

Vi Kors

The Mist and the Lightning

Part VII

СОДЕРЖИТ

НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ

БРАНЬ

18+

Ви Корс

The Mist and the Lightning. Part VII

«ЛитРес: Самиздат»

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Корс В.

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The novel's grand comeback. The three of them involuntarily stared at the picturesque picture of all kinds of patterns and drawings, interspersed with disgusting looking in some places, barely protracted, and in some places continued to fester ulcers. Содержит нецензурную брань.

“Lay me as a seal on your heart, for love is strong as death.”

Chapter one

A little earlier...

“So you can be congratulated?” Vitor Kors sat at his desk and twisted a gold pen in his fingers.

“Maybe it’s worth saying: “We can be congratulated”? – Ron Arwa hesitated, obviously not knowing what to say next, Vitor Kors seemed to congratulate him, but his face didn’t express any gratitude or joy.

“Well, we won’t drink champagne,” Kors grinned, “but I can offer coffee or tea.”

“Coffee if you can...”

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“Won't you?” Ron Arwa was surprised when the servant brought only one cup on a tray.

“No. Go on, drink, drink, calm down. I just rarely drink coffee,” Vitor Kors tried to calm the investigator, seeing his embarrassment:

“I don’t really like it, and Karina says that I don’t understand anything about it.”

“I don’t think so,” Ron Arwa shook his head and took a sip. “By the way, how is she doing? I haven't seen her for a long time.”

“Everything is fine.”

At the mention of his daughter, gloomy face of Vitor Kors lit up with some kind of inner light.

“You really love her,” remarked Ron Arwa.

“Her features... such lovely features, they remind me of...” Kors turned his gaze to the portrait on his desk, and with tenderness touched his fingers on the gilded frame. From the portrait, a fair-haired girl smiled at him serene.

“How much time has passed, Vitor...”

“It will be twenty-five years in the summer. Twenty-five years since I lost Iness,” Kors jerked his hand away, as if reluctantly returning himself to reality, again looked gloomily and tiredly at Wolf. He cringed under his heavy gaze, nearly choked on a sip of coffee. And playing it safe, he set the cup on the table.

“Clive Gabriel came to me yesterday,” Vitor Kors leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette, “he asked for Karina's hand.”

“So... I can congratulate you?!”

“No. Not this way. Let her decide, I will not intervene.”

“And... do you think she will refuse him?”

Kors shrugged.

“I see, does this not upset you too much?” Ron Arwa remarked.

“I was only upset if she chose Prince Arel or one of his people. That would really upset me. Everything else is little things.”

“Well, that’s unlikely,” Wolf thought for a second, remembering. “You should have seen his eyes...” he laughed briefly, apparently imagining Arel’s face again. “These are his painted eyes, and they have such a surprise in them: “What? No!” Ron tried to copy Arel’s expression and voice. “Damn, it was so funny!”

“He was surprised? For six months they sent summons and orders to return Nikto, and he was surprised?!”

“Yes! And no. You know... I think they were ready. I didn’t take the prince, remembering your order, although it was very easy to do so. They didn’t even resist.”

“They resigned to the inevitability. It’s good. And yes, you did the right thing that you didn’t take him today. We can take him any day, any minute. Taking the prince for me is no problem,” Kors was silent for a moment, thinking, “I want to do it beautifully.”

“You should send him a note... from Karina, for example,” Arwa suggested.

“No,” Kors shook his head, “even this is not necessary. I don’t want to interfere her into it anymore. He will come here to this office himself, if I order! He will fulfill all that I command! Do you doubt?”

“No,” Ron Arwa looked down, “I have no doubt.”

Chapter two

Vitor Kors and Karina

“Clive Gabriel told me Wolf had arrested Nikto today?”

Vitor Kors grimaced.

“Where are your manners?! Wolf! Don’t call him like that when you talk with me!”

Karina shrugged.

“Okay, I won’t, it’s just that everyone calls him that...”

“Did you want to talk about something? I don’t have much time...”

“Well, dad!”

“Yes. I’m listening to you.”

But Karina suddenly rounded the table, went to her father, hugged him tightly, sitting on his knees, hiding his face on his chest.

“I’m listening to you. I will accept whatever you say. And if you want it, it will be so. Therefore, don’t worry so much!”

Karina looked up in surprise and pulled away:

“What are you talking about?”

“And you?”

“I wanted to talk to you about Nikto...”

“About whom?!”

“And what did you think?”

“About Clive Gabriel!”

And seeing the slightly confused expression on her father’s face, Karina laughed:

“Dad! You thought I would ask you... pooh... I don’t even have my tongue turning to say such nasty things!”

“So you...”

“I don’t need him, and that’s all! Don’t even dare to think about this!” And, seeing how frank relief was reading on her father’s face, Karina pressed herself against him again, straightened tenderly his white gray lock, beautifully removed from high forehead. That was the only grayish strand among thick dark hair.

“How could you think!”

“What should I have thought?! First he comes to me and asks for you. Then you come and want to talk seriously about something!”

“He came to you?! Oh! Damn! I don’t want to hear anything else about Clive! I came to talk on a completely different topic. Absolutely!”

“There will be no indulgences and condescension for Nikto, keep this in mind, and you can even not start.”

Karina pulled away from her father, got down from his knees and went around the table. She pursed her lips and sat in a chair opposite:

“Because he is garbage, trash?”

“Yes, if you want it to be put so.”

“And he is half-breed.”

“It has nothing to do with it,” Vitor was embarrassed.

“I see,” said Karina knowingly, seeing his embarrassment. “So what do you intend to do with him?” Her voice fluttered. “You want to execute him, yes?”

“Let’s just say this,” Kors hesitated, as if picking up words softer, “let’s just say that he has no place in our world. He is called the son of the devil, so let him go to his world, to his father. Let him return to his father. I’ll get him home, that’s all.”

“Is this a joke? Do you think this is funny?”

Kors shrugged.

“Well, as I tell you, he really has to go back home, to his family, and to his father.”

“But his father is you!”

Kors grinned.

“Karina, I don’t have much time.”

“Very well! That’s when you see him, when you see... you yourself will understand everything! He looks like his mother, they are like two drops of water!” Karina took a portrait of Iness, which always stood at the desk of Kors. “I don’t even have to prove anything, just take off his mask and look.”

“Karina...”

And you know, when I saw him, there, among the people of Arel, in the “Lower”, where you will never meet a man with white hair and bright eyes, where he is like a thorn in everyone’s eye, so different from others, I thought, Glory to the Gods, that I was not born so bright! There are holes in his lower lip, from the rings, because he wears half-blood marks. Because he is a man of the second

grade, he is a half-breed, and not “black”! And I thought, I just thought, looked at it all from the other side, discarding all this romance about your mother and your great unearthly love, which I heard a lot from childhood. I thought about how it was possible to take a woman of a different race, from another world, drag her here, and begin to make children with her as a routine. Give birth to half-breeds! How old was I? I was not even three more years, probably, when he was already on the way. And I’m sure that if she hadn’t been stolen, it would not be limited to this. In the sense of me and him. You would still give birth to light, dark, spotty, but not “black”! How did you even imagine that? That your children will walk with holes and rings in their lips? How would you explain this to them? Would you do this procedure with them yourself? I was lucky, but how would you explain to him? This humiliation? You will understand this when you see him, you will understand everything! Why did you take mom here?! You knew that the “whites” were being stolen, that they were being hunted because the white-haired slave was worth her weight in gold! You knew that you were putting her in danger and didn’t guard her properly! I saw such a slave in the castle of Area, she is not “white”. She is half-breed but still light, like Nikto, both hair and eyes. Her name is Mina. She doesn’t even remember how she appeared there, at Arel’s place. She was stolen and sold when she was a girl. And so with everyone! And with Nikto as well! He was sold to a local witch, into the forest, into some dugout with witch's potions and dried paws. And there, he spent most of his life! Therefore, you didn’t find him!”

“Enough!” Cried Vitor Kors. “I no longer intend to listen to this nonsense! What are you blaming me for? You are all right, and no one forces you to wear rings!”

“Yes, with me, it’s all right, relatively... but I’m sorry, this is not your merit! This is a happy coincidence. Gift of the Gods! Looking at Nikto, I imagined how my life could have developed, if I had been born so light. Where would I be right now? Surely also rotted in someone's castle as a slave! Yes, I’m very lucky, but even they humiliate me! Unobtrusively make it clear. Remind.”

“Who?!”

“Never mind! I’m fine, yes. What about mom? What about brother? It’s your fault! There was no need to drag her into our world! You know, Nikto, after all, also had a “white” girlfriend, her name was Rosa, it seems. But he sent her upwards, saved her from such a slave life. Maybe you’ll say that he didn’t love her enough?”

“Are you now retelling the play of Donatella Valerie?”

“Yes, I am. Because he told her this story about himself. Why didn't he stay with Rosa? Maybe because he understood that he would not have life in this world, not him, not their children. And I don’t blame you, don’t look at me like that. You were young and everything is clear. It’s just... you blame yourself more than I blame you! Only you blame yourself because you didn’t save her, but you have to blame yourself because you took her from the Upper World initially!”

“I didn't take her! Everything was mutual, and the children... we were so happy when she realized what was waiting for you...”

“Don’t...”

“We didn’t think about anything, you are right, we were just happy. Unacceptably happy! And you... you were born dark, understand? There were no problems, and we didn’t think. And... I wanted a son, and she, she wanted to give me a son. We didn’t think about what he would be, light or dark, or rather, we were probably sure that he would be like you – dark.”

“You wanted a son... well, today you will finally get him! And you’ll try to explain to him why you put him in the trash in absentia, or as you say: “human waste”, and made him a slave.”

“Nikto is not my son! My second child is dead! And I’m not even sure that it was a boy! There’s some dubious similarity, as it seemed to you, even if it is, it doesn’t mean anything!”

“All the whites are alike, alike, yes... I know.”

“You cannot judge the similarity of a portrait.”

“You will see him yourself. This is the best evidence, although everything else converges as well. And the place where he grew up is exactly where your garrison stood.”

“He fooled you.”

“Because he is the son of the devil, yes?”

“Yes!”

“Isn’t it funny for you yourself to repeat this stupidity?”

“No. It’s not at all funny!”

There was a knock on the door:

“Arrested delivered, sir.”

Karina stood up abruptly:

“I’ll leave now.”

“Wait! I just wanted to tell you, Karina... you shouldn't blame me... you... you just haven't loved like that yet, that much. You didn't fall in love. When you love, you don't think about anything! You just want to be with this person and it doesn't matter if he is “white” or “not white”, from your world or from someone else's! It doesn't matter what is happening around, just you are together, that's all. It's hard for you to understand me, because you didn't love anyone like that, for real, then I would look at you! When you love nothing is important, everything becomes unimportant! You are capable of folly and stupidity...”

“And you tell me that?!”

Kors grinned sadly.

“It's hard to imagine me falling in love and reckless, but I was young. I was different! It was so long ago, and love... Love... It explains everything. Yes, maybe it makes you make mistakes, but it justifies everything. And everything pays off!”

“And... and is it more important than duty?”

“And where is the duty?! What are you talking about? What do you mean? If you're talking about Prince Arel and his notes, again, no! This is not love! This is your whim, and it doesn't mean anything!”

“I'm not talking about Arel...”

“Karina? Karina! What's the matter? Where are you going?!”

Chapter three

Vitor Kors and Nikto

The convoy, habitually following a long-established rule, roughly pushed Nikto into the room. Here, Vitor Kors usually conducted interrogations of the accused.

Lame Nikto stumbled and nearly fell, moreover, one of the guards forcefully pushed him in the back, and the other indifferently hit the legs with a stick.

Vitor Kors, watching this picture, barely restrained a smile and only shook his head. The guards laughed, they were amused by the awkwardness of Nikto and the fact that he stumbled.

“On your knees,” one of them growled, pressing Niktoon his shoulders, bending him to the floor. Nikto obeyed.

Having thus put the prisoner on his knees, they removed the bag from his head, but Nikto didn't raise his head, didn't look at the one to whom he had been brought.

Vitor Kors made a sign with his hand, and one of the soldiers with a stick raised the chin of Nikto up so that his face could be seen. Nikto closed his eyes, a light slanting fringe fell on his forehead, a mutilated cheek as usual was covered by part of the mask.

Vitor Kors looked at the portrait in a gilded frame, and looked at Nikto. He was silent. The pause was delayed, and the guards looked perplexedly at their master, waiting for further orders. Finally, catching the questioning glances of his subordinates, he shook his head, as if driving away the obsession, and rose abruptly from the table.

“Well, well...” He said, somewhat bewildered. He went to Nikto, looking at him very carefully. Walked around.

Nikto’s hands were closed in handcuffs behind his back.

“Free his hands, make him go,” Kors ordered.

The guards immediately began to obey the order. They stopped holding Nikto’s head in a tilted position, and he immediately lowered it down, a mass of white hair covered his face.

And Kors involuntarily looked at the beautiful, clear that good and expensive boots on Nikto’s feet. The new, not worn out sole was lined with shiny steel plates.

The convoy commander, whose name was Nolan, noticed the look of his boss, and nodded in understanding.

“I also noticed,” he said, “great boots!”

“Yeah! Dressed like a master, not a slave,” Kors agreed with a grin.

He stepped with the tip of his boot on the tip of one of Nikto’s braids lying on the floor. He saw that on the one side Nikto had two braids, and on the other – only one.

“Why three braids, not four or two?” He asked.

“What?” Nikto said quietly and a little surprised, he tried to turn around, but the soldiers didn’t allow him.

“And here it is, under his hair,” Nolan roughly lifted part of Nikto’s hair. “It’s short, as if cut off,” he grunted.

“I earn money by honest labor,” Nikto said, as if through force, “I fight at the Coliseum, and with that money... with this money I buy boots.”

The guards and Kors laughed.

“No need to make excuses,” Kors continued to smile, “no one currently blames you for anything. There is nothing wrong with being well dressed. I even like it!”

Nikto was silent.

“Well? Why did you shut up? You have such a funny accent, as if lisping, are your teeth all in place?”

“In place,” Nikto snapped back.

The guards laughed again.

“Okay, I’m joking. I see that they are in place. Tell me, as usual, that you are not to blame for anything, and you were treated unfairly. Everyone who happens to be here in this room always tells me about it. All innocent and arrested unfairly!”

Kors turned to the soldiers:

“Have you heard at least one person admit right away that he is here in fairness and for the cause?”

The guards continued to have fun:

“No, sir!”

“After all, they also treated you unfairly? Isn’t it so? And you are not to blame for anything? Correctly?”

“Yes,” Nikto answered.

Kors, barely restraining himself, made a signal to the soldiers to shut up:

“Stop having fun! Man has sorrow!”

They calmed down instantly, clearly continuing to enjoy the performance and anticipating what usually followed a little later.

“Here you see! And how was it that those people treat you unfairly? Will you tell us?”

Vitor Kors returned to the table:

“Well? Why are you keeping silent? Say it, don’t be shy, everybody are my people here!”

Nikto raised his face, and Vitor Kors again involuntarily turned his gaze to the portrait.

“I was not born a slave, but they made me it! Unfair!” Nikto said with some challenge.

Vitor Kors stopped smiling:

“What does it mean?”

Nikto blinked several times, bowed his head to the side, trying to dodge the light falling on him from the window:

“Yes. I didn’t commit any crime, for which I could be branded as slave and sent to hard labor!”

“Why did you sit in jail at the reds then if you are so good?” Asked Vitor Kors, but it was noticeable that this conversation no longer entertained him.

“The patrol of the reds spotted me near the portal, and I killed one of them. But this is not a crime. Killing the “red” is not a crime. I just didn’t want to go with them and defended myself.”

“What did you do near the portal? Wanted to escape to the upper world?”

“No. I just came there in memory of my girlfriend. That was stupid. But I had nowhere else to go. And I sat there for hours. But I didn’t open it.”

“Yeah, and what was to be done with you? Can you give some advice?”

“Maybe it was better to leave me there, at the Doctor, and give him the opportunity to treat me completely.”

Vitor Kors dropped a portrait of his wife:

“Heck!” He cursed, putting it in place.

“So, what is next? Let’s suppose a doctor would cure you. His name was Caspar, if I am not mistaken? Caspar Yanti.”

Nikto nodded.

“Yes.”

“And what would you do next?”

“Maybe... maybe he would let me stay with him and help him. I would like that. I would stay with him. I understand medicine and would help him.”

“Do you understand medicine?!”

“Yes. Mother and sister taught me.”

“According to my sources, Caspar Yanti moved to the city several years ago, and lives here.”

“I know that,” Nikto answered.

“Why aren't you with him now? Why don't you help him?” A grin played on Kors’ lips.

Nikto bowed his head:

“Now it's too late... But,” he raised his face in some kind of a fit, “I still love medi... medicine! Especially I'm good with eyes!”

Kors stopped smiling.

“You tell me everything very frankly, Nikto, that's what your name is, right?”

“Yes.”

“What did the prince call you?”

“Prince Arel?”

“Yes.”

“Nik.”

“Just Nik?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm... I never would have called you Nik. But that's only Arel! If he doesn't have enough imagination, even to come up with decent names for his people! If a person is squint, he will call him Squint-Eye, if he is red-haired, he will be Lis, if Nikto, he will be Nik,”Kors grinned.

“Yes. Nik,” Nikto confirmed.

“Nik, and Prince Arel didn't tell you how our conversations usually went with him?”

“He told me.”

“Didn't he tell you to keep your mouth shut? Didn't he tell you to be silent, as to Squint-Eye or others?”

“My words, they mean nothing, I don't do anything bad to anyone through them, they are no use now.”

“So it turns out you have your own head on your shoulders?”

Nikto shook his head:

“What does it mean?”

“Go here. Sit on a chair. Release him. Let him stand and sit in front of me in a chair.”

Nikto awkwardly got up from his knees, walked forward slowly, he extended his hands in handcuffs in front of him, touching the back of a chair, circled it and sat down.

“Do you have poor eyesight?!”

“I see poorly in the light.”

“Do you see me?”

Nikto shook his head.

“No. I need dark glasses. Here it’s light as on the street and the sun in the window hits right in the eye.”

Kors nodded toward his soldiers.

“Close the curtains.”

Nolan promptly complied.

“Tell me, how long have you been fighting at the Coliseum?”

“At the Coliseum?” Nikto seemed a little surprised, Kors asked him about everything and at odds, “In the “Lower” – two seasons.”

“Do you remember your first fight?”

“The first fight? No, probably not, maybe the first battle here in the city.”

“Tell me?”

“Why do you need this?”

“Maybe I want to hear the story of your life.”

“The story of my life?!”

“Yes. I have nowhere to hurry, you will tell me, and I will sit, listen.”

“I need... a restorative...”

“I see. You need drugs, you can’t find a place for yourself, leave your nose and eyes alone, you rub them every five seconds!”

“I need a restorative.”

“Nik, how old are you?”

“Twenty four. Probably...”

“When is your birthday?”

“I don’t know.”

“Good. What do you take, tell me, and now I’ll write down the names and send for the doctor. He will help you, but only so that we can continue our conversation.”

Nikto dictated the names of the drugs and indicated the proportions, and Vitor Kors wrote all this on a piece of paper:

“Take this paper to Dr. Baltazar Nate in the prison infirmary, let him take from this list what he sees fit and immediately come here.”

One of the soldiers took a note and quickly left the office.

“How did it happen that you began to do this?” Kors returned to the conversation.

“Take restoratives?”

“Prick yourself all sorts of rubbish.”

“I don't remember, it was... it was a long time ago. Everyone does it. Then the unclean... they made me addict to “black water”. I tried...” Nikto hesitated, picking up a word, “to move out, but it's hard... and I can't.”

“And I can't watch you jerk, can I give you a cigarette? Give him a cigarette.”

“Thanks.”

“Smoke already...”

Chapter four

Vitor Kors and Nikto (continued)

Balthazar Nate, an old prison doctor, was skeptical about Nikto sitting in front of him in a chair.

“Nah,” he said thoughtfully, “young man, don't stoop so, sit upright, straighten your shoulders.”

“I think he's having withdrawal already,” Kors said a little nervously.

“Yeah... Where do you find them,” the doctor shook his head, “after all, how many times I have seen them, and every time I never cease to be surprised!”

Once again, Nikto raised his handcuffed wrists and scratched his nose.

“Extend your hands to the doctor, he will give you an injection now,” ordered Vitor Kors, and Nikto dutifully extended his arms forward.

Balthazar rolled up his jacket sleeve and, bumping into a shell of steel bracelets, rolled his eyes:

“Here it starts! Hey!” He called one of the guards. “Open these bracelets to me here and here.”

“Painted face. One of the people of the prince?” He turned to Vitor Kors, “What makes them all make their faces gray?”

“Apparently he is,” Kors nodded, “and it's a sign of belonging.”

“Done,” the soldier reported, demonstrating Nikto's arm, freed from the bracelets and strips of black cloth from the wrist to the elbow.

The three of them involuntarily stared at the picturesque picture of all kinds of patterns and drawings, interspersed with disgusting looking in some places, barely protracted, and in some places continued to fester ulcers. The old doctor grunted and inserted a needle into one of the barely healed veins. Nikto gritted his teeth.

“You see,” said Balthazar Nate, as if giving a lecture to students, “the main veins died and secondary ones took on their functions, this compensation is very interesting, and speaks of the limitless possibilities of the human body.”

“You are not stabbing yourself in the arm yet, if I understand correctly?” He turned to Nikto with old-fashioned politeness.

“No, I stab,” Nobody said, often blinking, “but more often in the neck.”

“That's right,” the doctor agreed, “we will stab you in the neck,” he smiled, “shall I look?”

Leaning towards Nikto, he moved the slave collar to the side, now it became clear that where the dye ended under the chin, tattoos started again.

Vitor Kors laid the portrait of Iness on the table, face down, as if to prevent her from seeing this.

“Why all these drawings?” as if he asked himself, somehow sad.

Nikto rubbed his eyes with his hands.

“These are tattoos,” he said grimly.

“I know!”

“Surely his whole body is covered with them,” the doctor made an assumption, “and his face, too. This is was the “Lower” with all its identification marks: earrings in his nose, tattoos, overwhelming fascination with drugs... which would cost a lot to our prison infirmary...”

“And the face?” Asked Vitor Kors.

“What difference does it make? This is my face!” Nikto tried to snap back. But it was evident that he didn't like these questions and the words of the doctor, and he was upset.

Kors exhaled noisily and ran his palm from his forehead to his chin, as if trying to erase fatigue. He closed his eyes.

“Well, the young tattooed man, do you feel better?” The doctor smiled.

“Yes, a little.”

“Well, so sit still, after all!”

“The insides, the stomach, I can't...”

“Everything hurts? Is the liver infected?”

“Yes.”

“For a long time?”

“Yes.”

“That's why you wrote me this drug here?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

The doctor again took up the syringe, Nikto clenched his teeth and closed his eyes.

“Nips a bit, right?”

“I usually dilute it with more than just purified water,” said Nikto.

“I know,” the doctor smiled, “but it's more interesting, isn't it?”

Nikto bent, holding his hands to his forehead, then folded his hands in a boat, covering his eyes.

“Yes, and look at what is with his eyes,” Kors recalled, his face was somehow distorted, “he told me that he didn't see us.”

The doctor pressed on Nikto's forehead, throwing his head back, removed his palms from his eyes:

“Look at me, a young man from the very, most “Lower”, below than nowhere.”

“Just don't shine in my eyes!” Nikto literally shied away from the old man.

“What?! Stop twitching like that!”

“Don't shine in my eyes,” Nikto prayed.

“Don't,” said Vitor Kors, “don't shine.”

“Well,” the doctor shrugged a little offended, “I just wanted to look at the fundus, but we can do without it, as you say. Although, the case is interesting.”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Kors.

“Eyes are definitely redone as unclean. Reconstructed competently, he sees well in the dark, I think, and even sees a little now in the light.”

“You see a little now?”

“Yes,” Nikto nodded.

“Here it is twilight, thanks to the fact that you have closed the curtains, and now stimulants that we introduced to him are acting.”

“Thanks for the clarification, does that mean he needs darkness?”

“Yes.”

“That is, in the afternoon in the light, he doesn’t see anything?”

“Yes, unfortunately. And for a long time, as I understand it. When was this done with you?”

“When were you captured by the unclean?” Specified Kors.

Nikto shook his head.

“No. A long time ago, I did it myself.”

“Yourself?!” The doctor was surprised. “It is commendable, it requires remarkable skills.”

“Yes, he said here that he would like to be a doctor,” Kors said skeptically.

“Really?!” Balthazar Nate was delighted. “How interesting! He wanted to become a doctor, but became a patient!” He laughed at his joke.

No one else supported him.

“Okay, and look again, what is with his throat, he wheezes, you hear? Do you have a cold? Or an infection? Isn’t it all enough?”

“Yes, I hear that he wheezes. Open the mouth, young man, I’ll shine in your mouth, okay?”

“It’s nothing to do with a cold,” he said after a while, moving away, “the vocal cords were cut,”

“What?!”

“I confess that for the first time I see a person with such vocal chords generally talking. By all laws, he should not speak. He can’t talk!”

Nikto looked up and for the first time in all this time looked at Kors, and he realized that he had finally seen him!

Their eyes met.

And Nikto looked down. His shoulders slouched again, he froze, cringing in his chair.

“Who are you?”

Nikto flinched at this simple question, as if Kors had hit him. He squeezed his in leather gloves fingers into the lock.

“Get out,” Kors ordered quietly, but in such a voice that the convoy and the doctor literally flew out the door.

They two stayed in a room together.

* * *

“You’re not a human!”

“So be it,” Nikto agreed, somehow doomed, “so it’s easier. And you don’t have to blame yourself for the mistakes.”

“Bravo!” Kors clapped his hands several times. “And you almost threw dust in my eyes!”

“What does it mean?”

“That I really believed...” Kors suddenly grabbed a portrait lying face down from the table:

“Who is it?! See?! Or should I put your head in a bag and let you look from there?”

“I see now.”

“Well? So who is it, do you know?”

“I know.”

“Who?!”

“Your wife, Iness, Karina’s mother,” answered Nikto.

“Correctly! My wife and mother of Karina. Mother of only Karina!”

Nikto stupidly looked at his hands in expensive gloves lying on his knees, one arm remained unfastened and not closed. Bracelets were lying in a heap on the desk of Kors.

“After everything you did to him... to appear in the corpse of my...” Kors hesitated. “In a so cynically mutilated corpse.”

Nikto was silent and still looked at his hands.

“What do you really look like? What are you? This?” Kors pointed a finger at the spoiled drawing on Nikto’s hand, forcing him to recoil.

“Will you answer me something?!”

Nikto raised his face, looked at Kors, and it seemed to him that his eyes were laughing:

“I can’t,” said Nikto. “After all, my vocal chords are cut.”

And Kors hit him. With all his power, with a fist to the temple. Nikto fell from a chair, crouched on the floor.

“You think I'm afraid of you?! I will rot you in a stone bag,” Kors whispered, “it will be a tombstone for him. A beautiful gravestone, and you will lie there and you will not be able to move, and you will not be able to control this body anymore. What do you think about my idea?”

“No...,” Nikto said.

“Are you afraid of me?!”

Nikto covered his face with his hands.

“Nolan!” Cried Kors.

The soldiers readily returned to the room, and the doctor with them, seeing Nikto lying on the floor, none of them seemed surprised.

“Do you still need me?” Balthazar Nate asked carefully.

“No. Thanks for the help. And I think you will have to arrange injections for him at least for a while, because I will still need him...” Kors hesitated. “Alive.”

“I understand,” the doctor nodded, “I will organize everything. We will support him as long as needed. And we can even treat him, I think there is a running infection in the blood and liver...”

“Don’t treat. Just give it a minimum so that he moves and that’s it.”

“Yes. Can I go?”

“Go, and... thanks for the help.”

“I’m always at your service.”

The doctor left, and the soldiers, on the contrary, habitually approached the victim. They knew that all interrogations end in such a way, and this will not be an exception.

“Undress him,” Kors waved his hand wearily.

He sat at the table and covered his face with his hands, as if gathering his thoughts.

A few thuds were heard, he knew that the guard, undressing Nikto, had already begun to act.

“Wow! What does he have there? Some kind of piece of iron... Sir Kors?”

He took his hands from his face:

“Well, what’s the problem...” And fell silent, staring at Nikto as well. Probably, it was a very stupid sight, Nikto in Arel’s belt of fidelity.

“That’s even how...” Said Vitor Kors, somewhat perplexed.

“To take off?” Asked Nolan.

“No. Don’t. Let it remain so.”

“And what is this, sir? Some kind of protection?”

“Well, you have to ask him. Just I don’t think that he will tell us about it now.”

Kors examined his tattooed hips, and a chain encircling them. He looked at the crooked sign of Prince Arel, with a healed burn instead of a bird’s head.

“Nikto, how did you think to take me for a ride, disfiguring his body like that? Didn’t Arel tell you how my interrogations usually end?”

“He told me,” Nikto said.

“And what did you hope for, you didn’t think how it would infuriate me?”

Nikto was silent and didn’t raise his head.

“Or did you want to infuriate me?! Throw this in my face and say: “See what I did?”

Nikto raised his left hand to his face, put his fingers under the edge of the half mask near the ear, and pulled it away, tearing it from the skin, revealing the scar.

“See what HE did? The one you wrote to the dead! He got involved in the stories one dumber than the other! He cut himself in despair.”

“I’m glad he resisted. It pleases me!”

“Enjoy it!”

“His grave will be beautiful! Do you believe me?!”

“Yes! Cram him into the grave quickly, out of sight. And then howl in sorrow as if for your wife, for the rest of your life! Bury him deeper, no matter that he is still alive!”

“And what is this?” Suddenly Kors asked himself rather quickly, and going up to Nikto, who pressed into the wall, leaned over him and with a sharp movement tore off a thin gold chain with a small ring on it from his neck.

He clenched the ring in his fist:

“Don’t you dare desecrate her memory!”

“This is my girlfriend’s ring,” Nikto said defiantly, “why do you care?”

Kors looked at him a little in surprise and grinned:

“To begin with, this ring... however... what a difference now.”

He returned to the table and, opening his palm with a strange expression on his face, looked at a small piece of jewelry.

“Lead him away,” he finally whispered. “Take him away! And... damn you!” He cried when the convoy picked up Nikto from the floor and putting a bag over his head, dragged him out the door.

Chapter five

Afterwards

“Well?!” Karina in joyful excitement ran into the interrogation room. “Did you make sure? I couldn’t wait when you finish...” She looked at her frozen, hunched father, on an overturned chair, blood on the floor, a hill of bracelets of Nikto lying on the edge of the table.

“What did you do with him here?” Her voice became deaf, “Are you out of your mind?”

“Don’t dare,” Kors rose sharply, suddenly shouted at her so that Karina’s tears came involuntarily because of this evil shout. But she restrained herself:

“You can... you can, at least explain to me.”

“Nikto is a demon!”

“Nonsense! I don’t believe in demons!”

“And I believe!”

“And you will execute him?”

“Sure! But first, I will avenge him, cruelly I will avenge! I’ll give him a walnut finish, my daughter! I have some thoughts on this subject, I’ll mock him great, be sure!”

“Gods! You already scoffed at him enough! Much more than enough! You didn’t even look at him, without understanding, you sent him to the mines! And if then I talked with him, then I saw him... It is quite possible then he could still be saved and he would not be so spoiled!”

“I don’t have time to meet and interrogate personally everyone!”

“But you regret doing so then? Are you sorry? Well, confess to me! Confess that you could have done differently!”

“I could. But I don’t regret it!”

“You regret!”

“Well, I'm sorry, but I don't care what you think about it. And then it was too late! And now even more so.”

“I don't think so, he's not as bad as he seems, he's better than other people of the prince. Well, of course! How could I have thought that you would accept him! How would you introduce him to all your pompous friends. Tell them that your son is a slave, a rag from the “Lower”, and a half-breed.”

“And a drug addict.”

“Yes!”

“With a redone body, a disfigured face, head to toe covered with tattoos, the prince's slave wearing his...” Kors froze in mid-sentence.

“Wearing his what?!” Karina didn't understand.

“His brand. The brand. Clear?”

“Yes! It's so awful! It outweighs everything, and the fact that he is your blood and flesh and that he is your desired son and son of your beloved woman. I wonder if his mother would accept him as anyone? I don't really know him, but I accept him as my brother, no matter what he is!”

“You won't accept him. Neither I nor you. He is not a member of our family – he is nobody, in the literal and figurative sense of the word!”

“You are so embarrassed about him that you are ready to believe and convince yourself that demons exist, and they inhabit human bodies and live in our world.”

“Yes.”

“Father, don't you find it funny yourself?”

“It's not funny! It's not at all funny, Karina. And I hope that when you were there in the castle, you didn't communicate with him.”

“I communicated with him! He saved my life, in the “Lower” people of the Black Bey ambushed us, and Nikto closed me with his body, and received a strong poke in the stomach.”

“You lie, I didn't see any scar on his stomach, just a small burn, and even that seemed to be putting out a cigarette. What I quite believe. He has a scar from a stub on his stomach, not a sword!”

“Because he used the “black water” and “sama” to heal the wound and stay alive. I saw it! He saved me! And I thank him for that!”

“You hope you didn't tell him in a burst of gratitude about your assumptions about your relationship?”

“No, I didn't. But I showed him mother's medallion.”

“Oh! Now it's clear how he knew about Iness.”

“Yes. And I think he understood everything, and if he didn't understand, then I will tell him anyway! Let it be for him even a small consolation that I admit him, since his father betrays him and betrays him time after time!”

“You won't tell him anything! You won't even get close to him. By the way, he is contagious. You are very lucky that you didn't pick up an infection from him in the Castle. Why are you keeping silent? Agree, lucky?”

Karina pulled herself together:

“It doesn't matter! What matters is what you are going to do with him! Is not a drop of gratitude stirred in you after I told you? That he saved my life.”

“No. Quite possibly, it was all rigged. He is cunning. He almost took me for the ride as well as you. He managed to deceive you!”

“What does it mean: “He almost took me for a ride? You scare with these words.”

“Never mind. The main thing is that I resisted.”

“Have you even tried to talk to him? Or did you immediately hit him, father?” Karina looked doubtfully at the dried blood smeared on the floor.

“Well, why couldn't you just try to talk to him?”

“No need to make me a monster, as you love it! I talked to him normally! I behaved with him kindly!”

“Are you serious?!” She was delighted. “And he?”

“He... he also behaved normally,” Kors muttered.

“Here you see! When a person is treated in a good way, he behaves appropriately! I knew this, he wasn’t at all some kind of a moron and a drug addict, how you present him. Ruined his soul and became a demon! Nonsense! There is still a lot of good left in him. It's just that no one has ever treated him humanly. He saw only evil. And you were no exception. I am very sad, father, you, who may be the only one who could, who had to support him, seeing his brand and what else, immediately turned away with disgust! I hope he still doesn’t know that you are his father, otherwise he really felt very painful. If I had a son, I would accept him in any way, even demon, at least a thousand times a murderer and a criminal. This is your child! What else can you talk about!”

“I think he doesn't know,” Kors said.

“What doesn’t he know? That he is your son?”

“Yes.”

“What was it worth talking to him calmly? Just try to find out?”

“I talked to him! I figured out! Look.”

“What is it?”

“Your mother’s engagement ring. It hung on his neck.”

Karina took the decoration:

“Lay me like a seal on your heart, for love is strong as death.” She said. “You have exactly the same. I remember this engraving.” She looked at her father’s right hand, Kors never took off his ring, he wore it all his life, and Karina from childhood remembered it.

“Yes.”

“So he knows?”

“No. He believes that this is a ring of his girlfriend.”

“Rosa?”

“Yes. If he doesn’t deceive me on purpose.”

“So mom...” Karina hesitated, and tears appeared in her eyes, “she put her wedding ring on his neck...”

“Apparently so.”

“So you find him and recognize him! Do you still doubt it?!”

“Never mind. Don’t get involved in this anymore. Listen to me and don’t meddle, I beg you, Karina. I ask you in a good way, still!”

“Father, you're wrong...”

“Leave me. Go do something.”

“What?!”

“Go, talk to Donatella Valerie. She went to the doctor. Clive watched her. Her doctor was questioned and claims that she had a concussion. She was hit with something heavy on the head, but she says she fell down.”

“I don't care about that! It is not interesting. And even if she was hit. Even if you are hinting that Nikto hit her, then there is a way for her. I will not collect facts against him!”

“I don’t claim that it is he. So go and bring me evidence that it’s not him.”

“Will this change anything?”

“I don't think so.”

“Then I don't want to!”

“You have to do your job and my orders! Why is Clive doing his job, and you are not? Do you want me to fire you?”

“In that case, I’d better go and question Zara, according to agents, a former slave from the farm...”

“Why do you need her? Because Lis visited her? You are fixated on Lis, and Arel, and now Nikto!”

“I’m not fixated!”

“Zara is of no use to us!”

“As well as Doni!”

“Why should I argue with you?! To persuade you! You constantly do everything contrary to! I didn’t let you go to the Castle to Arel. I didn’t let you make friends with them. But you wanted to figure it out! You want to figure it out on your own!”

“But my information helped you, and try to say that it is not so!”

“How did it help me? You were just trying to find reasons to soften the accusations. They are all victims of circumstances! And Chris Wass, and Vish Cazen provoked Arela themselves, going up to him at the autumn ball, and summoned him to the battle.”

“Yes!”

“And in your words I provoked Arel, and because of my words he killed Lamy.”

“Yes!”

“And now you don’t want to go to Doni Valerie, because you don’t want to know that your unhappy offended friends beat her on the head.”

“I just want justice, father. I still don’t know for sure what happened to my maid, and who is guilty of the death of the singer from the “Lower”. I don’t justify them, but I want everything to be fair!”

“I will remove you from this business altogether! Do you understand me, Karina?”

Chapter six

Karina and Dony

“I’m in a hurry, I have a lot of things to do,” Dony was not at all disposed to host Karina as a guest. She didn’t even offer her tea.

“I won’t take you much time,” retorted Karina, starting to get angry, she didn’t want to do this job, she was sick of learning something from Dony, because she didn’t see any point in it. This was a meaningless task, which her father sent to fulfill just to occupy her with something else, so that she didn’t interfere with him with her conversations about Nikto. Waste of time. But, unfortunately, Karina had a rule – if she took up work, even it was most uninteresting, she should have done it well. If possible. As best as possible. And so she was sitting in Dony’s living room and was angry. Slaves and servants scurried past with boxes and suitcases, the bustle of moving was in the air.

“You see what’s going on,” Dony told her nervously, “I haven’t packed anything yet, the move is like a fire or an earthquake. At four my fiancé arrives, but nothing is ready, I still need to make up!”

“Now it's only half past three,” said Karina.

“Yes! During half an hour it is impossible to have time to put yourself in order. However, you don’t understand it, you are a warrior, not a woman.”

Karina silently swallowed a mockery, or what it was. She should just do her job well.

“You look beautiful without make up as well,” she said as good-naturedly as possible, not at all sure that her words sounded really sincere. And not because Dony looked bad without makeup, but simply because Karina didn't give a damn about it.

“Ah, don't talk nonsense!” Dony turned away from her, peering attentively at the surface of the mirror. “When I am without make up, I look ill, pale and tormented.”

“But you really were sick recently,” Karina remarked, glad that there was something to cling to in the conversation.

And Dony froze with a snow-white puff in her hand.

“I am absolutely healthy. And if I was sick, it was a very long time ago,” she said in an icy tone.

“I just have to do my job well,” thought Karina once again and said:

“You had a concussion.”

“Is this an interrogation? You follow me!”

“What is it about my simple question? Why are you so nervous?” Karina shrug her shoulders.

“Have you come to ask me about this?”

-Dony, we were hanging in the same company, we were almost friends. We could be close friends if you wanted to. What is strange that I came to find out how you are doing and say goodbye? After all, you are leaving.”

“Yes, I'm leaving. We can write letters to each other if you want to be friends.”

“And aren't you sad to leave all this? Your own theater...”

“No! I want to have a family, give birth to a baby. I will write new plays. There, by the sea. I will be a writer. I will have an ideal life with my beloved man, which I also wish you, Karina. Finally find your ideal man, your second half, and become happy.”

“But wasn't Nikto your ideal man?” Karina suddenly caught herself thinking that she could hardly pronounce that name.

Dony laughed pretendedly:

“Karina, it's all in the past, and I'm leaving. I'm leaving! Understand?”

She seemed to be running away from something, a thought flashed across Karina, as if afraid. She is afraid!

“Have you quarreled?”

“No! Karina, what do you want from me?!”

“Heck!” Karina could no longer drag this out with Dony. “I just need to find out who cracked you on the head so that you had a concussion!” She could not stand it.

“How rough! But at least thanks for the directness. I fell down! Is that all?! Is the conversation over?”

Karina stood up, Dony turned to the mirror, furiously began to wave her brush, putting pink blush on her cheeks.

“Maybe you should, nevertheless, return to your female destiny, Karina, it seems to me that what you are doing doesn’t suit you at all,” the ex-girlfriend of Nikto blurted out suddenly quite sharply. “Before it’s too late! Love someone in the end, and stop shaming!”

Karina froze on the threshold, not looking back, she seemed to force herself to step over it:

“Goodbye, Dony!”

“Good luck!”

* * *

“I just had to do my job well. Damn!” Karina angrily kicked the column to which her horse was tied.

Well, Dony may go to hell. She is afraid of something, very afraid, that's for sure. Well, okay! All the same, it doesn't matter, and nothing will change. Nothing. It is so?

Chapter seven

Karina and Zara

Everything was different with Zara. She herself opened the door for her. She had a small apartment on the very border of “Upper” and “Lower”, most likely not even an apartment, but a little room. Pretty poor thing.

“I was sleeping,” Zara explained languidly, “I apologize for making you wait...”

And Karina looked at her in all eyes and couldn't hide it. This girl Zara... she was pretty sweet, maybe even beautiful, but with some rude predatory beauty. And most importantly, she was all covered in tattoos. The short towel which she turned around herself didn't really cover anything. Legs, arms... When she lazily straightened her black hair, Karina saw that even her armpits were tattooed. “Gods! It's probably terribly painful!” Flashed through Karina's head. She saw black patterns on the temples of Zara, and they obviously continued on and moved to the forehead, only they were hidden by a thick long bang. For some reason, Karina became very interested in what was tattooed on Zara's forehead, under this fringe.

“I work in the evening, I dance,” Zara said, “and during the day I sleep. Now... I will show you all my documents. I have all the documents. I've been checked many times already.”

“You dance?”

“Yes, striptease,” Zara grinned, “in one eatery nearby, but this is not forbidden, right? I'm not a prostitute!”

“It's interesting what makes people cover their bodies with tattoos like this, go dance striptease, how crappy her life should have been, why did she do that with herself,” thought Karina.

“That's all here,” Zara handed Karina a stack of stamp papers.

“I believe you.”

Zara shrugged.

“Then what do you need? Will you drink something? But I only have strong drinks,” she grimaced in a smile, and, having folded in a certain way the filter of a cheap cigarette, lit it.

“Yes, I'll have a drink,” Karina agreed, not believing her ears. For some reason, next to this girl, she immediately wanted to drink, just looking at her, no other thought came to her mind. Well, what else to do with her? Only to drink!”

“Ah, great!” Zara yawned and slowly walked over to the loose buffet.

“One person bought me out. My owner. In his will, he wrote that he freed all his slaves after his death. He was alone. And old,” Zara handed Karina a small glass filled to the brim with a dark, sharp-smelling liquid.

Karina drank it in one gulp.

“You don't look like a snoop,” said Zara, “however, I'm saying that all the documents are in order. I am a free city dweller now. I wish the kingdom of heaven to my lord. And let him feast with the Gods at the same table forever!”

“He freed all his slaves?”

“Yes. I was very lucky,” Zara drank her glass too:

“Some more?”

Karina nodded.

“The old man was very kind.”

“I know that your documents are in order, and this person made sure that you did not have problems with the law. Well, only if you yourself don't make them.”

Zara raised her thickly blackened eyebrows:

“I am not looking for adventures.”

“I hope so. Friends should also be chosen with caution.”

“Clear. I have practically no friends. Rather, I don't have them at all, with friends it's only an extra mess, I know this, life has taught me.”

“No doubt.”

“Well, so which of my friends did you come to talk about? I have nothing to hide.”

“Do you know Atley Alis?”

Zara wrinkled her nose, remembering.

“He is called Lis,” Karina remarked curiously and wondered if Zara noticed how treacherously her voice trembled.

“Ah! Lis!” Zara laughed. “He's a scum! But charming! No. He is not my friend! And not even a buddy. He dropped in a couple of times, gave a long song and dance.” She abruptly moved closer to Karina, causing her to involuntarily recoil.

“He promised that he would promote me and make me the King's mistress. He said he had influential friends in the palace, everything was a complete chatter!” Zara stood up abruptly, again pouring herself a glass and lighting another cigarette, “Where is all his promised?! Chatterbox! There's only one benefit from him – at least he fucks well. Beautifully takes a woman... Hey! Are you leaving?! Did I say something wrong? Who are you?”

“Heck!” Said Zara to herself, when Karina hastily ran out the door, “Was it a snoop, or his girlfriend? Oh shit!”

And she laughed.

Chapter eight

The ball (the beginning)

“No,” Karina raised her voice, “I don't believe you!”

“Believe me,” Clive Gabriel grimaced in a smile, he was sitting in her room now, as at home, drinking strong coffee with alcohol and bulging his already bulged eyes. And he also was saying terrible things.

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