



Vi Kors

The Mist and the Lightning

Part 3

СОДЕРЖИТ
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ
БРАНЬ

18+

Ви Корс

The Mist and the Lightning. Part III

«ЛитРес: Самиздат»

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Continuation of the sensational erotic adventure...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 changeСодержит нецензурную брань.

Chapter 1

New Allocation

The servant whose eyes started tearing from Orel's flick rushed to the door. Orel didn't stop him, and the man happily slid out of the room. Nikto laughed; Orel looked at him questioningly, then laughed, too.

"You are laughing at the flick I gave him?" he asked shaking his dark head. "Aren't you?"

"Yeah." Nikto sat down on the edge of the bed, lacing his vest put on his nude body.

"Nik, it's cold outside," Orel poured some coffee and lit a cigarette.

"Are you afraid that I'll freeze?"

"Yes, I wouldn't want you to."

"My leather coat has thick fur."

"Thick fur," Orel repeated smirking and shook his head. "Do you want some coffee?"

"Yeah, give me some." Nikto got onto the bed with his legs and sniffed. Orel poured a cup of coffee for him.

"Be careful, it's hot." He took Nikto's wrist and put Nikto's forefinger between the cup and its handle. "Hold it? I'm letting go."

"Yes."

Orel took his hand away. Nikto drank coffee in a few gulps and put the cup on the tray by touch.

"Come on, eyes, come on," he drawled in exasperation.

"Do you want more?"

"You're kidding!"

"You don't understand anything."

"Fine with me."

Orel yawned, narrowing his eyes like a cat, then smiled slyly, quietly stretched his hand to the right and suddenly slammed his fist against the wooden back of the bed. Nikto flinched, turned around – his reaction was instant. He threw his hand forward and managed to grab Orel at the last moment. Orel hissed in pain. Nikto yanked him closer, twisting his wrist. Orel fell on his side, nearly overturning the tray. Nikto leaned towards him, blinking and touching his face with his free hand.

"Why did you do it?"

"Nik, let me go, I'm holding a cigarette!"

Nikto passed his hand over Orel's long dark hair.

"So soft," he said. "Soft and smooth."

"Ni-ik, let me go! I can't stand it..."

Nikto let his hand go and Orel pressed it to his chest.

"In the candlelight it shines and glitters when you shake your head turning up your nose. I've never seen such hair – fine, soft and thick at the same time. It's probably a sign of your breed." Nikto paused. "You were very beautiful until you mixed up with the Lower world."

"That's it. The Black mixed up with some shit and lost themselves," Orel agreed getting up and shaking his hand. "You are crazy, you cannot take a joke at all."

"Do you think so? I wonder if you'd find it funny in my place."

Orel laughed.

"Do you really think I'm handsome?"

"Too handsome for me to leave you like that."

"Aaah, but Nik! Why did you heal my eye then?"

"You had problems with fighting, I didn't want you to get killed."

Orel tensed.

"Was it very noticeable?"

"No, no, you're very strong and you managed but it really wasn't for you."

"Yeah, right." Orel lit another cigarette from the previous one. "By the way, you don't need to envy my hair, yours is great, too. You know, Dony said her new horse's mane is just like your hair, only cleaner."

Nikto laughed and pushed Orel in his face with an open palm. Orel, who didn't expect it, lost his balance and fell from the bed on the floor. He laughed getting up.

"You're just pretending you don't see anything!"

"I start seeing."

"Nik, tell me what you think," Orel sat down on the bed. "Enriki is a dead man, isn't he?"

Nikto kept silent, musing.

"No," he said at last. "I don't think so."

"Care to explain why?"

"He is cautious and now Squint-Eye will never let anyone kill him. If Squint-Eye stays paired with him and keeps standing by him, that is."

"Do you think Squint-Eye can do it? He is also crippled."

"Squint-Eye is not crippled. His eye and your eye are totally different things, for him it is as natural as for me being lame. He didn't know anything else and he isn't bothered with it. He'd rather be troubled if he suddenly started seeing normally. But I don't envy Enriki, he will be assaulted badly."

"I'm afraid he won't handle it."

Nikto shrugged.

"You're sure he'll be wounded in the first serious fight, aren't you?"

"Yes," Nikto looked up at Orel. "You know it yourself. Edin Ol is a dangerous enemy, he knows about Enriki's wound and his weak spots and he'll be pressing to the end. Wouldn't you do the same thing?"

"I did. Hundred times."

"Right."

"What should I do? Maybe, replace Squint-Eye?"

"It is your choice whether to discard Enriki or to cover up for him. If you replace Squint-Eye with Vil, Enriki is a dead man. Vil cannot fight in a pair, he thinks only for himself, he fights alone – and one is always weaker than two. If you keep Squint-Eye there, there is no guarantee he won't be wounded, two of them will have to handle all the pressure. Squint-Eye will be in trouble, he might save Enriki but get wounded too."

"And I'll have two very useful warriors wounded. I don't like it at all! Is there a variant when Enriki is wounded or killed but Squint-Eye is safe?"

"Think about it: Squint-Eye feels guilty, he will do his best to make up for it. He will risk."

"Shi-it, you're right, and taking into account his mood... they both might get killed!" Orel bit his lip. "But Enriki... I need Enriki for the Upper City!"

"You can go to the Upper City yourself, he managed to arrange it for you."

"I'm a zero in it! Without him all our privileges and amnesties will go down, like a house of cards."

"Aren't you depending on him too much?"

"I am! Every one of my men is irreplaceable for me! Without Enriki you, Lis and Squint-Eye will go to prison for sure."

"Without Lis's strategy there will be no victories in the Lower City. Without Squint-Eye no one will fear you. And you? Can't you do anything?"

"You, Nik – how can I replace you with anyone?"

"I'm not talking about myself! If Enriki means so much for you, lock him up in the castle, make him deal with papers and that's all."

"I cannot do it! If I lock him up, it will mean he isn't a warrior any more! He won't do anything then."

"If he cares for you, he will."

"Would you?"

"Any time, I'm fed up with this war."

"You speak like Squint-Eye, are you serious?"

"Yes. I envy Lis – I won't live long enough to get this old."

"But you don't know how old you are."

"I thought about it and tried to recall. I think I'm twenty-three, yes, I'm sure."

"Ooh."

"What, don't I look like that?"

"No-o. But Lis told me that."

"Told what?"

"He said you're barely over twenty, and I didn't believe him."

"Fucking shit, Lis knows more about me than I do!"

Orel laughed.

"He said: 'Nikto is at least seven years younger than me.'" Orel tossed a sly look at Nikto. "Fine, you're tired of fighting – quit it."

"What? Are you permitting me?"

"No! Of course, not! But Enriki won't quit, he want to prove he still can fight. Do you know what I think? I'll replace Squint-Eye and put Vil there."

"Enriki will understand that you give up on him. Put me there, I'll manage to defend him."

"And what about me?!"

"Your eyes are okay and you'll have Squint-Eye, like before."

"No. Never."

"If Enriki is with Vil and you're with me, where will you put Squint-Eye?"

"With Asa."

"What an allocation! He'll kill her himself not to meddle."

"What should I do then?"

"Replace everyone. Enriki-Vil. Lis-Squint-Eye. Asa-Tol."

"They will be mad! Though..." Orel mused. "There is something in it. No, Lis and Squint-Eye is a shitty pair... very shitty. Wait, Nik, you want to set up Lis? You're cunning!"

"Is it 'setting up'? Squint-Eye fights much better than Tol."

"Yes, but Squint-Eye doesn't like Lis."

"If you put him to stand by Lis, Lis will find a way to make Squint-Eye love him, believe me."

"It stinks, Nik."

"With this allocation there will be one wounded. Vil won't let himself be wounded and he won't risk. With the present allocation you'll have two wounded."

"So, in the first case there will be two wounded, and one of them not important, but that way we'll have two important warriors wounded. What should I do? Enriki will take Squint-Eye down with him, that's for sure!"

"The pair Enriki-Squint-Eye fucked up once. I ask you again, put me with Enriki."

"No!" Orel nearly screamed. "You're right, there shouldn't be irreplaceable men. Apart from me, everyone is replaceable in my team. Let Enriki show what he can do. I'm giving up on him – I hope he won't get killed, and if he gets wounded, he'll calm down for a while and will handle my affairs. I'll take Dick Nedwill in his place as a warrior. He and Vil will make a good pair."

"And now try to explain it to the others."

"Let's go downstairs." Orel got up. "I can even vote for it. You and Vil will be for me, Enriki, I'm sure, will not vote against it either. Four against three. Shit, Vil is convenient, after all, I can always be sure he'll vote just like me. Am I right?"

"Yes," Nikto smirked.

"Just don't express your wish to pair with Enriki, okay? Otherwise everyone will seize this opportunity and there will be no changes, and we need them."

"You said 'no', I got it. But it will be a difficult conversation."

"It is my problem, just keep silent."

"I always keep silent," Nikto said.

* * *

"Wait, there is one more thing before we have dinner."

They looked at him questioningly, silently, waiting what he'd say.

"My order is," Orel started slowly, lowering his head slightly. He saw them tense. "...I'm changing pairs," he said at last.

Everyone froze as if not quite understanding what he said. Lis was the first to regain composure.

"Who are you going to replace?"

"Everyone," Orel said. "I'm going to change ALL the pairs."

"And yours, too?" Lis's voice stayed calm but it was a pretense.

"No. I'm staying with Nikto."

"Ah," Lis said knowingly.

"Arel, changing pairs before an important fight is unreasonable," Squint-Eye interfered.

"Which way do you want to change the pairs?" Tol asked anxiously.

"Squint-Eye will stand by Lis, Vil by Enriki, you by Asa."

Tol really started back; he tried to say something but managed only a few hoarse sounds.

"Fuck you! You're completely insane!" Squint-Eye yelled. "It's nonsense!"

"Arel, why are you doing it? Why?" Lis asked tiredly.

"No objections!" Orel shouted. "That's it! I have decided, and it will be this way!"

"But can you at least explain us why?"

"It will be better this way. Is it enough for an explanation?"

"No, it is not enough." Squint-Eye nervously pushed his hair away from his face. "Changing pairs before a fight! Do you want to kill us? Do you want to ruin everything? At the very last moment? We fucked with this Bey for so long! We nearly lost everything! And now, when we have a real chance to end it, when we finally have a really good plan, you start fooling around! Arel, the fights will be hard, won't it be better to keep us the way we are used to, at least for a while? After that you can replace us, you can put me with Asa, can put Vil with Lis – whatever you want but after the fight!"

"No. Now," Orel said firmly.

Squint-Eye waved his hand hopelessly.

"No one changes pairs before a fight," Tol interfered. "I remember it from school."

"Shit! You were going to school?!" Orel yelled, unable to stand it any longer. Tol decided it was safer to keep silent. "I'm tired of your displeasure," Orel continued, and by his voice they felt they had got to him. "You always dislike everything! Whatever I do! Whatever I suggest! In reply I always hear: 'Arel, it's stupid! Arel, it's dangerous! Arel, it's wrong!' I'm not sure any more if you need me at all! Maybe you'll lock me in the dungeon and go on with your business as you feel like?!"

"Don't exaggerate," Enriki, who had been silent till now, said at last. "I don't mind if you change our places."

"You have nothing else left!" Lis snorted.

"Fine, maybe," Enriki shook his head jerkily. "Arel does everything right," he said as calmly as he could but his voice betrayed him, ringing with resentment.

"You're washed to the gutter, Rik, congratulations!" Squint-Eye said. He lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply, and leaned against the back of the chair.

Enriki raised his eyes to the ceiling, looking at the blackened girders. Lis turned to Squint-Eye and slowly, for him to see, flicked him on his eye-patch. Squint-Eye, who was used to such treatment, turned his head with dignity.

"What?" he asked looking at Lis; his eye was narrowed against smoke.

"Congratulations to you, too," Lis said. "You're not 'washed to the gutter!'" He smirked wickedly.

Enriki regained control.

"What are you talking about? I'm even happy with this new allocation! It will be easier for me to prove you that I'm worth something!"

"Enriki, you can rely on me," Vil said gingerly. Enriki didn't answer. "I'll also prove what I'm worth!" But no one listened to Vil.

"Basically, if to be honest," Lis continued, "it is a good allocation... good – if you don't care about interests and feelings of people," he paused, "people who are interconnected with friendly, close, important relations. If to forget about it, this allocation is not bad. But it is too stiff and straightforward, you don't take into account our feelings and ties, as if they are not there at all. And it is not right! If it rude towards Enriki – first of all, it's simply a betrayal, let's call a spade a spade. And I'll also say you couldn't come up with it, Arel."

"What do you mean?"

"It is not your idea! You wouldn't change our places, you would have thought it risky and unprofitable but you would have left us as we are. I know you and your style. You believe in luck. What you're doing now is not your style, Arel."

"Lis, I don't understand you. Do you mean the plan is good? Or is it bad?"

"It isn't good or bad, it isn't yours. It is not yours," he repeated slowly, nearly in syllables.

"Do you want to say that I cannot come up with anything?"

"You can," Lis agreed, " and you did many times, and you would never, never put Asa with Tol. You wouldn't even think of it!"

"You can only criticize, it's easy to do! Can you do anything but take a dig on me? Suggest your allocation, I'll think about it. What, why do you keep silent?"

"Who's gonna listen to me, you listen only to Nikto."

Everyone froze.

"Ooh shit," Nikto, who kept silent till now, drawled.

"So, you think I do what Nikto tells me," Orel reached for a cigarette. "Right?"

"Right," Lis said. "Who else will take Squint-Eye away from Enriki not to risk Squint-Eye, and who else will put Tol with Asa to protect her."

"Lis, don't drag me into it!" Enriki pleaded.

"Really! Enough humiliating him," Squint-Eye said. "He has already got to understand what his love and devotion are worth. And I'm not surprised, Orel did the same to me."

"Yes," Orel raised his voice. "I give up on Enriki, if you care. He is weak and I don't want to risk Squint-Eye for him!" He looked around. "I'm honest with you, what will you say?" He turned to Enriki. "Tell me whatever you want. I admit it, I'm betraying you. If Squint-Eye stood by you, very possibly you'd be just wounded but then Squint-Eye would be wounded, too, and I cannot afford it. With Vil you'll likely be killed. This is how I paid you for everything you did for me." He shook his head tossing his hair back. There was no embarrassment or repentance on his handsome grey face. He looked at Enriki, looked at his face calmly and confidently.

Enriki lowered his head.

"Thank you for your honesty, Arel. I know you for a long time and I'm not surprised. I understand that you think realistically and correctly. We are not children to weep over not being taken into a game. We're not toying here, it's life – everyone is for himself. But I will make you change your mind about me after the fight," he raised his head. "It's too early to write me off! I won't say anything else, words don't prove anything. You'll see it with your own eyes." And, seeing pity on their faces, he shouted. "I won't die to please you! You don't believe me? Fine! I shit care about you and your allocations, I just want to live! I want to stay alive! And I will survive even if you leave me all

alone. Don't think I'm just wasting me breath, I am afraid, very afraid to go into fight with it," he raised his mutilated hand, "but I have to, or I cannot respect myself. And you betraying me – I would do the same if such a thing happened to someone else. If you're unlucky, it's your problem, don't drag anyone else into it." He stopped.

No one from those sitting around the table said a word. Vil seemed to want to say something but changed his mind and kept silent, too. He started getting used and was tuning his behavior up to Lis and Orel. Vil became more silent and thoughtful, he became different.

"Maybe he is right," Tol said at last. "Why are we burying Enriki in advance? But I still think it's better to put me with him."

"Shut up," Orel snapped.

"But I don't want to be paired with Asa! She is too weak for me!"

"She's restored and she is okay for you!"

Asa asked something in Unclean. Lis answered her, naming their new allocation. Asa laughed happily.

"Nikto is promoting you just the way you want," Lis said. "What did you do to get into his grace? Maybe, used your Unclean hole?"

Asa got white with fury.

"Wasn't you ready to lick my hole just a short while ago?"

"Soon all of us will be licking one Unclean hole," Lis hissed.

"Do you want to start right now?" Nikto interfered.

"Hey!" Orel yelled. "Speak Black! Since when there is Unclean sounding at this table?"

"Get used," Lis said to Orel. "Soon we'll all start singing in Unclean, like good boys."

"Never!" Tol was enraged. "I will never do it!"

"You will be the first," Lis snapped.

"Shut up!" Orel was in fury. "Shut up, you all! Or it won't ever end. You're not kids. You're experienced warriors. No matter how I'll put you, it'll be good."

They laughed.

Orel stopped in surprise, then smiled.

"Don't pick on my choice of words. That's it, we finished discussing. You'll fight as I tell you. Have you finished, Lis?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

"I've finished."

"Then it's decided."

"I don't want to be paired with Asa! I don't!"

"Look, Tol," Orel said barely controlling himself. "Is she your wench or mine?"

"Hm," Tol muttered.

"You dragged her here, to the castle, you begged me to take her in!"

"Yes, but fucking her is one thing, fighting in pair with her is another!"

"Ah so!" Orel got up. "Then I'll finish her off right now and no more questions."

He walked around the table quickly, coming up to Asa. She got up, also very quickly, pushed Vil, stood behind him and took out her sword. Vil got up, his face distorted but he didn't make an attempt to move aside, he stood protecting her.

"Arel, don't!" Tol screamed.

But it was too late, Orel didn't hear him. Using Vil as a shield, he pushed him to Asa, to her sword, and she had to pull the blade back. When she'd tried to use Vil as her protection, she only worsened her situation: her momentary confusion was enough for Orel to grab her hand and wring her wrist sharply. He was strong and experienced and acted swiftly and mercilessly. She screamed in pain, her fingers couldn't hold the sword any more; it fell on the floor and rolled down from the dais.

Orel hit her with his free hand, without letting her wrist go, then yanked her forward, toppling her over on the floor. He didn't give her a single chance to recoup and do something. At the next moment he pulled out his blade, ready to kill her – in his signature blow that chopped off his enemies' heads in one movement. When he pushed Asa to the floor, he carefully turned her to the edge of the dais so that nothing could hinder his blow – neither Vil, frozen in terror, nor massive chairs. Defeated, Asa looked at Orel and understood she'd die now. Then she screamed very loudly in Unclean:

"Nikto! Help me!"

It was a scream of despair. Orel froze, starting back from her. Nikto who sat at the table screwed his eyes shut and squeezed his temples. Lis didn't look away from him, staring at him with his yellow penetrating eyes. Orel slowly lowered his sword. He didn't know Unclean but everyone in the city knew how 'help me' sounded in it. And the name, the name she'd cried out in her last hope, the name of his most precious person, the name he whispered hundreds times relishing in its sound and naively thinking he was the only one to have this right... The name that left her lips so unexpectedly but naturally and easily, as if it belonged to her, too, stunned him. He suddenly realized very clearly that he was not the only one, that there were others who also considered themselves entitled to say those five letters. It seemed she robbed him. No, she couldn't take anything from him because he had never had anything – he'd only thought he owned something, it was an illusion, a fallacy Nikto instilled into him. Nikto! Orel turned around abruptly; looking past Tol, white as a sheet, he gazed at the man sitting there.

"What is there between you?" Orel's voice was hoarse.

"There is nothing between us that might anger or hurt you," Nikto said even without looking at Orel.

"I don't believe you!" Orel came up to Nikto.

"Calm down."

Orel made a wheezing sound; he grabbed Nikto's hair, pulling his head back, pressing his sword to Nikto's neck right above the collar.

"Are you suggesting me to calm down? To sit down and shut up?"

Nikto didn't move.

"Yes," he said and his voice was completely calm, as if Orel was not holding a sword at his neck but was chatting with him over a glass of wine.

"Don't kid me!"

Nikto looked up at Orel, simply looked. A thin trickle of blood leaked from under the collar down to the carefully laced vest. Orel put his left hand onto Nikto's face, covering this unbearable gaze of grey eyes. He felt Nikto close his eyes under his palm, tickling it with his eyelashes.

"Don't" Orel said thickly. "Don't do it to me, Nik."

The blade was lowered slowly.

"Don't do it to me!" Orel screamed and in helpless rage chopped off one of Nikto's braids that stuck out of his mane of tousled hair and lay on the elbow rest of the chair. A heavy thick braid fell on the floor, only silver clamps chimed pitifully.

Without looking at anyone Orel quickly left the table and nearly ran upstairs. The door slammed loudly making them flinch. Orel locked the door.

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For a while they stayed frozen; then Squint-Eye got up, walked up to Nikto who sat in some kind of stupor, picked up his braid from the floor and came up to Asa.

"Take it," he said in Unclean and tossed the braid at Asa's face. Asa who sat on the floor started back instinctively, looking at Squint-Eye askance with her eyes full of hatred. "You've earned it."

Asa turned away.

"It was my fault," Tol said gloomily. "I shouldn't have..."

"Asa and Nikto are together," Lis said, "and you're a fool, Tol."

"No," Tol shook his head. "I don't believe it. Asa always hated Nikto."

"She did it for us to believe it!" Lis continued. "She acted for our sake but today she's given herself away. Bad girl, Asa, how could you?"

"But she saved her life," Squint-Eye said. "Orel really was shocked. I wonder whether Nikto would have helped her if she hadn't screamed. Huh, Nikto?" Squint-Eye turned to him. "Would you?" Nikto kept silent.

"I think he wouldn't," Squint-Eye smirked.

"No one could help Asa at that moment," Enriki said. "Orel has gone too far."

"Noo," Squint-Eye drawled, "you're wrong. Something would have definitely happened. Something that wouldn't let Orel finish her off. But the bitch has lost her nerve. She let you down so much," Squint-Eye shook his head, "didn't she, Nik?"

"How could Nikto help her?" Tol objected. "When Orel goes crazy, no one can help."

"Tol, listen to me," Lis said, "you were cheated and so were us. Nikto chose you to go to the Lower City for mercenaries. He chose you because you are self-confident and dumb. Quiet, quiet, don't interrupt me! Listen what clever people have to say. There, in the military school, Borgan was waiting for you to give you that Asa."

"How could he wait for us if we didn't know ourselves we'd go there!" Tol interfered.

"You didn't know," Lis said coldly. "But Nikto and Borgan knew. Nikto knew everything about us, even before the moment we dragged him to the castle so carelessly. He chose Orel a year ago, when he fought in the 'damned' detachment under his command. He found a way to catch Orel... it's difficult not to catch him, he likes everything shitty!"

"Exactly," Nikto said looking straight at Lis.

Lis turned to him.

"Shut up, I'm not talking to you! When we asked you, you kept silent – now stay silent again."

"Why should I keep silent when you say these nasty things about me?"

"Afraid I'll tell the truth about you?"

"It is not truth but your fantasies!"

"You are afraid, Nik, you are!"

"I'm not afraid, I'm just tired of it!"

"If you're not afraid, why don't you let me speak? Come on, keep arguing with me! Shut me up!"

"Go to hell! Say whatever you want," Nikto pressed his hand to the cut on his neck and turned away.

"That's better!" Lis turned to Tol again. "After Nikto had chosen Orel, he planned to meet us again. I'm sure he was gathering information about us just like we gathered info about him. He found out about our fight with Bey, our difficulties, he knew we'd need soldiers sooner or later, because Orel would never give up on his streets, whatever it cost him. Since the Upper City is practically closed for Orel – if he loses the Lower City, he won't be able to come out of his castle at all. Nikto knew it and agreed with Borgan to find an ally for Nikto, assistance for him in the enemy camp. They couldn't choose a man, Orel wouldn't accept him, so, they did better. They chose a girl – who'd take her seriously? Very clever, they managed to deceive me, too. I admit, I didn't pay attention to Asa's appearance in our team. But don't you think it's strange that a half-blood who doesn't speak Black suddenly replies with such fervor at our Tol's advances – Tol who is completely alien to her? She is ready to go anywhere after him, what a strange passion! I would have understood it if she were just a wench, but even then it seldom happens – the Unclean don't like humans. I know that their kin turn away from such apostates like Asa, considering them traitors. But she is not a wench, she is a warrior, she was learning how to fight and hate humans for all her life, and now such a thing! But she keeps going back to her place as if nothing happened and no one minds, no one says her a word. Too good to be true! She loves Tol, he loves her, and everyone around love them," Lis paused evaluating the impression he made, then continued. "Then she pretends to hate Nikto but they are really allies. And

I'm sure, Tol, she fucks him secretly while you and Orel are none the wiser. And now Nikto put her to be paired with you because it's safer for her this way. Well done, nothing to say. And it is just the beginning, soon he'll do away with all of us, one by one, and Orel will be in his full power, a scion of royalty, entitled to the throne, he will become a hostage of the Unclean. It's a conspiracy. Their aim is to open the Upper City for the Unclean with Orel's help."

"No," Tol whispered. "I don't believe you. You're crazy, Lis!"

"I don't like to believe it myself," Lis said quietly, "but look at their actions."

Tol swallowed hard. Enriki kept sitting still, somewhat grey and silent. Poor Vil looked in such a way as if the only thing he dreamed about was to vanish in the thin air now. Only Squint-Eye appeared undisturbed; it seemed no conspiracies could frighten or bother him. Very calm, he stood not far away from Asa, indifferently waiting for what would happen next.

"What shall we do now?" Enriki asked.

"We have to tell Orel about it," Tol said. "Let him decide what to do."

"What can Orel do?" Lis answered. "Orel can't do anything, he is in their power."

"But you can," Nikto said turning to Lis. "You're the cleverest, the most inquisitive, the most cunning – but not the boss for some reason!"

Squint-Eye grimaced smiling, watching Lis who did his best to keep a neutral expression.

"I don't mind telling Orel," Lis said, heroically coping with his wounded pride.

"So why are you still here? Go and share your discoveries with him!"

"You're mocking me! He dares mocking us, he isn't afraid of anything, he feels he's the master here!"

"Perhaps we give Nikto a chance to explain himself."

Everyone turned to this quiet voice. Vil, very tense, sat at the table and looked at them.

"Ooh, you have some more allies here!" Lis could barely control himself.

"You know, Lis, I would also like to listen what Nikto has to say," Enriki interfered.

"Come on, Nikto," Squint-Eye winked to him happily, "do Lis away!"

"Bert, stop with your foolish jokes," Enriki said quickly. "Don't add fuel to the fire."

"What do you want to hear?"

"Truth."

"If I say that I'm not in conspiracy with the Unclean or with anyone else... will you believe me?"

"We need a proof," Enriki said. "Can you prove it?"

"I didn't know Asa. I saw her for the first time when Tol brought her to Orel's castle, just like you did."

"Why is she attracted to Tol? Perhaps Borgan sent her to watch you?" Enriki suggested.

"If Borgan uses her as a spy in the castle, we should just get rid of her and that's all," Squint-Eye said.

Nikto kept silent.

"No," he said at last, "there is another thing between Asa and Tol. But I won't say anything, you will not believe me – as always – and it will only turn to the worse. Despise me, hate me," he stumbled for a moment, checking whether he'd used a correct word. "I know I didn't wish and don't wish evil to you, and I don't do evil."

"You don't have anything to say," Lis smirked.

"What do you mean 'turn to the worse'?" Enriki asked carefully.

"It's enough. I've said enough." Nikto put his elbows in the table and pressed his palm to his forehead.

"Nikto is not to blame," Asa said suddenly in Unclean, apparently having figured out something. She got up from the floor and now stood in front of them. "My master Borgan told me to be with Tol because Tol is Unclean."

"What? What did she say?" Enriki whispered.

"Quiet, quiet, calm down," Lis reached his hand as if pushing Enriki aside.

"Why should we believe you?" Lis's Unclean was very good. Asa shrugged.

"Because I tell the truth. Why should I lie? It doesn't make sense, since you can check Tol. I think there is someone among you who can do it and confirm my worlds. Nikto can hear the 'phone' and Squint-Eye can, too. Tol spent all his life among humans but you can still hear him. No matter how human-like he looks, he is not human, and one can hear it. Borgan heard him at once, I didn't, his 'phone' is very quiet. Nikto likely heard him too, that's why he took him along. Borgan was delighted with Tol, he at once did his best for Tol and for you. He gave Nikto and Tol his chosen warriors. I love Tol and he has to be with us. Not now, now it's too early, but sooner or later he'll come back to us. And... You won't tell him anything, will you? He is very attached to you and he needs you! You won't turn away from him, right? I gave him away only because I felt there was trouble. I don't know what exactly you talked about but I'm telling the truth!"

"We said that you and Nikto are together and work against us," Lis said. Asa shook her head.

"Nikto is always alone, he doesn't need me. I don't know anything about him, just like you. He saved my life, helped me to get out of coma, and I paid my debt to him," she glanced at Squint-Eye who stayed impassive. "Now he saved my life for the second time, and it means I will stand by him. But don't tie me to him, I'm with Tol, and... and..." she stumbled, "I was so afraid of that fucking Arel!"

"Are you afraid of Nikto?" Lis asked.

"It doesn't matter, I just know he would never tell about Tol himself."

"Why?"

"Because it is not his business. It is between Tol and me, if I want, I'll tell you, and Nikto has nothing to do with it. He really has nothing to do with it."

"How can it be that Tol is Unclean?"

"Borgan found out everything. He sent his servants to the place where Tol was born, to his estate. His parents are humans, they don't know anything, just like he doesn't and you didn't. Borgan's people talked to the Unclean slaves who lived there. One Unclean, when she heard someone was asking about Tol, was very happy because they didn't hear anything about him for a long time, since he left his parents and went away in search for adventures. She said that she was a maid in the main house about twenty years ago. She was Unclean but very beautiful and looked like a human. The mistress loved her in her own way. This Unclean replaced the mistress's child with the boy of her sister, he looked very much like human, that's why they decided to do it. It worked as she planned, their mistress gave birth to a child – I don't know if it was a boy or a girl – it was taken to the slaves' barrack and I don't know what they did to it."

"I can guess what," Lis said darkly. "What then?"

"Then they put the Unclean child in the baby's place. The master and the mistress didn't suspect anything, they were very happy that the baby was handsome and strong, they named him Ram and loved him very much. They didn't have any more children and doted on him. And the Unclean loved him, too, they dreamed that he would grow up and become a master, and then they'll tell him everything and he'll free them and the estate will belong to the Unclean. But Tol left them and isn't going to come back. He destroyed their hopes."

"What is she saying?" Tol couldn't stand it any longer. "What?"

"She explains that there is nothing between her and Nikto, and you know, Tol," Lis made a somewhat guilty expression that could deceive only Tol, "it seems she made me believe her. Forget everything I said before. I was wrong," he finished quite cheerfully.

Asa was listening worriedly.

"Relax," Squint-Eye said quietly. "Lis will not tell him anything." He smiled. "I suspected it from the beginning. I heard he was 'phoning' at once. But damn it..."

"You won't tell him, will you?" Asa interrupted him.

"No, you can be sure I won't."

"So, Lis, it was your fantasies, right?" Tol asked suspiciously.

"Yes," Lis said simply. "Just imagine, I was mistaken, my imagination got me carried away."

"Really?" Tol narrowed his eyes. "There is something wrong in it. You gave up too quickly."

Lis shrugged.

"What can I do, your Asa is very smart and made me change my mind. She really loves you, she loves you and does everything to secure your future."

"Yeah? Why did she call for him and not for me then?"

"Ooh, it's simple, Nikto has saved her life once, and she says she got friendly with him," Lis smiled at Tol nicely.

"Got friendly?"

"Yes," Lis looked at him innocently. "She got to respect him, stopped putting on airs, is it bad, huh, Tol? You wanted that, didn't you?"

"Yes," Tol said. He was tense, he started getting confused. "What else did she say?"

"Nothing special."

"But she said a lot."

"It just seemed so to you. You know, Tol, learn Unclean and ask her yourself. I don't mind your Asa any more. Is it enough for you?"

"Yes."

"Then keep enjoying your life. Besides, you started it, it was because of your shitty temper Orel got angry, nearly killed her, cut off Nikto's braid, made us think hell knows what about them. He paired Squint-Eye and me even though everyone knows what terms we are on. Squint-Eye wants to kill me!"

"It is not true," Squint-Eye exclaimed quickly.

"True or not but I have written a lot in my farewell letter – in case if I suddenly get killed. One letter is for Orel, another for the royal prosecutor. I've foreseen everything."

Squint-Eye went pale.

"So, Tol, next time before you argue with Orel, think twice and follow the example of Enriki, me and the others: we don't dispute. Orel is our master and we have to do what he tells us."

"Look who's talking," Tol muttered.

"Tol, what are you saying?! I always obey Orel," Lis was extremely incensed.

"Fine, ask her once more, is there something between her and Nikto, let her answer honestly. I'll forgive her, I promise."

"As you wish." Lis turned to Asa. "I didn't tell Tol anything, I'm covering up for you. But please admit, did you know Nikto before?"

"I only heard about him, have never seen him."

"You're lying, bitch, you had to see him, he's your Borgan's friend!"

"So what? When he came, I wasn't there."

"If you don't tell the truth now, I won't believe that you're not together."

"Lis, I'm tired of it! Fine, I saw him a couple of times from afar, he didn't even notice me. Is it important for you?"

"Yes, it is." Lis turned to Tol. "Here you are, I asked her again, that's right, there is nothing between them, they didn't even meet before. Do you believe me?"

"I dunno," Tol drawled doubtfully. "You say one thing at first, then another..."

"Well, forgive me for that, I'm a suspicious son of bitch, I was wrong. Do you forgive me?"

"All right," Tol smiled, a little strained.

"Then let's drink for it!" Lis reached for the bottle. "Let's drink for peace and friendship among us."

"Let's drink," Squint-Eye agreed. He walked around the table returning to his place.

"What shall we say to Orel?" Enriki suddenly asked barely audibly.

"We can tell everything, we can tell nothing," Lis filled Enriki's glass to the brim. "I think he and Nikto will make up soon, right, Nikto?"

"I would like to."

"I don't doubt." Lis filled his glass, too.

Before going to her place, Asa walked up to Nikto and gave him his braid. Nikto took it without saying anything. Asa returned to the table.

Lis raised his glass.

"Let's forget everything! No more suspicions among us. We are a family! For us and for Orel!"

Their glasses touched. They drank: Tol and Vil who didn't know Unclean and didn't understand anything; Enriki who knew Unclean very poorly but understood everything; and Squint-Eye, Lis, Nikto and Asa.

"I will never, never listen to you again, Lis," Tol said wiping his lips.

"Right, Tol. You should think with your own head," Lis agreed lighting a cigarette.

"And have your own opinion," Squint-Eye added.

"And do you have your own opinion about it?" Tol looked at Squint-Eye.

"Of course, I do."

"And what is it?"

"It is mine. It is mine and I don't have to share it with anyone. Lis can say whatever he wants, it's his right. If I wanted, I could have said something, too, but I don't, and it's my right.

"And what do you think, Enriki?"

"I think we are all right," Enriki made himself say. "It was Lis's fantasy about a conspiracy."

"I also think so," Tol started, and Lis smiled barely noticeably when hearing how confidently Tol said it. "I also think that Nikto cannot be in conspiracy with the Unclean against us, because he hates them. And he likes us, he even likes you, Lis."

"Now, Tol, you have your own opinion, congratulations." Lis took a deep drag, narrowing his eyes, hiding sharp glitter in them behind his auburn eyelashes.

Tol smiled and leaned to Asa, hugging her.

"I'm so glad you're with me," he purred. She smiled back at him.

"Make her learn Black," Lis said to Tol.

"Yes, Lis, you're right," he agreed. "But I can't make her! It's the same as if someone made me learn her fucking Unclean – I'll never do it! We're both alike, both are stubborn."

Enriki wanted to say something but turned around, hearing steps on the stairs. Mina walked down to the hall. She was dressed up lavishly: in a white fur coat, with strings of pearls in her golden hair.

"Where is the master?" Her voice was tender like a creek water. "He ordered me to come down by this time, he promised to take me to 'Backara'." She was confused and a little upset but tried not to show it.

"If he promised, he will," Lis said confidently. "Wait for him."

"If he leaves his room today at all," Squint-Eye added.

"He will, Nikto will take care of it," Lis said. "Nikto, go to Orel."

"Don't order me what to do," Nikto snapped. "I'll go to him when I decide it."

Mina sighed and sat down on the bottom step of the stairs.

"You're very beautiful today," Lis said looking at her. "Do you like it when Orel takes you along somewhere?"

"Yes!" She got animated for a moment, alit with some inner light; but it was just a moment, then her face fell again.

"We'll go to 'Backara' anyway, even if Orel doesn't. I can take you along, do you want it?"

Mina got up fearfully.

"I'd better go."

"Why are you afraid of me?"

"I'm not afraid, why should I be afraid of you? What can you do?"

"You're right, I won't do anything to you. But I'm worried about you. Lately Orel kills one of his slaves nearly every day."

"I know, the master does it from time to time. We all learned to live with it and I'm not scared any more. Sooner or later it'll happen to every one of us. You are worried about me because you feel guilty over Shela, she begged you to buy her out. You could have done it but you didn't, and she got despaired. She was trembling with fear every day – she only thought about it happening to her. She was afraid of pain, we saw what he did to other slaves, and Shela always repeated 'I will be the next, I will be the next' – and she drove herself to the state when her heart gave up. I don't want to think about it, it kills you before the death comes."

"These are the wise words, but still, try to be more careful. And don't leave, drink with us." Lis gave her a glass.

"Yes, drink with us," Tol joined. "Let's drink for all of us once again!" He started pouring wine.

"How lovely! A touching picture!" Orel stood atop of the stairs and looked down at them.

"Orel, come down to us!" Tol greeted him happily. "It's good you're back!"

"Indeed." Orel walked downstairs and sat down in his place at the head of the table. Tol quickly filled his glass. "I was waiting for someone to come up to me, to wonder what's happening to me but you care shit, you're sitting here, drinking wine. 'Arel is freaking out, doesn't matter, we'll have fun!'"

"It is not true," Tol said, "we worried about you. Nikto was going to go make up with you. You know, we were investigating, investigating if he had something with Asa – but we figured out he had nothing, Asa is just a stupid wench."

"What did you investigate? I knew that, that's why I'm here, I was afraid for Nikto! I thought you'd kick him to death, what a fool I am! You're nearly kissing with him here!"

"We picked on him, picked on him and then we made up. Because there was nothing between him and Asa."

"Really?" Orel pretended to be surprised. "There is nothing between you, is there?" He turned to Nikto still looking at him with resentment.

"Really," Nikto said raising his eyes and meeting Orel's gaze. "I just fucked her a couple of times, big deal."

"Whaaat?!" Tol shouted, and Squint-Eye, Lis and Enriki started laughing.

"Come on, Tol, it was a joke," Squint-Eye said.

"I don't like this kind of jokes at all." Tol was displeased.

"Enough about it," Orel ordered. "Time to go." He finished his wine, poured some more and gulped it.

"Arel, don't drink like this," Lis said carefully.

"Drink like this? 'Like this' is how? I have the second glass, is it a lot, you think?"

"And how many did you have upstairs?"

"Lis, fuck you! I hate you all! I hate you!" Orel got up. "Let's go. Mina, come to me, and you, Nikto, don't even come closer!" He made a show turning away from Nikto and walking past him. Everyone else followed him, including Nikto. Vil was the last to go. He came even with Enriki.

"Enriki, what shall we do in the Lower City tonight?" There was concern in his voice.

"I don't know," Enriki said indifferently. "Do you care?"

"Probably not," Vil whispered.

"What?" Enriki asked.

"No, nothing."

* * *

They walked down to the yard. The servants had their horses ready. Orel ran down the stairs and mounted his horse, ready to leave at once. His horse danced under him impatiently.

"What are you waiting for? Faster, faster! Let's go!" He turned to his friends and saw Nikto still standing on the top of the stairs, unable to walk down the iced steps.

"Nik," Orel called for him impatiently.

Nikto started forward instinctively, following this call, but he couldn't make even a step, or he would've just rolled down the stairs. Orel saw his face – pale as always and lost – as if Orel was going to leave him now, go away without him.

"Damn you!" Orel dismounted but Lis was faster. He ran up the stairs and gave Nikto his hand, helping him to come down. Orel walked up to them. Nikto avoided his gaze. Orel silently took the mask hanging on Nikto's chest; Lis quickly pushed Nikto's hair away from his face and Orel put the mask on Nikto, hiding his face and eyes behind the black.

"Let's go," he said.

* * *

They swirled along the streets of the Upper and the Lower City like a vortex. Orel was the first one – with his face unhidden and his hair streaming in the wind. He pressed Mina to his chest. In her white fur coat she looked like a fragile toy in his arms.

When they reached 'Backara' Dim and Berta joined them.

"Prince Arel," Dim shouted, "I'm chasing you since the Upper City, why are you in such a hurry? Do you want to break your neck? It's insane!"

Orel smirked, holding his horse.

"I know the way like my own palm and the horses have spikes on the hooves, they won't slip."

In a difficult battle against Bey Enriki is lethally wounded and Vil couldn't help him.

Bey gets back some of his territories.

Chapter 2

In the Castle, Afterwards

"What should I do? What should I do?" Orel rushed about the room like a beast in a cage. "I hate them! I hate them, damn them!" He fell on the floor, on the fur carpets, hugged a bear head pressing his face to it, then started back at once, hissing in pain. His corroded skin made any touch painful.

"Easy, Arel," Nikto said.

He sat on the bed with his good leg bent; his lame leg lay straight and lifeless.

"Arelh!" Orel mimicked him. "My name is Prince Arel! And I can't defeat this shit! A simple commoner! I'll kill Enriki for it! I'll kill him! It is his fault! His, Vil's and Squint-Eye's! They set me up!"

"Enriki is already dying," Nikto said calmly.

"Let him die! I hope he'll die sooner! I'll spit on his grave!"

"You will be able to do it in a couple of days."

"Are you mocking me? Laughing at me? Get up!" Orel came up to Nikto, yanked him up by his wrist. "Get up, I order you!"

As soon as Nikto got up, Orel wrapped his arms around him from behind, pressed onto his shoulders forcefully, making him kneel. Nikto resisted.

"You're fucking mad, Arel! Leave me alone!"

"Nik, I order you!" Orel whispered hoarsely, leaning forward, pressing to Nikto. Without saying another word Nikto knelt with his face on the bed, unbelted his pants and pulled them down. He couldn't help but hiss something in Unclean with a sudden push. Then he fell with his face on the bed;

his hair spread over the bed cover. He waited for Orel to move faster, as fast and hard as he could, then back away, panting, fall face down on the floor trying to calm down his racing heart...

* * *

When Enriki's sister left in tears, Lis, Squint-Eye, Tol and Vil exchanged glances.

"We have to do it," Squint-Eye said. "Otherwise he'll just burn out in front of our eyes."

"A warrior cannot die in bed," Tol added.

"Yeah, and that's why we'd better make a carrion out of him!" Lis said coldly.

Squint-Eye glared at him with his only eye.

"Lis, you know I'm right."

"Why should I?"

"'Black water' is the only thing that can save Enriki. Don't pretend to be an idiot, you wouldn't be alive without it yourself!"

"Lis used 'water'?!" Tol asked in surprise.

"No," Lis said without a blink. "Never. Squint-Eye simply wants to turn everyone into carrion because he is a carrion himself."

"Lying bitch," Squint-Eye hissed and dashed towards Lis, grabbed his hand quickly, pulling the sleeve up. "Looks nice, Lis, an armband from wrist to elbow! What is it covering?"

"Nothing." Lis yanked his hand free, hiding his steel incrustated bracelet under the sleeve again.

"Why cannot it be taken off then? You can take off the bracelet on your other arm, I know it."

"Fine. There is a tattoo under it."

Squint-Eye laughed.

"Lis, it is not smart, I expected better from you! You don't hide your other brands. You have decorations cut on your both upper arms and you don't hide them under bracelets, why?"

"Scars of the Red and the brand Orel gave me are not tattoos."

"Orel gave you a brand?" Vil asked. "But why a brand?"

"Because I'm a Red half-blood, for fuck's sake! You make your tattoos with black paint but the Red don't. They cut the lines on their skin, cut them meat deep, or burn out. Orel doesn't know how to make scarring, no one among the Black can do it, so, he just branded me."

"He didn't tattoo you because you don't deserve it," Tol interrupted him. "One cannot tattoo a Red with black paint, it would mean to consider him equal with us. The Red are burnt with their fucking fire they like so much!"

"Perhaps it is so," Lis said contemptuously, "I won't argue. I learned to live with your humiliating laws and with your attitude to people like me. What else can I do? The Black judge people by their looks, not by what they are."

"You'll do anything just to drive the conversation away from the sensitive topic," Squint-Eye interfered. "You're lying to us! Your bracelet hides the traces of 'black water'. The traces that will stay forever!"

"You want Enriki to have them?" Lis asked looking straight at Squint-Eye; his gaze was very serious, without a shadow of his usual slyness.

"I want him to live!"

"Live?!"

"But you live! Nikto does, too, and many others."

"You want to destroy him, he will never be like before!" Lis lowered his yellow eyes that didn't seem sly any more.

"Lis, if you could get through it, why don't you believe that Enriki will? Just one time, and he'll have hope to survive. It's his last hope!"

"It is not hope, and Enriki would never agree to it! He will become a living dead, what can be more hopeless?"

"What a pity that he cannot make his own choice now," Vil shook his head.

"That is why we'll have to make it," Squint-Eye said firmly.

"I know Enriki, he would prefer to die, and I'm prepared to lose him." Lis was implacable.

"Shall we vote?" Tol asked.

"Yes," Squint-Eye sighed. "I can imagine, Lis, what you had to go through but we need it."

"No, you can't imagine," Lis said very quietly.

"Just one injection, and Enriki will live?" Tol looked at them. "Is it for sure?"

"For sure, don't doubt," Squint-Eye said. "Why do you think the Unclean addict their human slaves to the 'water'?"

Tol was silent.

"At first a man becomes very strong and sturdy, he can work day and night, without food or rest. Then the downfall comes, and the Unclean inject him more 'water', and do it as many times as he can bear. But we are not going to do it to Enriki, we'll inject it to him just once."

"And it will save him?"

"You can ask Lis if you don't believe me, but I don't hide anything from you, I'm telling the truth."

Tol looked at Lis questioningly, and Lis nodded at him silently.

"And when the downfall comes – he won't die, will he?" Tol still was in doubt.

"When the downfall comes, he'll be strong enough to survive it on usual restorers or strong alcohol, and that's all."

"Then I'm for it," Tol decided at last. "The main thing is for Enriki to live, and we'll help him to quit the drugs!"

"Well said," Squint-Eye smiled.

"Help Nikto or Squint-Eye to quit, and Squint-Eye doesn't even use 'water', just normal restorers, as he calls them," Lis shook his head.

"But you did quit? If Squint-Eye tells the truth and you used 'water' – you did quit?"

"You're a fool," Lis said bitterly.

"Can I vote?" Vil asked gingerly.

"Yes. Don't ask silly questions. Since Orel made you his, you're one of us."

"I'm against 'black water'," Vil said. "It's a sin, and Enriki will never be able to go to gods. We cannot take this opportunity away from him. He was lethally wounded in a battle, and the gods wait for him in heaven. Although I love Enriki very much and he is very dear to me... It is because he always treated me kindly, we should pray for him and let gods decide whether to let him stay with us or not. I also was lethally wounded," Vil glanced at Lis quickly – Lis sat frozen, like a stone figure, "but I survived without 'black water'. It was gods' will! Listen to me, they saved me..."

"They?" Squint-Eye asked ironically. "Maybe, someone just the opposite?"

"I will pray for Enriki," Vil said and lowered his head.

"So, we can't decide anything," Tol summarized. "Two against two. We need to ask Arel and Nikto."

"Orel said he doesn't care and won't participate in anything." Squint-Eye lit a cigarette.

"Did he say exactly something like that?" Vil asked doubtfully.

"Noo," Squint-Eye drawled, smirking. "He said much worse, cursed me all over, and Enriki, too, by the way. He thinks we are to blame for everything. Me, Enriki and you."

"If Orel doesn't want to," Tol said, "let's leave him alone. Then we need to ask Nikto."

"No!" Lis got up abruptly. "It will mean his choice will be decisive!"

"Don't jerk so, Lis," Squint-Eye sat in the armchair and looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"I don't understand, Lis, do you want to take away his right to vote?" Tol was exasperated. "He is one of us!"

"Lis, perhaps Nikto will support us," Vil said.

"Yeah right," Lis laughed mirthlessly.

"I'm against deciding it without Nikto," Tol continued. "Besides, he has some experience in it."

"I'm also against deciding without Nikto," Vil added. "We cannot decide for him."

"But we can decide for Enriki, right?" Lis shouted. "I'm against the 'water' and Nikto there!"

"Then we'll never come to anything," Tol got angry. "I'm going to bring Nikto and, maybe, Orel will come, too."

"I hope they're fucking each other and won't come," Squint-Eye hissed. "I'm sure, Lis, sooner or later you and I would come to an agreement."

"No, we wouldn't! But it doesn't matter, everything will be as the Devil wants!" Lis fell into the armchair and unclasped the foxtail hair clip, letting his wavy reddish hair fall over his shoulders. He looked tired.

For a while they sat silently and waited for Tol and Nikto. Suddenly Lis raised his head.

"I've changed my mind. I'm for it. Squint-Eye, do it!"

"What?!" Squint-Eye didn't understand.

"Do what you wanted to! Do it now and let's be done with it!"

Squint-Eye didn't ask anything, got up quickly taking a small black bottle out of his secret pocket.

"You cannot!" Vil screamed seeing Squint-Eye's preparations. "Lis, what's going on?"

"Shut up, we're tired of you!" Lis got up and punched Vil's jaw. Vil didn't expect it, waved his hands losing balance – and another immediate blow made him fall on the floor. The third blow – a shattering kick of an iron-heeled boot – followed, and Vil lost consciousness.

Squint-Eye didn't even look back.

"I don't want him to interfere at the most important moment," Lis explained.

Squint-Eye walked up to Enriki and without a moment of hesitation, the way only he could do it – it was his special talent – quickly and calmly injected him 'black water'.

It was all they had time to do.

When Tol and Nikto entered the room, they understood everything at once.

"I've changed my mind, Tol," Lis said calmly; his eyes glittered again.

"What a shit you are!" Tol was infuriated. "You did it on purpose, just not to let Nikto vote!"

"What if I agreed with you, Lis?" Nikto asked. He stood in the doorway, leaning against the doorjamb, stood and looked at Lis. And Lis looked at him, at his face crossed by a scar, a scar that disfigured him so much, at his tousled fair hair.

"I don't want to trust you," Lis whispered.

"Why? You and I, we both went through it, we know..."

"I don't know anything!" Lis screamed.

"And who knows? The first and the best warrior of the Red – Sigmer?"

Lis started back.

"You're a traitor, Lis! A traitor!" Vil got up from the floor heavily. "You betrayed Enriki! I hate you! I don't know what kind of a man you were when you were called Sigmer but I know that now, when you're called Atley Alis, you're a real shit!"

* * *

Thick shining candles lit the room pleasantly making it warm and cozy. Obeying this soft play of shadows, the furs with animal heads didn't just bare their teeth but smiled. Leaning over an unconscious slave, Orel said:

"Come round, you dumb bitch!" and punched her belly again trying to make her regain consciousness. The slave didn't move.

Nikto who sat on the bed yawned. His arms were fully unwrapped and smeared with healing ointment from wrist to elbow.

"Are you going to come round, bitch?" Orel slapped the girl's cheek with such force that her head jerked aside unnaturally. "Shit! She's got on my nerves, Nik!"

"What do you want?"

"I want to love her! And she doesn't come round!"

"Fuck her."

"It's boring like that!"

"Really?"

"Don't laugh at me! Or you'll join her!"

"I'm so scared." Nikto reached for his precious lacquered box.

"No," there was plea in Orel's voice, "don't leave me! You're just sleeping and taking drugs, nothing else! I'm all alone! I don't want to get used to being alone! Do you hear me? Do you understand me?"

Nikto raised his grey eyes, looked at Orel somewhat questioningly.

"You don't need to answer," Orel turned away.

He leaned to the slave again, didn't find any changes and yanked her by the hair abruptly, raising her like a big doll. He slammed her head against the back of the bed. The massive bed shook and Nikto froze with a needle in his hand.

"Arel, move away from the bed," he said very quietly.

"She'd dead," Orel said watching blood leaking from the slave's nose.

"She is the fourth this week, Arel."

Orel kept silent.

"You didn't fuck any of them, you just kill them. Do you hate women?"

"I love them."

"Leave them alone, they won't help you."

"Do you forbid me?"

"Forbid you? No."

"You're leaving me in it, too!"

"Do you want me to tell you what to do?"

"Yes!"

"No."

The slave gave out a long quiet moan.

"Fucking shit! She's alive! Oh you little whore." Orel took out his knife. Nikto who watched him shook his head and injected a needle into his vein.

"I don't know where to make a hole in her to love her," Orel said thoughtfully running the blade over the girl's body. A thin nettle of cuts was turning into a strange bleeding ornament according to the insane fantasy of its author. Orel watched it, mesmerized.

"Cut out her eyes," Nikto said, "you like doing it."

"I did it only once! Don't remind me about it! I don't want to recall that shitty time, I had to turn my head ten times more to stay alive. Shit! I wonder how Squint-Eye can stand it!"

"His eye is used to working for two, but yours was lazy."

"Lazy? Then what are your eyes that don't see shit at all?"

"I'm not whining about it."

"Am I whining?"

"All the time."

Orel threw his boot at him. Nikto barely could dodge.

"Arel, don't! My fucking leg shoots my head when I move suddenly."

"Ugh," Orel just sighed sticking in a triangular blade slightly above the girl's pubis. Her moans got louder – one could wonder where her strength still came from. Orel widened the opening a little. Now she was not moaning, she was screaming madly, there was nothing human in those sounds.

"This cunt isn't going to die at all!" Orel smiled. "She is strong." He shoved his hand into the bloody wound.

"Ooh," Nikto drawled.

"Stop me!"

"No."

"Why don't you stop me? Why?"

"Weren't there enough people who tried to stop you?"

"Yes." Orel tossed his head back in delight; he squeezed something inside the slave in the way that made the girl scream so loudly that Nikto couldn't stand it and covered his ears. The girl tried to get up: not to get up but to run, to escape, it was not conscious, just the last instinctive attempt to save herself. Orel hit her in her temple with his free hand.

"No one can stop me!" he said. "I will do whatever I want. I will do whatever I want – to spite you all!"

Nikto closed his eyes falling into drugged sleep slowly. He heard the slave's moans; he knew it would be going on for a long time: Orel would pause, drink, talk to himself, and the slave would be screaming and dying slowly. Blood would soak the furs with smiling beast heads. Orel would fall asleep by the morning. He would sleep hugging the slave, hugging her with all the tenderness and love he was capable of.

Chapter 3

Bert Dallen

"You found your son, now go away!" Squint-Eye said rudely looking at his brother askance. "And next time watch the brat better for him not to run to the city and especially not to come here, to Orel. He has nothing to do here."

"I wanted to talk to you."

"About what?" Squint-Eye interrupted him. "You also have nothing to do here, Berk, leave!"

"Is it so difficult? Just to talk? We haven't seen each other since you got free last time."

"Fine with me! Forget about me, I don't have a brother!"

"Yes, you have," Berk said firmly and sat down in the armchair. He was not going to leave at all.

"Go to hell!" Squint-Eye almost screamed.

"Why are you driving me away? I said I won't leave until I talk to you."

"Shi-it!" Squint-Eye clasped his hands nervously, turned away from Berk and looked at the window.

"Stop pouting, Bert, I wish you no evil."

"Look," Squint-Eye didn't turn back. "I'm grateful to you that you gave me my part of inheritance despite father disowning me. I took the soldiers I needed. Thank you once again, nothing connects us any more."

Berk flinched somewhat strangely, closing his eyes as if in pain.

"Forgive me," he swallowed hard, "forgive me, Bert."

Squint-Eye started away from the window, he turned to his brother; there was surprise in his face but just for a moment. When Berk opened his eyes, Squint-Eye looked at him with cold indifference, like before, and there was just animosity in his eyes.

"You haven't been like that, Bert! You haven't! I remember you little, you were so happy and kind, always obeyed me and our parents."

Squint-Eye just smirked.

"Until," Bert paused for a moment, "until you noticed you were different. After that everything went to hell! Everything went to hell," he whispered letting his head drop on his hands.

Squint-Eye sat down on the bed in front of his brother, lit a cigarette. They were alike, very much so. One could easily say they were brothers: similar features, raven hair. Berk was just slightly taller and his eyes were light brown, not grey, like Squint-Eye's.

"I protected you," Berk seemed to be talking to himself, "and later I taught you to protect yourself. I taught you everything I knew and could. And still it didn't work!"

"You did your best, enough of it, you don't need to beg for forgiveness here," Squint-Eye said.

"No, I didn't do my best! And I have a reason to repent! I betrayed you, turned away from you, ditched you when you were imprisoned for the first time! You were just two years older than my son is now, just a child!"

"Your son is not a murderer."

"You wouldn't have been either, if not for your cursed eye."

"Bert, I'm not alone like that. Many people live with it and don't kill anyone, even if someone laughs at them."

"I understand you. Who knows what I would do in your place, maybe, I'd do the same. We are alike, I know you followed my example. I don't believe that you were jealous, I don't! You followed me but not out of jealousy, you just loved me."

Squint-Eye was silent.

"That day, after you were sentenced, I didn't come up to you. I left the court hall without even looking back. That day I ruined you."

"Look, don't take my sins upon you," Squint-Eye said. "I didn't even think of resenting you for leaving then. You did the right thing."

"No, it was not right!" Berk raised his head meeting Squint-Eye's gaze. "I left you alone, I walked away and left you to him, damn him! I left you to Orel!"

"Am I a thing or what? Left me! I had my own head on my shoulders."

"You were too young to understand consequences."

"But Arel wasn't older than me and he needed help much more. He suffered a hundred times worse and he was all alone!"

"If I stayed with you... if I were there, you wouldn't get together with him."

Squint-Eye shrugged.

"Who knows. No use to talk about it now."

"I need to tell you that. I never said it to you before and I will never repeat it."

Squint-Eye wanted to reply but choked, coughing, covering his mouth.

"You need a doctor!"

Squint-Eye shook his head; he couldn't say a word because of the cough.

"Leave," he managed to say when the fit subsided a little. "You've said everything you wanted, now leave."

"You're driving me away because you don't want me to see you like that! It is unbearable for me to see you as you are now, you look even worse than when you came for the soldiers. What happened? What is this bastard prince doing to you?"

"Leave!"

"I can't! I can't leave you like that!" Berk walked around the room nervously. "You know I came to pick up my son but not only for that. This conversation... I talked to you thousands times in my thoughts. And when I came here today, when I saw you... Gods, Bert, I saw your hair cut!"

"I cut it off myself, I was drugged."

"Like I would believe you! It was Arel! Why didn't he let you talk downstairs, in the hall?"

"He himself talks to everyone who comes to the castle."

"And you kept silent, you obey him!"

"You're strange. He is my master."

"What if you answered me? What would he do?"

"How can I know? Ask him, not me! But I wouldn't answer you – when I am in the right mind, I obey him. I obey all his orders. Your brother is dead. I'm not him. I'm not even human!"

There was mute suffering in Berk's eyes.

"Squint-Eye," he whispered, "fucking Squint-Eye, stubborn and stupid. Murderer proud of his crimes, wearing his shame on his own face!"

"Yeah, tear it off! Tear it out to the meat!" Squint-Eye grabbed Berk's hand, yanked him closer. "Why don't you do it? Take it off me, you want that, don't you?"

"If only you wanted it!" Berk gripped Squint-Eye's head with both his hands, squeezed his temples, leaning closer to him.

Squint-Eye didn't move; he looked at his brother – boldly, challengingly. Berk's hair made in a long ponytail slid onto Squint-Eye's shoulder, mixing with his hair. Squint-Eye seemed to be looking at his reflection: at the reflection of a man he could be but didn't become. Then he raised his hand and took off the thread from one of the needles that held it. It fell revealing a stripe on his skin, thin and deep, left by it. Even if Squint-Eye never put the thread on again, the trace would stay all the same. Berk let him go quietly. With a habitual movement Squint-Eye tied the thread back, separating his face again in two uneven parts with a thin black line.

"I will be waiting in the estate. You need to make up your mind and leave here. I will make sure Orel will never find you."

"Berk, why don't you despise me like others? Why don't you leave me alone?"

"I did leave you once and what happened?!"

"You did the right thing!"

"No, I did what everyone did. What seemed proper. But I'm not everyone, I'm your elder brother, I taught you to hit back, I taught you to kill, I taught you bad!"

"Not at all. You taught me good."

"I don't believe that everything is lost, we can correct it, I'll help you! I don't know how but I swear I will! Whether you want it or not. I couldn't get you out of prison but I will get you out of this castle."

"I don't need it, Berk, please, don't try to oppose Arel!"

"I'm not afraid of your Arel, he's just a scarecrow! For fuck's sake, is there really royal blood in this man?"

"Shut up!"

"I just can't believe a scion of royalty can look such a shit, it's degeneration. I admit it, when I saw him so close and without a mask today, I was scared. What's happening to his face? I even felt a little sorry for him, the grey paint simply disfigured him."

"The paint corroded his face. Arel is ill exactly because he has 'royal blood' in him, as you say. It doesn't accept the paint, that's why the paint corrodes him so quickly. But it doesn't have to concern you."

"I didn't know that. It means the king's punishment was twice as cruel."

"You don't know many things, and the punishment doesn't matter, the thing is Arel can't stop himself," Squint-Eye said. "But it really has nothing to do with you."

"Who was the man with long blonde hair sitting next to him? His face was hidden behind a mask."

"Berk, get out!"

"I just want to help you!"

"Too late! If you don't want to get in trouble, leave now! And never, do you hear, never, come back here! I don't care about your belated repentance, I don't need your apologies. I don't need anything from you! I don't need you!"

"Bert!"

"Leave!"

"And if I don't? What will you do? Kill me? Will you kill your brother? Huh?"

"I don't have a brother!"

"I forgive you these words! It is not you who's saying them. My poor, poor little brother, fate was so cruel to you!"

There was a knock on the door and they heard Orel's voice.

"Hey, aren't you too noisy there?"

Prince Arel Chig himself appeared in the doorway.

"Have you sorted it out, Squint-Eye?"

"Sweet family arguments," Lis entered the room. "Arel, perhaps we shouldn't hinder them." He gave Berk a fake smile.

"I'd better leave now," Berk said; there was unconcealed hatred in his eyes when he looked at Orel. "But your time is running out, prince, and I'll take my brother away from you!"

"What? You want to take him? Then take! But when he has another fit and cut the throats of your entire family, don't beg me to take him back!"

Berk went pale and left the room quickly without saying another word.

* * *

"You have a nice brother," Lis said to Squint-Eye who sat in a kind of stupor. "I haven't ever met him before, he is great! Is he older than you?"

"Yes," Squint-Eye said lifelessly.

"But not for much, is he?"

"For seven years."

"Really? I would never say! He's a real Black warrior. Tall, handsome, confident. As long as there are such men, neither Red nor Unclean can defeat you."

"Enough," Orel said seeing Squint-Eye clench. He walked up to him and hugged him gently. "I love you very much, Squint-Eye. I have no better friend than you."

"Berk and Bert," Lis said. "Shit, it sounds good. You look alike and he loves you despite you being a disgrace of the family. And you? Do you love him, Squint-Eye?"

"He loves me," Orel said. "Bert loves me. And I won't let anyone have him. Never!"

* * *

Berk hugged his son again before leaving.

"I have to go now but we'll meet soon. Behave and study well."

The boy nodded.

"All right, dad, but will you come back to the city for good?"

"I won't but you'll graduate from the military school and stay here."

"But you lived here before! The house was burnt, I know, it's because of the uncle, but let's rebuild it and move here!"

"Haven't we agreed that you won't mention your uncle, or you can't stay here?"

The boy got frightened.

"All right."

"Fine. Well, I have to go."

"Dad! May I ask you – for the last time."

"Yes."

"Why did the uncle want to commit suicide?"

"What? Who told you such stupid things?"

"I saw myself, by chance. I didn't want to peep but it happened. His arms..." the boy passed his finger over the inner side of his arm from wrist to elbow, "they are sewn with threads, here and here. Sorry, I didn't want to, I won't ask any more!" He understood his father's expression in his own way.

Berk hugged him, pressing to his chest.

"I love you," he said quietly patting his son's unruly hair, closing his eyes. "Everything will be all right," his lips whispered barely audibly.

* * *

Leaving his horse, Squint-Eye quickly walked up to the tier he needed along curving streets. In a long black coat and with his face covered he stuck out too much among careless citizens of the Upper City. Many people noticed him and followed him with their eyes. He didn't see it: or rather, he didn't want to see, he didn't care. Dumb indifference overtook his consciousness, and he just walked, neither too fast nor too slowly, walked to a small square Orel had pointed for him. There were a lot of restaurants and small shops that offered their goods right in the street. Under the sounds of music passer-byes warmed up themselves with alcoholic drinks while continuing walking. Squint-Eye turned to one of side streets and stopped. The man he needed wasn't there yet but he would come – a note would make him leave his place. Leaning against a wall of some building Squint-Eye waited. It was getting darker and colorful street lamps hanging in garlands above the street rocked in the wind softly casting bright spots of light at the pavement and at the figure frozen at the wall. It seemed an eternity had passed before the man he needed appeared among infrequent passer-byes.

Squint-Eye knew his face; he knew all somewhat rich and respectable people in the Upper City. As soon as you gave him a name, he knew who the man was and where he lived. An elderly man walked unhurriedly, smiling and nodding at the acquaintances he met on his way. His house was located a bit down the street and everyone knew him here. Next to him, holding his arm, his young daughter walked. She also was smiling: they were going to visit her fiancé who lived nearby, and it seemed finally her father had warmed up towards him. At least he agreed to meet and talk. To see her beloved and maybe to soften her father's heart at a moment of necessity the girl had convinced him to take her along.

They likely had noticed Squint-Eye but they didn't pay attention. Their thoughts were too preoccupied with the meeting that waited for them. The man in black moved away from the wall; multi-colored spots of light ran over his covered face. Without paying attention to other passer-byes he walked up to the man and stuck his knife into his chest in one precise, very calm motion. One blow was enough – through the knife Squint-Eye felt the last pumps of the pierced heart; it meant the man was dead. Anyway, Squint-Eye didn't doubt it. He pulled out the knife. The old man's gaze kept holding incomprehension; he slowly collapsed onto the pavement. The girl screamed, loudly, wildly. A few people stopped, turned at her scream. It seemed only now Squint-Eye noticed that the man was not alone. He looked at the girl, and she stopped screaming, backed away but it was too late. Everything happened instantly: she screamed again, not so loudly, and with pain, not with fear. Squint-Eye turned and walked away. Some people ran to the dead man and his dying daughter. They didn't even try to stop him. Someone whistled calling for the guard. Squint-Eye didn't speed up. People who heard screams ran past him from the square; women shrieked.

Someone shouted: "Hold him! Hold him!" People who ran to the place of the accident literally bumped into Squint-Eye and didn't notice him. Could they even guess that a man who walked so calmly was a criminal? In the square he started pushing his way through the crowd.

King guards on their horses appeared, they tried to get to the narrow street shouting at people. Someone pushed Squint-Eye so hard that he nearly got under a horse's hooves.

"Watch out!" the guard yelled.

The girl was dying; she tried to say something.

"One... one-ey..." She didn't finish.

People looked for a man in a long black coat, with black shoulder-long hair and in the mask with only one eye-slit, without a slit for the other eye.

They ran around all nearby streets and alleys. "He couldn't walk far, he's hiding like a rat," they said.

Squint-Eye paid a coin to a boy and picked up his horse.

"Something has happened up there," the boy-servant said. "I'd like to go and see but I can't, my master will beat me."

Squint-Eye didn't answer anything. When he reached the gates of the Upper City, the first sounds of alarm came; the guards got worried, and the watchman started giving a signal in reply. It meant that the Upper City would be closed now. Squint-Eye crossed the border of the Upper City and the gates were shut behind him. He spurred the horse and turned to one of the Lower City's streets going to 'Backara' and Orel.

* * *

"Bring him." Orel pressed his hands against the table, leaned back as if trying to push the table away from him.

"And if he locked the door?"

"Knock it out, for fuck's sake! Lis, do I need to explain you such things?" Orel said in exasperation continuing to push against the table. Two front legs of his armchair rose in the air dangerously.

Lis smoked; his whole appearance expressed his unwillingness. But he decided not to annoy Orel and walked out of the room.

The door to Squint-Eye's room was unlocked. Squint-Eye lay on the bed, over the furs, fully dressed, with his weapon and in dirty boots; he only tossed his mask on the floor.

"Orel calls for you," Lis said gloomily. He stopped in the doorway, clearly unwilling to stay here longer, and shook the ash from his cigarette on the floor. Squint-Eye got up heavily without even looking at Lis, coughed thickly. His short tousled hair fell onto his face. Lis winced.

"Don't dally, you dirt, everyone is waiting for you," he said turning away.

Squint-Eye raised his head abruptly. If only Lis could see this gaze! But Lis had already turned away and left.

* * *

Squint-Eye sat down silently in the place Orel pointed for him. It was not his place but this way he sat right opposite his master.

"Well, talk," Orel said unkindly. "What have you done?"

Squint-Eye didn't look at anyone and kept silent.

"Listen, Bert, don't get on my nerves! Look here and stop making this dumb face!"

Squint-Eye looked at Orel obediently with his only eye; it was void of any expression.

"He's drugged up to his ears!" Lis said.

"Why are you so moody, Squint-Eye?" Tol asked; he stopped digging with a fork in his teeth and spat on the floor.

"Shit, don't spit on the carpet, it's not stables here!" Orel exclaimed.

"Fuck off, Tol," Squint-Eye said and laughed.

"Whom are you telling to fuck off?" Tol got up.

Squint-Eye leaned back against the back of the chair; his shoulders shook in laughter.

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