said.

"Fuck off."

"What?"

"You heard what! Fuck off of me."

"Do you hear, Orel, he's telling me to fuck off!" Tol was laughing.

"Enough! You're a bunch of idiots!" Orel yelled making a strict face. "Stop laughing and eat!"

He didn't pull it off though, started laughing, too, and the others followed his example.

"I'd like to talk about business," Orel said at last.

Tol hiccupped. Nikto lit a cigarette leaning against the back of the chair.

"What we told each other before was not true or partly true. What we learned about you from others needs to be confirmed," Orel said. "I don't want to go deeper into it but there are some things we need to clarify here and now."

"I can tell of myself," Nikto said, "if you tell me of yourselves. And if you are honest about it."

"All right, what do you want to know?" Orel said. "We have nothing to hide."

"You start."

"What is your real name?"

"Not again," Enriki moaned. "Aren't you tired of it, Orel?"

Orel glanced at him in annoyance. "Shut up."

"Orel, it's silly."

"Shut. Up."

"My name is really Nikto<sup>1</sup>, as funny as it sounds. I have a nickname instead of a name. There was time when it angered me deeply but then I got used to it. I don't have a family name or father's name either."

"No name, no family name, are you a commoner?"

"I don't know my real parents."

"Who named you then?"

"My foster mother."

"She was a jolly woman, it seems," Enriki said.

"She was a witch."

It was Lis's turn to choke. He whispered shaking his head. "A foster mother, indeed."

"Lis, I've had enough of you," Nikto said.

"What do you think, Nikto can't have a mother?" Tol said digging with a fork in his teeth.

"He can," Lis said in an icy voice.

"That's enough about me," Nikto said, "now you tell me of yourselves."

"You can ask." Orel smoothed his long dark hair.

"Why are you called Orel<sup>2</sup>?"

"Ha." Orel laughed. "I don't even remember that, my ancestors thought an eagle was their forebear, something like that. I'm the last scion of that ancient, formerly royal family. Prince Arel Chig

from the family of Eagle."

"Cool," Nikto said. "Now Lis."

"My name is Atley Alis," Lis said without enthusiasm. "Atley son of Alis."

"Why Lis<sup>3</sup>?"

"Can you guess it?" Lis tossed his dark-red hair gathered in a ponytail on his nape. Nikto smiled.

"You can guess," Lis stated. "No more questions then?"

"You're not a Black, are you?"

"No. I'm a Red half-blood." Lis winced. "My father was a Red. Something else?"

"Your teeth, they are filed in the way only Red warriors file them. Are you one of them?"

"In the past I was," Lis smirked. "I betrayed them and joined our side."

"Cool, too," Nikto said. "Now Tol."

"At last! My name is Ram Murh! These bastards call me Tolsty<sup>4</sup> just because I'm taller and stronger than them! And then they got tired of saying such a long word and they started calling me Tol! I'm not a commoner or a half-blood! I'm a true Black, a native citizen of this damned world! My father owns huge lands in the southwest, only I don't like it there, it's boring."

"As far as I remember, there are only forests."

"Yep."

"And you're the owner of those forests."

"Not yet," Tol laughed. "In ten years, maybe."

"Enriki, now it's your turn."

"I'm from the city and my family lives here. And I'm the only one Orel didn't come up with a nickname for. My name is Enriki Galas and I'm a former investigator, eight years worked for the secret police."

"I think I want to be your friend!"

"Do you like my people, Nikto?" Orel smiled.

"Chosen with a great taste, I'd say."

"Then a question for you," Orel paused. "Is it true what the Unclean say? There is a creature from another world behind you."

"If I say there is a part of the truth in these words, will it be enough?"

"Yes," Orel said. He was looking at Nikto as if he saw him for the first time.

"Do you meet with \*him\*?" Tol asked; he seemed careless as always.

"What?"

"You know, I've decided I'll take back all the bad words I said to you," Tol laughed. But the others didn't feel like laughing.

"Fine," Orel said at last. "We've cleared it and won't talk of it again."

"So, you're an Unclean, aren't you?" Enriki asked.

"Not at all."

"You look like an Unclean."

"He looks like a half-blood," Tol said.

"The Black have dark hair and eyes," Orel said. "The Red have red hair and yellow eyes. Nikto has blonde hair and light eyes, he looks like someone from the White world."

"I spent my childhood in the southeast near to the entrance to their world," Nikto said.

"Have you been there?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen the sky?"

"Yes."

"How does it look?"

"When it is covered with clouds it looks just like ours."

"So, what are you? Are you a White half-blood?"

"Yes."

"You still look like an Unclean to me," Enriki said.

"I've lived among them a lifetime."

"Oh, Orel, you have a knack for making pleasant acquaintances," Lis said.

"Now we have two half-bloods," Tol said. "Lis is a Black-Red and Nikto is a Black-White."

"Rather Unclean-White," Enriki corrected him.

"The Red and the White races belong to the upper world," Lis said, "they cannot have children from the Unclean, you should know that. Only the Black race that belongs to the lower world can interbreed with the Unclean, and even then not with any Unclean."

"Nikto, can you make a baby to your Unclean girlfriend?" Tol

asked.

Nikto laughed. "No, Tol. She is too alien. I think I can't have children at all, as many half-bloods can't."

"How old are you?"

"I don't know exactly. Same age as you are, I think."

"I'm twenty-one and Lis is twenty-nine."

"And I'm probably somewhere between you."

"You look cool," Tol said. "You would be handsome if not for the scar."

"And tattoos," Enriki added. Nikto lowered his head and kept silent.

"Stop embarrassing him," Orel said somewhat nervously. "Enough of your questions, let's have a drink!"

## **Chapter 5**

### **In the Morning**

"Orel, do you understand what you dragged us into?" Enriki said. "Didn't you reassure us saying that the Unclean were lying?"

"Didn't you say you'd never believe that bullshit of the Unclean?!" Lis added.

"I still can't quite believe it myself." Orel spread his arms.

"Are you mad? He said it yesterday himself, literally: my mother is a witch, my father is a devil!" Lis hissed at him.

"He didn't say his father was a devil... literally," Orel muttered in annoyance.

"What are you trying to achieve? Orel, think who you want to have business with!"

"Do you mean 'who you want to have'!" Orel shouted.

"You said that, not me," Lis said.

"Tol is on my side. Tol isn't afraid of him."

"Tol is an idiot," Lis said.

"Tol wouldn't like you saying that," Enriki interfered.

"And I shit care if he wouldn't! Everything's going to hell and I don't care what Tol likes or not," Lis raised his voice.

"You're panicking because of nothing."

"Yes. Sure."

"What can he do to us?" Orel leaned over the table to Lis.

"Kill us and start living in my castle? Take away our streets? It's ridiculous, Lis."

"He can take away you power."

"Oh really? And become a prince? Prince Nobody! I don't have so much power to tempt anyone to take it."

"We will become his puppets. And you have already become one."

"So far he's obeying me."

"Such hubris! He's a wolf in a sheep's skin. Yes, that's true, he pretends to be a misfortunate cripple but his eyes give him away. His cold calculating stare. In his heart he's laughing at us. He's so confident that he doesn't even mind me, my digs only amuse him, I feel that!"

"Lis, you've lost your mind," Orel said slowly; he looked at

Lis in surprise and with some sympathy.

"Don't look at me like that, Arel, do you hear me?"

"Sit down," Orel snapped. Lis obeyed hugging his head.

"Oh gods, what's going to happen to us!"

"Why do you keep silent, Enriki?"

"I don't know, Arel. I don't think Nikto wants your castle. I'm more concerned with your intentions. Arel, forget your plans."

"But I fell in love with him! I need him, I want him, want him every minute! The more I look at him, the more I want him!"

"So, who's losing his mind?" Lis said skeptically.

"Orel, leave everything as is, let him stay with us. But for gods' sake, don't touch him – I'm afraid for you," Enriki said.

"Easier said than done! I can't. I want to touch his hair. I can't stand it any more!"

"You're a pervert," Lis winced, "thinking with your ass, not with your head. But if you get together with him, you won't break away from him easily. He's not Toby who was your toy and then you dropped him. Nikto is different – do you understand you want to fuck the son of the Devil? It's the worst thing one can come up with."

"It excites me even more."

"Orel, I beg you, stop," Enriki moaned. "What do you like about him? His hair? He's probably never combed it. It's dirty and twisted. And his hands – fingers black with tattoos! And what about his face – one has to be totally crazy to tattoo his face!"

"Orel doesn't see it," Lis interrupted. "He's got into a trap. I bet you even like his tattoos. He looks like a painted jug but it arouses you, doesn't it?"

"No," Orel snapped. "Enough. Lis, you belong to me and you know you can't just leave me: either you obey me or one of us dies. Do you want that?"

"I won't fight you," Lis said. "You'll kill me and I want to keep living to see how it ends. I obey your will. Cherish your cripple."

"Don't call him a cripple!"

"Your wish is my command, my lord."

"I order you to become his friend as soon as possible, do you hear?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Right. Enriki, I'm talking to you, too."

Enriki bowed his head. "Yes, my lord."

"Uugh, I'm so hungry!" Tol tumbled into the hall loudly and stopped, looking at everyone in surprise. "Are you praying or what? Ooh, buns for breakfast..." He froze catching Orel's burning stare. "All right, all right, I'm not saying a word."

"By the way," he said a little later when noticing that Orel had calmed down, "where is Nikto? Doesn't he have breakfast with us?"

"I sent a servant to bring him half an hour ago," Orel said. He rang the bell.

"Did you wake up the master?" he asked a shaking servant.

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said," the servant started shaking even more, "...'go to hell!' I was afraid and left. I'm very afraid of him." The servant sobbed and fell onto his knees. "I thought he'd kill me! He looked at me – like I wasn't there – and said: 'Go to hell!' and my legs seemed to carry me to the door by themselves," the servant cried.

"All right, you idiot, you can go. I'll wake him up myself," Orel said.

"Yeah, you try," Tol winked at him.

Orel walked up the stairs and quietly entered the room that had been offered to Nikto yesterday. It was one of the best rooms in the castle.

A splendid bed with a canopy was located on the dais near the wall. The floor was covered with expensive furs. They were littered with Nikto's weapons, his clothes and bag.

Orel approached soundlessly.

Nikto lay in bed on his side, covered with a fur layer up to his waist. He was asleep. Orel stopped and looked at him. Nikto didn't move. Orel smiled and slowly reached to his belt. Carefully, he took out his knife without taking his gaze away from the sleeping man. He raised the knife aiming at Nikto's closed eye. His muscles were taut, he was ready for Nikto to wake up any moment. But Nikto kept breathing evenly and Orel relaxed his hand, lowered it slowly, nearly touching Nikto's eye with the tip of the knife.

"Bingo," he said quietly, then took the knife away. "Lis is just

an idiot."

Something crunched under his boot and he jumped back, frightened. Looking down he saw it was just one of the pills that fell out of Nikto's carelessly tossed bag. He picked up a few smooth white capsules.

"What could it be?" He dropped them back on the floor. "Hey, Nikto, wake up!"

Nikto stirred, opened his eyes slowly. He looked at Orel as if he was seeing him for the first time in his life. Orel felt uneasy.

"Hey, come round," he said apprehensively.

"Aah," Nikto drawled. "Prince Arel Chig." He turned to his back, stretched his arms, then covered his face with his palms. "All right, all right, I'm getting up." He took his hands away from his face. "Shit, it's too light here!"

Orel watched him silently.

Nikto sat up in bed shaking his shaggy head. He raised his face looking straight ahead of him with a strange, empty look.

Orel who stood at the side backed away in fear.

"Nikto, stop fooling around," he said.

Nikto turned to him looking through him.

"Orel," he said, "leave now, please. I'm coming down in a moment."

Orel recoiled, then left the room. He walked down to his friends.

"What happened?" A chorus of questions met him.

"Nothing." Orel managed to regain control.

"You look even worse than the servant did!"

"I said everything's all right. Tol, pour me some coffee," he ordered in annoyance.

Gulping his coffee, he looked at Lis.

"Lis," he said quietly, "I could've killed him ten times right now, do you hear me? Ten times! And I'll spit at your face if you say he was giving in to me on purpose."

"Is it true?"

"Yes!"

"I don't know," Lis said shakily, "I don't know."

"I know," Orel interrupted him. "He trusts me and he isn't dangerous to us."

Nikto slowly walked down the stairs and approached the company.

"Hello," he said.

"Good morning," Tol waved to him. "You don't look good, you know."

"Orel, may I sit with my back to the window?" Nikto asked.

"Fine," Orel said. "Enriki, let him sit in your place."

Enriki exchanged places with Nikto in surprise. Now Nikto was sitting on the right from Orel, next to Lis. He took a cup silently and started drinking.

"Nikto, you didn't warn me the daylight caused you such problems," Orel said, "and today isn't even sunny."

"I'm okay," Nikto said, "I've just forgotten when I got up in the morning for the last time."

"I wouldn't say you're okay," Orel said. "You're totally NOT okay, in fact."

He leaned towards Nikto.

"Look at me."

Nikto slowly looked up.

"Tell me the truth, do you see anything?"

"Yes," Nikto said quietly but firmly. He lowered his eyes again.

"What are you talking about?" Tol asked in surprise.

"The thing is, my friend Tol, Nikto doesn't see shit when it's light!"

Lis turned to Orel in astonishment.

"It can't be!"

"Oh fuck," Enriki said.

"Is he like an owl?" Tol asked.

"I don't know! Maybe, even worse than an owl!"

"I can see!" Nikto said defiantly.

"Really? What is Tol holding? Answer me!"

Tol froze in fear with a piece of bun in his hand. Nikto even didn't glance at him.

"Orel, I'm all right."

"What is Tol holding?"

"Orel..."

"What is Tol holding, fuck you!"

"Bread, bread," Nikto hissed. "He's holding bread."

Tol frantically put the bun back.

"Orel, stop it. Please?" he said.

"Nikto, don't get on my nerves," Orel said. "If you do, you'll regret it."

"What do you want from me?"

"Truth."

"Yes, the light blinded me at first but now it's all right, A few more days and my eyes change their mode completely. My vision will be better than yours."

"We are going out and it is much lighter in the street than it is here!"

"I'll put on sunglasses."

"Fine, we'll see." Orel took out a sheet of paper from his pocket. "It's your pass to the Upper City. You just have to put your name into it. Your name will be Nik – I decided to call you that. Tol, give us ink and a quill. Can you write it yourself?" He gave the paper to Nikto.

"Enough of testing me!" Nikto took the quill and wrote confidently: Nik To.

Orel smiled.

"Good. Name is Nik, family name is To."

The friends laughed.

"All right, put on your mask and sunglasses, I don't know how you're going to put them both, and we're going to the city. Does your horse see by day?"

"Yes," Nikto snapped.

"Let's go! Enough stuffing yourself, Tol, we're leaving."

"Nikto, put on some gloves, too," Enriki added. "Your hands are somewhat..."

"I got it."

They rode through the castle gates: first Orel on his black beauty, without a mask and a hood; his dark-brown hair streamed in the wind. Lis followed him, then Enriki, Nikto and the last was Tol.

Lis came alongside with Orel on the slope of the hill.

"Orel, I saw that. Nikto didn't look what Tol was holding, not even once," he said quickly.

"What do you mean?"

"He just knew what Tol was holding."

He didn't give Orel time to answer and spurred his horse forward.

## Chapter 6

### In the Arbor

"Do you like our domain?" Orel asked Nikto proudly.

"Yes."

They were sitting on the second floor of the restaurant in the Upper City: it was an arbor made of carved stone, decorated with ivy. It was quiet and fresh here; just some music and noise of crowds reached them from the square.

Tol sprawled in the chair; he took off his cloak and closed his eyes. Enriki sat next to him and smoked thoughtfully. Lis looked

down at the square leaning with his cheek against the tracery grate and pushing away the leaves of ivy. Orel put his legs on the table. Nikto, as usual, leaned against the back of the chair; his face was hidden by a black mask. Black glass glimmered in the slits for the eyes. His hands were covered with gloves, the fingertips cut off not to impede his claws.

He smoothed his shaggy hair lazily.

"They went just crazy when seeing me," he drawled.

"They'd gone even crazier had they seen you without your mask," Tol said.

"Never mind, they'd get used," Orel said. "Take off your mask."

"Let the owner bring our drinks first," Nikto objected.

"Don't mind him."

Nikto pushed the lower part of the mask down slightly and put a cigarette into the opening. "No," he said. "I don't mind him but I've had enough of everyone staring at me."

"And I've had enough of talking to a man without a face!"

Nikto stubbed the cigarette harshly and tore off the mask; his face was angry, eyes glaring fiercely. He tossed the mask on the floor.

"Happy now?" He turned away from Orel. Leaning on his elbow on the table, he covered the scarred half of his face with his palm and lit another cigarette.

"Orel, you hurt him," Enriki said.

Orel touched Nikto's hand that held the cigarette.

"Hey," he said quietly, "I always ask you to take off your mask because I like to see your face, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"Fine, fine." Nikto took a drag. "I've got it. But I'm tired of it: put on the mask, take off the mask, put on the mask, take off...!"

"I'm sorry," Orel said.

"Let him wear it when he feels like," Tol said.

"Then he won't take it off at all," Orel objected. "It's made in such a way he doesn't need to take it off at all. Am I right, Nikto?"

"Yes, you are."

"And I don't like it."

"Why do you care?" Nikto asked in annoyance.

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