

The background of the cover is a dramatic, painterly illustration. The upper portion shows a bright, golden light breaking through dark, swirling clouds, with a figure on a white horse appearing to fly or fall through the air. The lower portion depicts a dark, stormy sea with turbulent waves and a small, dark boat or structure struggling in the distance. The overall mood is one of intense action and mystery.

Ви Корс

The Mist and the
Lightning

Part II

СОДЕРЖИТ
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ
БРАНЬ

18+

Ви Корс The Mist and the Lightning. Part II

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Аннотация

The next series of the acclaimed series of books.

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.

Содержит нецензурную брань.

Вн Копс

The Mist and the Lightning. Part II

Chapter 1

Gifts

"Nik, Nik, open up!"

Orel was shaking. He yanked the doorknob several more times, with no result. There was no sound coming from Nikto's room.

"Gods damn you," Orel hissed through the clenched teeth. He rummaged in the pockets of his jacket with his bloodied hands. At last he found what he was looking for: the door key. He pushed it into the keyhole abruptly.

"Shi-it," he whispered looking at the locked door, not daring to open it. Trying to suppress shivering, he leaned with his shoulder against the doorpost not letting the key go. "Never mind, never mind."

He turned the key. The door opened with a slight click. Orel grabbed his head, squeezed his temples as if expecting a blow but nothing happened. It was as quiet behind the door as before. Orel relaxed. He pulled out the key carefully and looked into the room opening the door slightly. His face lightened – he saw

Nikto. Nikto slept in his bed as if nothing happened. His fair hair was very visible in the darkness. One of his braids hung down almost to the floor.

Orel came in shutting the door tightly.

"Nik," he called softly. "Nik?"

Nikto flinched.

"Arel, go... mm... that is, get out," he muttered hazily. "I want to sleep."

Orel came up to the unoccupied side of the bed. He took off his jacket and stayed naked down to his waist. He crawled up on the bed.

Nikto rose slightly, mumbled angrily:

"Fuck your mother! I'm tired of you!" He glanced at Orel and hissed. "Ooh, enjoyed my gift? You're covered in blood."

Orel understood just now that he'd smeared himself in blood all over when cutting the slave. He looked at his hands.

"Oh shit," he said in surprise and started unlacing his leather armbands soaked in blood.

"No need," Nikto slowly sat up in bed. He watched Orel with curiosity, then laughed softly. "So, you really like to fuck dead women, don't you?"

Orel froze, his armband half-unlaced.

"Don't," he said quietly without raising his head.

"Arel, I injected myself a crazy dose of various shit, I can't think straight, let's talk tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," Orel looked at him with insane eyes. "But I

couldn't, I need to tell you now..."

"What else?"

"I, I..." Orel swallowed convulsively. "I can't any more! I... I..."

His face distorted, he screwed his eyes shut as if the words he said hurt him.

Nikto lay down on his back stretching.

"I got it," he said. "Don't torment yourself saying the rest. Go away."

He yawned and turned to his side, with his back to Orel.

"No," Orel whispered. "No!" he screamed angrily. "Why do you reject me? Why?!"

He was shaking again.

"I don't understand! Am I not handsome? Everyone says I'm handsome, I see that myself. Don't you like me at all? What is wrong with me? Explain me!"

"Arel, you're all right and you're handsome," Nikto drawled tiredly without turning towards him. "But I don't sleep with men."

"What?!" Orel gasped in exasperation. "You fuck anyone you can get! You fuck even that disgusting Unclean creature! That scaly bitch! You are ready to sleep with her but you don't want to be with me! You're humiliating me with it so much!" he added resentfully.

Nikto was silent. Orel nearly howled. His fists clenched, he was trembling.

"I can't stand it! I can't stand it. You're just trying to sell you for a higher price! But I'm ready to pay! I'm ready!" He yanked the 'royal' ring off his finger. "You always liked it, I don't care, I'm ready to pay! You'll be mine! I'll pay! I'll pay!"

Nikto was breathing deeply and evenly, he didn't react at Orel's words. Orel leaned over him, took his hand and put his ring onto Nikto's finger.

"Nik, my love, please be with me," he tried to hug Nikto, and Nikto woke up.

"Arel..."

"Don't, don't say anything," Orel covered Nikto's mouth with his palm, pressing onto him with all his weight. "I love you, don't resist. I love you! Be mine completely. You also want it, I know!" He grabbed Nikto between his legs with his free hand, squeezed his cock.

Nikto punched his face with his fist. Orel yelled, starting back.

"I told you! Go away!" Nikto hit him in his eye with such force that Orel lost his balance and fell flat. He curled in a ball covering his face. Nikto grabbed his head by his disheveled hair.

"That's all," he said, "that's all, don't be afraid, I won't hit you again."

Orel crawled down from the bed slowly.

"Shit, what is it?" Nikto shouted only now noticing the 'royal' ring on his finger.

"It is yours," Orel said holding his split lip. He picked up his

jacket from the floor.

"Oh no! It is yours and only yours, you idiot, how could you give it away? Why? You wanted to buy me? Right? I hate you for that!" Nikto yanked the ring off his finger and threw it at Orel. "Take it! You cannot buy me, even with a 'royal' ring! Get it? Yes, it is written on my face that I'm corrupt! But you..."

Orel didn't answer. He knelt down on the floor slowly and started patting his hand over the furs trying to find the ring. He couldn't find it in the darkness. Nikto watched him silently. Orel raised his gaze uncertainty; his eyes were full of tears.

"I'll find it and leave," he said quietly and turned away.

Nikto got down from the bed and sat on the furs next to Orel. He reached his hand touching Orel's shoulder and turned him to himself.

"Arel, I didn't want to..."

Orel moved away from him.

"Nik, don't, I understand, you'll never forgive me. I deserved these blows."

His split lip was bleeding but he didn't seem to notice it.

"I cannot find the ring but let it be, I don't need it."

"Arel..."

"Don't, Nik," Orel shook his head, pushed a few bloodied strands away from his face and reached for his jacket.

Nikto abruptly covered Orel's hand with his, not letting him take the jacket.

"Arel," he squeezed his hand. "Orel, wait!"

"Forgive me if you can, please," Orel said.

"Enough. We are always begging each other for forgiveness, like two idiots. I'm tired of it!"

Nikto pulled Orel closer.

"I'm tired of it, do you hear?"

"Do you want to kill me?"

"Little fool," Nikto laughed softly and gently patted Orel's dirty hair, then hugged him pressing him to his chest like a child. "I can't hurt you, I can't."

Orel clung to him, hiding his face against Nikto's chest. Nikto stroked his head kissing his hair.

"You're very beautiful, prince, really. You're just splendid!" He paused. "But you stink like a butcher!"

Orel laughed and raised his head.

"I don't know how I managed to get dirty like this," he shook his head. "I spoiled your gift. I was drunk."

"Forget it," when Nikto was talking quietly and gently, his voice didn't sound dissonant at all.

"Why are you comforting me? Have you read my thoughts about killing myself? You shouldn't have done that."

"I don't read your thoughts. I was very rude to you. Drugs are finishing me off, they make me mad. You didn't do anything that deserved hitting you so badly. I seem to have hit you too hard, I don't understand how it happened." He pushed Orel away slightly, carefully passed his fingers over Orel's eye that started swelling shut, looked at the bruise closely. Leaning towards Orel,

Nikto touched his lips, kissing them gently. He looked straight at Orel, his eyes glittered in the darkness.

"What are you doing?" Orel whispered. "Are you kissing me? Why?"

He reached to Nikto's face but froze halfway, hesitant, and let his hand fall without touching Nikto.

"I don't know," Nikto said barely audibly. He passed his fingers over Orel's hand, pulled it towards his face again, pressed his clean cheek to Orel's palm and closed his eyes.

"I don't know. I like you," he rubbed his cheek against Orel's hand, not letting it go, then kissed Orel's fingers and palm.

"Oh gods," Orel nearly moaned leaning with his whole body towards Nikto, wrapping his free arm around Nikto's neck and catching his mouth with his lips.

"I love you, I love you," Orel whispered from time to time, leaving Nikto's mouth just for a moment. He stroked Nikto's blonde hair, burying his fingers in it, squeezing Nikto's head. Nikto moved away from the bed and fell onto the furs, pulling Orel with himself, pushing down Orel's pants. They came off easily, Orel laced them just sloppily.

"No," Orel recoiled. "Gods! What are you doing? What are you thinking?"

"What am I thinking?" Nikto laughed softly.

"Fine, it was my wish but you said you don't do it with men, you made it perfectly clear!"

"Don't blame me," Nikto held Orel's head not letting him turn

away. "I didn't lie to you. But it doesn't matter. I want to be yours, I can't be yours until you do to me everything you want. I want you to do it, want you to do what you always wanted..."

He put Orel's hand onto his stomach, just below the navel for Orel to feel the unevenness of the skin where the tattoo had been made just recently. Orel pressed his palm to his own sign. His eyes filled with tears again, he started crying.

"Oooh," Nikto drawled. "What's wrong now?"

Orel smiled through his tears.

"I don't know! It's silly, I never cry!"

"I've noticed."

They laughed softly.

Nikto turned over onto his stomach, spread his bent legs apart. He seemed dressed because of his many tattoos.

"No, lay back as before!"

Nikto turned onto his back obediently.

"Can you do it like that?"

"I can. I can do it in any way, it doesn't matter..."

"So?"

Orel started trembling.

"No, I can't," he said slowly. "I wanted it for so long and now I can't."

Nikto reached to his groin, snorted.

"I think you definitely can."

Orel shivered with his touch even more.

"No!" he screamed in fear. "Don't! Don't touch me!"

Nikto jerked his hand back.

"What is it? You don't want any more?"

"I do, I do! But I can't like this!" Orel clung to him, he was shaking. "I can't!"

"You can't?" Nikto pushed him way. "Yes, I got it, my consent breaks your mood. You wanted to force me. Make me, suppress me. Take me by force! You need violation, that's what you want!"

"No, no," Orel cried harder, trying to press to Nikto again.

But Nikto pushed him away roughly and sat up.

"Yes! You like to fight me, not to love me!" He smirked looking at Orel. "You want to show everyone how cool you are!"

Orel lay with his face buried in the furs and sniffed silently. Nikto turned him over and looked down at Orel, at his beautiful face smeared with blood and tears. Orel's eye was swollen shut, his lip puffy. Orel looked at Nikto pleadingly with his only good eye, his chest rose and fell jerkily. He was breathing through his mouth because his nose was stuffed with all that crying.

Nikto couldn't stand it and laughed.

"Arel, you're a wonder!" he passed his hand over Orel's eye. "Does it hurt?"

Orel shook his head.

"What shall I do with you?" Nikto smiled. "If you don't want to fuck me, I'll fuck you then."

"No, no!" Orel tried to get away but Nikto pressed him back to the furs, pulled down his pants and tossed them aside.

"Nik, don't! I'm afraid of you!" Orel screamed.

Nikto let him go.

"Fine, whatever! I don't need you, I don't have wish to break you. If you don't want to do it, let it be. But remember! It's useless to fight me, if I want, I'll always fuck you but you will never take me by force. Learn to live with it. I'm not joking. You really know little about me. I was always kind to you, I wanted to please you, I wanted you to fuck me, damn you! I wanted it in a good way. You don't have any chances to do it in a bad way – and I don't have a wish, clear?"

"Nik! Don't leave me!" Orel got up in despair, wrapping his arms around Nikto's neck. He held Nikto with both his hands, not letting him go.

Nikto hugged him.

"Fine, fine, calm down. Don't scream like this."

Orel froze holding onto him, holding Nikto's collar, sticking his fingers between Nikto's neck and the iron.

"Don't scream like that, don't," Nikto started stroking his face and head.

"I love you more than life itself and you don't believe me," Orel whispered.

"I believe you. That's why I'm here, with you. And I'm kissing you." Nikto carefully wiped tears away from Orel's face.

Orel overturned Nikto onto his back again, then pushed his cock between Nikto's legs and shoved forward sharply. He froze in horror, looked at Nikto under him and seemed to be incapable to believe his eyes. Unable to move, Orel was sitting like that,

with his knees spread wide, holding Nikto's thighs.

Nikto hissed.

"Shi-it," he rose slightly, spat onto his fingers and rubbed his saliva over Orel's cock. Then he grabbed Orel with both of his hands and yanked him closer, pushing forward at the same time. Orel moaned. Nikto let him go. Orel leaned over him, supporting his weight on his hands, pulled out slowly and then pushed forward, very slowly too. It seemed he didn't understand what he was doing at all. His body jerked, he bit his lip continuing to move back and forth. It took only a minute for him to moan. He gripped Nikto's knees, spreading them wider, made a few strong pushes and panted pressing into Nikto as deep as possible. "Nik is mine! It's madness... Nik is mine!"

He pulled out his cock and fell next to Nikto. Nikto sat up leaning with his back against the bed. He was silent.

Orel raised his head.

"Nik, I'm a total shit. I couldn't bring you any pleasure at all. You didn't even feel anything."

"Well, I did feel something."

Orel laughed. "It's not what I meant."

"All right, I'm joking," Nikto said. "But you want too much from me, don't you think so?"

"I think I didn't fuck so horribly since I was a boy!" Orel said. "I disgraced myself before you. I was about to come when you just touched my cock to check if I had a hard-on."

"But you screamed really expressively: 'Don't touch me! Don't

touch me!"

"I'm a fool but I just don't know how to treat you, you're so different from anyone else."

"I'm different for others but not for you."

"You'll be surely laughing when recalling this night," Orel said in distress.

"No," Nikto shook his head. "I don't feel like laughing at all. Arel, I need to tell you something. It is very serious."

Orel looked at him in fear.

"What? What do you need to say? Are you leaving?"

"No, forget that!" Nikto paused, then looked at Orel. He seemed distressed. Orel paled.

"Oh gods! Tell me now, don't look so horribly!"

"I knocked out your eye," Nikto said.

"What?!"

"I knocked out your eye," Nikto repeated and looked at Orel again waiting for his reaction.

Orel started at him for a while, not understanding. Then he got it.

"No," he shook his head. "No!"

"I didn't want to. I hit you precisely to hurt you very much but it had to be safe. I don't know why... Oh shit! The ring! It was because of the ring! Your ring you put onto my finger! I wasn't used to it. I didn't even notice it then."

Orel grabbed his face.

"Nik, do you want to say that you knocked out my eye with

the ring?"

"Yes. At first I thought I was mistaken, you'd be all right, but now I see you won't. Maybe you shouldn't have strained and come... It got worse."

Orel touched his swollen eye carefully.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

Nikto just nodded.

"But I don't feel anything."

"Do you want to feel?"

"No-o, no! Anything but that!"

Nikto kept silent.

"He made a hole in my eye with the 'royal' ring, oh gods," Orel whispered sitting on the floor and rocking from side to side. "What shall I do now? My eye will leak out and even if it doesn't, it'll stop seeing. I don't want to be a cripple! I don't want to be single-eyed! Ooh..."

Suddenly he froze and looked at Nikto with hope.

"Help me! Heal me like you healed Asa! You can!"

"I'll try," Nikto raised his eyes. "But I have to go to the Unclean District for medicines."

"I believe you," Orel said. "I believe you and trust you and..." He moved towards Nikto and hugged him. "I don't blame you. It's my own fault."

"It'll be all right, I promise you," Nikto said.

Chapter 2

Friends

"He's here!" Lis shouted to his friends looking into Nikto's room. Orel sat up in bed forgetting about the bandage and at once understood what a stupid thing it was to do. He quickly buried his face into the pillows screaming: "Get out!"

But it was too late; Lis suspected something and rushed to him.

"Arel, what happened to your face? What happened?"

Orel sat up again slowly and looked at Lis angrily with his only eye.

"Nothing."

Tol, Squint-Eye and Enriki stood in the doorway and watched him in fear.

"Ooh shit." Orel turned away.

"Orel, what happened to your face and where is Nikto? How many times can I ask?" Lis asked again.

Orel shook his head trying to toss his hair away from his face and winced with pain.

"Shi-i-it!" He grabbed his bandaged eye. Then he looked at Lis. "I knocked myself down while drunk and Nik went to the Lower City to bring some medicines for me."

"How could you hit yourself like that?" Enriki asked Orel.

"I told you, I was dead drunk – like when I fell down from the stairs and broke all my ribs."

"Let me see," Lis said reaching for the bandage on Orel's

damaged eye. Orel shrunk back.

"No, don't!" He hit his head against the back of the bed and howled in pain. A thick dark trickle of blood leaked from under the black cloth.

"Oh gods! Arel? What is it?" They rushed to him crowding around.

"We need to take him to the doctor right now!" Enriki said shakily.

"No, go to hell," Orel could barely speak, clenching his teeth in pain. His fingers gripped the cover. "Leave me alone!"

Lis turned to his friends; he was pale.

"Nikto mutilated Orel," he said to them, then turned to Orel. "Well, Arel, you did finish badly, didn't you?"

"Fuck you," Orel hissed holding his bad eye. He looked terribly: his glorious dark hair, half-heartedly washed of blood, hung in tousled icicles. His lip, despite the ointment, was still puffy. A thick black bandage covered his forehead, the bridle of his nose, his damaged eye and the upper part of his cheek. Nikto pulled it under Orel's hair and knotted tightly. He had based his actions exclusively on the practical use and hadn't cared about the appearance. The crude bandage looked horribly on Orel's chiseled, beautiful face, disfiguring him. The remaining brown eye looked at the friends in pain. Orel suffered but did his best not to show it. Yet they knew him, he couldn't deceive them. Enriki looked at Orel with unconcealed horror. Tol and Squint-Eye were distressed, not know what to say. Lis clenched his fists.

"I'll kill Nikto," he said. "I'll kill him!"

Orel moaned. "Nikto is not to blame!"

"Lis, perhaps it's true, Nikto is not to blame," Tol said gingerly. Lis didn't even look at him.

"If I were you, I wouldn't fish for trouble," Squint-Eye said to Lis. He sat down in the armchair at the bed and looked at the friends frowningly, cracking his knuckles.

"Stop cracking!" Lis yelled at him. "I'm sick of you!" He looked in disgust at Squint-Eye's arms covered in razor scars and terrible bruises left from injections.

"Do you think you can tell me what to do?" Squint-Eye's face distorted, he looked at Lis hatefully. "I see you think you're the boss here and I'm a loser!"

"Yes, exactly," Lis looked at him defiantly. "I respect myself unlike others who follow Nikto like a dog begging him for drugs!"

Squint-Eye started shaking. "Who are you talking about?"

Lis bared his teeth. "About you, you, don't worry, just sit and shut up."

"Lis, why are you treating me like that?" Squint-Eye was barely controlling himself.

"Ah, I've hurt your feelings! Go and cut your arms then, you like to do it! Go, go, you'll feel better!"

Squint-Eye practically went grey with rage.

"Lis, shut your mouth!" Orel yelled.

Enriki wrapped his arm around Squint-Eye's shoulders. "Bert,

calm down, don't mind him. Lis is just upset. We all are," he said.

Squint-Eye lifted his hands and squeezed Enriki's fingers.

"It's all right, Rik, I'm in control."

"Where is your ring?" Lis said to Orel suddenly.

"Lis, leave me alone. Go away, all of you! Go!"

"Where is your ring?" Lis raised his voice. "If you don't tell me now, I'll punch your other eye, you know I have a heavy hand!"

"Just try," Tol interfered. "If you touch him, I'll knock out both of your eyes."

"What are you doing?" Enriki cried out in exasperation. "Let's keep at least some decency!"

"Nikto beat Orel up and took his 'royal' ring! And you talk about decency!" Lis was in rage.

"You also beat Orel up and more than once, I know!" Tol stood by Nikto.

"Only when he was begging for it!"

"Nikto didn't beat me up!" Orel yelled. "And I gave him my ring!"

Everyone stared at him.

"Are you complete mad?" Lis asked.

"I'm not going to explain anything! It's my ring, I can do whatever I want to it, got it?"

"I got it," Lis nodded. "You paid Nikto with your ring. You couldn't come up with anything better. I'm disappointed."

"Yes, I couldn't come up with anything better," Orel said quietly. "And I couldn't do anything else, I needed him, I was

ready to pay any price, anything to be with him."

"So why isn't he with you now? Why did he take the ring and run?"

"He didn't run. He'll come and heal me! I believe him, do you hear?"

"Wait," Tol interfere. "Wait! I don't understand anything. What does it mean pay Nikto with the ring? Isn't he already with us?"

"He is with us but not with our lord Orel personally," Squint-Eye smirked. "So, you bought him like a whore, for a ring? Cool!"

"What?!" Tol got pale.

"No! No! Don't dare think that! I wanted to do it," Orel pressed his palm to the bandage soaked in blood. "But he hit me – that's why he hit me. It's my fault, I insulted him with my offer."

"So, you offered Nikto to sleep with you for the ring and he beat you up," Enriki said. "I was always afraid something like that would happen. I asked you not to harass him but it's useless to talk to you!"

"Oh my," Tol whistled. "That's something."

"He didn't beat me up, he just punched me slightly – and even that he did because he was full of drugs. He felt bad and I woke him up, nagged him..."

"It doesn't matter," Lis shook his head. "He didn't have the right to beat you, whatever happened. We talked about it, he promised me not to do you any harm and I believed him like a

fool! Fine, I won't make this mistake again."

"I think he just couldn't control himself," To said. "I'm sure he didn't want to."

"Yes," Squint-Eye said. "Perhaps he believed it himself when he promised you but then he got angry and forgot about it for a moment. And when he came round, it was too late."

"He is not you," Lis muttered. "Nikto never forgets anything and he controls himself, you won't make me change my mind. I'm absolutely sure Nikto knew what he was doing when he hit Orel. And I'm sure he remembered his promise. But he did it nevertheless, he didn't care about me and our agreement. I will never forgive him that!" He stared at Orel. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Squint-Eye laughed suddenly, he was rolling in laughter like a madman. Everyone stared at him.

"Fuck! Bert, you said you're in control," Enriki said disapprovingly.

Squint-Eye covered his mouth with his palm, compressed his lips together with his fingers in expensive rings. Lis glanced at him quickly, then looked at Orel.

"Yes," he said. "I did a tremendously stupid thing believing Nikto. How could I even think one could negotiate with him about anything. I'm an idiot. It is written on his face that he is a traitor and can't be trusted."

"Stop it," Orel moaned. "You just wanted to protect me."

"Yes, yes, I did. But I didn't manage! And it is not for the first

time, right, Arel? He hit you before, he hit you every time you harassed him, that's why you had that stupid idea to give him your ring. Oh gods! How could it even come to your mind? Where is your pride? Where is your pride, prince Arel Chig? Why did you harass him, followed him like a dog, debased yourself in front of this bastard who has shit instead of blood! He is a commoner, he isn't fit to hold a candle for you. Is it the way true princes treat slaves? You put yourself below him! You, you... you're really a fallen prince! Yes, you are!"

Orel got pale.

"Yes, Orel, that's how low you fell. Your friends say such things in your face, do you like it?"

"I don't say that," Tol said.

"Orel, you haven't been such a fool, what happened to you? Where is your brain, up your ass?" Lis was shaking.

"Get out," Orel whispered. "Get out, I don't need you."

"We are not leaving, we are not like someone else who ran away. We don't ditch our friends!"

"He didn't ditch me!" Orel shouted. "He'll come back!"

"If he comes, I'll sort him out," Lis didn't stop. "And I don't care about those scary tales of him!"

"Just try to say something to him! I'll kill you!" Orel growled.

"You're defending him," Lis smirked. "And he is an evil, lying bastard. And a thief!"

"I gave him the ring, I gave it to him!"

"Do you think he is not coming back?" Enriki asked Lis.

Lis shrugged. "I don't know. It depends on what he wants. If he wanted the ring, we won't see him again."

Squint-Eye got up and came up to the bar.

"Why would he need the ring? It's bullshit!" He poured a drink.

"Stop drinking in the morning," Enriki said.

"Enough of watching over me," Squint-Eye snapped. "Ooh, there is a lot of shit." He opened a casket on the table. "No, he'll definitely come. There is all his money, jewelry and drugs."

"Squint-Eye, stop rummaging through someone else's things!" Enriki gasped.

Squint-Eye took out a few capsules.

"I wonder what it is. A medicine or..."

Lis and Tol walked up to him. Lis took several capsules from the casket and put into his pocket.

"What are you doing?" Orel asked darkly.

"I'll show them to knowledgeable people to check something. Soon I'll know everything about your beloved."

"You fool," Orel said. "Ask him, he'll simply tell you."

"No, I've had enough of his tales, now I know their worth."

"Don't play an insulted gentleman, he didn't deceive you. Nikto didn't touch me, not even once!"

"Yes. Calm down, I know."

"I think it was stupid to demand such promises from Nikto," Squint-Eye said. "No matter how much he'd try to control himself, his real essence would come out, sooner or later. He

is not human, the whole city knows that. He is a dangerous predator, you have to be careful around him – since Orel decided to take him on our team. I don't mind Nikto but we have to take his nature into consideration and remember that he lives according to different concepts."

"He is human! You don't know him at all!"

"Well, now you know him," Squint-Eye smiled dreamily.

Tol took out Nikto's jewelry, the chain with nose and ear rings.

"Wow! It's heavy!" Tol admiringly weighed it in his palm.

"Put this disgusting thing back," Enriki winced.

Tol looked at Orel.

"Can I try it on? I wanted to see how it looks on me for a long time!"

"Why are you asking me, it's not mine," Orel turned away; he felt sick.

Tol came up to the mirror.

"Beautiful!" he whispered admiringly, pulling out the ring from his nose to put on Nikto's chain.

"We need to bring a doctor," Lis shut the casket. "We're wasting time."

"I won't let the doctor touch me," Orel shouted, "I'll kill him, I have enough strength for that, rest assured!"

"But why, for fuck's sake?"

"Because Nik will heal me, that's why! He wounded me and he'll heal me!"

"But it is stupid, Arel! Let me take a look, at least!"

"No! Get your hands off me! Get your hands off, Lis, or else!"

"You're burning! Oh gods! You have fever!" Lis grabbed Orel and yanked the bandage off. Orel screamed wildly. There was a crimson swelling in the place of his eye, seeping blood and white mucus.

Enriki covered his mouth. It seemed Squint-Eye's bad eye managed to look straight at the moment when he stared at Orel. Tol dropped the chain, forgetting to stick the ring into his ear, and the chain hung swaying onto his chest from his nostril.

"He knocked out your eye!" Lis screamed holding his head. "What shall we do? He mutilated you! Gods, what shall you do? You're a warrior! How will you fight without an eye? How?"

"Well, I do fight, after all," Squint-Eye said. "Orel will get used with time, I'll help him."

"What? What are you talking about?" Lis was ready to pull out his hair in anger.

"Nik will heal him," Tol said taking off the chain. "He did heal Asa."

"Orel, my poor Orel, forgive me! I'll bring the doctor!"

"No!" Orel tried to get up to stop Lis.

Lis ran to the door and at this moment it opened and Nikto entered the room. He and Lis nearly bumped into each other. Everyone froze.

"Curse you!" Lis shouted. "Curse you, you freak!"

He slapped Nikto's cheek, then the other, the first again, then once more, it happened very fast. Nikto pressed to the door, he

was without his mask. Lis yanked off his glasses. Nikto screwed his eyes shut, tried to cover them, he didn't even try to counter Lis. Lis grabbed his hair, yanked it with all his force, pulled Nikto closer at first and then pushed slamming Nikto's head against the door.

Orel got up but grabbed his face moaning and fell back onto the bed.

"Pull Lis away!" he yelled with his last bit of strength.

Tol rushed to Lis, wrapped his arms around him from behind. Lis turned to him.

"Don't touch me, I'm all right. It's over."

He walked away from Nikto.

"If I'd wanted to kill or maim him, I'd have done that, you wouldn't have time to stop me. But I didn't harm this animal because I hope he might really help Orel."

Nikto slowly slipped down and sat on the floor; his cheeks were aflame, Lis's fingers left imprints on them. He pressed his head to the door and didn't open his eyes.

"I challenge you," Lis said.

"No," Nikto shook his head, "I don't accept your challenge."

"You cannot refuse to accept it, I insulted your dignity slapping you like a cheap whore."

"I don't care. You just love Orel, and so do I."

"Shit," Lis turned away and lit a cigarette standing at the window.

Orel clenched his teeth with pain and walked up to Nikto, sat

down next to him. He picked up Nikto's glasses and put them into Nikto's hand.

"Nik, put on your glasses, it's too light for you," he said and his voice shook. Nikto turned to the sound of his voice.

"Arel, you shouldn't get up."

Orel hugged him.

"Nik, Nik, forgive Lis."

"I've already forgotten," Nikto smiled.

"Will you heal Orel?" Enriki asked.

"Yes." Nikto put on his glasses. "My vision will restore now and I'll take care of him."

He passed his palm over Orel's face.

"You're in pain! I was away for too long," he pressed Orel's head to his chest. "It'll get better now, my poor Arel."

Orel clung to him. Nikto leaned to him and kissed his damaged eye.

"Let's go," Lis stubbed his cigarette.

Tol looked at Nikto and Orel grinning like a madman.

"Yes, I think we should leave," Enriki said.

"Really? What a pity," Tol said laughing. "I wouldn't mind staying and holding a candle for them."

They left.

Chapter 3

A New Set-up

Orel woke up and yawned with enjoyment. Still half-dreaming, he stretched lazily and covered his face with his palms, trying to rub his sleepy eyes.

"Oh gods!" he flinched feeling thick cloth of the bandage over his right eye and recalling everything. He shivered, his sleepiness gone without a trace. He sat up in bed abruptly trying to suppress trembling.

Nikto who slept next to him opened his eyes and reached his hand squeezing Orel's palm.

"Easy, easy, don't be afraid. Lie back," he said.

Orel lay down obediently.

Nikto didn't let his hand go, kept squeezing it. "Don't tremble, calm down," he smiled at Orel. "C-a-l-m d-o-w-n."

With his free hand Orel stroked Nikto's fingers, black with tattoos, and gently touched the short stump of his ring finger.

"Nik, you're here, with me," he said, moved.

"Yes," Nikto stopped clenching Orel's palm but didn't let it go. "Though it is you with me. It is my room." He laughed softly.

"What happened yesterday? I don't remember anything," Orel tensed again.

"I healed your eye and soon you will be able to see as before."

Orel touched the bandage on his face.

"You healed me."

"Yes, yes," Nikto took his hand off the bandage, "just don't touch it."

Orel turned to him.

"I won't be single-eyed, will I?"

Nikto smiled shaking his head.

"You won't. You'll have two eyes, like before."

Orel lay back in the pillows, relaxed.

"It's so good. But is it for sure, Nik?"

"For sure, don't worry. But you can't get up yet, do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear. I won't make a step without your permission!"

Nikto laughed again but didn't say anything.

"What time is it?"

"I don't know," Nikto shrugged. "But your friends are gone."

"Why are they just *my* friends?"

Nikto rose slightly smoothening his hair.

"Well, they are mine, too," he grinned.

"I asked you not to quarrel again."

Nikto turned to Orel. "We didn't quarrel."

"And with Lis?"

"And with Lis."

"Do you resent him badly?"

"Arel, I don't want to talk about it now. I need a shot. Later, okay?"

Nikto got out of the bed, came up to the table, took his bag and started preparing a dose. He stood near to Orel, turned with his side to him; Nikto's bare feet were buried in the thick fur on the floor. Setting the syringe against his neck under the angle only he knew he injected the needle into his vein.

Orel turned away.

"You're doing it standing," he said. "You really are a finished man."

"Orel, it's ridiculous," Nikto said.

Orel passed his hand over Nikto's thigh.

"Nik, will you stay with me for a while longer?"

"As long as you want," Nikto returned to him. "I'm all yours."

Orel moved making some place for him. "Then sit down."

"Okay," Nikto took out a few pills from his casket and swallowed them washing them down with wine from a bottle.

Orel swallowed hard.

"Nik, can I drink now?"

Nikto gave him the bottle. Orel grabbed it gratefully and gulped quickly. Having emptied it, he stretched happily.

"Gods! Can anything be better? I'll have my eye, I have my wine, and my Nik is with me!"

Nikto sat next to him, turned Orel's face to himself.

"I need to check if everything's all right."

Orel got pale.

"I'm scared."

"Don't be foolish. Besides, you take pain well, I noticed."

Nikto untied the knot and took the bandage off carefully. Orel froze submissively.

"Nik, you can't see well, how can you check my eye?" he said suddenly. Nikto covered Orel's mouth with his hand.

"Keep quiet. Don't worry, I'll always see what I need."

He passed his fingers over Orel's eye, just like he'd done many times before, then smiled.

"It looks fine!" he said at last, smiling. He covered Orel's good eye with his palm. "Look. Can you see?"

Orel blinked his damaged eye.

"Yes! A little..." he squinted, his eye was tearing with light. "Nik, thank you!"

"Not at all," Nikto again covered his eye with the cloth soaked in the healing ointment and tied the bandage.

"When can I take off this shit?" Orel asked.

"Well, wait a little, not everything at once."

Orel got up.

"Hey, where are you going to? I've just told you that you couldn't get up!"

"But Nik, I need to piss," Orel looked at him fearfully.

Nikto shrugged.

"As you wish. Choose yourself what is more important for you, a good eye or..."

"Nik, you're joking, I hope?"

Nikto lay down in the bed. "I'm joking."

Orel flushed. "Idiot!" He got up carefully and slowly walked to the bathroom door. At the door he turned to Nikto. "Did you hear what I said? You're an idiot!"

Nikto laughed and threw an empty bottle at him.

"All right, go!"

Orel barely managed to dodge; the bottle hit the wall and fell

on the floor rattling. Thick glass resisted the fall and didn't break.

"Fuck you!" Orel yelled and hid behind the door. When he came back, Nikto was still in bed. Orel came up to the mirror.

"Oh gods! I look like shit!"

He tried to smoothen his twisted hair.

"Nik, what have you done to me? I've never looked shittier!"

"Really?" Nikto could barely keep from laughing.

Orel turned to him.

"You're laughing! At first you mutilated me, made me a laughing-stock and now you're amusing yourself!"

Nikto reached his arms. "Come here, come to me!"

Orel lowered his gaze and silently walked up to him. As soon as Nikto could reach to him he grabbed Orel and overturned him onto the bed.

"Enough!"

Orel didn't resist. Nikto put him onto his back, leaned over him, his eyes glittered merrily.

"I hear, you're angry," he said. "Prince Arel Chig is displeased with something again."

Orel kept silent.

Nikto patted his hair, pressed his lips to it, then blew at Orel's temple.

"Should I call for Mina to comb your hair?"

"No, I don't need Mina, I don't need anyone but you. But I'm afraid – you didn't particularly like me before, and now when I look like that, you'll like me even less."

"Indeed," Nikto said. "You're simply disgusting: one-eyed and – just imagine! – with dirty, not combed hair."

Orel laughed. "Uncombed!"

"Whatever. You understand me."

"No, I don't understand. Are you just keeping me company while I'm sick? Or do you really want to be with me?"

"What do you think?" Nikto moved away from him slightly, supporting himself on his elbow. His other hand fingered his earrings mechanically.

"I'm afraid even to think about it," Orel got pale. "If you're just playing with me and then will leave me, I'll die. No, I don't even want to think about it!"

"Calm down, it's all right, I'll stay with you," Nikto lowered his gaze. "And I accepted the idea that I have to be not only a warrior here but also your lover."

Orel shivered and sat up in bed.

"But you don't want that! You just submitted to me because you were cornered! I didn't leave you a choice from the very beginning. Right?"

"Arel, calm down."

"Enough of calming me down!"

"Are you not tired of discussing our relations? I am," Nikto took a cigarette and lit it.

"Why do I always start a quarrel with you?" Orel said, depressed. "I don't understand."

Nikto smoked silently. Suddenly Orel raised his head.

"Nik, get up and dress."

Nikto looked at him in surprise but didn't say anything. He stubbed the cigarette and started dressing. Then he looked at Orel questioningly.

"Should I take the weapon?"

Orel nodded. "Now take the armchair, move it to the bed and sit down."

Nikto did everything as Orel said. Now he sat in the armchair, Orel, on the bed.

"Shit. You're obedient," Orel laughed. "I like it."

Nikto shrugged silently. Orel stopped smiling. He seemed to gather his strength.

"Nik, I rendered you a service accepting you into the circle of humans. You thanked me fulfilling my wish. Now we are even. Maybe I said it wrong, it isn't really so but it doesn't matter. The main thing is that you don't owe me anything any more," he looked at Nikto. "Do you understand? No more gratitude, no nothing. You submitted to me, accepted my whim, gave me what I wanted – it's enough. Now you're free."

Orel looked at Nikto's face but couldn't understand what he was thinking at this moment, no matter how much he tried. He would like to know it so much! He lost the track of his thoughts, stammered, trying to express what he wanted to say.

"No, don't think I fell out of love with you, I think it's just impossible... and maybe because I love you even more I don't want to keep forcing you. I don't know if you understand me but

I swear by all my ancestors that you will be just my friend. Do you think I won't be able to stand it? I'll stand it, don't doubt. You said it yourself that I handle pain well. You will be on the team, as before, we'll talk but there will be nothing else for my part, just friendship. Believe me, believe me, Nik, you're free from my love, and there will be no hard feelings from me. You know it's silly," he smiled sadly, "but I hoped that since I love you so much, you'll get to love me too," he paused.

"Yeah, I was too self-confident. Well, it's just that it never happened to me before. If I showed any interest about anyone, they were glad to respond to me. And for some reason I decided that it would be forever like that. Well, it didn't work – and to kiss you knowing that you just want to please me and you don't have any feelings towards me – I don't want that. It is humiliating me, and you too. I need everything or nothing – yes, that's it. I decided to make a choice like that. Enough of this illusion of relationship, it is stupid. That is why, Nik, leave – go to the Lower City, to the others. And when you come back, I won't be in your room, I'll go to mine. We'll forget everything that happened. I'll never remind you about it," he looked away. "Perhaps I've talked for too long but I wanted you to understand that I don't need your gratitude any more, you're free. Leave, Nik, it'll be right. I respect your choice and there are no hard feelings from me."

Nikto kept silent. At last he slowly got up from the armchair. Orel tensed all over but didn't look at him.

"Arel..." Nikto started.

Orel stopped him with a gesture.

"Don't. Don't explain anything, I'll be all right."

Nikto knelt down at the bed slowly, took Orel's hand.

"Nik, leave! For your gods' sake!" Orel said hoarsely.

"But I don't want to leave! I don't need your Lower City and your friends, I don't need anyone but you!"

Nikto pressed his face to Orel's hand.

"You say you don't want my gratitude any more but I was not thanking you! I did only what I wanted myself. I kissed you not because I wanted to thank you but because I wanted to kiss you. Let me stay with you!"

"What? Gods, Nik, I can't believe my ears!"

Nikto raised his eyes at him.

"Orel, I want to stay with you. It's my choice."

"Nik, Nik!" Orel pulled him closer; Nikto readily leaned towards him, kissing his hands.

"Nik," Orel laughed, "stop kissing my hands, you silly! What a habit you have! I'm not your master and you're not a slave!" he hugged Nikto's shaggy head, pressed it to his chest. "You're not my slave, you're not my servant, we're equal, hear me?"

Nikto nodded.

"Nik, you won't regret your choice," Orel was shining with happiness. "I swear you! I'll do everything for that, you'll never regret staying with me!"

"I know," Nikto said, "I know."

In a fit of insanity Squint-Eye cuts off his long hair and bangs.

Lis tries to get friendly with Asa. He wants to use her to find out something about Nikto and to get to Tol by making her his lover.

Bey manages to find allies in his war against Orel. He attacks.

With enormous efforts and great losses Orel's soldiers hold the positions they recently acquired.

They manage to fight back the enemy but by paying a great price.

Chapter 4

After the Battle

"Everything will start tomorrow again! Do you understand it?"

Lis said looking at Orel seriously. They returned to their rooms at 'Backara' to have some rest and lick their wounds. Orel sat in his armchair at the head of the table. His face was pale, he held his damaged eye with his right hand.

"I understand everything," he said tiredly.

Nikto and Asa talked quietly in Unclean over wounded Tol. Nikto said something pointing at the deep cut on Asa's side. She sat down on the sofa, at Tol's feet, and took off her ruined vest. The cut was not bleeding, it was smeared with the ointment in time; it looked much better than Tol's ragged wounds but still it wasn't too good. Not embarrassed at all that she was sitting with her breasts bare in front of them, Asa raised her arm for Nikto to examine her wound. He squatted in front of her, started

preparing a thread and a needle.

"Now she'll have a scar on her side," Lis said. "Why don't you apply 'sama'?"

"She can't bear it. She still isn't restored after her overdose," Nikto said without looking aside.

He pierced Asa's dark beautiful skin and started sewing the cut neatly. Asa tensed with pain, screwed her eyes shut but didn't make a sound.

Lis turned to Orel again.

"Orel, what shall we do?" he asked.

"A stupid question, Lis. We'll fight." Orel poured a full glass of wine.

"Can you drink?"

"Of course I can, for fuck's sake! I'm not drinking with my eye!" Orel emptied the glass in a few gulps. "I don't know how Squint-Eye manages to fight but if not for Nikto standing by me, I wouldn't be sitting with you here! It would be my last fight today!"

"Arel, I'll finish with Asa and deal with you," Nikto turned to him.

"Don't hurry, I'm all right."

"Shit, I want to fuck Asa," Lis said. "This Unclean bitch arouses me."

"Do you want me to translate it?" Nikto laughed.

"No," Lis came up to them, squatted near to Nikto and passed his hand over Asa's arm gently. She flinched and opened her

eyes. Lis looked at her with his eyes full of sympathy, his face was sad.

"I'm so sorry," he said in Unclean. He looked very upset. "You were very brave in the fight. You helped us so much!" He shook his head in distress. "I'm so sorry you are wounded."

"It's okay," Asa said, "don't worry about me."

"Yes, you're right," Lis smiled at her. "You're so beautiful no scar will spoil you." He reached and touched her dark-brown nipple with his lips gently. She laughed, pushed him away but did it lightly.

"Lis, I haven't done yet!" Nikto shouted at him.

"Finish quicker, I can't wait to do it," Lis laughed speaking in Black. Nikto didn't answer, he finished sewing the wound and smeared it with the ointment.

"Asa dear, let me dress your wound, I want to help you," Lis's voice was sweet like honey.

"No," Asa said.

"But why?" Lis was in despair. "Don't you trust me? Do you trust Nikto more, do you like him more? Tell me and I'll leave you alone."

"I like Tol," Asa said.

"But Tol is sleeping and he won't wake up soon, let me dress your wound, let me!"

"No."

Nikto prepared the bandage and Asa got up, raised her arms for him to be more comfortable to do it.

"You're so cruel!" Lis was getting angry. "I'm ready to do anything for you and I don't want to give me such a small joy."

"Lis, fuck off," Asa snorted.

"Shit!" Lis slammed his fist against the table. "Shit!"

Orel raised his head.

"Go get a wench if you need it so!" he growled. "Just don't make a noise, for gods' sake! My head is splitting!"

"I don't want a wench! I want this beast!"

Nikto laughed. "Hold back your tongue, she understands a little in Black."

"Oh fuck," Lis covered his mouth.

"Maybe I can be your friend," Asa drawled, "but you can't count on anything more."

"Fine, fine," Lis became submissive again. "I agree to anything, my queen!"

Asa smiled to him indulgently.

"You have a funny accent," Nikto said. "Did you learn Unclean among Reds?"

"Yes. Frankly speaking, I thought I forgot it but no. When I need it, it comes back."

"Lis, you want to a fight with Tol, right?" Orel asked.

"No, I don't. He won't even know," Lis sat at the table and smoked. "Like Enriki doesn't know everyone fucks his sister," he laughed.

"What a bastard you are!" Orel leaned back in the chair.

"So what?" Lis shrugged. "Does it trouble you?"

"No," Orel winced in pain. Nikto came up to him, sat down on the table.

"Let me see," he said.

Orel looked at him fearfully. "Nik, I'm afraid a little."

"Don't be afraid," Nikto took off his bandage and looked closely.

"What's there? Tell me, don't torment me? Did it burst again?"

"No, no, it won't burst, don't worry," Nikto made him toss his head back, examining his swollen eyelid.

"Aah, hu...rts, it hurts!"

"Quiet, quiet," Nikto let him go. "It's all right but it's going to heal slowly. If you stayed in bed for a few more days..."

"But you see I can't afford it!"

"Yes, I know. I just warn you that it will heal slowly, that's all."

Nikto applied a thick layer of the ointment over the eye and bandaged it again. Orel touched the bandage in distress but didn't say anything. Lis looked at them.

"Now you look like him" he said nodding at Nikto. "Just as disfigured."

Orel tensed.

"Yes, I was tired of being the only one ugly among you," Nikto agreed. "I decided that Orel would keep me company."

"I don't doubt," Lis looked at him darkly. "Who's next?"

"Squint-Eye doesn't suit, Tol and Enriki are wounded. So, it's you."

Lis lowered his eyes.

"What will you do to me, if it is not a secret?"

"It's not a secret," Nikto bared his teeth. "I'll cut off your tongue."

Orel laughed.

"Ni-i-ik, but why?"

"Because he talks too much."

"You're shit," Lis said, "I'm not afraid of you."

Nikto walked around Orel's armchair and stood there, leaning with his elbows on its back; his eyes sparkled impishly.

Lis looked at him, smirked. "You think you're cool, huh?"

Nikto leaned to Orel, hugging him around the back of the chair. "Lis, enough, I know you're just jealous of me."

Orel laughed, pressing his cheek to Nikto's. "Lis, is it true?"

"What? Do you believe the bullshit he says?"

"He is jealous and envious," Nikto said. "That's why he is angry."

"Cool!" Orel looked at Lis with interest, waiting for his reaction.

"Envy you?" Lis snorted. "That's something! You're nothing, you just pretend being tough but you really are an empty place!"

"Really?"

Lis laughed. "Exactly. I think you have nothing I should envy."

"And I think I do," Nikto said.

He moved away from Orel and standing behind his back for Orel not to see what he was doing he showed Lis his finger with the royal ring on it.

Lis's face flushed, he got up, turned away. Asa who watched this scene laughed. She was dressed and smoked now leaning against Tol's legs; Tol slept, full of medicines.

"Nikto is an animal," she said. "Lis, come to me, I'll pity you."

"Fuck off!" Lis snapped.

He came up to a little table and grabbed a statuette from it, threw it at the wall. It shattered into small pieces.

Orel clapped his palms. "Well done, Lis! You've amused me!"

"Glad to hear," Lis said through the clenched teeth. He returned to his corner. Asa said something.

"What does she say?" Orel asked.

"She says we behave worse than the Unclean," Nikto said.

"Tell her to shut up!" Orel said and poured more wine. "Why don't you translate?"

"She has learned this phrase."

"Enriki is wounded, Tol is wounded, Asa is wounded, you're wounded," Lis shook his head. "I think we're in trouble."

"It is not so bad. I, Tol and Asa will be okay tomorrow. You, Nik and Squint-Eye are fine."

"Squint-Eye is not here, maybe, something happened to him."

Orel didn't answer looking down.

Asa lay down next to Tol and hugged him closing her eyes. It was quiet in the room. They sat like that for an hour, everyone submerged in their thoughts. At last Lis raised his head.

"It's getting lighter," he said, "we'll need to go to the camp soon. Squint-Eye is not here yet."

Nikto got up. "I need a shot." He took his bag and walked to Orel's bedroom.

"Check how Enriki's doing," Orel said.

"All right."

Nikto left, and just a minute later they heard a soft knock on the door.

"Who's there?" Lis jumped up.

"Lis, it's me, Squint-Eye."

Lis quickly opened the door letting Squint-Eye in. He nearly ran in, his face was anxious.

"Arel, you're here! What happened?"

"What do you think?" Orel asked in an icy voice.

Squint-Eye looked around, saw Tol and Asa sleeping together on the sofa.

"Asa is here, too," he said getting even paler and tensing. "Bey?"

"Where have you been?"

"Arel, I... I was fulfilling the order... in the Upper City, you know..."

"You're losing qualification," Orel said. "For you to spend so much time for one lousy order – don't feed me this shit, Squint-Eye!" Orel's only eye glared.

Nikto returned to the room.

"Enriki is delirious," he said, "but I think he'll survive."

"Did you hear?" Orel said to Squint-Eye. "Pray gods for him to survive!"

"Arel, look, his clothes are all wet," Lis said looking at Squint-Eye. "Did you fall into the river?"

Squint-Eye grabbed his head convulsively as if trying to cover it from their stares. His black hair parted in the middle clung to his cheeks. Lis took his wrist roughly, turned his hand towards Orel.

"Look," he said. There were a few fresh scratches on Squint-Eye's arm.

"I scratched myself by accident," Squint-Eye said in a trembling voice. He looked at Nikto fearfully who met his gaze but said nothing.

"Do you believe him, Arel?" Lis said.

"No," Orel was turning a cigarette pack in his hands.

"Orel, for gods' sake, forgive me! I'll pay!" Squint-Eye was shaking.

"Of course," Orel tossed the pack away. "You let us down and it's your luck I need you now or I'd strangle you with my own hands. And for now, Lis, take him to the dungeon, to the post."

"No!" Squint-Eye screamed. "No!"

Asa woke up with his voice and sat in bed.

"No, not the post! I cannot stay in a locked room! Anything but that!" Squint-Eye fell on the floor. Lis pulled him by his cloak.

"Get up, enough of this comedy."

"No!" submitting to him, Squint-Eye got up. "I don't want back to the cell, to the dungeon!" His face distorted, he was

shivering. "I'd better die than go to prison again!" He pushed Lis away trying to take out his knives.

Nikto was faster than him. He rushed to Squint-Eye and quickly twisted his arms back. Squint-Eye screamed. Lis pulled the knives from the sheathes on his belt and tossed them on the table.

"That's better," he punched Squint-Eye in his belly a few times. Squint-Eye bent down wheezing. Nikto didn't let him go. Lis turned to Orel.

"More? Or enough?"

Orel got up, walked up to Squint-Eye, grasped his head in his palms turning Squint-Eye's pale face upwards.

"Stop with your madness. Do you hear me?"

"Don't touch me!" Squint-Eye jerked trying to free his arms but only hurt himself worse. "Make the Unclean let me go!" He tried to turn to Nikto.

Nikto twisted his arms even more; his joints cracked. Squint-Eye shrieked in pain.

"What are you doing, Nik?" Orel asked half-surprised, half-frightened.

"He wants to break his arms off!" Lis laughed. "Go on, don't restrict yourself!"

Nikto pushed Squint-Eye away, letting him go. He cursed in Unclean.

Squint-Eye fell on the floor, his arms didn't obey him. He curled in a ball on the floor not looking at them. Orel knelt next

to him. "Bert, where have you been?"

"I fulfilled the order," Squint-Eye sobbed. "Then I decided to take a swim."

"Dressed," Lis added. Squint-Eye looked at him askance, sniffed.

"Do you know that Bey attacked us while you were taking a swim?" Orel said in a calm, icy voice. "We fought without you. Enriki nearly died. Do you know why? Because you were not there to help him. He led both his and your soldiers. And Bey has flair about such things. He understood at once Enriki was alone. He sent Edin Ol to attack. Enriki was unhorsed, he was wounded, horses stomped on him. There was no one to stand by him."

"But I didn't know! Everything was quiet! You stayed in your castle, they went for a routine check, I went to fulfill an order in the Upper City," Squint-Eye swallowed hard. "Who could know Bey would attack!"

"You had to know Bey could attack any moment! You always have to be on guard, wait and be ready! You cannot do anything else," Orel squeezed his shoulders. "You cannot do whatever you want. You cannot go for a swim or wherever you've been. You don't have such a possibility. Do you understand me? You have to be here, with us, do only what I order, and as soon as you do it, you have to come back at once, for another order, and then again and again. You're not free, you're on the team!"

Squint-Eye raised his eyes at Orel.

"Am I a slave?"

"Yes, if you want that, you are a slave. If you like it this way. If you feel like a slave, it's your choice!" Orel turned to Lis. "Lis, do you feel like a slave in our team?"

"Of course, I don't!" Lis snorted looking at Squint-Eye with contempt.

"You see, Bertran Dallen, you're the one to blame in your unenviable position!" Orel continued. "You couldn't make others take you into consideration. There was time when you were one of the best! Everyone loved and respected you! I loved you too! Huh, Bert, do you remember?" Orel talked quietly, almost tenderly. "You were brave and fierce, everyone was afraid of you. And your face wasn't grey like now, your eyes were not red and swollen, always bruised. Your hair," he touched Squint-Eye's dark hair, cut jaggedly, "your hair was long. You were a real warrior. I was proud you were with me."

Squint-Eye covered his face. "Orel, shut up, it was a long time ago! And I don't care! I don't even want to recall it, I became different."

"Why? Bert, why?" Orel moved closer to him, took his scratched hand. Squint-Eye shuddered, yanking his fingers away from Orel convulsively.

"Don't! Don't call me by my name! Everyone knows here my name is Squint-Eye! My name is Squint-Eye! Squint-Eye! Squint-Eye!"

Lis looked at him in disgust.

"Why are you treating him like a child, Arel? Don't you see

he became a complete nonentity?"

Squint-Eye glanced at Lis furiously.

"I hate you so much, Lis! I would cut your throat a long time ago, if Orel didn't love you. It's your luck I respect Orel and don't want to hurt his feelings!"

"Ooh, just listen to him!" Lis sat back in his place at the table, shook his head. "How scary! I'm so frightened!"

Orel laughed.

"Really, Bert, you are insane."

"You can never kill me," Lis said smirking, "because I'm much smarter than you. I'm clever and you're a real loser!"

He laughed wickedly showing his teeth filed like a saw jags – horrible, savage teeth that didn't suit his intelligent face. He kicked Squint-Eye's side. Squint-Eye bore it silently, his just lowered his head and his hair hid his face, haggard with illness.

"You're an ass," Lis said, "good for nothing. I wonder how you still manage to fulfill orders."

"I don't want any more," Squint-Eye whispered. "I don't want to fulfill any more orders."

"Of course!" Lis snorted. "It takes effort. It's much easier to inject yourself some shit and then cut yourself."

"Lis, enough," Orel ordered. "Bert – well, Squint-Eye, if it is easier for you... pull yourself together at last. You angered me a lot but I've already calmed down because you're really pathetic. Your fits became too frequent, you become unbearable, you become a burden for all of us."

Squint-Eye raised his gaze at him.

"So, what are you waiting for? Kill me!"

He pushed his short, unruly hair away from his face, raised his head proudly, one of his eyes looked at Orel bravely. His pale lips were compressed stubbornly. He was beautiful at this moment, somehow calm and peaceful. Despite everything, he was a warrior, dark, wicked and strong.

Orel shook his head.

"I can't kill you, we've been together for too long. We were together since the very beginning. You did a lot to restore our square."

"Gods damn your square," Squint-Eye growled, "my whole life went to hell because I had bad luck to be born in your territory! Where is everyone who helped you to assert your power? Where are they? Long rotting in your castle cemetery! I want to join them. If you can't kill me, tell Lis."

"No," Orel shook his head.

"Then him," Squint-Eye pointed at Nikto.

"Maybe, her?" Lis looked at Asa, then at Squint-Eye.

"Fuck you! Do you want to humiliate me even when killing!" Squint-Eye screamed.

"No one is going to kill you," Orel said. "Forget about it and try to pull yourself together. I'll talk to Nik, maybe, he will care to help you, and you'll quit that shit."

"Nik?" Squint-Eye smiled. "What a beautiful name he has now, I would never think Nikto and Nik is the same."

"Shut up," there were steely notes in Orel's voice.

"I don't want him to help me," Squint-Eye said, "I don't want anyone to help me!"

"You will try to get up yourself, right?" Orel asked. "You will try hard."

"No, I don't want to, I don't see any sense in it," Squint-Eye cracked his knuckles nervously. "Do you see any sense in this endless war? Tell me!"

"Sense?" Orel thought for a moment. "I like it, I like fighting. I enjoy it, I can't imagine my life without war, without risk. Why should I look for sense in enjoyment? I entertain myself, so, the rest doesn't matter."

Squint-Eye shook his head.

"No, it's not an answer. I could have accepted such an answer from Tol but not from you. I wouldn't even ask Tol, it is clear about him. But you, Arel, I expected a different answer, I thought you were smarter."

"Do you hear?" Lis asked. "He thinks you're a fool."

"Fine," Orel said in irritation, "don't add fuel to the fire. I would like to punish Squint-Eye but I see it won't change anything – he punishes himself, and cruelly. Bert, promise me you'll stop abusing yourself, stop mutilating your body and raping your mind. It's enough. I beg you, stop killing yourself!"

Squint-Eye didn't answer.

"Fine, if you're tired of everything and you want to die, do it with dignity! Like a warrior! Not like a street wench. Die

fighting! For us to bury you with honor." Orel paused. "At night we'll start attacking and you will have a chance to make your wish come true," he said at last, got up and walked away from Squint-Eye.

Squint-Eye stayed sitting on the floor; he leaned against the massive leg of the table tiredly. His hair, cut in an ugly way, hung pathetically framing his pale face; in the front thick black strands reached only to his chin now. He shook his head, touched the remnants of his previously gorgeous long hair.

"You regret your hair," Orel noticed his gesture. "How could you disfigure yourself like that?"

"I'm sick," Squint-Eye said quietly. "Orel, I'm so sick."

"You need to restore yourself, not to destroy," Orel poured some wine. "Go to your room and stay in bed. We're going without you now."

Squint-Eye looked at him frightened.

"Hey, don't look at me like this! Don't try anything stupid, clear?"

"We cannot leave him like that," Lis said. "He'll stay alone and who knows what'll come to his mind. He'll start cutting himself again."

"What do you suggest?" Orel lit another cigarette.

"I think we should tie him to the leg of the table and Asa will look after him until we come back."

Orel smiled. "Hm, why not. Do you have cuffs for him?"

Lis took out the cuffs, tossed them to Orel. Orel came up to

Squint-Eye.

"Give me your hands, my friend, and no shit."

Squint-Eye, without looking up, put his arms behind his back and let Orel chain him to the table leg.

Lis leaned to him.

"So, now we won't need to worry about our mad dog."

Squint-Eye turned away.

"Why are you turning your nose away?" Lis laughed. He took Squint-Eye's chin and tried to turn his face towards himself. Squint-Eye backed away from Lis.

"Why are you resisting, look at me! You, shitty suicidal!"

Squint-Eye jerked back sharply trying to get up and move away from Lis but only hit the back of his head against the table. Everyone laughed.

"Lis, stop picking on him," Orel said laughing. "Time to go."

He got up, took his mask from the table and put it on hiding his bandaged face. Lis and Nikto followed his example covering their faces.

"Tell Asa not to hurt our boy," Orel said to Nikto.

Nikto passed his words to Asa. She just cursed in reply, as usual. They left locking the door behind them.

Orel, Nikto and Lis come to the military camp.

Orel has a meeting with commanders. He discusses the present situation with them and plans their further actions.

Since Enriki won't be able to participate in battles in the

nearest future, Orel decides to dismiss his detachment that is left without its commander.

But the commoner in command of the detachment, Enriki's right-hand man – Dick Nedwill – convinces him to postpone this decision. He assures Orel that he will manage to command and lead them. Orel gives him a chance.

Orel's troops plan to start the attack. Orel is risking a lot but his soldiers believe in him, they don't doubt their master's strength and power. Mercenaries also believe in the strength and power but not those of the prince – but of the one they think their true master. They all need those rich territories in the southern part of the city.

Tol, Asa and Squint-Eye join them.

Thanks to a clever attack plan made by Lis who took into consideration all the weak points of the enemy's defense and all the characteristics of the location, the vanguard detachment consisting of the best Orel's soldiers and mercenaries make an unprecedented at its bravery dash into Black Bey's rear catching him off guard.

Bey's main forces are located at the borders with Orel's territories. He calls for some troops from the borders to help his weak and scanty detachments in the rear.

It gives Orel the opportunity to break through Bey's impregnable defense at the border and advance. Lis's and Tol's detachments close the ring from the west, the detachments of Squint-Eye and Dick do the same from the east. Bey is

surrounded. He flees. His streets are conquered.

Despite his initial wish, Squint-Eye couldn't let his enemies kill him.

They have won.

Chapter 5

In the Garden

They sat in Orel's garden resting and watched the city that spread below. Enriki, very pale, with his arm bandaged and his eyes dim with medicines and pain was sitting in the armchair.

Near to him, hugging each other tenderly, Tol and his faithful Asa were sitting. Tol hadn't removed his sign of mourning for her and the paint was slowly fading by itself. Now a half of his face was dirty grey but it didn't bother him at all. His wounds had practically healed and he was quite perky. The same thing couldn't be said about Asa: she, on the contrary, looked very tired. It was one of the rare cases when she was in a dress – a beautiful black dress with exquisite embroidering. In her hair made into a high hairdo there was a wonderful adornment given to her by Lis. But her face was haggard, her eyes sunken; expensive things made for noble ladies didn't suit her. They just increased the contrast between the luxury of her outfit and her exhausted face with irregular, rough features; it was an attractive face but still a face of a commoner and a half-blood. The sparkling of the jewelry didn't suit her misted eyes; Asa

looked ridiculous in this outfit.

Slightly away from the others Squint-Eye sat right on the ground. He leaned with his back against the edge of a broken fountain; his head was hanging over his chest, a forgotten cigarette smoked in his fingers.

Nikto sat on his cloak spread on the ground; his cane he never parted with during last time lay nearby. Lis occupied one of the armchairs. He looked thoughtfully at the twilight covering distant mountain peaks and watchtowers in the east.

Orel walked towards them from the castle.

"So, why are you sitting here as if you're sick?" he said coming up to them. His face painted light grey seemed lifeless in the dusk.

"The weather is good," Lis said, "and the summer is over soon."

Orel sat down on the grass and looked at the city with his good eye.

"My sisters liked to sit here, my mother said," he took out a bottle from the pocket of his jacket, opened it with his teeth and made a few gulps.

"Why don't you order to repair the fountain?" Enriki asked looking at the bulky marble sculpture surrounded by rotting water.

Orel glanced at the fountain.

"When I was little, there were fishes in it," he said.

"Cool!" Tol exclaimed. He almost lay down on the ground and

pulled Asa with him.

"So, what about your servants?" Lis yawned.

"Aah, as always – dumb like shit," Orel laughed. "By the way," he turned to Enriki, "your Coal pleasantly surprised me, he is a good warrior and commander, you're lucky to have him. What's his real name?"

"Dick son of Nedwill, Dick Nedwill but everyone calls him Coal."

"Why Coal?"

"He has this name since his childhood. He told me. He was born in the east. One day the Red attacked his village, killed everyone and burned everything. He was just a boy; he managed to hide in the basement and took his little sister with him. Their house was burning but they didn't come out, they just stayed there. When the Black came and started cleaning out the ruins, they found him. They didn't think he'd survive, he was badly burnt, so, they called him Coal."

"And what about his sister?" Tol asked.

"It is even more interesting about her. Three days later he came round and could explain them there was also his sister in the basement. They found her – she was alive and not burnt but her hair was completely grey. Since then they never part. She plays in my sister's theater."

"Is she beautiful?"

"She is pretty, a commoner cannot be beautiful."

"Why didn't we see her before?" Orel asked.

"Did you want to? Are you interested in theater, Orel?"

"Well, I'd like to see her playing."

"Fine, I'll tell Mily."

"I liked her brother, you can't say he was burnt looking at him. He looks good and his hair is long. Why do you let him have such long hair, like a nobleman?"

Enriki shrugged.

"So what, he still is a commoner and he is short."

"Why are all commoners short," Tol asked, "but Lis and Nikto are as tall as you?"

"First of all, they are half-bloods," Orel said. "Besides, Lis's father was not a commoner and Nik doesn't even know who his parents were."

"Anyway, Nikto and Lis are shorter than we are," Enriki added.

"Yes, Lis is the shortest," Tol said.

"I'm not much shorter!" Lis said starting getting nervous.

"Much shorter than me!" Tol said.

"I don't even mention you, you're abnormally tall, like your trees!"

"You are a tree yourself!"

"Fine, don't start! Let's go back to the castle." Orel got up abruptly and grabbed his damaged eye hissing in pain.

"Easy, you fool," Lis laughed.

"You're a fool! Let's go to the castle!"

"What shall we do in your castle?"

"What are you doing here? Watching the mountains?"

"Let us rest."

"Shit, you're crazy," Orel hobbled to the castle.

"Arel, stay with us!" Tol shouted at him.

"Fuck you," Orel didn't even glance back.

"Now he's going to drink himself senseless," Lis said, "and fell from the stairs."

Everyone laughed.

For a while they say silent.

"Fuck, I'm so tired," Squint-Eye said at last. "I'm tired of this shitty castle and its owner."

"We all are tired," Lis said.

"Except Orel," Squint-Eye said. "He is never tired."

Asa asked Lis something in Unclean. He answered.

"What are you talking about?" Tol asked.

"She asked what we said," Lis explained. "I told her we're tired."

Tol looked at Nikto seeking confirmation to Lis's words. Nikto nodded at his questioning stare. Lis smirked but didn't say anything.

"Ask her what she thinks about us," Squint-Eye said.

Lis laughed. "As if she'd say," but translated.

Asa said something.

"She says we're the worst of anyone she's seen, except for Tol, that is."

"Hey, you can't say that about my friends!"

"Come on, Tol, she's right," Squint-Eye said. "At least I won't argue with her."

"But it's bullshit! Don't listen to her! We're the best!"

"Yeah," Squint-Eye drawled and they laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" Tol was exasperated a great deal.

"Didn't we beat up Bey? A little more and we'll crush him!"

"Yes, Tol, it's cool," Squint-Eye said calmly. "We beat up Bey, we're tough..."

"Aren't we?"

"Yes, Tol, yes, calm down."

"Enriki, aren't we? Why are you silent?" Tol started looking for support.

"I don't have anything to say, Tol. My arm hurts."

At these words of Enriki Nikto turned to him, he seemed to feel like saying something but then changed his mind and turned away.

"What do you want?" Enriki asked.

"I don't like your arm."

"What do you mean?" Enriki got pale. "Explain please, since you have started."

"I'm not sure, I saw it for the last time a long time ago, when you were unconscious. But I don't like what I see now. Your fingers are black, Edin Ol's horse stomped on them so hard that it couldn't be improved, infection will spread from them further. Do you know what I mean?"

"Ooh! It would be better if you kept silent!"

Nikto turned away, put his head onto his bent knee.

"I would let him look at your arm if I were you," Tol said worriedly.

"Is he, like, a doctor?"

"Well, he is, in a way."

"Then let him heal himself first!"

"But he wants to help you," Squint-Eye said.

"Why should I ask for his help?"

"You don't even ask, he offers it."

"And you put him down with your refusal," Tol added.

"What? I put him down? He doesn't care!"

"I wonder why you think so."

"He isn't with us, he is infinitely far away. I look at his transparent eyes and don't see anything, like there is nothing inside. He's empty and it's driving me mad!"

"Maybe it makes you angry because you don't see your reflection in his eyes," Squint-Eye said quietly.

"I'm not empty and I have feelings," Nikto said.

Squint-Eye laughed.

"Do you really love Orel?"

Nikto kept silent.

"He loves his gods," Enriki shook his head. "Why would he decorate himself with their images otherwise?"

"He simply likes to draw," Lis smirked.

"That tattoo on his shoulder, it's like a spit at our faces! You could at least have some respect to our religion," Enriki

continued, "and not tattoo such openly blasphemy drawings."

"Why that?" Nikto said.

"Oh really!"

"Come on, cool down. I've spent enough time with you and haven't seen you worshipping your gods even once. Though there were some of your religious holidays during that time. Or am I wrong?"

"No, you're not," Lis laughed.

Nikto grinned in reply, showing his filed but still impressive fangs; it was a smile of a predator admitting his strength. He'd never done that before in their presence. He showed them what they wanted to see. He was magnificent.

"You're not a human," Enriki said. "You're not a human and you don't even try to become one."

* * *

When Nikto came back to his room, he saw Orel who lay in his bed with a half-empty bottle in his hand.

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