



BRIGHTSTONES

NORTHMEN SAGA ~ BOOK ONE

BLACK STONE OF VALLANIR



R.D. VILLAM

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1

The Blacksmith's Apprentice

*Town of Ortleg, 115 A.R. (115th year of the Age of the Alton Kings) or
24 N.E. (24th year after the founding of the Greater Elniri Empire)*



“William!”
 Bortez the blacksmith called out to his apprentice. He was a tall, well-built young man who was forging a long iron blade with a large hammer. The sound of the crash was deafening, rattling the entire dark, stuffy and hot workshop. The young man didn’t stop. He didn’t appear to have heard Bortez’s call at all.

The blacksmith knew William didn’t have a hearing problem. The young man could usually hear the call despite the sound of metal banging. He wasn’t deaf, he only reverted to his bad habit of daydreaming while working.

He called out once more, “William!”

This time, the dark brown-haired teenager stopped his work. The crashing sound disappeared. He returned the blacksmith’s

gaze while showing his innocent-looking face. "Yes, Uncle?"

"Your iron is still bright red! Still too hard to beat. What an enormous waste of energy! Reheat if necessary. Wait until the color turns yellow. I've said it a hundred times before, didn't I? Look, I know you enjoy hitting. But save your energy for other tasks or important things, will you?"

"Yes, Uncle, I'm sorry. But tell me, apart from work, what else is important?" The young man grinned.

"Huh?" Bortez got confused for a while. "Why don't you figure it out for yourself? Look at what your friends are doing out there!"

"Well. Farming, feeding livestock, or looking for wood," William said. "Unfortunately, I've just realized how boring it all is."

Bortez silenced for a moment, then he chuckled at the thought. "Yeah, you weren't wrong about that."

"But there is a thing that isn't. Traveling with the girls in the village." William smirked. "Right, perhaps I should do that. Uncle, can I take Muriel to the town?"

Bortez glared at the young man for mentioning his daughter's name. "No. After I think about it, you'd better stay here!" He shook his head. "After all, this is the best job for you."

William chuckled. He seemed happy, but then he looked lost again. Something was indeed bothering him.

In the end, Bortez gave up. "That's it. I think it's time for you to get some rest. That's enough for us today, anyway."

William looked at him in surprise. "Shall we close early? How about the order of Master... that man in black—what's his name?"

"Mornitz? It's finished." Bortez pointed to a sword wrapped in thick cloth in the workshop's corner. "He didn't ask for the

scabbard to be made. He said a sword would suffice.”

“Too bad. It’s a magnificent sword, though.”

“Magnificent, because the iron is magnificent, and the person who worked on it is also magnificent.” Bortez chuckled, a little cocky. “Perhaps I’ll make the scabbard as a bonus when I get back from Prutton. I don’t think he’ll be here in a few days.”

They turned off the stove and cleaned up the tools before sitting on the terrace in front of the workshop. They savor the steaming spiced tea served on a small table. On a chilly afternoon, the drink quenched their thirst and warm their bodies. Muriel, Bortez’s only daughter, had brought the drink earlier, but the girl had already gone somewhere.

They both relaxed their arms, backs, and legs. Bortez returned his gaze to William, who again lost in thought. Something was indeed bothering the young man. William appeared to be about to open his mouth to speak several times, but he always kept it shut.

“Do you have anything on your mind?” Bortez finally asked.

William paused before responding, “Uncle, after my mother, you are the nicest person in the world. Your generosity to us is immeasurable. You gave me a job and taught me a lot. I am extremely grateful.”

Bortez cocked his brow in surprise. William was never so solemn. The young man always enjoyed cracking jokes.

“Yeah... because I don’t have a son, William. That’s why,” Bortez said. “I believe you are aware of this.”

“Yes. You even stated you wanted to leave this workshop to me.” William laughed a little.

“Well, it’s not something I can pass on to my daughter, is it?”

“Hmm, why not? It should be possible. Yes, she’s a girl, and a little frivolous, but she’s intelligent, quick to learn, strong,

and always tries her hardest. You need to have more faith in your daughter. I don't understand why you're always hesitant." William sipped his hot beverage.

Bortez stared at him. "Did you just speak with Muriel?"

"Everything I said is my thought. After all, you should be the one talking to Muriel about this, not me. Don't you feel sorry for her?"

"Sorry? What do you mean?"

"You don't care about her."

"What? What are you talking about? I just don't want her to work in a workshop like a man! She should do something... mmm, a job that she deserves more!"

"And what kind of job is that?" William asked. "Are there any better job opportunities in this village or Ortleg? Maybe you just want her to stay at home until it's time for her to get married."

"Hmm... no, I don't think that way. Well, it's not that bad, but and I'm sure you understand I was talking about jobs that should be more suitable for women." Bortez scowled before finally inhaling deeply. "Um, alright, I'll talk to her about it." As he regained his composure, he nodded. "Yeah, maybe she'll be able to run this smithy with you later. You know, you and Muriel are going to grow up soon, and after two more years, it's about time you two get—"

"Uncle, I've been thinking," William cut in as if he knew what Bortez was going to say and thus avoided him. The young man paused for a moment before saying, "I don't want to be a blacksmith for the rest of my life."

"What? Hey, hey, just a minute." Bortez could hardly believe his ears. "What's this? It feels like yesterday that you said you wanted to be the best blacksmith in the world. Why? What is it? Come on, you are just bored. How about you practice making a

magnificent sword again? Yes? I'll teach you a few things later. Look, forging is only the first step. The most important thing is the next step. Measuring the hardness and flexibility in every corner—”

“Yes, yes. Hard in the blade, flexible in the middle.”

“Well, talking is always easy, boy,” Bortez said. “However, you should know that is the art of making good swords. Adjust the proper cooling so we can get both the hardness and flexibility. Grinding and the ending process will be easier if the previous processes are successful.”

Bortez was always ecstatic when he talked about making swords. He was never shy about sharing his knowledge. William was usually very attentive to what he was saying. But this time, the youth's anxiety seemed unbearable.

“May I say a few more words, Uncle?”

“Hmm... of course. Go ahead.”

“I'm sixteen. I think I already know what I want to do with my life.”

Bortez looked at him suspiciously. “What's that?”

“Become a sword warrior!” William raised his fist. He grinned.

Bortez gaped at the young man's childish gesture.

Has this kid gone mad?

Nothing More Than a Mercenary

“**A** sword warrior?” Bortez responded to William’s words in a dismissive style. “That’s ridiculous. Do you know what kind of work is that?”

“I know. It’s a work like... Rogas has. I practice with him a lot. He said I have talent. Good enough to be a warrior.”

“A warrior? Rogas? He’s nothing more than a mercenary!”

“Merce... what?” William looked confused.

“Mercenary! A group of men that the Kingdom of Alton pays to fight against raiders or enemy forces. Something like this exists too in the Kingdom of Tavarin, far south.” Bortez shook his head and said, “Believe me, one day, the two kingdoms will use these mercenaries to fight and kill each other, even though they may be from the same country. From the same village! I know that because I’ve made swords for them several times. Huh, a warrior he said?”

“Rogas always said that he was a sword warrior,” William said adamantly. “Yeah, sort of. Anyway, the payoff is quite a lot, you know? When he comes, he always treats people to food and drinks.”

“Do you mean that being a soldier can make you richer than being a blacksmith?” Bortez moaned. “What kind of idiotic idea is that? They fight, they die, with no money.” He then shrugged. “Yeah, they could get rich, if they’re lucky, so it’s possible. There’s always a possibility. To me, it’s not important.”

“Well now, about what is important and what isn’t, which is more important: making a sword, or using it?”

“Making swords, of course!” Bortez gave a snort. “How can you use the sword if you do not make it?”

“What’s the point of making something if you will not use it?”

“That’s not... What I meant is it is not very important to be rich if it’s not useful to you,” Bortez said. “Rogas came here with a lot of money, but for what? Only to be spent drinking and gambling. What a waste! Do you understand what I’m saying? Ah well, maybe you don’t understand yet.”

“I understand. I’m not a kid anymore. And I don’t like gambling either. But if I drink a little, it’s okay, right?” William grinned. “According to you, Uncle, am I suitable or not to be a mercenary?”

Bortez shook his head again. “William, a year ago, a Tavarin merchant came and said you’d better be a stage performer in his country. He said you have a pleasant face and a wonderful voice. The audience will be happy to see you. Do you remember what your answer was? You said you’d think about it. But after two months, you forget all about it. It’s the same now, you’ll soon forget what Rogas said. For me, it’s obvious that your talent is making swords. When I was your age, I didn’t understand this at all, while you have almost mastered all the techniques now. You’ll be great here. If you believe what I’m saying.”

“Do you think I can’t use a sword well? And become a warrior? Or mercenaries?” William insisted.

Bortez took a deep breath. “Okay, I believe you can. You’re the strongest and the most skilled boy I’ve ever seen. You can be whoever you want to be. I’ve seen you practice swordsmanship with Rogas, and if he’s honest, he’ll admit that you’re much better than him. But you’re still young, William. You will learn later about yourself, what is important and what is not, what is good and what is bad. What you want isn’t always what’s best for you.”

William nodded. He appeared to accept Bortez’s words this time.

Bortez remained unconvinced. There seemed to be something else that the young man was interested in.

“There is one important thing, Uncle, that prompted my desire to master the sword as soon as possible.”

Bortez regarded him with suspicion. “What is it?”

“I want to find my father,” William said without a hint of hesitation in his voice or the look in his eyes. “I need to know why he abandoned me and my mother. Or, if he’s no longer alive, I need to know why. And if someone killed him, I have to kill that person back.”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Bortez narrowed his eyes once more. “What kind of talk is that? Who poisoned your thoughts about killing Rogas?”

“I talked to Rogas about a few things, and with other people.” William shrugged. “I’ll figure out the rest on my own.”

“Don’t listen to Rogas anymore! That worm, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“But your job is making swords. You should be familiar with this killing affair, right?”

“It’s just a job! It doesn’t mean I enjoy it when my family or close friends have to deal with such things.”

William shook his head. “Uncle, since childhood, I always wondered who my father is and where he is now, but no one ever wants to answer. Not my mother, not even you. I always keep quiet when my friends gossip about my mom and dad. How dare they! If it weren’t for Mother’s advice against fighting, I would have beaten them all. Now I’m not a kid anymore. Despite that, no one wants to tell me. If I ended up finding out for myself, would it be wrong?”

“William, your mother forbids you to fight because she knows your strength would harm your friends! Besides... I think she has her reasons for not wanting to tell you about your past.”

“That reason. Are you sure you don’t know about it?” William probed.

“I don’t know! How many times have I told you? When you were two years old, you and your mother arrived. Your mother didn’t say where you were from. She never spoke.”

“People say I come from the north, from a faraway land called Hualeg. How did they know?”

“They’re just guessing,” Bortez said. “You know, because of your blue eyes and your big body.”

“According to you, is that true?” William asked.

“I don’t know.”

William turned gloomy. “I’ve heard that the Hualeg people are cruel, savage, and enjoy killing. Do you think my father is like that?”

Bortez shook his head, unsure. “They’re not as bad as people say. Hundreds of years ago, it was the Hualeg people who came to build villages here. That’s why this area is called Ortleg. It’s the Hualeg language which means ‘red land’. Some people in this area are descendants of Hualeg, mixed with the Alton people. I mean, mocking those Northmen is the same as

mocking themselves. But... William, do you really want to know about your father?"

"Every child wants to know who their father is. If you were me, you'd want to know as well."

"Yeah, that's right." Bortez agreed. "Then maybe you should ask your mother. But do it nicely!"

"What if she still refuses to answer?"

"Yes, what if she refuses?" Bortez asked back.

William silenced for a while, before saying, "I don't know. Perhaps... I will accept it. I'll wait for her to explain."

"Good. You're a good boy, William." The blacksmith patted the young man's shoulder. "Believe me, your mother knows what's best for you. She'll tell you when she sees you're ready."

Money First, Then Things

Bortez traveled to Prutton that afternoon. It's a small town in the south, which is on the other side of the Ordelaehr River. The stocky man used an old borrowed cart to bring metal tools ordered by a merchant. William had been to Prutton before. Bortez should be there just after dusk.

Bortez explained his plans to William before leaving. He said, after his business in Prutton is over, he will continue his journey to Milliton to meet the Alton Kingdom's army commander. The kingdom needed many weapons, and Bortez didn't want to miss out on getting orders.

William once asked why Bortez didn't just stay at Milliton and open his workshop there, where he could be closer to buyers and more competitive with other blacksmiths. Bortez rejected the suggestion. He said that the closer to the big city, the higher the taxes the kingdom took. After all, if his job is good, buyers will seek him out even if he lives in the north.

Whatever the reason, there's one thing Bortez said that might come true. Alton will go to war with Tavarin one day. Although the two kingdoms are officially at peace, minor incidents occa-

sionally occur at the border. It's only a matter of time before that incident escalated into a major one. That was the reason the demand for weapons continued to rise.

Or could this be because the Alton Kingdom was preparing to face an invasion by the Elniri people? Elniri had already conquered the Terran Kingdom in the east, and people said their army was far larger and more deadly than Tavarin's.

William knew little about war. He wasn't interested in it unless it meant more money for his master. But, of course, if the kingdom one day obliged all males of military age to fight, William would comply. Maybe he would force himself to love war.

However, now isn't the time. When he got the chance to practice with his master's handmade swords at the workshop, he did it more for fun than anything else. As a warm-up for his quest for his father's killer, if his father is indeed dead.

His life's goal is in the north, not in the south. That's why William showed no interest when Bortez was about to take him to Milliton. It was better for him to stay in his village. For him, this was a golden opportunity. Rogas was still around Ortleg, and without Bortez, William could find Rogas and practice swordsmanship with him tomorrow more freely without fear of being scolded by his master.

William whistled joyfully as he shut the workshop door. As he was tucking the bars into the door, someone punched him in the shoulder from behind. William turned annoyingly.

A girl with curly brown hair stood in front of him with her hands on her hips. The girl's eyes were fierce, and her clothes were dirty with mud. William did not know what she had just done. But for him, the girl's disheveled appearance could not cover her cute face. If only her behavior could also be sweeter,

like an ordinary girl.

“What?” William asked.

“Is he gone?” the girl asked back.

“An hour ago.”

“Have you told him?”

“Told him what?”

Muriel, Bortez’s only daughter, looked more irritated. “Told him I want to learn how to work on swords, armor, or other more difficult items!”

William sneered. “Smartass. Why do the hard work? The easier it is, the better.”

“But have you told him?”

“Your father is already aware.”

Muriel shook her head, dissatisfied. “Brother, Father won’t understand if you don’t say it clearly!”

“Your father knows best,” William remarked confidently, paraphrasing his master from earlier that day. That suggestion proved to be valuable as well. “When he sees that you’re ready to take everything, he’ll tell you.”

“That means you haven’t told him yet!”

“No need to shout.”

Muriel was getting sullen. “I just want you to tell him! It’s not that hard!”

“If it’s not that hard, why don’t you tell him yourself?” William laughed at her, then smiled. He didn’t want Muriel to get upset.

“He doesn’t want to hear me talking.”

“Calm down.” William took the tray and cups from the table and handed them to Muriel. “As soon as your father comes back, he will talk to you. Maybe he will even tell you something important.”

“What’s important?” Muriel looked at him. William laughed again.

The girl became more curious. “Something like what?”

“Here.” William brought his cheek closer to Muriel. “Kiss here first. Then I’ll tell you.”

“Huh,” Muriel growled in annoyance. If her hands weren’t carrying the tray, she might have punched William in the jaw.

However, she’s still dangerous. The girl kicked William’s shin.

The young man winced, this time in genuine pain. Muriel turned around, walking away quickly.

William yelled as he rubbed his chin, “Hey, don’t forget to take a shower. I know what you were doing. You helped fix Master Benzo’s wagon wheel, right? Take a shower before dinner, so you can be cute again.”

Muriel turned her head and stuck out her tongue.

William burst out laughing.

The young man took a broom and cleaned the workshop terrace from the leaves. His attention then diverted as soon as a male figure appeared and approached him from the corner of the street.

The man was tall, a little taller than William. He had a sharp gaze and thick eyebrows. His hair, mustache, and beard were dark. His black robe covered almost his entire body, reaching down to his knees. William recognized him. It was Mornitz, who had come two weeks ago to order the sword.

Bortez was wrong. That man came earlier than expected.

“Good evening, sir,” William greeted as friendly as possible.

He was about to ask why Mornitz had come so quickly, but stopped when he saw the sour expression on the man’s face. He chose another question.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Don’t you remember me?” Mornitz responded curtly.

William gulped, slightly annoyed by that man’s words. “I remember, sir.”

“Where’s Bortez?”

“My master is going to Prutton.”

“Is my sword finished?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

William grinned. Mornitz’s unpleasant demeanor made him want to prank that man.

“I’m waiting for your money, sir,” he said. “May I see it before you see your sword?”

Mornitz gave a piercing stare.

William calmed him down. “I’m only relaying my master’s message. Money first, then things.”

Mornitz snorted as he pulled a leather pouch out of his robes. The tinkling of coins sounded from inside the pouch as he held them up at William.

“Fifty sazets. Your master told you about the price, right?”

“I’ll check it first, sir.”

William accepted the leather pouch, then sat down in front of the workshop and spilled the contents of the pouch onto the table. With his index finger, he shifted the pieces one by one.

“One, two, three ...”

The entire pieces. Until long enough.

Then he looked up with a grin, didn’t care how much the black-robed man grew impatient.

“Right, it’s fifty sazets. You have paid your payment. Thank you, sir. I’ll get your sword.”

I Would Keep Asking

William put the pouch in his pocket. He stood up, reopened the bars and doors of his workshop, and hurried inside. He rushed to the corner. Besides the long table with metal plates on it, there was a small cupboard embedded in the ground. It was hidden, and the corner was dark. William pulled open the sliding door and tucked the money bag into the cupboard.

It's not ideal storage, but it was pretty safe so far. Bortez once told William he had carelessly put the money he had just received in the open place. As soon as he handed over the goods to the customer, the money disappeared. The customer, who turned out to be a thief, took it again. William was sure this Mornitz, despite his brusque manner, was not a thief. But it's better to be careful. Who knows, maybe he's worse than a thief. Robber, for instance.

William came out and handed the sword to Mornitz. The man checked the sword he ordered. Surface smoothness, length, weight, balance, sharp edges, to the engraving on the handle. Soon he nodded. He looked satisfied.

“Good. Your master is clever.” Unexpectedly, the man in black smiled. It was William’s first time seeing him smile.

“Will you be in Ortleg long, sir?” he asked.

Mornitz shrugged as he looked at William. “I still have to find... some people. Those who can fight.”

“Oh. Mercenary?”

“Something like that.”

“For what?” William asked. “I mean, you will pay them for what?”

“Chasing criminals.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Do you know where I can find them?” Mornitz asked.

“I know a soldier. His name is Rogas. He is in Ortleg. I also know some people who are good at using the sword. And I can do a little too, if... um, how many people do you need?”

Mornitz looked at William, probing. “I just need one, the best. It’s better if you already know the person. Can you help?”

He reached into his pocket, took out two sazets, and gave them to William.

The youth gaped.

“Y—yes,” William stammered, as soon as he realized that the money was for him. He quickly grabbed the money and put it in his pocket. “Of course, sir! I will help you!”

“Meet me in two days at Horsling’s Tavern, after sunset. Do you know the place?”

“North of the town.”

“Bring him... what is his name? Rogas? You two, come. I’ll give you three more if you come, and he’s willing to come with me.”

“Oh, we are coming, sir! Don’t worry.”

Mornitz nodded. “I’ll wait.”

He wrapped his sword in thick cloth, then walked away.

In front of his workshop, William stood watching the figure of Mornitz disappear in the distance. He didn't expect to get extra money today. Turned out Mornitz wasn't a thief, much less a robber. On the contrary, he was a generous person.

The man's offer was also interesting. William thought it would be good if he could join as a soldier accompanying Rogas. The payoff seemed great. But, was it possible? Bortez will not return for the next three days. It was impossible for William to just leave without the permission of the man who he considered his uncle.

More importantly, he couldn't leave if his mother didn't agree. He was frightened to even ask his mother who his father was, let alone beg for permission. William knew that gaining an answer to that issue was his top priority, and he didn't want to get sidetracked by other queries.

William decided. He needed to know who and where his father was right now. Before doing anything else, he had to talk to his mother about it.

The best time to talk to his mother would be after dinner, when the two of them used to sit together by the fire and talk. Before going to bed, his mother always fills the time by knitting blankets or clothes. Knitting had always been his mother's passion, and William would sometimes accompany her when he was tired of practicing the sword.

His mother was forty years old. She had slanted eyes, a slender build with tanned skin, darker than most people in Ortleg. Her long black hair had turned white, but she was still beautiful.

However, even though she looked healthy, she had a serious disease in her lungs. People say it was because she worked too hard when she was young and never cared about her health. She

always did all the work alone, day or night. She never wanted to be helped by others.

She was a strong woman who never complained. That's why many men fell in love with her and wanted to marry her again. She refused them. She always chose to live alone with William.

When William remembered all that and saw how his mother coughed when the cold bites, he always wanted to cry. It seemed impossible that he dared to hurt his mother's heart even for a second. Could he possibly have the guts to ask about his father tonight, and bothered her again?

As he recalled, the last time he had asked about the same thing was three years ago, and she didn't answer. So he had to ask her carefully.

"Mother, may I ask you something? I hope that won't upset you."

His mother stopped her knitting and looked at William, as if studying his heart. She said, "Have I ever been mad at you?"

William chuckled. "No."

"So you can ask anything."

"I want to know who my father is," William said quickly.

Then he waited. His breath caught. He was ready if his mother turned out to refuse to answer, even angry.

She smiled. "Why do you ask?"

William breathed a sigh of relief.

"I wanted to know what he was like," he said.

"If you want to know what he looks like, look in the mirror. You will see your father there. Your face is very similar to his. Only your hair color is distinct. Your hair is brownish black, while his hair is gold."

"Is he still alive? Or is he dead?"

This time, her mother closed her eyes.

After a while, she opened her eyes and said, "He's dead."

William nodded. He was ready with that answer.

"Is he a good person?" he asked again.

"He's the kindest man I've ever known."

"If he's a good man, why are you afraid to tell me about him?"

His mother was silent.

"How did he die? And why?"

His mother remained silent and continued to stare at him, then said, "Why do you want to know?"

"Every child wants to know who their father is," William repeated the words he said to Bortez.

"Yes, but once you know, what will you do?"

"Mother, if you are not willing to tell me now, I will accept it, but every year I would keep asking what happened in the past. Did my father make a mistake? Did he die because someone killed him? Because, if that's what happened, shouldn't I, as his son, avenge his death?"

Lessons From a Story

His mother answered William's words in a trembling voice, "William, you said it yourself, the reason I didn't want to tell you. That day, when I spoke to your father for the last time, it was he who wanted us to go and never look back. He didn't want you to know what happened. He understood, if you ever find out, when you grow up, you will try to take revenge."

"He didn't want me to avenge his death?" William whispered. "Then can I be called a devoted son?"

"Do you think revenge measures your devotion?"

William looked at his mother, confused.

"Your love measures your devotion," his mother said. "If you love your father and your mother, then fulfill our request: don't look back."

"But... what happened?"

"Your father didn't want you to know."

William shook his head. "Mother, you are the wisest person in the world, and I believe so is my father. But how can I learn wisdom from you or my father, if I'm not allowed to know your

life experiences? Or knowing your happiness and suffering. You told me not to look back, but... why should I do it when I don't know what wisdom lies in it? How can I believe in all kinds of rules and restrictions if I don't know what troubles might happen to me in the future?"

His mother closed her eyes again, this time longer. Her tears flowed. "Looks like I really can't hold this from you. One day you'll find out too, and I don't want you to know from anyone else. I will tell you everything I know, as long as you promise not to disobey your father's orders, not to return to his country for any reason. Don't go there. Just take a lesson from this story, and forget the rest. Your life is still wide open in front of you. Can you promise?"

William immediately kneeled. "Mother, I am an ignorant child if I make you cry like this! I promise to follow your advice and my father's. Don't worry."

"Then I will start with the story of my life before I met your father. I never told him this. I had already decided when I married him, all of my past was not important anymore. The most important thing was my next life with your father. I made the same choice when I separated from your father. The most important thing for us at that moment was your life, William. You must understand this."

"Yes, Mother."

"My real name is Ailene, and I come from the land of Tavarin, far to the south."

She told her story. In the city of Tavar, the capital of the Tavarin Kingdom, she was the daughter of a wealthy merchant. Her life was peaceful and her future was secure, especially if she married the son of the king of Tavarin.

However, her father had an enemy, another merchant, who

then incited the royal family to destroy him. Ailene hoped for her future husband to protect her family. But it turned out the prince betrayed her. The prince sent soldiers to arrest them and confiscated all their wealth. Ailene and her father escaped, but they killed all their relatives.

Ailene and her father crossed the woods and fled to the land of Alton in the north. They went into hiding, then started life as small traders. Both of them went around selling and buying merchandise to towns and villages around Alton.

They dared not move too far near the country of Tavarin in the south or the Elniri dominion in the east, so they ventured to the cities further north. Unfortunately, when they were in the northern village, the Hualegs came to attack and they killed the father, along with the villagers.

“That’s when your father came to help. He’s a Hualeg too, but he’s different. He freed me from the hands of those people. Your father’s name is Vilnar, and he’s the most perfect man I’ve ever seen in my life. Strong, brave, honorable. No one compares to him.”

The mother smiled as she said each of those words. She told how she married Vilnar and lived happily on the banks of the river Ordelaehr, far from her husband’s home in the north. In the same house, Ailene gave birth to William.

“Vahnar was the name your father gave you when you were born, but I changed it to William once we both lived in Ortlegh when you were two years old, just as I changed my name at the time to Elise. I didn’t mean to ignore the name your father gave you. I only did it to protect us from your father’s enemies. William is a common name in the south, and I like it.”

Vahnar?

That name sounds foreign and filled William with curiosity.

He wanted to ask what that name meant, but then he let his mother continue the story.

However, the next part was told by his mother in a more sad tone. His mother told how the three of them had gone to Hualeg, to his father's hometown, a few months after William was born. There, they experienced a series of sad events. William's grandfather and his eldest uncle died, while his father became embroiled in a dispute with his two other brothers.

Not wanting to prolong the feud, his father took William and his mother away again from Hualeg. But while boating on the river, his father's enemy caught up. His father told the two to go south alone while he confronted the men. They split up. Since then, his mother never saw his father again.

"So, is that it? That's all you know? Didn't you see what happened after you two separated?" William asked. "Mother, maybe my father is still alive!"

His mother shook her head. "Your father is dead. Otherwise, he would have caught up with us. That was his promise to me, and I always believed in his every word. I rowed south for days until we finally arrived at our old house by the river. There I waited with you. Days. Weeks. Months. Until finally, I had to accept the fact that he was gone, and we both had to start our new lives without him. I then carried you away and arrived at Ortleg."

William tried to understand it. He looked at his mother. "Who do you think were the people who attacked Father? My uncle and his men?"

His mother looked back at him cautiously. "Listen, son, it doesn't matter anymore."

"How can you say that?" William asked. "Of course, it matters ..."

“Then you don’t understand why I told you this story!” His mother looked away, all her sadness mixed with annoyance.

William caught his breath. Quickly, he kneeled.

“I’m sorry, Mother. I won’t ask again.” He gripped his mother’s fingers tightly. “Believe me, you don’t have to worry. I understand that there are more important things than bringing up the past. It’s just... I guess I still need some time to admit that knowing my father’s killer isn’t something important anymore.”

Luminous Black Stone

Ailene watched her son, who left the house without a word. Pensive for a moment, she then continued knitting in front of the fireplace. The sound of creaking firewood accompanied her, but she could also faintly hear the wind blowing from the courtyard. It seemed William was back in training with his sword, even though it was getting late.

Ailene didn't like it when her son spent too much time with his sword, especially at night. Apart from being worried, it was also because she didn't know who William got the sword from. She wasn't sure that Bortez the blacksmith gave the sword, so he most likely borrowed it from a retired soldier in the village. Then, after a while, it finally became William's.

A sword would bring William closer to the harsh life which Ailene wanted to avoid. That's why she didn't like it. She could not forbid him, though. Forbidding William to use the sword was the same as forbidding him from becoming a man. It might be possible at first, but it would be a waste in the end.

After all, this could be a good thing. William had overflowing energy. By practicing, he could vent his emotions when he was

upset. As long as he didn't hurt anyone. After he was tired, his annoyance would dissipate and he could sleep soundly.

Ailene was still worried. The conversation with her son tonight wasn't something that would be easily erased from memory. Maybe it would never go away. William had promised that he would never again question her about his father. But Ailene knew very well, her son always had a desire that couldn't be stopped when it had exploded. There was no guarantee that one day he would not go to the north to satisfy all his curiosity, as well as his grudge.

Ailene became restless and suddenly felt guilty. What would happen if William really went north and disobeyed his father's request? How could she dare to meet her husband in the afterlife?

She now regretted it. She should have been able to hide this story about Vilnar and his origins a little longer. Even forever, if it was necessary. Now everything was open, and could never be closed again.

That night Ailene could not sleep well. Every time she tried to sleep, Vilnar's face seemed to appear before her, staring at her full of anger, blaming her for telling William about their past. When she finally fell asleep, the figure then returned to her dream and scolded her again.

Ailene woke up, and the sadness made her condition worse.

One day passed, Ailene felt her chest hurt more and more. She coughed without being able to stop. She hoped that William, who was sleeping in the next room, didn't hear it. But that's not possible. In the middle of the night, her son came into her room.

Seeing Ailene's deteriorating condition, William immediately said, "Mother, I'm sorry for making you sick like this!"

Ailene replied with a shaky breath. "Don't... Don't say that. I

just... can't sleep.”

“I will look for Master Kanlon. He has medicine for you.”

“No need.... You... just accompany me tonight. Maybe I'll be able to sleep well... if you're by my side.”

William sat beside Ailene all night. It was true. That night Ailene could sleep well, even though dreams still came to her.

But this time, the dream was different. It felt more peaceful.

Her husband's figure came back and smiled at her. The man's hand caressed Ailene's head gently. He said, “Ailene, I am happy to see you again.”

Aileen cried immediately. “What do you mean? Last night you came to scold me because I told our son about our past.”

“Those who came were not me. Don't believe them, don't think about them. You know I have never been and could never be mad at you.”

“I miss you... I want to be with you.”

“Ailene, we will be together again. But before that, I want you to do one important thing. Pass my message to our son. Tell him: be an honorable man who can maintain his behavior, and be a light to those around him, as the meaning of his name, Vahnar Vallanir. The Luminous Black Stone of Vallanir. Say to him, he must never hesitate to stand firm and uphold the values of truth and justice. He doesn't need to doubt, because all those values are already in him, if he dares to look for them, and is always honest with himself.”

Ailene shook her head, unsure. “Our son is still very young. I'm afraid he won't be able to live up to your high expectations if no one shows him the way.”

“He will learn. Yes, he will fall, but he will rise. That was the path he had to take. Soon he will be an adult. Ailene, you've given him the best advice. But the time will come for him to

choose his path in life, while we can only pray that his choice is the best for him.”

Ailene nodded, but was still crying. “I’ll pass it on to him.”

“Get up and tell him now. Tell him I love him very much and am proud of him.”

“When I wake up, will you leave me again?” Ailene asked.

“I’ll wait for you here,” the man replied.

“Then wait for me.”

Ailene woke up. This time she happily patted the shoulder of his son, who was sleeping beside her. “Get up, William. I just met your father, and he has a message for you.”

William looked surprised, but Ailene didn’t care, and told him about the entire dream. After that, she could smile with relief, because all the pain seemed to have disappeared.

After he heard her words, William was sad. “Mother, I wish my father could speak to me directly because I want to meet him, see what he looks like, and hear what he sounds like.”

“You will meet him, but later. A long time from now. For now, I’ll meet him first. He’s been waiting for me.”

William’s face went pale. “What... what do you mean, Mother?”

“William, I’m going back to sleep.”

Ailene lay down on the bed, then caressed her son’s face. “I have said a lot of advice in my life. I won’t say it again. You already know which is best for you. My love is always with you. Take care of yourself. God bless us.”

William was stunned. He could not speak and could only cry.

Ailene smiled again because for her, it was okay. She knew her son’s love no longer needed to be expressed in words. She said goodbye to her son in silence, then closed her eyes.

That night Ailene fell asleep and did not wake up again.

After the Funeral

William sat in front of his mother's grave. After he had prayed, Master Kanlon, the village headmaster, and some neighbors came over. They touched William's shoulder and said various expressions of condolences. He remained silent. From morning until noon, when finally his mother's body was covered with earth, he hardly said a word.

Perhaps it was only this morning that he could speak when he finally steeled himself to leave his mother and went to the village headmaster's house and told him that his mother was dead. After that, it was Master Kanlon who took care of the whole funeral.

When he remembered that, William looked up and said to the man, "Thank you..."

He wanted to say more, but only those two words he could say.

"If you still need anything, tell me," Master Kanlon said. "We will all help you."

"Yes, sir."

After that, they all left, and William returned alone again. He sat wiping the ground in front of him, then looked up. A tiny

bird flew and then perched on a branch of a tree not far behind his mother's grave, among the white and golden yellow flowers. Another bird came along, and the two birds seemed to talk up there.

William took a deep breath. Two months have passed since the snow melted. In mid-spring, everyone in the village, as well as every other creature, was usually filled with renewed vigor. There was so much to be done, there was so much to achieve. So did William two days ago. At that moment, all his desires were overflowing, and he was so sure of himself. He felt capable of conquering the world. Now, is all that desire still there?

His mother's death was unexpected. It came so fast, as if it happened and then just passed without him being able to do anything. It made William realize that in the end, there was something far more powerful than him. Something that seems indifferent to the desires that everyone has, and which would take anything whenever it wants.

William knew his mother was in pain. Yet he still found it hard to believe and never imagined that she would die at such a young age. And imagining that his mother's illness got worse after he asked about his father made him regret. Maybe he shouldn't have asked that night, and his mother could live forever.

William can no longer crying. All his tears had spilled from night to morning. Or maybe, because he could understand at last, that his mother left him in peace. William tried to recall his mother's message from last night, and more than that, her last smile.

He smiled. "Mother, take good care of yourself there. You don't have to worry. I'm fine here."

He stood up, looked at his mother's grave one more time, then turned around. Muriel was still standing, waiting for him.

The curly-haired girl's eyes were still red and wet. William didn't know how much she cried. When he looked at her, the girl couldn't say anything.

"Your father isn't home yet?" William asked the girl, though of course he already knew the answer.

"Not yet," Muriel answered. "He doesn't know about this yet.... I'll tell him."

William nodded, trying to smile. "Come on, let's go back to the shop."

Muriel's eyes widened. "Do you still want to work today?"

"I still have work to do. After all, I'd rather do something ..."

"Brother, you don't have to force yourself. You can rest today."

"I'm fine," said William.

Muriel nodded. The two of them walked side by side towards the workshop in the side yard of Bortez and Muriel's house. When they walked, several of the villagers they encountered nodded at William and offered their condolences once more. He only smiled and thanked them in return.

In the workshop, he worked, trying to let go of his sadness. He took out his tools, then gathered some pieces or plates of iron that he had to forge. The remnants of yesterday's work. This was the last order of a merchant from the east. Some of them were already semi-finished, which Bortez would grind and finish later. Some others still have to be forged.

While he was working, Muriel accompanied and helped him heat the stove. The girl looked enthusiastic and happy, so William allowed her to join the forging.

Muriel smiled broadly as she removed the plugs from her ears. "Can I try it? But... my father ..."

"He wouldn't know," William said. "And if he does, I don't

think he'd be mad, as long as you do it right. Can you do it?"

"Yes," Muriel rolled up her sleeves.

William smiled. From the outside, the girl's body looked weak, but when she was working, her muscles seemed to stick out like a man's. Muriel was only fifteen, but when she was angry, maybe she could knock out a grown man with her fist.

After putting on a face mask and tarpaulin to cover her body and putting back the earplugs, Muriel forged. Her hammer swung and hit the metal in front of her. The rhythm of clashing metal clanged. Beside her, William heated the stove by raising and lowering a lever to blow the wind and adding firewood.

In a short time, the temperature of the furnace and the room were getting hotter. Smoke billowed out through the chimney. William and Muriel's sweat dripped even more heavily, but both of them grinned.

William was sure the girl must smile behind her mask. She was such a lovely girl, and he was happy to be with her. Muriel's presence made him able to forget his sadness.

A loud knock from behind suddenly sounded through the metal clang. William turned. He noticed the figure of a well-built, broad-shouldered man standing with a grin in front of the door.

The age of the man was not clear, but probably about ten years older than William. His hair and beard were the color of corn. His eyes were witty. But when the man exchanged glances with William for a few moments, his grin subsided and he cleared his throat.

William walked up to him and said, "Rogas."

The man nodded. "William!" His sound was loud, to rival the metal slamming sound made by Muriel. "Sorry! I just heard what happened. Please accept my condolences!"

“Thank you.”

“I heard yesterday you were looking for me. Do you want to practice?”

“No.” William glanced briefly at Muriel, who was still working.

The girl watched him.

William wasn't sure what the girl had in mind when she saw him talking to Rogas. He got the feeling that Muriel didn't like the man's presence. She probably kept working on purpose and didn't stop the noise she was making, so that Rogas wouldn't feel comfortable and left quickly.

The Perfect Time To Have Some Fun

William smiled at Muriel to keep the girl from getting upset, before saying to Rogas, “Let’s talk outside, so we don’t have to scream.”

They both walked out.

In the courtyard, after being quite a distance from the workshop, William said, “Someone’s looking for you.”

Rogas frowned. The man had a characteristic. He had an expression that can change drastically. Sometimes when he was cheerful and laughing, his eyes curved as if it was laughing too. But if he was angry or upset, that face could turn sinister, with emotions that seemed like they were about to explode. The last thing usually happened often when he was drunk. Earlier, when he had expressed his condolences, his grief seemed genuine, almost childlike. Now, when William told him that someone was looking for him, Rogas’ face turned suspicious. His eyes were piercing, his smile turned sour.

“Who?” the man asked.

“Mornitz, the one who ordered the sword last week. He’s looking for mercenaries to help him catch criminals. Someone

good with the sword.”

The suspicious expression on Rogas’ face was replaced with curiosity. “How much is he willing to pay?”

“It seems big. He gave me two sazets yesterday and will give me another three if you’re willing to come with him,” William answered.

A moment later, he wondered to himself, why did he have to be so honest? Rogas shouldn’t need to know about these two and three pieces, right?

“What else did he say?” Rogas asked.

“If interested, meet him at Horsling’s Tavern tonight.”

“When did he ask for this?”

“Two days ago.”

“Why didn’t he ask us to meet him that day?”

“Maybe he must go somewhere. How would I know?”

Rogas scratched his chin. His eyes stared at William without blinking. “Well, let’s see about that first. If the offer is attractive, I’ll take it. Otherwise, I will return to Alton and rejoin the royal army.”

“Hmm... yes, good luck.”

Rogas’ eyebrows rose, his eyes staring in surprise. “Don’t you want to meet him? Isn’t he going to give you more money?”

William hesitated, then shook his head. “I don’t know. Frankly, at first, I was even interested in joining as a mercenary, but now I don’t think so. You go, I’ll stay.”

“Hey, I think you should go too. At least you come with me to Horsling’s Tavern and take the money from him. After that, you can go home. Come on. Pretty good, right? You can get three pieces for a bit of fun!”

William was pensive. Yes, that’s right, he thought. There’s nothing wrong with just coming to Horsling’s Tavern. He just

needs to get the money, then go home, and doesn't need to go with them. What's important is the money.

Finally, he nodded. "Okay..."

"Good. Let's go. If we leave now, we can reach the tavern shortly after sunset." Rogas patted William on the shoulder with a big smile. "Hey, I'm telling you, if someone is at their saddest time, that's also the perfect time to let go a little and try to have some fun. Come with me, we will relax for a while there. You'll feel better later, trust me."

A person with a poor reputation like Rogas gave advice? William looked at him suspiciously. "You want me to gamble with you, don't you?"

Rogas laughed. "You know I can help you do that. I'm the expert. But if you don't want to, then you don't have to. We'll just have a drink. Agree? I heard the drinks are pretty good over there, you know?"

"I don't know. I only know the place, but have never been in."

"Well, now is the time to know."

William hadn't answered yet. Suddenly, he hesitated again. Should he go? Shouldn't be a problem, right? Even a few drinks shouldn't be a problem.

Finally, he said, "I told Muriel first."

"I don't think you need to tell her. She's not your mo—" Rogas held back his words as soon as he realized something, then grumbled softly. "Okay. Hurry. We have to get going so we don't get there too late."

William walked into the workshop. It was only then that he realized that Muriel's metallic clanging sound had stopped. The girl was now taking off her gloves while frowning at him.

William replied with a wide grin. "Is all the work done?"

Without feeling guilty, he approached the girl and looked at

the long, forged iron plate. "Yeah, needs a little more work here. This part is still not thin enough. Let me finish it later."

"What is he doing here?" Muriel asked. She did not hide her displeasure at all.

William glanced at her for a moment, then apologized, "Mmm... sorry, I left you to work alone earlier."

"That's not the problem. I don't like him. Neither did my father. Father said he was a bad influence on us. For you."

"I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me," William said, annoyed. He wanted to tell Muriel that his father might have judged Rogas too badly. "Mornitz wants to see him. Rogas agreed to meet him at the Horsling's Tavern. We both. I'll go there."

Muriel looked shocked. "That's the tavern north of the town, right? Isn't that a place for adults? If my father was here, he wouldn't have permitted you!"

"Well, I'm an adult too. I'm free to go wherever I want," William said. "Your father knows that. Instead, he said I should try to have fun outside instead of continuing to work in the workshop. Something like this is a good example."

Muriel scowled again, between belief and disbelief.

"Don't worry, nothing will happen," William said. "Your friends also usually go out at night, even as far as Prutton. Maybe I'll meet your friend in the tavern too."

"Then I'm coming."

William gaped. "You? Come with me? What for?"

"To keep you from doing stupid things!"

"Now that is precisely the stupid thing from you. I don't need you to take care of me!"

"I'm coming!" Muriel said, even more insistent.

"Are you serious?"

“Yes!”

“But... Uh, whatever.” William shrugged. “Fine, as long as you do nothing stupid.”

In his heart, he regretted. Maybe he shouldn't have stopped Muriel too harshly. It would only challenge her even more to do the opposite. “If your father was around, he wouldn't have given you permission.”

Muriel stuck out her tongue, mocked him. “Well, I'm an adult too. So you don't have to worry either.”

“I don't believe it,” William grumbled. “You're still a little girl, and now I have to take care of you!”

Common Jokes

Horsling's tavern was at the foot of a rocky hill north of the town of Ortleg. This humble tavern and several small inns in the vicinity were the northernmost bustling point in the Kingdom of Alton.

Its remote location made it rarely visited by royal soldiers, so the tavern often became a gathering place for bandits from the south who were trying to escape to the north. Hunters who descended from the forests, as well as merchants who came from various regions who brought their bouncers, joined these bandits. All of them were fearless, risk-takers, as well as cunning and dangerous to anyone who wasn't alert.

But that didn't mean it's a chaotic place. This tavern was safe because the owner, Master Horsling, was a respected person. He was big, had a thick beard, and liked to laugh, so he seemed friendly. But there were many stories about him, both real and exaggerated, about him being good at fighting and having killed many bandits. No one dared to get into trouble with him. That's why in his tavern, as well as in other places around it, visitors can feel quite safe.

Rogas told all of that. Therefore, William could now sit comfortably in the tavern without being afraid to see the behavior of the rude people around him who kept laughing or shouting while drunk and gambling. William was never afraid to gather with people like this. Even at other times and in other places, he often also drank wine until he was drunk. The thing was, now there's Muriel with him. If Bortez found out that William had brought his daughter to a place like this, the blacksmith will scold him.

When he remembered that, William felt annoyed again. He should have thought about this one more time before leaving. Besides, Muriel's appearance, which was like a nice girl from the village, could also be a problem.

Rogas advised before they departed. If it could be called advice.

He said, "If you dress like a grown woman, which is revealing, don't blame these bastards if they think you're a prostitute and offer you money to be with you. It's up to you if that's what you want; none of my business. If you dress like a country girl like this, they can get suspicious, too. They will think, why would a girl like you come here? There must be something. Whatever it is, if they ask all kinds of questions about us, I don't like it."

Muriel only replied to Rogas' words with an annoyed snort. It seemed the girl didn't care, and would still go with her usual clothes, only to irritate Rogas. It was her right, but William was sure Rogas' words had some truth in them. At Horsling's Tavern, they had to be careful not to be the center of attention, even if they had no money to steal. Basically, a child or a good girl shouldn't go to this kind of place.

"Then what should we do?" he asked.

"Give her your clothes," Rogas answered. "Let her look like a man so that no one bothers her."

In the end, that's what they did. Muriel was wearing William's shirt, pants, and vest. All the clothes were William's size, so of course, they looked too big for her. The girl also hid her curly hair under the hood, so she now really looked like a boy. Meanwhile, William was wearing his other clothes.

They arrived at the tavern before evening. The three of them entered and sat in the room's corner, then ordered wine and drank. They tried to appear like ordinary visitors so that no one cares about their existence.

Everything was according to Rogas' wishes.

After drinking one bottle, the man asked William, "Where is that man?" He looked here and there. "We've been here long enough. It's already sunset outside."

William also looked around. In his observation, there were over twenty people inside the tavern. Some played gambling accompanied by several girls in revealing clothes. Others just watched the game or sat talking at the table drinking and smoking cigars. Mornitz's tall figure was nowhere to be seen.

He shrugged. "Maybe soon."

"If he doesn't show up soon, I'll go," Rogas said. "Tomorrow I will return to Alton. But first, maybe I'll find a nice place to stay... and find a girl." He smirked as he glanced at Muriel. "Actually, I wanted to invite you to accompany me. Maybe you want it too. Hmm?"

Muriel, who had been silent all this time, suddenly glared. Her face was bright red. She almost threw the water in her mug on Rogas' face. William held her hand quickly.

"Hey, don't listen to him," he said, hoping it wouldn't catch the attention of those men around them. "Rogas is an asshole, but he's just kidding."

"That's right." Rogas nodded. "You can mock me back. Such

jokes are common in a place like this.” He gave off his ugliest grin. “Besides, I know that if you want to find a room, you’d prefer to be accompanied by William. Right?”

“Haha... good joke, Rogas.” William gripped the collar of Rogas’ shirt. If he wanted to, he could just punch the man and fight him. Their stature was almost the same, and William was not afraid of him. William did not hesitate to do so, even though the man was older. But he quickly realized Rogas was only joking, even though it was an annoying joke.

The problem, of course, was that Muriel couldn’t take the joke as lightly as William. Her face was getting redder, though now it seemed more from embarrassment. When William looked at her, the girl immediately looked away.

William turned to Rogas and pulled back his collar, wondering if maybe Rogas was drunk already. “Time to apologize.”

“Um, yes.” Rogas’ expression immediately changed, as if filled with regret. “Muriel, I’m sorry. Really sorry...”

Which was definitely a lie. William wasn’t sure Rogas really felt guilty. Men like him deserved to be beaten once in a while. Yes, William was determined to do it later. But of course not here.

Muriel turned. Just staring at William. She didn’t want to look at Rogas one bit. Her jaw hardened. “I want to go home.”

“Now? Are you sure?” William asked, somehow relieved too. Maybe the sooner they leave, the better.

“I love walking around here, and I also love seeing the people playing those cards. But I don’t enjoy sitting with a loser like him.”

“Hey...” Rogas smirked. “I already apologized.”

“Shut up, Rogas,” William snapped, then turned and looked at Muriel again. “Okay, if that’s what you want, we go home

now.”

“Wait a minute,” Rogas held back. “Mornitz hasn’t come yet. How do I know who it is when you’re gone?”

“It’s your fault for causing trouble,” William replied. “You can ask Master Horsling, anyway.”

“Yeah... I could do that, but—”

“Shut up. That’s him,” William interrupted as soon as he saw a tall man enter the room.

Use It To Book a Room

The tall man spoke briefly to Master Horsling at the bar and ordered a drink. He looked left and right and didn't grab anyone's attention.

William almost called out to him, but Rogas grabbed his arm.

"What?" William said.

"Let me see him first." Rogas' face turned serious. It must have been because he had just smelled money. "I don't want to deal with poor people."

He was greedy and arrogant. William muttered.

Across the room, Mornitz sat behind one table. His face was unsmiling, as usual. William was still in the dark corner of the room, so he couldn't find him. William grew impatient. He didn't understand what Rogas was waiting for.

When two large bottles of wine reached Mornitz's table, Rogas grinned. "He has good taste. And money. Okay, you can call him, William. Ah, no, you go there. I will follow you."

William hated being ordered like that. But if it could help him complete this matter as soon as possible, he wouldn't hesitate to do so. He got up from his seat and crossed the room, squeezing

his way among the people still engrossed in watching beside the gambling tables.

As soon as William showed up, the arrogant man stared at him.

“Did you bring your friend?” the man asked.

“Yes. He’s in—”

Before William had finished speaking, Rogas came and greeted Mornitz. “I heard you need help, sir?”

Rogas’ wide smile spread out.

Mornitz didn’t answer right away. He studied Rogas, as if trying to convince him of something, then nodded. “Only from the right person.”

“I am the right person.” Rogas sat in front of the man in the black robe. He told Mornitz about himself, about his experiences with the royal army, and so on. Promoting himself.

Mornitz seemed quite patient with the ramblings. The black-robed man remained silent, but his eyes stared at Rogas without blinking.

William felt bored and neglected. He looked at the corner where he had been sitting. Muriel was already standing, waving. The girl’s face scrunched up again. William understood.

He said to the two men, “Sir, I have to go.”

Mornitz nodded without a smile and only glanced at him.

While Rogas grimaced. “Thank you, William. We’ll meet again later.”

William nodded. Just as he turned around, Rogas resumed his ramblings. This time it’s about how he beat up a gang of criminals in the south and killed them with no mercy. William could only mutter. To him, Rogas’ boasting sounded full of bullshit.

William and Muriel rushed out of the Horsling Tavern filled

with raucous laughter and the smell of liquor. They were both relieved because on the outside, it was quiet compared to the commotion inside.

William led Muriel down the cobbled streets beside the hill. The villagers had put some torches on the left or right of the road, and the moonlight made the darkness of the night a little less.

During the walk, William said little, until finally, Muriel said, "Brother, you look upset."

"No. Hmm... yes, maybe. A little."

"Why?"

"I don't know," William remembered, at exactly this same time last night he still had time to talk with his mother, where his mother finally told him many things about their past. He felt sad again.

Muriel smiled, seeming to know what was on William's mind. "I think your mother is calm now and happy in heaven."

"I know." William smiled back.

"If you're still sad, why go to a place like this?"

"Rogas said, when we're sad, we should have fun first so that later we can feel better."

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Not really."

"Huh! I told you Rogas is annoying, and a bad influence on us. You don't want to believe it!"

William chuckled. "Yeah, I think you're right. So if I ever see him again, I'll beat him up."

"Good! I want to join too!" Muriel raised his fist.

Both laughed.

"Then what business did you guys have with the black-robed man?" Muriel asked.

“Mornitz? He’s looking for mercenaries, and Rogas is willing.” William was silent for a moment. “And at first, I wanted to come too.”

Muriel’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I wanted to come along. But Mornitz only needs one person.”

“If you leave, how about your job at the workshop?”

“I won’t be working in the workshop forever, Muriel.” William looked at the little girl beside him. “One day I will go.”

Muriel gaped, apparently not expecting it. “You mean... you’re going to leave us? Leave me and my father?”

“There are many things I want to do. I’ve told you before. I want to go to other places. To other countries. From the stories, they all seem interesting. But I’m not leaving now.” William tried to laugh.

But Muriel didn’t laugh. Her face was grim. “If you go...” she said hesitantly, “... can I come with you?”

“That’s not possible. Your father will beat me first.”

“Yeah, but when I grow up, I’ll do it!”

“Your father needs you here. Do you want to leave him?”

“We both need you here, but you still want to go!”

Both fell silent.

For a while, the two of them walked without words, until finally, William said, “We’d better talk about something else.”

“Anyway, I’m glad you didn’t go with Rogas!” Muriel said. “I have a bad feeling if you go with him!”

William laughed. “Why? If I can get some money from him or Mornitz, I can give some of it to you.”

“I don’t want your money!”

“At least, I should have got those three pieces.”

“What three pieces?”

“Mornitz said if I could bring Rogas to him, he would give me three pieces of sazet,” William replied.

“And he didn’t give it?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you ask?” Muriel asked.

“Yeah... looks like he forgot about that.” William thought to himself, is it true that Mornitz forgot? “Never mind, I don’t need the money.”

“Three sazets are pretty good!”

William grinned. “Yeah, it is. We can use it to book a room here.”

Muriel growled and immediately punched William’s arm hard. The young man grimaced, then laughed again.

“But you’re right.” William froze. “Why didn’t I ask him?”

“Yes!”

“That money is my right!”

“Yes!”

“Alright, I’ll go back to the tavern and ask Mornitz for the money.” William immediately turned around.

“What?” Muriel looked shocked. She quickly grabbed his arm. “You want to come back there? No! What I meant earlier, next time something like this happens, it’s better if you tell him what is on your mind. Don’t hesitate! Only that!”

“I’ll go there,” William answered stubbornly. “We’re still close to the tavern. Why? You’re not coming and want to go straight home?”

“Oh, of course, I’m coming with you!” Muriel said. “Once again, to make sure you do nothing stupid.”

Do Something Stupid

William and Muriel turned around, headed back north towards the Horsling's Tavern. This time they walked faster because William was afraid that Mornitz and Rogas would soon leave the place.

The two of them arrived. William told Muriel to wait outside, hiding in a quiet corner of the street. Muriel was happy to do it because she had no interest in going back into the tavern.

Unfortunately, Mornitz and Rogas were not there anymore. In the tavern, there were only a few people who were talking in low voices. William didn't know what to do. Then he turned, and his eyes met the eyes of the big man standing behind the bar counter.

Master Horsling smiled as soon as William saw him.

That's right, William thought. The owner of this tavern probably knew where Mornitz and Rogas had gone. He approached him.

Master Horsling said first, "Your two friends have just left. I saw them walking towards the river. If you run, maybe you can catch them. But be careful, son, at night that place can be

dangerous. Did you bring something to defend yourself?”

William was confused. “Mmm... what do you mean, sir?”

“Sword, knife, or something?”

“No.” William shook his head. Now his confusion mixed with fear. “I brought nothing.”

“Then take this one.” Mr. Horsling’s hand grabbed something from behind the bar counter. A long dagger with a leather sheath. The length of the dagger was almost an arm’s length—from the wrist to the elbow. Master Horsling placed the thing in front of William.

The young man stared. He took turns looking at the dagger on the table and Master Horsling in front of him.

“What do you mean, sir? You... want to lend it to me?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that?” William asked in disbelief.

“Bring it back when your business is done.” Master Horsling smiled as he twirled his bushy mustache.

“But... why should I take it?” William didn’t want to touch the scary thing in front of him. He suspected that something was wrong. “Is something going to happen?”

Master Horsling shrugged his shoulders. “It’s been a long time since anyone has dared to do wrong things here. But time passed. Who knows, someone will try to do something stupid. So you better watch out.”

“But... if the situation is dangerous, why don’t you suggest that I just go away? Why are you giving me a dagger?”

“Well, you can go home. And you will be fine at your house. But sometimes...” Master Horsling brought his face closer and whispered, “... you have to do something strange and unexpected, once in your life, especially when you are still young. You can learn more about yourself. About something you didn’t

know that will lead you to the next path in your life.”

William stared. The next path? What is he talking about?

They stared at each other.

The tavern owner pulled back and smiled. “So? What is your choice? Do you want to take it?”

William gulped. His heart was beating fast. At first, his fear arose because he was not a soldier like Rogas. He had never been involved in things that grazed danger like this. But if he thought more about it, why should he hesitate? Doesn't he already have pretty good swordsmanship? After all, this long dagger is also similar to a sword, only slightly different. He also always practiced every day with a much heavier sword. And if the situation turns out to be dangerous, he can still hide or run away from there. The important thing is that he saw first what will happen.

Suddenly, an overflowing curiosity replaced his fear. Master Horsling's words occupied William's mind about how he might get to know himself better. That man's gleaming gaze seemed to hide something, which made him curious. Yes, he must know something. Should William ask further?

But instead of asking, William grabbed the dagger lying on the table. His breath was rising and falling, holding back his emotions and his increasingly erratic heartbeat.

“I... I will return the dagger later.”

Master Horsling smiled again. “Calm down, boy. Probably nothing bad would happen. But you know, we need to be careful. And remember, don't act rashly. Always look back.”

William was stunned. Someone gave one more piece of advice to him, and this time it felt strange, for it was so different from the message his father had given his mother last night: never look back.

The young man was silent for a moment, before replying, “Yes, sir.”

“Go now, before it’s too late.”

William came out of the tavern with mixed feelings.

Before it’s too late? What’s too late?

“Shh,” Muriel’s thin whistle sounded. The girl emerged from the darkness and tiptoed over to William.

“Did you get the money?” She grinned.

William shook his head, suddenly a little hesitant about his intentions as soon as he saw Muriel.

“Rogas and Mornitz are gone, toward the river,” William said. “But I will go after them. Maybe I can get my money there.”

Muriel was confused. “Go after them? Is it really necessary?” Her brow furrowed. Her gaze fell on the long dagger William was holding, and her eyes immediately widened. “What is that? Why are you carrying a dagger?”

“Just in case. For protection,” William replied as he hid the dagger under his shirt. “Don’t ask too many questions, okay? Look, maybe the situation will get dangerous. So I think you better go home first. Let me go alone.”

Muriel was getting shocked. “If it’s really dangerous, you better not go there! What for? Come on! Let’s just go home!”

“I have to go.”

“Why?”

“I can’t explain yet. I’ll explain later. Just go home, Muriel. I’ll see you later.”

Then he looked at the girl. “I mean... you dare to go home alone, right? Don’t worry, the streets within the town are still safe, there are still many people. You will be fine.”

Muriel didn’t answer. She just stood looking at him, more and more confused. But there was no time for William to explain.

Besides, he wasn't sure what he felt. Was he really worried that something might happen tonight, or was he just curious?

"Be careful," he said his last words to Muriel.

He turned, running west toward the river.

It was only a moment later that William realized his words might be more suitable for himself.

Always Look Back

In the dark, William walked the grassy path at the foot of the hill. His steps were fast, but he tried not to make a sound. He gripped the dagger borrowed from Master Horsling. His heart was pounding. He remembered the words of the tavern owner, who told him to go to the river before it was too late. Did Master Horsling know something was going to happen tonight?

Or maybe the tavern owner with the mysterious background was planning something on the river. Maybe he was trying to trap William there. But if that was the case, why did he even lend him a dagger? And it makes little sense, because how important was William to a Master Horsling?

William heard the faint sound of the rush of the river. He stopped behind a bush and peered out. Two men were standing beside the river. The moonlight hidden behind the clouds made it impossible for him to see their figures. Were they Rogas and Mornitz? If he looked at their stature and clothing, it seemed so. But what were they doing there?

William hesitated whether to go out to say hello, or better see what would happen first. He slipped through the trunks of

the gigantic trees, coming closer so he could get a better view. Yes, that's them. On the right, the well-built one with broad shoulders was Rogas. While the one on the left, whose body was taller, was Mornitz. The two of them were looking at the river.

William squinted. There were two points of light approaching from two boats, each containing two men.

"They're here," Mornitz's voice rang out.

"Just a moment," Rogas said. William could see the face of his friend, who became tense. "Could you explain again what is your plan, Mornitz? I don't understand why we have to boat across the river at this time of night."

"The person we're after has gone a long way from us," Mornitz's voice sounded harsh. "We have to hurry up and catch him before it's too late. Do you still not understand?"

Before it's too late? William froze. Was this what Master Horsling meant? The tavern owner wanted William to join Mornitz's company and go with the two boats across the river?

William was getting restless. He thought of the dagger in his hand. The man mentioned by Mornitz must be a dangerous person. Six soldiers would chase him. Seven, if William came along.

At first, he felt afraid and tense, then it turned into curiosity, and finally enthusiasm. Was this the moment he had been waiting for? The most defining moment in his life?

As Master Horsling said, it might be time for William to do something different if he wanted to know what he really was, and then get to his next path in life. This was the crucial moment. He's an adult now, and his mother was dead. It was time for him to decide and do something for himself.

William nodded, trying to be sure of his decision. He would go out, then go to Mornitz, asking if he could come along. William

knew he was about to encounter something dangerous, but he shouldn't have been afraid. He already carried a dagger, and he also felt quite skilled. Perhaps the only thing to think about is supplies, because he brought nothing for this trip. But hopefully, they don't go too far and he can get home soon.

Before William could come out from behind the bush, something unexpected happened. Rogas suddenly pulled out his sword, then swiftly pointed it at Mornitz. The black-robed man gasped.

"Hey, you guys!" Rogas shouted to the people on the boat in the middle of the river, "Stop! Don't come over here! Or I'll cut his neck right now!"

William gaped, while the four men in the boat were stunned. They released their oars, and their hands were now down to the sides of their waists, over the hilts of their swords. For a few moments, everyone was silent. Without being rowed, the two boats moved slowly along the river, away from Rogas and Mornitz.

Rogas grinned once he was sure he had the upper hand. He pinned his sword to Mornitz's neck. "Well, well, do you think you can fool me that easily?"

"I don't know what you mean," Mornitz replied. The expression on the black-robed man's face changed little. The man looked shocked at first, but he was now looked very calm, as if he was still in control of the situation.

"You want to take me across the river, do you? Ha! No, my friend." Roger shook his head. "I know you want to set me up. Take me to a lonely place, then kill me! With the help of your men on that boat! You bastard. I'm not that stupid."

"You're delirious, aren't you? You haven't slept yet, but now you're dreaming," Mornitz said. "I think you're stupid for

threatening people who can give you a lot of money later. That's the first stupidity. Then you think you can win over the five of us? That's the second stupidity. You'll be dead any minute if you keep going. You better lower your sword. Let's talk."

"No more lying!" exclaimed Rogas. "I know that person on the boat! He was the one who tried to kill me in the south! Do you think a thick beard can cover the scars on your face, huh?" he shouts at someone on the boat. "Stupid! I recognize you, bastard!"

Rogas turned his head back to Mornitz. "And you—"

His words stopped. Mornitz had already retreated quickly and away from his sword. Rogas was about to charge forward, but Mornitz was no less agile. His cloak stretched out, the man's hand pulled out the sword from the side of his waist and directly pointed it at Rogas. The tip of his sword clashed with the tip of Rogas' sword. William recognized it, it was a Bortez-made sword he had given the man two days ago.

Mornitz smirked. "Okay, you're not stupid, if that's what you want." The black robe man laughed. "You will die if you dare to fight us. Better to just give up."

"You dog! Bastard!" Rogas looked nervous. "Bastards like you can't be trusted!"

Mornitz shook his head. "Master Bellion chose to see you alive when you were brought to him. He wants him to be the one to chop you up. Of course... in case you die here, he won't mind."

"I will kill you first!"

Rogas drew his sword and swung it with all his might.

Mornitz parried. The clink of metal clashing.

Rogas didn't stop and attacked many times. His moves were fast and powerful, full of emotion, but Mornitz was no easy opponent. Every swing of Rogas' sword he withstood.

Twenty steps from them, behind the bushes, William trembled. He panicked, not knowing what to do. Rogas was his friend, and although William didn't yet know what the problem was behind all this, of course, if things got any worse, he would have to help his friend.

William gripped his dagger tightly, preparing to come out to attack Mornitz. But at the last moment, he remembered Master Horsling's words.

"Be careful. Don't act rashly. Always look back."

So William looked back at the path he had walked and was immediately taken aback when he saw the frightened look on someone's face there, behind a tree trunk.

Muriel?!

First Blood

That girl! Why is she here?

For a moment, William's mind was stuck. He didn't know what to do. He looked back at Muriel, who was hiding behind a large tree. William did not dare to shout at the girl. He didn't want to be found out. So he could only make a stern look on his face to show Muriel that he was very upset to see Muriel following him all the way to this place.

What's in that girl's head? Why does she always argue and don't want to listen to his words just once?

Not yet lost his fear, the next incident made William even more panicked. The two boats that were previously drifting were now moving closer to the river bank. They were now quite close to where Muriel was hiding, maybe only about a dozen steps. If those people were observant and alert enough, they could spot Muriel easily.

William whiffed his hand, telling Muriel to come running towards him. In the dim light of the moon that now viciously emerged from behind the clouds, Muriel's pale face became even clearer. The girl was still shivering, not daring to move,

but knowing that four people were approaching her. She lifted herself up, ready to run.

The girl's sudden movement caught the attention of a bandit who had just gotten off the boat. The bearded man with the scar on his cheek. The man exclaimed while pointing at Muriel. His three companions now saw her, too.

The scar-faced man shouted an order. Two bandits, including himself, stepped away to help Mornitz fight Rogas, while the other two walked towards Muriel.

William cursed as soon as he knew what was going to happen. Without thinking, he darted out of hiding, slipping through the thickets. He reached Muriel faster and went straight past the girl to approach his two enemies.

He shocked the two bandits. One man failed to react. Before that villain could lift his sword, William's dagger stabbed his right waist, cutting him from front to back. The man screamed. Blood spurted everywhere.

The other bandit swung his sword around. William looked down, crouching as low as he could. Then his dagger stabbed straight ahead, piercing the bandit's stomach. The man screamed, too. With all his strength, William then pushed the knife that stuck in his opponent's stomach, making him fall on his friend, who was lying down. Blood covered the two bandits.

Near them, Muriel huddled with a trembling body, while William stared at the bloodied dagger in his hand. He had learned to use the sword for a long time, and he knew from the start that one day, if he became a soldier, he would shed someone's blood, maybe even kill him.

Of course, if it's not him who gets killed. He had heard stories like this from Rogas and other people in the village. At one time,

such battle stories sounded exciting and exhilarating, but at other times, they could be gruesome enough to send chills down his spine. When listening to it, he felt excitement and horror mixed into one at the same time.

William had that mixed feelings now. He knew what he might go through and do once he received the dagger from Master Horsling. He will injure someone, maybe even kill him. Or on the contrary, that person will kill him. He was relieved that he wasn't the one injured, but shuddered at the thought that it was his hands that had inflicted fatal wounds on the bandits' bodies.

But this wasn't over yet. Death was still very close if he was careless. Close to him, Rogas was still fighting, but Mornitz's sword skills were comparable to his. Coupled with the appearance of two other bandits, Rogas was now pushed and cornered under a cliff. William must immediately help his friend without having to wonder why all this happened. As soon as possible, before it was too late, and he regretted it.

William held the dagger with his left hand while his right hand grabbed the enemy's sword that was lying on the ground. He tried to ignore his first two enemies, who were moaning to death. For a while, he also must leave the crying Muriel behind in the thicket.

William ran toward Rogas and his three enemies, trying to shake off fear and replace it with anger. Actually, he wasn't sure. It was a foreign feeling to him. But if this was genuine anger, then he needed it more than fear, if he wanted to act cruelly and hurt his enemy mercilessly.

The next fight was tough. The enemy was already more alert once they saw him successfully incapacitate their comrades quickly. A bandit confronted William, while Mornitz and the scarred man surrounded Rogas.

The bandit cursed and swung his sword. William replied with an equally powerful slash. He moved wildly, with little force, but strong and ferocious. He continued to put his sword against the enemy's sword.

William's massive and explosive power seemed to take his enemy by surprise. He pushed the man back. William knew he had just found an opportunity. His left hand, which was still holding the dagger, found an opening. The dagger slashed towards his enemy's waist.

The bandit tried to dodge, but unfortunately for him, his foot stumbled on a broken tree trunk that was about an inch high. His body tumbled backward, and before he could react, the tip of William's sword had already come into his stomach, stabbed through the back. The bandit's muffled screams sounded, his eyes bulged, his body swayed, before finally dying.

Meanwhile, William getting used to blood.

Finished dealing with three people, he approached the scar-faced man, who was now despairing because he and Mornitz had failed in killing Rogas. When he saw William coming, the scarred face immediately shifted his sword.

"Bastard!" the bandit cursed. His eyes glazed over at William. He panicked. "You devil child! Who are you? What are you doing here? We have nothing to do with you!"

William gulped, then glared back and growled as horribly as he could while brandishing his sword. His screams made his enemy recoil in horror, although he was actually very nervous. His heart seemed to jump. But he strengthened his heart. He couldn't show his fear. He must not be careless, nor can he blink for a second.

Mornitz, who was keeping his distance from Rogas, immediately rebuked, "Stupid! He's just a kid! You don't have to be

afraid! Kill him! Fast!”

The black-robed man glared at William. William gasped, imagining that he had intended to go with the man and even work for him. Crazy!

Whereas yesterday he had considered Mornitz a good person, not a thief, let alone a robber. Turned out he was worse. The two sazets that he gave in front of the workshop were mere inducements. And the two pieces would mean nothing if William died here.

Kill Him!

William pointed his sword forward, preparing for the attacks of his two remaining foes. Two against two. The position was now balanced. Rogas' mocking laughter sounded.

"Wow! Your friend seems scared, Mornitz!" Rogas exclaimed. "Don't you have pity? Do you want to keep forcing him to fight? Look, how about you guys just give up? Instead of dying here!"

Mornitz looked back at the scar-faced man. "Hey! What are you waiting for? Attack the boy! Don't you want to avenge the deaths of your friends?"

That was enough to ignite the scar-faced man's emotions. He let out a long scream. The swing of his sword was strong. He was tougher than his three comrades. William felt it when he collided with the man. He let go of the dagger in his left hand and gripped the sword with both hands.

But to William, the sound of swords clashing that filled his ears was almost the same as the clatter he used to hear when hitting the metal plates in his workshop. He was used to it. It made him move without hesitation and become even more ferocious. His

sword spun like a cyclone, full of energy, pushing the scar-faced man further and further away until he approached the riverbank.

The enemy was getting madder, and his movements were getting chaotic. Panicked, not expecting William to keep up with him, the scar-faced man tried various attacks. Slashing from left and right, also stabbing straight ahead. Everything failed. William could fend off all the attacks and charged back with blows like sledgehammers.

The scar-faced man was getting desperate and out of breath. The man could not control his emotions and forced himself to attack back. But the sweep of his sword failed to hit the mark. William slammed his enemy's sword to the side, causing the scar-faced man's body to lose balance. Not wanting to waste the opportunity, William slashed from top to bottom, scratching his opponent's back.

The scar-faced man roared in pain. The man desperately tried to twist his body while swinging his sword once again. William dodged, then slashed his sword. This time, the bandit's right thigh was torn apart. His body knelt, full of blood. The sword fell. William kicked his enemy's chest until he lay on the grass.

William looked at his enemy with bubbling emotions. If he didn't think about it, he would have swung his sword again to slash his enemy's head. That kind of thing was common during the war, as in the stories of Rogas or other rude people in the village. But when that moment came to him, William was not that cruel. His compassion was still there, covering his anger as soon as he saw the man in front of him, who was now lying helpless.

William gulped, his lips quivering. For a moment, he was confused. Should he finish his enemy or give mercy?

Several questions popped into his mind. Why does he have to

kill this man? Are they really the enemy? Even if it's true that they are enemies, should he kill them?

"William!" Rogas exclaimed.

William turned, looked at his friend, who was sitting, wincing in pain. The man pointed towards the river with his sword.

"Mornitz! He ran away!"

Mornitz, the man in the black robe who had previously looked so convincing and dangerous, had already run to the river bank and was now pushing a boat. The man jumped up and rowed. He and William looked at each other. Even from a few meters, William could feel the hateful look in the black-robed man's eyes.

A moment later William gasped because near the boats he remembered there was Muriel. Where is she? Is she okay?

Fortunately, the girl then appeared, running towards William. The girl's face was pale and her body was shaking.

"Go after him, William! Take the other boat! Don't let him get away!" Rogas shouted. He groaned in annoyance, clutching his thigh. It turned out that Mornitz badly injured him so he could not run. That's why Rogas told William to go after Mornitz.

"W-why?" William asked nervously. "Why should I go after him? What matters is that he's gone and we're safe!"

"Safe? We're safe?!" Rogas struggled to his feet while leaning on his sword. With dragging steps, he walked over to William. His face looked fierce. "Are you stupid or what, huh?"

He stood beside William's last enemy, who was still whimpering in pain. The man with the scarred face. Rogas unexpectedly raised his sword, then swung it, slashing the man's neck.

Muriel screamed as she covered her face with both hands. William stared, shocked beyond measure.

Rogas glared. "They are your enemies! That's why you have

to go after Mornitz! Not only that! When you have the chance, kill him!”

William shook his head in disbelief. “But... he, Mornitz... he’s a dangerous man! I don’t think I can chase—”

“He’s scared!” exclaimed Rogas. “He fears you, William! Mornitz has seen how you beat these guys! It’s not you who should be afraid, but him! He’s scared and a coward! He’s not as great as you think. Go after him!” His gaze blazed with emotion. Then after a while, as soon as he realized William wasn’t willing to do his request, his voice lowered almost as if to plead, “Kill him ...”

William’s jaw tightened, his head shook without hesitation. “No. He’s not my enemy, and I’m not his enemy either. You’re his enemy! You’re the one he’s after, for a reason that I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. I have nothing to do with any of this!”

Roger was stunned. “Nothing to do? Gosh, you are a moron!”

“I was only helping you! Only that!”

“Yes, you have helped me. Thank you!” said Rogas. “But do you think after this you can go home, live quietly, and pretend all this never happened? You and this girl will think like that?”

William looked at Muriel, who was also looking at him. When he saw Muriel’s frightened face, the youth was restless. The fear arose. Images of bad things that might happen later flashed through his mind. William had killed several people tonight. Did he really hope that after this incident, everything would be fine?

Rogas shook his head in annoyance. “As of tonight, Mornitz has considered you an enemy. Thanks to your stupidity, he survived. One day he will come looking for you, to your house, and bring more people. And do you think he’ll come just to visit or order a sword? No! He will come to kill you! Do you

understand? The only way now, if you want to survive, is to get out of this town. Disappear for who knows how long, until he finally forgets you, or doesn't care about you anymore!"

The Only Way

William couldn't say a word. All of Rogas' words bothered him. Escape from this village is the only way to survive? Is there no other way?

Beside him, Muriel sobbed.

To which Rogas replied most annoyingly, "Hey, are you crying for William? Don't bother. Don't you understand? You have a problem too! If you go back to your house, someday Mornitz will find you. Maybe he'll kill you too."

Muriel was stunned.

William was furious. "Muriel has nothing to do with this! Why is she being targeted too?"

"What can you do? If Mornitz recognizes her face tonight, she's in danger," Rogas answered with a wry smile.

William turned, looking at the little girl with curly hair, who was getting more and more panicked. "Did... did Mornitz see you? Muriel! Did he see you?"

The girl's eyes blinked. "No..." her lips trembled. "I... I don't think so. He didn't see me..."

"Are you sure?"

“It was dark...” Muriel looked unsure. “When he ran past me, I think I was still hiding. I—yes... I think so. He didn’t see me!”

William breathed a sigh of relief. Just a moment’s relief, of course. He wished Mornitz didn’t see Muriel, but he was still afraid to imagine the terrible things that might happen to Muriel, to the girl’s father, and himself, if he made the wrong decision.

What if one day, Mornitz will come back with his flock, not only to William’s house but also to Muriel’s? William might defend himself. Yes, he must be able to defend himself! But what about Muriel? He wouldn’t be able to protect those people. What a nightmare!

Rogas watched the confused William. “If you think Muriel will be fine, it’s up to you. But I have warned you. Yes, I hope she survives! Let the girl go home and forget about it. Right, Muriel?”

Muriel was silent, not wanting to answer. But she glared at the annoying man.

Rogas ignored her and kept talking. “While she’s home, we must leave at once, William, as far as possible. Right now. I’m sure Mornitz won’t take me for granted anymore. He will come with more men. We have to be careful.”

“Go... go where?” William asked.

“Hmm. Let me think about it ...”

“To the south?” William asked. He couldn’t think of a solution at the moment because his mind was not clear.

“South?” Rogas looked at him in surprise.

“Yes. In the south, if you return to the royal army, you’ll be safe,” William said, feeling like he was finding a glimmer of hope. “Right! I might as well join the army ...”

Rogas shook his head. “No. That’s a bad idea. Before we get to the capital, they would have intercepted us at Milliton.”

“By Mornitz?”

“It’s safer to the north. For now.”

“North?” William was stunned.

Suddenly he remembered. As his mother said, wasn’t he a northerner? He was born there, and his father was from the north. How far will he go? Will he reach Hualeg land? William remembered that his mother had told him not to go back north. What would happen if he disobeys his mother’s message?

“Prepare the boat, William,” Rogas said. “We’re leaving.”

“By boat?”

“Yes, by boat, of course!” Rogas said with an annoyed face. “Do you think I can walk with injured legs like this? Stupid.”

That’s enough! William couldn’t help himself and immediately punched Rogas hard in the face.

The man stumbled. His nose was bleeding, and he stared at William in disbelief, clutching his nose.

“Why... why did you hit me?!” he screamed hysterically.

“Damn your wounds, you bastard!” William replied. “You’re lucky I only hit your face and didn’t step on the wound on your leg!”

“Hey...”

“You cause all this trouble! Instead of apologizing, you continue to irritate Muriel and me with your annoying words!”

“But... but you are also wrong!” Rogas argued. “You were the one who brought me to see Mornitz! For two pieces? Or three?”

“Bastard.” William raised his fist, ready to strike again.

“Hey, hey, I’m sorry!” Rogas raised both his hands.

William looked away. For a moment he was sick of seeing Rogas’ face. His chest rumbled with anger. He even felt bad for Muriel.

The three fell silent. William then looked at Master Horsling’s

long dagger that lay near to him.

That dagger. Yes! Maybe there was something he could do.

He ran for the dagger. Gradually, his anger subsided. He glanced at Rogas.

Rogas raised his hand. "I'm sorry... to you two. Okay? Is that not enough? Look, you can be mad at me, as much as you like, but everything I said was true, William. We have to leave before Mornitz returns."

"I'll take Muriel home first," William said.

"We have little time!" Rogas said irritably.

"Brother." Muriel touched William's arm. William looked at her. The girl seemed to have calmed down. "I can go home alone. You don't have to worry."

"I won't be able to calm down if I let you go home alone."

"I was more worried about you ..."

"Yeah... I'm sorry, it shouldn't be like this ..."

"Hey, hurry up." Rogas grew impatient.

"Shut up!" William immediately scolded him.

Then he looked at Muriel again and put his hand on the girl's shoulder. "I'll take you to Horsling's Tavern. After that, you can go home alone. This time, you should really go home. Don't follow me."

"Sorry..." Muriel sobbed.

"Never mind." William shook his head, angry with himself. It was all his fault. Why was he blaming Muriel? "Come on, let's go."

"Hey, wait a minute. How about me?" Rogas exclaimed.

"Wait for me here," William said.

"How long? What if Mornitz came with the rest of his men? I still can't run. Do you want me dead?"

"Just hide!" William replied. "Behind a tree, behind a rock, I

don't care. If you die before I return, I will go north alone."

Rogas cursed. "Then I'd better go alone now! I don't need to care about you either, do I?"

"No problem. That means I'll look for you later," William threatened. "You've got one more enemy."

Rogas looked shocked. "I thought I was your friend! Oh well, hurry then! I don't want to wait long here."

William gripped Muriel's arm tightly and rushed to take the girl away. For now, he didn't care about Rogas. Only Muriel was on his mind.

Plus that man, the tavern owner, who had lent him the dagger.

William hoped that man would take responsibility. It was he who had brought William into all this trouble.

I Can Sense You

All the way back to the Horsling Tavern, William and Muriel were speechless. William was reluctant to explain what he had just experienced, and Muriel didn't seem to dare to ask either. For both of them, the incident by the river was a harrowing experience. There was blood, and death, on levels they had never imagined before.

William's mind filled with emotions. He got angry. Why would he accept the dagger from Master Horsling, then change the course of his life? He had already had a pleasant life in the village. Why did he have to spoil it?

Master Horsling said that after experiencing this, William could recognize who he was. But what can he learn now, other than knowing that he can kill someone?

Master Horsling also spoke of the path of life. After the incident, does it mean William's path of life is to become a killer?

"Wait here," William said to Muriel as soon as they arrived at the tavern, "and—"

"... hide in a safe place." Anxiety was still visible on the girl's face, but her words sounded calm. "You don't have to worry

about me.”

William shook his head. “Worry makes us wary. I just learned that.” He forced himself to smile, then entered the tavern.

He looked around. There were only four other diners left gathered at one table, gambling. Those guys had also reached the last limit of their strength, and would stop and come out soon.

William looked at Master Horsling, who was standing behind the bar counter. The man’s gaze was unpredictable. What was he thinking? Did he know what had just happened to William?

William walked forward and sat down at the bar.

Without being asked, Master Horsling handed him a cup of wine. “Drink. You need this.”

William stared at the tavern owner, yet to accept the offer. “Do you know what happened?”

“Tough night, I guess.”

“You guess? No. You don’t just guess. You know what’s going on,” William said. He took out his dagger and placed it on the table. There was still blood on the blade, and he hadn’t bothered to clean it yet. “You know what will happen, sir. That’s why you lent it to me.”

“Are you accusing me?” Master Horsling asked. “Do you think I planned everything? I am the one who got you trapped there?”

William had not yet removed his hand from the dagger. He didn’t want to be careless, in case Master Horsling wanted to take the dagger back and use it to attack William.

He asked back, a little nervous, “Am I wrong?”

“Yes, you’re wrong. I don’t know what will happen. I just sense it.”

“Sense?”

Seeing that William didn’t understand what he meant, the

bar owner continued, “Look, boy. For you, I will tell you a little about myself. I’ve been through a lot of terrible things in my time, far more than you might have just experienced. A person like me wouldn’t be able to live long in a place like this if I could not sense. I’m not as strong as you think, but I have a slight advantage that other people don’t understand, and that’s very important.”

He leaned closer to William, then spoke more quietly, “Do you understand what I mean? I can sense, and judge, everyone who walks into my tavern, and predict what they will do next. Do you see those four people gambling? They look rude and dangerous. But they have no evil intentions. Most of my visitors are like them. Yes, maybe because they were afraid of me from the start.” He chuckled when he saw William was still tense. “Come on, have a drink first. Release your tension. Are you not thirsty?”

William was stunned. Master Horsling’s words made him even more curious. He knew he had to leave immediately. Muriel was waiting for him, and so was Rogas, but he wanted to know what exactly Master Horsling had to say. He took a sip of the wine that the tavern owner offered him.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Do you feel more comfortable now?”

“Yes ...”

“They are harmless, these people. Cunning, but harmless. But,” Mr. Horsling’s smile disappeared, “it was a distinct feeling when I saw your friends talking to each other.” He glanced at the empty table and chairs that Rogas and Mornitz had previously used. “They are dangerous.”

“They?”

“The soldier and the black robe. They’re both your friends,

aren't they?"

"Only one is my friend. The other one isn't. I mean, are they, both of them, dangerous? Not just one of them?"

"Both." The tavern owner's eyes flashed as if pleased to have caught William by surprise. "I don't know what they're planning, but the bad intentions in their heads are clear to me. So when they left, I expected something bad to happen. Someone's going to die, I think."

"Then you knew something was going to happen!" William retorted. "And you allowed this!"

"What should I do? If both of them are bad people and want to kill each other, do I have to interfere?"

"What if your guess is wrong? What if only one was truly bad? Are you going to let someone who isn't bad die?"

"My guesses are rarely wrong." The tavern owner looked a little arrogant. "Besides, I did something, didn't I? Because you came back, right?"

William's brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"You came to me and said you were looking for them. I thought, well, let this be your business. Let you clean it up." Master Horsling chuckled.

"Clean it up? You almost got me killed!" William shouted angrily.

A moment later, he caught his breath as soon as he realized his harsh words made the gamblers turn around. Luckily, the drunks didn't care and went back to playing the game.

"But it didn't happen, right?" Master Horsling smirked. "It was you who killed them, or one of them. Once again, my guess was not wrong."

"I didn't kill them. Both are still alive."

Master Horsling nodded. "Well, but... you killed people, didn't

you? There is blood on this dagger.”

William was upset. He remembered the time when he plunged daggers into his enemies by the river. One by one. Blood gushing and clinging to his hands. The moans and pained faces of those people. He fixed his eyes on Master Horsling.

“You made me do it,” he whispered furiously.

“Don’t be upset. I believe you can get through times like this,” Master Horsling replied annoyingly calmly, “and then learn something.”

“I don’t feel like I learned anything good from all this!”

“Try to sleep well tonight, and you’ll understand tomorrow.”

“No. I don’t want to hear your bullshit anymore!” William stood up. “I’ll return your dagger. It has helped me, so I thank you. But whatever your reasons were, you’ve changed my life, and I’m not sure it’s for the better. I shouldn’t have followed your advice.”

Master Horsling smiled. “Actually, I can give you more advice. But, given your circumstances, it’s probably best not to. Let yourself be the one to prove whether what you said was right or wrong. But... I want to say one more thing, if you don’t mind.”

“Say it.”

“I can sense you.”

Life Changes, Like It Or Not

William held his breath as he heard Master Horsling's last words. He stared at the man without blinking. His heart was beating fast.

"You... are different," Master Horsling said. "There is something in you which I haven't felt in a long time and makes me dare to lend you my dagger. But I don't need to give you more bullshit, do I?" The man laughed. "Yeah, well, you go. Be careful."

William sat thinking about it. He wanted to ask further, but he was afraid that Master Horsling's words would influence again him.

Finally, he answered politely, "Thank you."

He suddenly felt bad for having spoken so loudly to the man.

"Is there something you're still worried about, boy?"

"No. I just... have to go. My friend is waiting."

"Your friend?"

"Muriel."

"Muriel?"

"Yes, she is in front."

“A girl? Your friend is a girl? And she is in front of my shop?” Master Horsling’s expression turned annoyed. “Why don’t you bring her in? Silly boy, what were you thinking, huh? Leaving her outside alone like that?”

“I’m just afraid someone recognizes her here with me.”

Master Horsling gave William a sharp look. “Okay, I see what you mean. You want nothing to happen to her?”

“Yes.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I... maybe we split up here. I’d better run north while she gets home, and hopefully, nothing will happen to her.”

Master Horsling took a deep breath. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t know. I just want her to be safe.”

“What scares you?”

“Mornitz. The man in the black robe. I was afraid that one day he would come to the workshop. If I’m not around, I can’t protect Muriel and her father.”

“You should be more worried about yourself. Do you work in a workshop?” the bar owner asked again.

“Yes. With Bortez.”

“I know Bortez. A good person. Alright, here’s my suggestion. You’re right, you go north until it’s safe. Meanwhile, I will take Muriel, and my friends will take care of her and her father later. If a foreigner comes to your village, I will definitely hear it and do something about it. You don’t have to worry. I assure you, if Mornitz knew I was protecting Bortez and his daughter, he wouldn’t dare do anything to them. But you, since you’ve killed someone, I can’t be of much help. Sorry, I’ve made you go through this. If you want to blame me, I understand.”

William shook his head. “Everything that has happened to me was my decision. I won’t blame you anymore. And you have been

a great help to me if you will look after Muriel and his father. I thank you, sir.”

“Because I made you like this, it becomes my debt,” the tavern owner said. “I think... after this conversation, I can consider you a friend. I’m doing this as a friend.”

William took Master Horsling to see Muriel. William briefly explained his plan to the girl, then the two parted ways.

It all happened so fast, as if it was just a normal everyday occurrence, that they might only be apart for a little while.

Muriel only had time to say, “Be careful.”

While William only had time to reply with, “I’ll see you later.”

Then he left the girl.

It wasn’t until William had walked quite a distance down the dark path to the river that he felt something bothering him, which saddened him in the end. After this, he had to go as far north as possible. He didn’t know when he could return to his village and meet Muriel again. Maybe he should have said something more meaningful to the girl.

One by one, everything flashed through his mind. He wanted to tell Muriel that he should also be careful. He also wanted to tell the girl to always obey her father’s words, but if she has a desire, say it. William also wanted to tell Muriel not to cry anymore, and that everything would be fine. Unfortunately, all of this only occurred to him now. As much as William wanted to say all that, he couldn’t come back.

The sound of the river rushing brought him back from all his thoughts. He brushed the grass carefully. The boat by the river was still empty, and Rogas was not there.

William looked around. The four bandit corpses that were supposed to be lying around were also missing. His heart was beating fast. What happened while he was gone?

“Rogas,” he whispered. “Rogas!”

“Shhh,” the man hissed. His annoying face appeared from behind the bushes. “Don’t be so loud.”

“There’s no one else here,” William said.

“Still, you have to be careful!” Rogas grumbled.

William saw that the man was carrying the swords that the bandits had previously owned. He was sure, not only swords, but Rogas must have also stolen other things from them.

“There could be people who walk here at night and then suddenly appear,” continued Rogas. “Fortunately, I had the bodies hidden.”

“Where?”

Rogas glanced at the row of rocks behind the bushes. The place was quite far from the trail. It was great that Rogas could drag all the corpses all the way there. Wasn’t his leg hurt? William saw that the man had bandaged his right thigh to cover his wound.

“Eventually, people will find the bodies,” William said nervously. “You think they’ll know we did this?”

“No, unless you brag about it all over the place.” Rogas glanced suspiciously. “After killing over one bandit, people usually become arrogant and ramble on. Did you tell someone?”

“No,” William answered. For now, he didn’t want Rogas to know that he had spoken too much to Mr. Horsling.

“Good. That means only Mornitz and his gang know about this. And the girl,” Rogas threw things onto the boat. “So now you pray she doesn’t talk like that to other people.”

“Muriel wouldn’t do that!”

Rogas smirked. He pushed his boat into the river. “You have nothing to fear. One day, people might find out about these bodies and suspect you. You vanished from your village, right? Most people won’t care, but eventually, someone will suspect

you and associate you with the bodies found here. But once they find out, you've come a long way, so what are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid! Just annoyed! I had a pleasant life in the village, and now everything has changed!"

"So what? Do you want to blame someone else, or yourself?" Rogas jumped onto the boat and stretched out his hand to grab William. As soon as William boarded, Rogas immediately gave him an oar. "Life changes, at some points, whether you like it or not. Just face it, and be grateful, because you are still alive. That's all that matters."

Evil Intentions

William and Rogas rowed all night down the river to the north. When morning came, even though they were tired, they still rowed. Rogas, who was sitting in the front, said over and over that they had better get away as fast as possible and then disappear. But when William asked how they would disappear, and did Rogas really had a plan, the man laughed.

“That’s what’s interesting about adventures. We don’t know what we will find. We also don’t know what we’re going to do next!”

William said in annoyance, “This is not an adventure. We’re running away. We should have a plan if we don’t want to be caught.”

“I have a plan!” Rogas said. “I’ve heard of the villages in the north. We’re going there.”

They rowed non-stop, and finally reached a village in the afternoon. The village, called Orulion, was at the corner of the confluence of the river they had crossed with its larger parent river to the west, the famous and long Ordelaehr River far to the

north.

Its strategic position makes this village visited by fishing boats from the north and south. The crowd was like a small town, but because it was so far to the north, the influence of the Alton Kingdom didn't extend here.

In the past, Alton had stationed several soldiers nearby, but not for long. The village was not rich and Alton needed their soldiers more to face the threat from the Tavarin Kingdom in the south. In the north, there was another nation that was also dangerous, the Hualeg people, but for most of the Alton people, the Hualeg land was far and had relatively few soldiers, not worthy enough to be a threat to the kingdom. So finally Alton gave up the north and left the residents there to fight on their own if the Hualegs came.

When Rogas told about the Hualeg people, William did not want to comment. In his heart, somehow he got annoyed when Rogas continued to insult his father's native nation. But what Rogas said had some truth in it. In the last ten years, Hualegs have come five times to rob the villages north of the Ordelahr River. William was silent because he did not want his origins as a descendant of the Hualeg people to be known by others.

"So here's my plan," Rogas said as they tied the boat to the mast and climbed onto the dock. He glanced left and right to make sure none of the villagers could hear. There was actually no one else near them, but Rogas still whispered, as if something he was about to say was very important.

"The village head here is called Turpin—or Taupin, eh?" he said. "A few weeks ago, I heard he teamed up with other village heads in this north area to form an army of their own, which could fight if the Hualeg men came to attack. You know what? Here's our chance. We can join this army." He gave one of the

stolen swords to William and hooked another to his belt.

“Join them for what?” William asked.

“For what? Of course, to get money!”

“But we went north here to hide. If we stay here too long and Mornitz comes, he can find us right away. Why don’t we go further east? We just have to follow the creek to the end.”

“And what do you want to do in those forests? Be a hunter until you’re old? How much money do you think you can make from hunting rabbits?”

“Why is it only money you think about?” William said indignantly. “I followed you here because I believed what you said, that we could safely hide in the north! Not for money!”

“But before that, you also suggested that we head south and join Alton’s army. It’s the same now. We will become soldiers too. The difference is just that the people who pay us now are the villagers, not the kingdom. Do you see? And don’t tell me you don’t like money,” Rogas said curtly. “That’s bullshit.”

“You’re the one who always says bullshit! Everyone knows that. This morning you said we should disappear, now you say to make money. Is this what you mean by the plan? You’re only doing what’s in your favor at the moment. You don’t care about other people. No wonder so many people want to kill you!”

“Be careful with what you say, brat,” Rogas said furiously, with a savage look in his eyes. “I can beat you right now.”

“Just try it then.” William was furious, too. “Do you want to fight? Or a sword fight? I can beat you easily. You know that.”

“You know nothing. You’re just a kid. Yes, you are strong, but I can still beat you.”

William and Rogas looked at each other. Their hands are ready on the hilt of the sword.

A moment later, Rogas’ expression changed. The man grinned

widely. "Hey, hey, why are we doing this? We're both friends, right? Relax."

William shook his head. "I will become your friend when I can believe what you say. So before you proceed with your plan, you better tell me why this happened. What terrible thing did you do to make those people want to kill you, and also what terrible thing were you thinking when you met Mornitz at the tavern?"

"My story can be very long. Now is not the right time. And what do you mean when I'm at the tavern? Do you think I have some kind of bad intention? You saw it. They trapped me and are about to kill me!"

"I think when you met Mornitz at the tavern, you actually had the intention of either killing him or robbing him. Right? Rather than working for him, it would be more profitable if you could just take the money from him." He stared intently at Rogas, making the man dumbfounded.

Rogas shook his head. "Where did you get such thoughts from?"

"I can sense it," William imitated Master Horsling's words. "The stench reached my nose. You can't lie to me."

"That..." Rogas looked nervous, seeming to believe that William could read his bad intentions while in the tavern. "I didn't mean to do it! I do really want to work!"

William shook his head. "I think, just like now, you keep every possibility in your head. Including evil intentions. So when the time comes, you just have to choose which one is the most profitable for you."

"Well, aren't we all supposed to be like that?" Rogas smirked. "I mean, that's what being smart is. Always have lots of options."

"Others refer to it as cunning. And because they were so

angry with your cunning, they wanted to kill you. That's what happened to Mornitz." William glared. "But you're right, maybe I should do that too another time, keeping a lot of plans. As long as I know first who my enemy is."

"William, I promise you I'll tell you everything, but not now."

Rogas glanced left and right. Their bickering has caught the attention of several people. Even though the number of people in this village wasn't much, it was a terrible start if William and Rogas were to hide in this place.

The Risk of Being a Soldier

Rogas continued, still whispering, “I ask you to believe me first. I’ve dealt with this sort of thing many times, and I’m still not dead, am I?”

“That’s because I saved you yesterday!” William said.

“That’s because you’re part of my fortune! I made a choice, I gambled with it, and survived. Thanks to you. Right?” Rogas smirked. “Now, let my luck help you. If you want to believe it, you’ll be fine, and could benefit from this.”

“You’re still full of bullshit. But fine, I’ll follow your plan.”

“You won’t regret it.” Roger laughed.

“I won’t regret it,” William said, still not smiling, “even if I had to kill you later.”

Rogas looked shocked for a moment, then smirked. “Look at you, even if you’re just joking, now you getting used to killing! After the first kill, the next one gets easier, right? You even threaten other people. Haha! It is always like that. I used to be like that too!”

William did not respond to the joke. He honestly didn’t know if his threat was serious or not. Maybe not. Surely not. He just

wanted to bluff. He could not imagine if he had to kill again. For him, it was a terrible experience. But if Rogas betrayed him later, or Mornitz came with his pack and attacked again, who knows?

He followed Rogas into the busier center of the village. The man was always well-spoken, and William admired him for that. Rogas could immediately become acquainted with some fishers when they stopped by a small restaurant and chatted there.

After chatting for a while, one resident of Orulion named Root—he was a friendly old man with a thick beard—offered them to stay at his house.

“I have an empty cabin in my backyard,” Root said. “My son used to live there, but he hasn’t been home for... for...” The old man frowned, struggling to remember. “Mm... two years?”

“Ten years,” Moor, another man sitting next to him, corrected, shaking his head. The man also had a bushy beard but looked younger.

“Ten years? Ah, it’s been that long, huh?” Root chuckled.

“Where did your son go?” William asked.

“To the south,” Moor answered. “Joining Alton’s army. My nephew was tired of fishing and wanted to be a soldier. He said it was more interesting and profitable. So that’s it. He went south. During the first two years, he could send us a lot of money here. Well, maybe not much, but enough. But after that, he disappeared.”

“What happened?” William asked again.

“I don’t know,” Moor replied. “Until now, there is no news.”

“He’s dead,” Root said.

That’s a pretty awful thing a father would say about his son. But the old man smiled. Maybe it’s because since long ago he had accepted the fact that his son was dead.

But didn’t he say he forgot when his son left?

“We don’t know that yet, Root,” Moor said. “Maybe he just went a long way. Maybe one day he will come back here.”

“No. That’s the risk of being a soldier. You know that, Moor. He knew it too when he asked my permission,” Root said. “And you guys, too... should have known.” His eyes glanced at William and Rogas. “What was your name?”

“I’m Dall,” Rogas answered quickly. “And my brother is Tuck.”

Tuck? What kind of name is that?

William stared, then muttered inwardly.

“Yes, you both must know that too,” Root said again.

“Must know what?” William asked back.

“By becoming soldiers, you will die faster,” Root replied.

“Only if we’re stupid,” Rogas said.

“My nephew is not stupid,” Moor replied, displeased. “He is strong and quite skilled with the sword. Still, he died. If it’s true, he’s dead...”

“What’s your nephew’s name?” Rogas asked.

“Boot. When he left, he was as old as your brother here.” Moor glanced at William. “Do you know him?”

Rogas was silent for a moment, his expression flat. Then he shook his head. “No. Never heard of his name.”

Moor nodded in understanding. “If you’ve seen him, you’ve probably forgotten it by now.” He then said more seriously, “Listen, young man, we know why you’re here. You two carry swords. You want to join Taupin’s army? Am I right?”

“That’s my plan,” Rogas said without hesitation.

“Then you know the risks,” Root said. “In the north, you will fight Hualeg people. You know what they’re like, right? They are giants. Strong and cruel, and probably likes to eat human flesh. You guys seem pretty tough, so Moor and I don’t need

to give you any more advice. After all, we're just ignorant old fishers."

"Sir," William said, "if you know something that we should have known, just tell us."

"Taupin would be happy to have you guys, that's all I can say," Root replied. "Should I take you to see him now?"

"Let me take them there." Moor patted his brother's arm. "Do you two want to go to his house tonight?"

"We want to rest first," Rogas said. "We'll see him tomorrow."

"Thank you for your offer, sir." William smiled at Root and Moor. "But we don't want to bother you."

"Get some rest." Moor nodded. "And good luck."

"And hopefully you guys can outlive me." Root chuckled.

The old man's eyes gleamed brightly, as if he had just discovered something new that excited him. Or maybe just because he found it funny that he could outlive younger people.

Moor took William and Rogas to an old wooden house not far away. As Root said, in his backyard was an old cottage. There was a lot of used stuff inside, which was enough to show that anyone had not occupied the hut for a long time. There was also a wooden couch. As soon as Moor left, Rogas lay down on that couch and fell fast asleep.

William was just as tired, but he could hold on longer. He still had time to stop by Root's house and eat the soup and fruit the old man had given him. William then gave a sazet to the host in return.

At first, Root refused to accept it. He said he saw William as his son used to be, so he was quite happy to receive the young man in his home without having to get anything from him. But William insisted on giving the money. He said that if he was

the old man's son, he would be happy to give the money to his parent. Finally, Root accepted it.

When it was dark, William returned to the hut and lay down on the wooden mat spread out on the floor. He heard Rogas snoring from above the wooden couch. But that didn't bother him. It didn't take long for him to fall asleep too.

Whoever Comes First Is Not The Luckiest One

The next morning, William was awakened by a ray of light streaming in through the wooden windows, which were still closed.

All the events of the past few days filled his mind. From the death of his mother, the bloody battle by the river, his separation from Muriel, and finally his journey north. His anger once again filled his heart once he remembered he had to leave his village, which he now realized could have happened because of his fault.

It shouldn't be like this. He should have been more careful.

Then suddenly he remembered what Rogas had said when they left. "Life changes, at some point, whether you like it or not."

The guy was annoying, but often right.

He turned. Rogas was no longer on his couch.

Where did he go?

William hurried out of the hut. Root's backyard was full of rotten wooden boxes that were all empty. These are boxes commonly used to store or ship fish. He thought earlier, Rogas

might relax outside, but apparently not. William hurried across the courtyard and through the small street that separated the two wooden houses in front of him. At the end of the road, William turned to the left. On his porch, Root was sitting in a rocking chair.

The old man smiled when he saw William. "You're awake. Come here, sit next to me. I have tea, and also some bread."

"Thank you." William complied with Root's offer.

Not bad. Even though the dry bread was almost tasteless on his tongue, it could cover his hunger. Taking a sip of his hot tea, he asked, "Sir, did you see Ro—I mean, my brother?"

"Oh, your brother? He... what's his name?"

"Dall." William tried to remember. "Yes, Dall. That's his name."

"He asked where Taupin's house was. Then he left."

"Why didn't he invite me?" William asked with annoyance, more to himself. "He can wake me up."

"I asked him that too. He said let you rest first." Old Root chuckled. "Don't worry, there's no need to be upset. You can catch up later. Whoever comes first is not necessarily the luckiest one. That's what I know, son, every time I've been going to the river to fish for decades."

The old man showed the direction to Taupin's house. William walked away. Unlike most people's houses in Orulion, Taupin's house was located across the Ordelaehr River. To get there, William had to ride a raft guided by two people. The two men pulled the long rope over the river, and the raft moved across without fear of being carried away by the current.

The raft is quite wide and strong and was made of enormous tree trunks that were sturdy and waterproof. In William's calculations, the raft could carry up to twenty people if there

were no horses or other items on board.

After crossing the river, he followed a winding road. Finally, he arrived at the courtyard of the house at the foot of the hill. The courtyard was wide and flat, and there was a crowd there. Dozens of people gathered, all men sitting in a circle, cheering.

In the center of the circle, Rogas stood in his most arrogant manner. His left hand is on his hips, while his right hand holds the hilt of a sword whose tip is resting on the ground. In front of him, a young man lay down, clutching his stomach.

William stared in annoyance. What did Rogas do? There was no visible blood splattered on the young man's body, so most likely he was just bruised. But did Rogas just do the next stupid thing, by showing off like this?

A loud voice brought all the cheers to a halt from a man sitting on the other side of the circle. The man was thin, and his hair was gray. His clothes were simple, but his countenance was firm and dignified. Without a doubt, it must be Taupin, the village head.

"Our new friend seems to be an outstanding soldier," the village head said, which was immediately greeted by cheers from everyone on the edge of the field. "Five people have already lost. Does anyone else dare to challenge him?"

William shook his head in annoyance. Rogas apparently couldn't help but show his arrogance once the opportunity came! He was a mercenary, of course, so his skills were higher than the villagers. But what was the need for him to do this? Rogas has caught the attention of many people! After this, word of this incident would spread everywhere, maybe even to the south, and Mornitz could hear it. William and Rogas could not hide anymore. Then what's the point of them going north?

"Come on!" Taupin exclaimed, challenging everyone. "No

one else dares?”

Dozens of people let out mumbling sounds like bees. No one dared to raise their hand. Rogas smirked, while the young man he had defeated earlier shuffled away and joined the others.

Taupin’s gaze then reached William. “You, the young man who just came to my yard,” the village head pointed at William. Everyone immediately turned their heads following his gaze, including Rogas, whose face suddenly turned pale. “I just saw you today. What’s your name?”

“Will—I mean, Tuck. My name is Tuck!”

“Tuck, you are tall and well built. You seem like a strong young man. You don’t wanna try it, kid? Don’t you want to fight this man?”

William’s heart skipped a beat. He swallowed, then shook his head. “No.” Not sure if the answer reached Taupin’s ears, he repeated it louder, “No!”

But suddenly he realized maybe that was not a wise answer. What if the village head finds it rude? He then said again, “Excuse me, may I ask you a question first? What for?”

“What for?” The village head smiled broadly, and everyone laughed. “I’m making an army! I need a strong and brave man who can help me lead the army as my deputy. You can try it if you dare. So, do you dare? Against this man?”

William looked at Rogas. The frustration that had been piling up came back again. “Sir, do you think I am afraid to fight him?”

Taupin chuckled. “Are you afraid?”

“I am not!”

“So, why did you say no?” Taupin laughed.

The surrounding people laughed too.

William was furious. He suddenly forgot about his intention to hide and want to do his most basic wish: beat up Rogas and

teach him a lesson.

“I will fight him!” he exclaimed.

He walked forward to the center of the courtyard, and the people blocking his path moved away. As soon as he arrived beside Rogas, he smirked. “I’ll beat him with pleasure if I’m allowed. Do I have to use a sword?”

“We’re not barbarians like the Hualeg people,” Taupin said. “I don’t want anyone to get hurt before the actual battle. Use that sword.” He pointed at the sword lying on the ground, which the young man had used earlier. “The tip and sides of that sword have been dulled. So you’ll only hurt a little if you get hit.” He laughed as he watched William take the sword. “Are you ready?” William stood up straight. “I am ready.”

The Deputy Of the Deputy

In the center of the courtyard, close to William, Rogas smiled wryly.

“Are you serious?” the man asked.

“Of course,” William replied. “I’m just following the way you play.”

“I’ll kick your ass.”

“I’ll smack your nose one more time.”

“Well! This is the final and most decisive battle! Are you two ready?” Taupin’s cry boomed.

As soon as William and Rogas nodded, the village head signaled, “Start!”

The audience cheered.

William swung his sword first, strong and fast, with a terrifying whoosh. But Rogas fended off, no less quickly. Then it was Rogas’ turn to advance with a stab to the body. William parried with a more fierce slash.

William attacked with explosive energy and full of emotion. His sword whirled wildly above his head, into the middle of his enemy’s body, and also down to the feet. A series of attacks that

would make his enemy's sword bounce off if he were just an ordinary soldier. Rogas was not an elite and disciplined soldier like the royal troops, but he had sufficient combat experience. In fact, he was the one who taught William many things about swordsmanship. So for a while, Rogas could still fend off the attacks.

But after that, he got tired and couldn't keep up with William. William pushed Rogas to the edge of the battle circle. He swung his sword as hard as he could from top to bottom. Rogas couldn't help it. The sword slipped from Rogas' hand, and the man fell to his knees.

Everyone cheers.

William grimaced as he pointed his sword at Rogas' face. "I told you, I'll beat you up."

Rogas growled. "Take off your sword. We use bare hands. Dare you?"

"No problem." William threw his sword aside.

Rogas jumped quickly. His head butted into William's stomach.

William did not expect it. His stomach immediately rumbled, and he was pushed back. Luckily, after a few steps, he could strengthen his stance and keep his balance. His two fists hit Rogas' body from left and right. However, because their distance was too close, the swing was not optimal. Rogas seemed to feel no pain at all. The man backed away, then swung his left fist, landing heavily on William's jaw.

William was dizzy. He lost his consciousness for a while. Fortunately, the reflex movement of his left hand blocked Rogas' right blow. William lost his stance and almost fell over if his left hand hadn't grabbed Rogas' hair, then pulled and pressed the man's head down with all his might, reversing the attack.

William pulled his right leg back, ready to kneel Rogas in the face.

If he succeeded, maybe that unfortunate face would be out of shape later. Rogas, who smelled the danger, butted in again to narrow the distance. The move saved his face, and he could head William in the stomach once again. But as a result, his defense became open. William continued his kick into Rogas' stomach until the man let out a suppressed moan from his mouth.

William lifted Rogas' head with his left hand and swung his right fist. His punch landed on Rogas' nose. The man staggered, then fell to the ground.

William jumped up, about to hit again with the final blow. But Rogas seemed to have lost his strength. He raised his hand in surrender.

"Hey, hey! Enough! It's enough!" He clutched his bleeding nose and screamed in annoyance, "You broke my nose!"

William snorted. His chest rose and fell. "You already know that... you know I have every reason to smack your nose."

"Why? You're a damn vengeful brat!"

"No, I'm just teaching you a lesson."

"You arrogant brat. You will get a lesson too later!" Rogas cursed, but his face was no longer as irritated as before. Instead, he was grinning.

William was quite relieved to see him, for his friend had not been angry with him for long. As for the broken nose, well... if Rogas treats it a little later, it will definitely heal. Although maybe the nose will be a little crooked.

Taupin stood up from his chair and walked over to William and Rogas. Her face beamed. "It seems obvious, you are the winner!" he said to William, to an immediate cheer from the crowd. "I'm looking for the deputy troop leader. You proved

yourself to be the strongest and bravest person in this place. I hope I can trust you too. So, do you want to accept it?"

William looked at Taupin for a moment, then shook his head.

"I want to join your army, and you can trust me, but I don't want to be troop leader or deputy troop leader. Let him do it," he said, glancing at Rogas, who was still rubbing his nose. "I think he wants this job more."

Taupin nodded while stroking his beard, then turned to Rogas. "Then I'll offer you the position. Are you ready?"

Rogas smiled slyly. "If the pay is good."

Taupin retorted, "We can talk about it. Right now?"

"Yes. Right now."

"We'll talk at my house."

"I want my little brother to come into the discussion," Rogas replied. "He also needs to know. If I become your deputy, then he will become my deputy, or ... the deputy of your deputy, so to speak..."

Taupin glanced at William, apparently surprised. "He's your brother?"

"Yes. I'm Dall, he's Tuck. I think you can understand now, sir, why he wanted so badly to punch me in the nose." Rogas grimaced, then answered his question himself, "Because we are brothers."

Taupin just looked at him without smiling, then retorted, "Unfortunately, I don't understand what you mean. But I'm glad you two are here. Your strength is very much needed."

"Only if the pay is right, sir, don't forget," Rogas said.

William understood now. That was the reason Rogas bothered to display his skills in front of everyone. To increase his price in Taupin's eyes. Rogas probably didn't really care about his position as a deputy troop leader. All he could think about was

the fee, and of course, the fee for the deputy of the army was greater than the fee for an ordinary soldier. Good thinking, but still annoying and dangerous. William hoped that word of this fight would not spread, so Mornitz and his gang could hear it.

Taupin invited William and Rogas to sit on the veranda of his house. Cups and teapots with drinks are served. Meanwhile, the twenty people who had been watching them fight before now gathered in the courtyard. They seemed to be fishermen and hunters from Orulion or other small villages. They didn't look as convincing as soldiers, but maybe after some training, they would get better.

Taupin glanced at William. Handing him the tea, the village chief asked, "Tuck, what do you think of them? Are they strong enough?"

William shook his head. "I don't know. I don't even know what you're doing here. Making troops? If this is a troop, where are the weapons?"

"It's in the warehouse. Swords and spears, enough for thirty people. I collected it from various places. Just simple weapons, but I think that's enough for now until we can get better ones."

"I heard the Hualeg people are terrible," Rogas said, looking like he was about to provoke talk into the subject of pay. "Do you know?"

"Of course, I know," Taupin replied. "They attacked me a few years ago, and I survived. That's precisely why I created this army, because I couldn't expect help from Alton's people. You know, at times like this, those people from the royal army are useless."

You're Going To Pay Us With Fish?

Taupin continued his explanation, "I've contacted other villages in the north, and they agreed with me. It's spring now, so we'll all set off immediately and then make a defense in the northernmost village. Hopefully, we will be ready if the Hualegs really come to attack."

"How long will you stay in the north?" Rogas asked.

"Until the end of autumn. If you count from now on, it will be about seven months."

"Who will work in every village if you all leave?" William asked.

"We divide the tasks," Taupin replied. "Some men will stay in the village. This is indeed a tough choice. Our income will decrease, but what can we do? We have to do this to keep everyone safe."

"How many soldiers will you gather?" Rogas asked again.

"From here to the north, plus a few villages in the forest's interior, there are eleven villages. Orulion is the biggest, so from other villages we might only get ten soldiers each. There would be about a hundred people. I guess that's enough for now. The

number of Hualleg raiders who came to the south was usually below that. What do you think?"

Rogas shrugged. "If you said so. But it's a dangerous job, sir. Especially if your men can't fight. Mostly just fishing, right? They're going to be bullied."

"You can help us. Besides fighting, you can train them."

"Sure, I can make your life easier." Rogas let out a wide smile. The good thing is, the position of his nose is better. "But you must understand, sir, the more dangerous and complex a job is, the better the pay must be."

"This village is not rich, Master Dall," Taupin said. "We don't save a lot of money. But you don't have to worry, we have enough fish to eat. If you stay here, you don't have to worry about starving."

"Do you mean..." Rogas straightened up, "you're going to pay us with fish?"

He shook his head when he saw the innocent face of the village head. "We need money, Master Taupin. Sazets! Which we can easily bring if we want to return to the south. You think we'll have to lug around sacks of fish all over the place?"

"Like I said before—"

"Sazet, Master Taupin. Money! I believe you have that. Don't lie to me. I know, for every fisherman and hunter who works here, as well as every merchant who passes, you always collect taxes. You collect money, not fish! It is time for you to give some of what you took. I'm not asking for much, of course, I'm just asking for an appropriate amount, which matches the difficulty of the job, as well as our skills."

"How much do you want?"

"Thirty sazets at the moment, plus thirty at the beginning of each month, and thirty at the end of the fall." Rogas glanced

at William. “Oh, that’s for me. For my brother, twenty at the beginning, twenty every month, and twenty at the end. Hmm... yes, I guess that’s enough.”

Taupin looked at Rogas in disbelief. “I’m not lying, Master Dall. I have savings, but definitely not as much as you’re asking. That’s crazy!”

“Okay, so how much can you give?”

“Fifteen, fifteen, fifteen.”

Rogas froze. “So... thirty every month, for the two of us?”

Taupin shook his head. “Fifteen for you two.”

“What?!” Rogas’ face instantly turned darker. “I can earn that much by being a waiter at a restaurant in Ortleg! We are two experienced soldiers! We-”

“We accept it,” William cut in.

Rogas immediately glared at him. “Hey, you shut up. Let me decide.”

“We accept it!” William glared back. He turned and nodded at Taupin. “We accept it, sir.”

“I’m glad you understand, Master Tuck.” The village head nodded happily. “So we agree, Master Dall?”

Rogas’ face was still red. He glanced at William again, but in the end, he agreed. “Okay. Fifteen! Ten for me, and five for him.”

“No problem,” William said.

“Good!” Taupin smiled broadly.

“Now, can we receive our first fifteen sazets now?”

“You seem really impatient. Don’t worry, Master Dall, I’ll give it to you.” Taupin stood, looking at his two guests. “But hear this: once you receive my money, you become my men. You will not deceive me. Obey and work well. No bullshit, rebuttals, or anything. If not... I’ll take back every piece I gave away.” He

looked at Rogas and William. "Do you understand?"

William nodded. "No problem."

"Hey, we're professionals," Rogas said casually. "We know what to do."

Taupin looked doubtful, but then nodded and turned back into his house.

As soon as his figure disappeared, Rogas looked at William.

"Next time, let me decide. You ..."

"No," William replied. "Next time you let me give my opinion before you decide. I know a fair price for our work. You greedy bastard!"

"I was bargaining!" Rogas whispered. "You shouldn't take it for granted." Then he snorted. "Okay, I see. You did it to piss me off. You damn vengeful brat."

"You have seen that this village is not rich, right? Do you expect to make a lot of money from here?"

"You need to get to know this person better." Rogas approached William and whispered more quietly, "Taupin is a loan shark, understand? He likes to lend money to those who are poor, then ask for it back with interest, or impose high taxes on their work. He has a lot of money in his pocket, or under his table, you can say. Taupin has nothing to lose by spending some of that money on us."

"How do you know that?" William asked.

"I know people like him."

"That's just your assumption. He cares about the safety of everyone in the north. Do you care?"

"Of course I care!" Rogas exclaimed. "If only I could have gotten those thirty pieces at the beginning, I would have given twenty of them to the poor people here, for free."

William looked at him in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

“Yes! Now, with only ten pieces, how can that be?”

“You can still give it now.”

Rogas shook his head in annoyance. “You suck.”

“It’s your own fault. If you have any plans to hand out your money, tell me from the start. Now, let’s just accept it. For the next seven months, we have to work for this man.”

“Don’t worry.” Rogas smiled meaningfully. “That was the original plan. But you’ve learned, haven’t you? Everything could change in a short time if something happened. Maybe our luck will change later, for the better.”

“Or for the worse,” William said irritably. He should have understood that Rogas must have other plans in mind.

“Worse how? Do you mean we’re going to die? Hey, if we’re going to die and cannot make it through that seven-month term, that means we don’t have to worry about anything anymore, right? Cause we’re already dead.” Rogas let out a long laugh.

Survive For Months and Still Have Fun

After giving fifteen sazets to Rogas and William, Taupin asked them to check the readiness of the thirty people who would go with them. It was Rogas who got orders from Taupin, but then he ordered William to do everything from checking the weapons in the warehouse to testing the skills of each soldier.

William didn't mind because he had nothing else to do. After all, this was a novel experience for him. He was actually quite happy because he could get to know these people.

In the afternoon, he gave a report to Rogas. "Some of them used to hold weapons. I guess that's enough for now. Meanwhile, the existing swords and spears need to be sharpened. If I had a grinder, I could fix it one by one, but let them do it."

"The most important thing is the soldiers' spirit," Rogas said knowingly. "Are they happy and really want to do this? If they're just a bunch of cowards, no matter how good their weapons are, they'll run away at a critical moment."

"I believe that those who previously were not brave will become bold, and those who were lazy will become excited if

the deputy leader of the squad can set an example,” William retorted sarcastically. “If you can’t give an example, maybe I should get the ten sazets. You should just get five.”

Rogas laughed. “So you really want to be Taupin’s deputy and earn more money than me?”

“If I had to,” William said.

“Be patient, your time will come later.” Rogas smirked. “I still need those ten sazets.”

William looked at him suspiciously. “Looks like you just made another evil plan. What are you thinking now?”

“You always have bad thoughts, William. I planned nothing!”

“It reminds me, you haven’t answered my question yesterday. What terrible thing have you done to make Mornitz want your life?”

Rogas was silent for a while. He watched the people who were resting and eating together in Taupin’s yard. William and Rogas were sitting in the courtyard’s corner, away from everyone. The man rubbed his chin while glancing at William.

“What do you want to know?” He seemed a little hesitant. “The story... is long. I don’t know where to start.”

“Who’s Mornitz?”

“Sort of bouncer. Bounty hunter. They paid him to look for me.” Rogas grinned, apparently proud of being the hunted. Maybe because it means he has value, even if it means bad.

“Then Bellion. I heard the name by the river. Who is he?” William asked. “Did he pay Mornitz? He wanted to kill you, so I guess you did something terrible. What did you do to him? Robbed his stuff? Or maybe... killed his son?”

William’s accusations were, of course, mere guesses.

But unexpectedly, Rogas’ face turned pale. “I didn’t mean to do it!”

After a moment, his face turned sour. He shook his head. "Mornitz's allegations are not true. He knows nothing!"

William didn't care. He continued, "So it's true that you killed his son? Well, if I were Bellion, I would do the same then. I would hunt you, and would not accept Mornitz's failure to kill you."

"I didn't kill anyone! I mean..." Rogas said nervously, "in this case, I only hurt him a little..."

"That Bellion's son. What's his name?"

"Darron." Rogas snorted in annoyance. "And he doesn't need sympathy. He's an asshole, believe me. So he really deserves a beating."

"I'm sure his father wouldn't be so angry if you just beat him up a little. You must have seriously injured him or maybe taken something of his, which is very important. Why don't you just admit it? Maybe I can help you!"

Rogas stared at William for a moment, then shook his head. "Believe me, I took nothing. It happened last summer, near Nordton. My army met a band of robbers at the edge of the forest, and we fought. There was a lot of blood, and people died." He smirked. "But my army won. The robbers who survived then ran away. My troops returned to Alton, and after my contract was over, my comrades and I went to Milliton. Unexpectedly, there they attacked us again. Those bastards. We could defend, and the attackers fled. But many of my friends died."

After taking a breath, Rogas continued with a sour face. "Before running away, the scarred face, the ugly-looking man you saw by the river, left a message that Bellion would not forget me. It surprised me because, to my knowledge, Bellion was quite a wealthy man in Nordton and I had no dealings with him. But then I found out, his son named Darron turned out to be the

leader of the robbers who had escaped from us. After that, I quickly went north, as far as Ortleg. I hope that in a faraway place, those people won't be able to find me and then forget about me."

William tried to digest the story. "So Bellion, this rich man from Nordton, is actually the chief criminal? In that case, why don't you just report to your commander? Let the kingdom crush them, and you don't have to worry anymore."

"I won't make it all the way to Alton! Those bastards must have been waiting for me. I'd better stay north."

"Evidently, Mornitz can still find you easily in Ortleg. With your bullshit and show-off style, I think you're easy to find."

"Hey, I can survive for months and still have fun. I think that's quite a feat."

"Because during the winter, they are reluctant to chase you all the way to Ortleg! Once the snow melts, of course, they will come!"

Rogas nodded pensively, then laughed. "But my luck hasn't run out yet. In fact, I guess there's still a lot. I believe I will still be able to make it through this winter safely."

"And after that? Are you going to keep hiding?"

"Don't forget, William, you're also wanted by them now." Rogas burst out laughing. "What about you? What do you want? Do you want to hide, or run away?"

"I haven't thought about it."

"I have a plan." Rogas' eyes flashed. "Do you want to hear?"

William stared at him. "What?"

"Listen, after working for months in the north, we're going to make a lot of money. Not much, but enough. With that money we will invite these northerners, those who are willing, to come with us to the south."

“To the south? What for?” William’s brow furrowed.

“To form our own troops.” Rogas smiled broadly. “With these troops, we will go to Bellion’s base, then beat him, his son, and also Mornitz. We destroy them all, down to the roots! Exterminate them until no one else can take revenge on us for decades to come.”

As Long As The Pay Is Right

William was stunned to hear Rogas' explanation. What the man had just said was a terrifying plan. Not something to play with. He didn't expect Rogas to think that way. Behind Rogas' intention to join the Taupin army, it turned out that he had planned something bigger. He was about to create an army and counterattack the stronghold of the criminals in Alton.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" William asked in disbelief. "Do you already know the strength of your enemy?"

"I know," Rogas answered confidently. "With thirty soldiers, as long as all of them are skilled and will follow my every word, I can destroy them."

"Hmm... yeah, well, if that's the case..."

"Quite clever, right?"

"Not bad." William nodded. "But... I wouldn't believe it if that was your only plan. Just to get rid of them? No. In the end, you will definitely rob Bellion. Yes! You're actually planning to make your own band of robbers!"

"Your thoughts are always negative." Rogas sneered. "Listen,

in war, spoils of war are common. And again, they are robbers. We're just going to rob the robbers. We can share the loot with the people they previously robbed. Do you think that's not a noble act?"

William was silent.

Yes, that seemed like a good deed. But it still felt wrong.

"Now you understand, don't you?" Rogas continued. "I have a pretty good plan. So I'm sure you'll want to come with me too."

William shrugged. "As long as the pay is right."

Rogas laughed. "That's it! You're a mercenary now! You've studied well! Our future is bright, don't you agree?"

"As long as you don't act stupid, then yes."

"No. As long as luck is on our side."

"Whatever," William said.

He straightened up to get up from his seat. The sun was almost setting behind the hill. All the soldiers who had gathered in the courtyard had already dispersed. Those living in Orulion returned to their respective homes, while those from other villages went to the front and side verandas of Taupin's house to sleep there. Tomorrow morning they would all gather again at this place, before embarking on their journey north.

"I'm going to bed," William said. "If I'm lucky, maybe I'll have a sweet dream, in which there's definitely no you in it."

"Who do you want to meet in your dream?? Muriel? Hey, I can help you."

"Shut up!"

Rogas laughed, then restrained William, who was about to leave. "This is serious. If you really wish for luck, I can give you something."

William looked suspiciously.

“Look at this.” Rogas reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a reddish-yellow metal ring. “Every time I wear this ring, luck never runs away from me. I always win at gambling, never lose in battle, and also... always have luck with the girls.” He chuckled.

“Hmm... if it makes you feel lucky, why don’t you put it on your finger and instead keep it in your pocket?”

“I used to wear it often.”

“I never saw it.”

“It’s your fault if you never see it,” Rogas said. “I’m serious. It’s a lucky ring. If you want it, I’ll give it to you.”

William took the ring, studied it. Despite Rogas’ remarks about luck, it was indeed an attractive ring and probably quite expensive. “Yes, this is a fine ring. But if you give it to me, then you’ll lose your luck.”

“I have another lucky item,” Rogas smirked again as he showed William his necklace. The necklace was black and in front of it hung three thumb-sized bear hooves. “This is something better. With that ring, I’ve won ten sazets, but with this necklace, I’ve won thirty!” Roger laughed. A moment later, his expression changed. “Unfortunately, while using both, I lost fifty! Outrageous! Since then I have never used them together. I ended up wearing the ring less often. Now, instead of wasting it, I’ll offer it to you.”

“You’re talking like any other bullshit you said yesterday,” William said. “I don’t believe any of it. But if you really want to give your ring, I’d be grateful.”

“I give it to you.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Put it on.” Rogas watched William, who was still hesitating. “Then tell me tomorrow what you did with Muriel in your

dream.” He laughed out loud again.

William wore the ring, thinking it might not hurt. Who knows, maybe what Rogas said this time was true.

Turned out it was still bullshit.

When he woke up the next day, William could hardly believe that last night he really hoped to have a sweet dream just because he was wearing the ring that Rogas gave him. In fact, William was fast asleep, like a baby. No dreams at all.

Or maybe he should consider himself lucky for not having nightmares and being able to wake up refreshed?

William looked at the ring on his finger, then got up from his bed and left the ring on his finger.

All the soldiers had gathered. Thirty people. Plus William, Rogas and Taupin. Everyone got their weapons, then they headed north along the Ordelaehr River using six boats. There was no release ritual with the villagers. Even though there was a possibility that they would return home in just a name if a battle occurred and they were unlucky. But maybe, if the sadness really existed, these people had released it yesterday in their respective homes.

While rowing, a strange feeling came over William. He remembered his mother’s message that she did not want him to return to the north. Now he really went there. More than that, he went to confront the Hualegs. William has half of Hualegs blood in his body, and now he will fight them. He felt restless, but strangely excited at the same time. He knew that no matter what happened, he still wanted to see the faces of that strangers from the north, even if they came as enemies.

The Ordelaehr River flows from the mountains in the south to the cold seas in the north. If they passed through the thick forest, they would arrive at the land of the Hualeg people. The

six boats can go fast because they move with the flow. By sunset, they arrived at the next village. The next day, ten people from the village joined in and they continued north.

William and his companions rowed for several days and stopped by many villages. When they finally arrived at Thaluk, the last village to the north, eighty people had joined. Twenty Thaluk residents joined in as well. They made their base in an old building on a cliff. From there they could look far to the north, to the river that meandered and then disappeared into the forest.

William heard someone telling a story. Once upon a time, there were other villages in the north, which meant that Thaluk was not the northernmost village in the region. But all those villages were destroyed. Only Thaluk survived, thanks to its strategic location in the highlands. In this place, when the Hualeg men came, the villagers could see from afar and had the opportunity to flee to the hills to the east. Their treasures in the village were robbed, but at least their lives were saved.

An Old Friend

William passed day after day in his new home in the small village of Thaluk. Half a month passed. He trained, patrolled the forest, or when he got bored, he joined in hunting and fishing with the villagers.

As he was on patrol with five soldiers to a creek in the east, a fisherman said, “Actually, not all Hualleg men are bad. There was one who came once, and his behavior was good. He gave us coats, while we gave him food, fruit, or medicine. But one like him was rare. They’d rather rob us.”

“When did they come the last time?” William asked.

“Last summer. They came in five boats, each containing ten people. Some of us ran and hide in the forest. Many didn’t have time to run. They didn’t survive ...”

“Why did they kill? Was it not enough for them to just steal?”

“How would I know?” the fisherman replied with annoyance. “Maybe they thought what’s the point of carrying an ax if it’s not being used to slash people?”

William rowed pensively. Hearing that story made him really hate the Hualleg people. Now, if these villagers and his friends

knew his father was a Hualeg, he would definitely feel very embarrassed.

William and his soldiers continued their patrol. They followed the creek to the east, then pulled over and climbed the hills. They dispersed and soon regrouped, finding nothing suspicious. As the sun slipped to the west, they came to a log cabin near to the riverbank.

An old man with a white beard greeted them. The hunch-backed old man's name was Bullock. He lived by gathering wood, fruit, and medicinal plants. It is said that he had lived there most of his life.

"Finally, you guys stopped by my house," he said. "Why now? Wait, let me get you a fresh drink. I haven't had a drink with anyone in a long time."

"Thank you, sir. But we're only here for a moment," William said politely. "We just wanted to ask if you've seen anything strange lately."

"Strange... things?" Bullock brought her ear closer.

"A suspicious person, for example."

"Oh. You mean the people from the north?"

"Yes, Hualeg people."

The old man walked over. His eyes, which were almost covered by thick white eyebrows, narrowed, trying to recognize William's face. "I have seen no one else in a long time. The northerners have never been here either. Usually, they only move near the major river. Only my friends from another village used to come."

"So there wasn't one recently?"

"No one, son."

William nodded.

"Is everything okay?" Bullock asked back.

“We hope so. Well, if that’s the case, then goodbye, sir. We have to go now.”

“Why are you in such a hurry?” The old man patted William’s hand. “You don’t want to accompany me for a while? I’d really like to talk to you, son.”

William suddenly felt pity. The old man really wanted to talk to other people. Perhaps he had lived alone in this hut for too long without having visited the other villages.

“If you insist,” William replied with a smile.

“Ah, thank you, son.”

“Hey, Tuck,” a soldier said. “We’ve been on patrol since yesterday and haven’t gone home. We’d better get back to the village before evening.”

“You go first,” William replied. “I will follow. Leave me one boat.”

The five soldiers agreed and went home first.

Bullock invited William to sit on the veranda of his house. William had to sit down carefully because the chair looked rotten. The old man briefly entered the house, then came out with two bottles of water.

Once again, he expressed his joy. “I told you before, son, I haven’t had a drink with anyone in a long time. In the past...” Bullock mused, “I used to drink every month until I was drunk, especially when he visited me.”

William took a sip of his hot drink, then frowned. “He?”

“Yes, that man. The bear-coat gatherer.” Bullock looked at William’s face once more. “You don’t know him?”

“Why should I know?”

“Because your face looks like him. Both of you... are very similar.”

William’s breath caught. His mind wandered. He remembered

his mother's words about his father, who she said was very similar to William. Did Bullock mean his father?

His joy exploded. But doubts arose. It's still uncertain. He shouldn't just show his feelings. "Who's he?" he asked.

"A Hualeg. Imagine, the person I drink the most with, my best friend for a long time, is a Hualeg." Bullock laughed. "He was a hunter who often sold his coat to the villages. He lived by the river for several years. Then someday he disappeared, never to appear again. I don't know, maybe he finally returned to his country and settled there again." The old man watched William, who was still holding back his emotions.

"That's been a long time ago," Bullock continued. "But I never forget the face of a friend. And today I saw you, with my myopic eyes. You look a lot like him. Your face, your stature, your eyes." He nodded. "So I believe you actually know him. That's why I don't understand. Why didn't you want to admit it? Are you afraid? Are you afraid of a weak old man like me?"

William was still silent. One thing that surprised him was why he didn't want to just admit that the man Bullock was referring to was his father. His father was a good person. Everyone who knew him said that, that he wasn't like most Hualeg people who seemed to just like killing. So why doesn't he just admit it?

William finally nodded. "Yes. He... seems to be my father."

"I'm pleased to hear that. But why do you seem unsure?"

"Because I've never met him."

"Ah. So... you don't know if he's still alive or... dead?"

"Yes," William answered, though he remembered his mother's words that his father was dead.

"Now you want to know more about it?"

"Yes." William nodded. Emotions stirred. He almost cried when he said that one word.

“I may not be of much help to you. What do you want to know?”

“You know where he used to live?”

“He once said his house was by the river. Not the Ordelahr River, but this little river. I’ve never been there, but I think if you follow the river all the way east, you might find it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“What are you looking for there?”

William was pensive. “Nothing. I just wanted to know,” he answered uncertainly.

Bullock nodded, stroking his beard. “I used to think I knew him, but maybe I didn’t. And I wonder what happened to him. I think you know a little more than I do. But... you don’t want to tell me yet.”

“Once I find out more later, I’ll tell you about it.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Bullock replied. “Because it means you will come here often and become my friend. Like your father.”

Take Out Your Sword!

William rowed his boat further east. His meeting with Bullock had awakened his long-buried desire. He wanted to know again what happened to his father.

William delayed his return to Thaluk and ignored his mother's message that she didn't want William to go find out about his father. William felt he was so close to what he was looking for. He was sure that one day he would regret it if he didn't dare to look further. Of course, a visit to his father's house would not reveal all the secrets, but at least this could cure his longing for the figure of his father and mother.

Besides, maybe this would help him get to know himself better because that's where he was born.

The boat kept going. He looked left and right while rowing, not wanting to let go of small things that could be clues. He passed through boulders, thickets, and rows of trees, but so far, he found nothing. As the sun went down, he doubted. Is this really the right tributary?

The Ordelaehr River has so many tributaries, especially to the east, so maybe the house was actually very far from here. His

enthusiasm faded, and after a while, he thought more about looking for a quiet riverbank, where he could moor his boat and rest for the night.

He found a river bank jutting into the mainland. The water was calm, protected by a row of boulders. William took his boat ashore and tied it to a tree trunk. At that moment, he saw a wooden house behind the thicket. He could not see it directly from the river.

William stood with his chest pounding. Something in his heart said it clearly: that was the house he was looking for. His house.

He stepped cautiously along the path that circled the thicket. He stopped behind a large tree, then studied the wooden house for a while. The house was simple and small. There may only be three or four rooms inside. Weeds grew all around it and covered the path in front of the door. Anyone had not lived the house in for a long time.

But one thing made him doubt. The window on the side of the house looked opened. Could anyone be in there? Or had the window been open long ago?

William held the hilt of the sword at his waist, alert as if there really was someone else in this place. Slowly, he walked around the house, toward the wall where the window opened. He didn't get closer to the window and only looked at the inside of the house from afar. It seemed empty and quite dark. There was no sign of anyone's presence.

For a few moments, William tried to convince himself, before finally being relieved. The house was empty, and he had nothing to fear.

He walked back to the front of the house, then stunned.

A girl who was as tall as William stood about ten meters from him. She had long yellow hair which was braided to the back.

Her face was beautiful, but her round blue eyes shone fiercely. The girl's appearance looked dashing in a thick sleeveless shirt made of bearskin. But what made her look terrifying was the enormous sword in her left hand. With one look, William could tell that sword was much better than the sword he currently had.

William glanced at the now open front door. Could this girl be in there? Maybe she came out as soon as she noticed William's arrival. Her actions showed she was a very brave girl.

William did not want to be careless. From the girl's yellow hair, it was most likely that this girl was a Hualég. She's definitely dangerous. Maybe he should talk to the girl first.

"Put down your sword!" William said. "Can we talk?"

A moment later, he felt stupid. Most likely, this girl could not understand what he was saying.

Turned out she understood, just didn't want to follow William's words. The girl looked at the sword in her hand, then raised her face, pointing at William.

"Your sword," she said with an odd accent. "Take it out."

William looked at her, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Take it out." The girl pointed her sword at William.

William cursed. The girl wanted to fight with him.

"Take out your sword!" The girl's voice sounded louder now.

William had no choice. He drew his sword.

The next second, the girl rushed forward with wide strides through the grass. She swung the sword in her left hand. William quickly parried to the side and was surprised because her swing was powerful. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, the girl continued to hit again and again with equal force. William had to endure.

One thing that made it difficult for him to expect these attacks was that he had never faced a left-handed opponent, while that

girl must have fought enemies wielding a sword in the right hand many times. Every time William tried to swing his sword to the left, the girl easily dodged by continuously shifting to William's right, away from his attacks.

William became annoyed. He gripped his sword and gathered all his strength, then swung his sword to the right. Clashing, the sword in the girl's hand trembled. She took a step back.

William didn't want to let her go. His sword swung again. The yellow-haired girl tried to parry, but her grip wasn't strong enough to match William's power. Her sword was thrown into the air.

William jumped up, grabbed the girl's thick clothes, and pushed her body with all his might. The girl's back hit the tree trunk. It was hard enough. But she didn't moan at all. She even glared at William and tried to rebel.

William pointed his sword at the girl's neck, while his left hand held the girl's chest. "Stop it!" he said.

Their faces were close enough that he could feel her snorts and growls.

"Calm down!" he said again.

William was happy when the girl finally stopped fighting because then he didn't have to beat her up. Only the girl's eyes were still gazing.

Relieved, William lowered his sword. "Listen, we don't have to fight. I don't want to hurt you. Just tell me, why are you in—"

A knee kick in his groin stopped it all.

William almost threw up, and lose his concentration. The girl's left hand held William's right hand, which was holding the sword, then her right hand hit from below, crushing William's chin. Next, the girl's left fist swung right into William's jaw. Twice.

It was the hardest hit William had ever felt. The young man staggered, the sword slipped from his hand, and he fell. Before he could recover, the girl's hard kick came hitting him in the head like a hammer. William collapsed instantly and passed out.

No Need To Promise Anything

When William woke up, he felt the warmth of the bonfire burning in front of him. He blinked, for a moment didn't know what had happened to him. His body was leaning against something, perhaps a tree trunk, while his head was still dizzy.

He turned his head and saw the yellow-haired girl sitting in front of him. She was eating something and her eyes glanced when she saw William lift his head.

All of his memories came back from how he got here and how that girl had beaten him. He straightened up his back. His hand rose to grip his aching jaw. Then he realized both his wrists were bound by a strong coil of plant roots. William looked down. The same root tied his ankles and his knees.

He glanced at the yellow-haired girl, who was still chewing. He was helpless and a prisoner. Even if his enemy was just a woman, and she hadn't killed William, there was still a high chance she would kill him later or do something terrible.

Then he tried to think. There was a possibility this girl didn't intend to kill him, though. Maybe she's just scared and tied

William so he wouldn't do anything to her.

The girl continued to stare at him, as if trying to study William, then pointed to something burning above the campfire. "Fish. Eat."

William glanced at a skewer of fish that was being grilled. The sweet smell pierced his nose, provoking his rumbling stomach asking to be filled. But he didn't want to react. It must be clear first whether this girl had no bad intentions towards him. Only then would William accept her offer.

"Take it," the girl said again in a louder voice.

William shook his head. "Who are you?"

The girl stopped chewing. She took a fish skewer from the fire and threw it at William. The fish fell right into his palm. Of course, it's hot. William groaned, tossing the fish several times in the air, before being able to hold the skewer.

"Hey!" he cried. "Can't you give it better? This is food!"

"Eat!"

"If I don't want to, then what are you going to do?"

The girl drank her wine. "I'm angry."

"Why are you angry?"

"Because you don't do what I say."

"So what if you're angry?"

"I will hit you."

William laughed. "So I have to eat. Then, after I do that?"

The girl shrugged. "Do you want me to hit you again?"

"I mean, what do you want from me? Why did you capture me?"

"I don't want to capture you," the girl said.

"Then why are you doing this?"

"Because you came to this place. You shouldn't be," the girl stared. Then she said again, "After eating, you go."

“I go when I want to,” William said.

“You have to go.”

“Why?”

“Or my friends will kill you,” the girl replied flatly.

William nodded, now getting wary. “A lot of them?”

“What?”

“Are there a lot of them?”

“Lots.”

“Are they here?”

The girl looked at William again. “Soon.”

“Why did they come?” William kept asking.

“Because they want to.”

“Do you want to rob villages again?”

The girl’s expression changed. Now she looked angry. “You ask too many questions. I caught you. I should be the one asking you.”

“Well, if you want to chat, you can untie me first,” William said. “We can chat as friends.”

The girl shook her head. “I already know you. So you eat, then go. If you stay here until morning, you will die.”

William froze. The girl’s threat looked serious. Hualeg men have arrived in the south. William knew he had to leave quickly and then report this to his comrades in the village so they could get ready. But he wondered, why did the girl let him go? Not holding him or even kill him? Was it because the girl was actually not as bad as he thought?

Another question arises: why was that girl doing here? Was she looking for something, or was she just making this house her resting place? How did she get here?

William didn’t see any other boats on the riverbank, so maybe she wasn’t alone. There were her friends around this river, who

were probably wandering off somewhere.

William ate the fish. He glanced at the wooden house behind the girl. It was his old house, and he wanted to have a look. He probably wouldn't remember anything, but at least there was something that could remind him of his father or mother. But the Hualeg girl would definitely not allow it. She firmly wanted William to go, and he agreed he had to go.

William took a sip of his drink, then thanked her.

The girl unhesitatingly cut the bonds in William's hands and feet with her sword.

William stood up and looked at the tall girl, who was also standing in front of him. "You let me go. Aren't you afraid I'll attack you?"

"No," the girl answered. "If you do that, you are stupid."

"Of course, since you're still holding my sword. That one. I can't ask it back, can I?" William tried to joke. "But I can still attack you without a sword."

"Go."

"You know, maybe we'll meet again later."

"Maybe," the girl replied flatly.

"And fighting again," William continued.

"Maybe."

"And maybe to death."

The girl pondered. "Yes."

"Could be... later, I have to kill you."

This time, the girl did not answer.

"So, don't you regret releasing me?"

The girl sighed softly. "No."

William shook his head. "I'm the one who will regret it if I ever do that to you. I won't kill you, not even hurt you! Tonight you did good to me, and I will remember it. So when we meet at

the worst possible time, I'll be nice to you. I promise.”

“You don't need to promise anything.”

“That's up to me.”

“Go.”

William nodded and then left. He walked down a dark path, circling the undergrowth until he came to the bank of the river. He untied his boat, then jumped up. While preparing to row, he saw the yellow-haired girl who was watching him silently. The moonlight illuminates the girl's beautiful face. William smiled at her, but the girl didn't reply.

William took the boat away. A strange feeling came over him. He really hoped that some words he had said to the girl weren't true. William didn't want to see her again in battle; he didn't want to meet her at the worst possible moment. If he could, he wanted to be friends with her.

Even if it's just hope.

The girl was a Hualeg, and she was his enemy.

No One's Coming Back

William boated all night. During the trip, he was worried, because if what the yellow-haired girl said was true, that her friends from the north had arrived, then William might meet them in the middle of the river. If it's just one or two men, he still dares to face them, but if it's over three, he's in big trouble. Because he did not carry any weapon at all.

Fortunately, the men from the north were nowhere to be seen, neither in the tributaries nor in the Ordelaehr River. Because William couldn't see them, or because they were actually still far north. The yellow-haired girl might just be scaring him so he can go away. William sped up his rowing and arrived at Thaluk before noon.

William rushed up the cliff to the base. He didn't stop, even though he was still tired. He met Rogas and Taupin in the main meeting room. There was also Master Morrin, the village head of Thaluk.

Rogas grinned happily when he saw William. "Ah, Tuck, you're finally back. How long have you been gone? Three days?"

I really hope you find something interesting.”

“I just hope you don’t bring bad news,” Taupin said.

“Other patrols have returned from the west and north,” Morrin, who was short and stocky, said to William. “And they didn’t see those barbarians. I hope the situation is the same in the east.”

William looked at the three men. “Maybe they’re close.”

They fell silent.

“We went all the way to Bullock’s house,” William continued, “and he said he saw nothing suspicious.”

“That’s good news, isn’t it?” Morrin said, a little hesitant. “But he’s old. His eyes were almost blind and his ears were deaf. Information from him is unreliable.”

“My soldier checked the surroundings of his house, and it seems he was right,” William continued. “Then from there, we parted. My five soldiers returned here first, while I continued to check east, along the river.”

“What do you mean?” Rogas asked. “Your soldiers came back before you?”

“Yeah, they came back yesterday.” William suddenly felt something strange.

“No one’s coming back,” Rogas said.

“What?” William asked in surprise.

“Your soldiers haven’t returned,” Taupin said.

“Wait, wait. What happened here?” Morrin panicked.

William froze, looking at the three men, who looked confused. His mind was spinning, trying to link one possibility to another. What he imagined was the worst possibility, that his soldiers might meet the enemy in the middle of the river.

“I don’t know what happened yet,” he whispered. “But maybe they’re close.”

“Who?”

“Hualeg warriors.”

“You’d better tell us more clearly! Don’t just say like that!”
Taupin exclaimed.

Rogas gave William a sharp look. “What did you find in the east?”

“I rowed until the afternoon to the east, then pulled over to a place that I thought would be a good place to rest. Turned out there was someone else there. A Hualeg. We fought, and I lost.”

“You lost?” Taupin jumped in surprise.

Rogas grinned in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“How could you?” Morrin asked. “You’re the best swordsman we have, and you lost?”

“I guess because my opponent is more skilled than I am,” William replied flatly. If he thought about it, maybe he lost because of his carelessness, thinking that Hualeg girl had already bowed to him. But that’s not an excuse. He lost, no matter how. “That’s not what’s important. Do you want to continue hearing my story?”

“Yes!” Taupin said.

“That Hualeg warrior caught me, but then released me.”

The three men stared at him in disbelief.

“That’s weird,” Morrin said. “Hualegs never give mercy, and they like to kill. Why did he let you go?”

“Are you sure he’s a Hualeg?” Taupin asked.

“Yes. But I think a good one. The warrior instead gave me a warning that the rest of the Hualeg men would come soon.”

Taupin and Morrin looked at each other, while Rogas was stunned. For a moment, everyone was silent, restless.

“What is this warrior look like?” Rogas asked.

“Tall, yellow hair, good with the sword, and hits hard.”

For now, that explanation sufficed. William did not want to mention the most important characteristic: that the warrior was a woman. William wasn't sure why he was hiding it. Maybe because it was a bit of a thank you to the girl who had been kind to him. It felt wrong if William explained all the characteristics of the girl to his colleagues at headquarters.

Or maybe it's just because he's afraid of being laughed at by Rogas for losing to women?

"Do you believe his words?" Rogas asked.

"I believe." William sighed and shook his head worriedly. "Now my soldiers have not returned. It's possible they found something suspicious and pulled over. Maybe they met those Hualeg men."

"They should be back by now," Morrin said.

"Yeah, unless..." Rogas said, "something bad happened. Dead, for example."

"That was terrible!" Morrin cried.

"This wouldn't have happened if you all didn't split up!" Taupin accused William. "If you stick together, you'll be fine!"

"If Tuck stays with them, he'll die too," Rogas defended William. "He was lucky. Do you understand, Tuck?" He smirked. "Your luck just played here. Someday you'll have to thank someone for this, right? You're lucky you didn't die like your men. That's if they were really dead. And lucky to get information from the Hualeg guy who released you."

"The one who beat him!" Taupin still looked annoyed. "If only Tuck had beaten that guy, things might not have been so bad. Tuck could have brought the man here. We can take him hostage and then question him. We can have more information!"

"Listen, sir, my soldiers aren't necessarily dead. I'll go look for them," William was getting annoyed too.

“Alone?” Morrin asked.

“No,” Rogas said. “Tuck, go with ten soldiers.”

“They all could be in danger when they meet Hualeg warriors!” Taupin said.

“Then what do you want?” Rogas asked impatiently. “We were all waiting like fools here until suddenly the Hualeg mob came?”

“We’re staying here, as originally planned!” Taupin exclaimed.

“We should have patrolled better.” Morrin shook his head as if to say to himself.

“That’s what I meant!” Taupin glanced back at William. “You should have done better on your patrol. Remember, I paid you well, so you should repay me well too with your work.”

William snorted. “I’ll give you your money right now if you don’t think I deserve it. After that, I’m going back south. But remember, some soldiers might come with me. Seeing this dire situation, they knew it was better to leave than die in this horrible place. Is that what you want, sir? I’m here to help you! Compared to you, I’m really doing something out there, not just sitting around here and talking. So don’t tell me more nonsense!”

Taupin was silent to hear William’s rebuke, as was Morrin. But Rogas grinned happily. A grin that often seemed annoying, but this time it calmed William because he felt Rogas was on his side.

“Ten soldiers, Tuck,” Rogas said. “Take Thom and his friends.”

William nodded. “I’m leaving now.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you want to rest first?”

“I’ll do it later. The sooner I go, the better.”

Rogas nodded. “Remember, don’t let go of your lucky item. It has helped you, believe it or not.”

Would Kill With The Same Cruelty

William went to the barracks where the soldiers lived. He filled his stomach with bread while telling his friends about his plan. Then he left, accompanied by Thom and nine others.

They crossed the Ordelaehr River to the north. Tired, William took time to sleep, and let his comrades row and watch.

As soon as they arrived at the junction between the Ordelaehr River and the tributary leading to the east, Thom woke him up.

“Did you see something?” William asked.

“Not yet,” Thom answered.

“Keep going east, take it slow.”

The two boats moved slowly. One boat moves on the left side, and the other on the right side. They followed the winding river and passed old Bullock’s house. Afternoon, they finally stopped on the right side of the river where the banks were protected by a fair amount of boulders. They found another boat moored there.

William noticed the trees and shrubs in front of him, as well as the footprints on the muddy ground. This place was like

the riverbank at his house yesterday, only this one was closer. Last night after being caught by the yellow-haired girl, William didn't see the boat around here. But it must be because it was dark.

"They're there." He pointed toward the woods. "Let's go."

"Are you sure?" Thom asked doubtfully.

William looked at the soldiers, who looked tense. They were all older than him but depended on him, simply because he had slightly welled swordsmanship. William knew he couldn't show his doubts to them. He had to look brave. The bravery of an experienced soldier, not the bravery of a boy.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "Follow me and keep your distance. Don't be too far away, but don't be too close to your friends. If you see something strange and suspicious, tell your closest friends, or act right away. Understand?"

Those men looked more convinced. William stomped his feet on the muddy ground. Cautiously, he walked behind the thicket. His men followed him. The forest they passed was thick, with enormous trunks and bushes that could be used as hiding places. They can't be careless. He pointed left and right, telling his soldiers to spread out. He asked them to keep their eyes and ears open.

William kept walking until he finally stopped. The distance between the trees stretched. The gentle gurgling of the small river water reached his ears. Apparently, they had arrived at a clearing in the middle of the forest. Sunlight freely infiltrated into the place.

William peeked out from behind a tree. His breath caught as soon as he saw a man's body lying face down on the bank of the river. William recognized from the clothes, it was one soldier who patrolled with him yesterday.

William glanced back. His comrades had approached and saw what he saw. Their faces were pale and looked nervous. William looked back at the river. He saw another corpse not far to the left, and another to the right.

“I’ll check them out,” William whispered to Thom. “You guys stay here. Don’t rush forward. If there are enemies, let them come out first before you attack.”

Thom nodded, though he didn’t seem to understand the point.

William came out of hiding. His sword gripped tightly. These dead soldiers seemed to have been killed yesterday, and their murderers may have been long gone. But there was still a possibility that the enemy was still.

He crouched beside a nearby corpse, which seemed to have been killed with an ax. The wounds on the head and back are deep. William was sad and angry at the same time. If he ever met the person who did this, he would kill him with the same cruelty.

A rustling sound was heard from the right side.

William turned. A large man stood about ten steps away from him. He had red hair and a bushy beard, wore a thick shirt made of bearskin, and held an ax as wide as a head in his hand. The man smirked behind his beard and drew near with his ax.

William reacted quickly. He took a step back, then attacked with his sword. The sword clashed with the enemy’s ax, which was made of iron. The two of them pressed against each other, fighting for strength. William looked into his enemy’s eyes. He could hear the Hualeg’s snort and the smell of wine wafted out.

William lifted his right foot from the shallow river, kicking his enemy in the groin. The Hualeg looked down, not expecting it. Getting the chance, William hit his enemy’s chin with the lower end of the hilt of his sword. The man retreated, his defenses

exposed. William swung his sword from above while jumping, slashing his enemy's arm, then breaking his skull.

A fierce exclamation immediately rang out from behind. Another enemy soldier appeared from the opposite direction, at the end of the bend in the river, running over. No, not just one. There's another one behind that man. So now there are three new enemies, and all carrying big axes.

Ignoring his fear, William replied with an equally fierce roar. He waited, measuring the distance of his closest enemy, then at the right moment he leaped forward, half-down while swinging his sword. The first warrior's ax whizzed above his head, while his sword slashed his foe's waist mercilessly.

One enemy fell, the second enemy's ax came from above. Half kneeling, William parried with the sword over his head. His body rotates using his left foot as an axis while his right foot seeks a new position. In an instant, he was standing tall beside his enemy. His sword swung and slashed at his second enemy's back, simultaneously striking at his third enemy.

The third person blocked his attack with the hilt of the ax. William pulled his sword and hit again with all his might. In the third attack, the enemy could not resist. The Hualeg man's eyes flashed with horror as if he couldn't believe that he lose so quickly. William jumped to the side, then slashed the man's neck.

The two enemies that had been wounded earlier, one on the back and one on the waist, roared and raised their axes, ready to put up a last fight. But William moved faster than the wounded men. Two slashes killed them both.

Finished with them, William stood watching his surroundings. He listened and waited to see if any more enemies would come. Apparently not.

Slowly, he breathed a sigh of relief. He looked at the victims one by one. He had just carried out his second series of murders after the first in Ortleg. His body shuddered.

William hissed at the thicket where his soldiers were hiding. Thom and the others appeared. They looked at William and at the scattered corpses.

Thom whispered, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," William said. "Why?"

"I... just want to know if our actions were right."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you actually need our help?"

William glared fiercely. "If you guys can help me, that would be great."

"But... you can beat them all easily," Thom replied. "And you said we shouldn't go out before—"

"Do it if the number of enemies is only a few. I didn't do this easily. I'd love it if you guys could help!"

"What's the limit?" Tom asked. "I mean, we should help you if the number of enemies is... how many?"

"I don't know! You guys just come out, if you see me pressed. Other times I might not be so lucky."

That's Not The Right Answer

William and his soldiers continued the search. Nine people advanced across the river, spreading out in three groups, while the other two remained behind, just in case. They became more confident, after seeing with their own eyes that the terrifying Hualeg warriors could actually die like ordinary humans.

In the woods, William found two more bodies. They were soldiers who patrolled with him yesterday. Thus complete, the five missing soldiers were indeed dead.

William shook his head sadly. Maybe Taupin was right. He should have stayed with them yesterday. He could help them during a battle, and they didn't have to die.

But one thing still made him wonder. What had made the five soldiers lured here? Did they see someone here from the river bank and chase after him? Would they dare to chase if what they saw were these terrifying Hualeg warriors? They shouldn't have dared. There must be something else.

"Now what?" Tom asked.

"We have to find out why they died."

“The Huallegs killed them. That’s obvious.”

“That’s not the right answer,” William said.

“That’s the sufficient answer,” replied Thom. “We’d better go home and bring the bodies of our friends. They died because something provoked them. Do you want that to happen to us too? To them?” He glanced at his colleagues behind him.

William was silent. Thom was right. If he followed his curiosity too much, they could all meet their doom. He couldn’t rely on his luck all the time. Luck will not come many times. On the other hand, he couldn’t possibly ignore his desire to know what was behind this series of deaths. Because it could be the key that can prevent them from a bigger disaster.

“Look,” he said. “I’ll check a little more. You guys, three people are guarding here, the rest take the five bodies of our friends to the boat, then wait there. If I don’t come back until the sun goes down, you guys go home.”

“Then... how will you get home later?”

“I will find a way. I could walk along the riverbank by land all the way to Bullock’s house. There, maybe I can borrow a boat.”

“It’s quite a distance, and you don’t know what’s in the woods,” Thom said. “You don’t have to do this, Tuck. It’s a risk you don’t have to take.”

“Don’t worry, I can hide. Go on and be careful.”

“You the one who should be careful.”

William continued the search. For a moment, he thought, walking alone meant that the tactics he had made with Thom would be useless. He had to fight alone again.

He went deeper into the dark forest. Sneaking through the trees, turning left, right, still trying to remember the path he took. Then he saw that the sky was bright, and the trees were sparse again. He arrived at another clearing in the middle of the

forest.

He peeked out from behind the bushes. It turned out that there was another small river in front of him. Wider than the creek William had fought in earlier, but it was most likely the same stream that meandered through the woods and finally got here. One end of this river must have led to a larger tributary.

His breath caught as soon as he heard people talking. He noticed there were two people sitting on the river bank. Both men and large. Near to the two, there was a girl with brownish-red hair.

William was stunned. Was that the girl he met yesterday? The clothes she wore were similar, but that was all they had in common. Besides her distinct hair color, this girl has a more oval face shape, a sharper nose, and a smaller body. The girl laughed along with the two nearby soldiers, looked very different from the serious yellow-haired girl's behavior.

Suddenly, the red-haired girl stopped laughing. Her eyes stared straight at the thicket where William was hiding. She said something. The two soldiers immediately stood up while taking out swords.

William cursed, unable to believe they could see him. Could they really see him? The two Hualeg warriors approached and crossed the shallow river. The two of them stopped, then shouted. William, who had wanted to emerge from hiding, now did not do so.

The warriors seemed to call someone. But apparently, no other enemy appeared. It was likely that they had called their comrades whom William had killed first.

The red-haired girl screamed. The two men took another step forward. William retreated to get a better fighting position. As soon as a Hualeg brushed aside the dense undergrowth and

swung his sword, William was ready. His sword twisted even more violently, hitting his enemy's blade until it pushed him farther to the left. With both hands, William swung to the right, slashing the soldier's neck without mercy.

The second enemy came and swung his sword three times. William parried, then moved through the trees, making it difficult for his enemies to attack. In the end, his enemy's sword was stuck in a tree trunk. William found an opening, ducked down, and stabbed his sword straight into his enemy's left waist. The Hualeg man roared. He drew his sword and tried to strike back. William dodged, as he spun around and swung his sword horizontally at his enemy's neck, cutting him off. They're dead now.

William looked at his last enemy, the red-haired girl.

The girl brandished her sword while screaming, but suddenly turned around and ran down the river to the right.

William immediately gave chase, and of course, he ran faster. The river was splashing. In no time, he was behind the girl. He pounced. Both fell into the river. William pressed his opponent's back until she stumbled, panicked, and rebelled, trying to get her head and body out of the water.

A moment later, he realized. What a terrible act he did? Was he going to kill a helpless woman?

He quickly pulled the girl's body out of the water. The girl coughed out the water that had fallen into her mouth, then passed out. William's chest was pounding. He suddenly felt guilty. He looked at the girl's face, which was not as old as he had imagined. This girl was younger than the yellow-haired girl he met yesterday.

William pondered with mixed feelings. "Sorry, I did this to you. You are my enemy. Your men have killed my friends. But I

will not kill you. I will take you, and we will question you.”

Talking to a girl who was fainting was, of course, the useless thing to do, but at least it would put William’s heart at ease. Maybe it could be a kind of apology because he had been cruel to the girl. What he did before was something inappropriate to do, even though he was her enemy.

Just Do What I Do

William tied the red-haired girl's wrists and legs, then carried her body on his shoulders. Now he has found one person to serve as a source of information, so he shouldn't have to look around anymore.

He ran through the forest. The sky was getting dark when he reached the stream where his first fight was. He saw that the bodies of his comrades were no longer there. The soldiers must have taken them to the boat.

Thom's worried face then emerged from behind the tree.

"Who did you bring?" the man asked in surprise.

"One of them," William answered. "Where are the others?"

"Already gone. Come on!"

The forest was getting darker. By the time they reached the riverbank, the sun had already set, and there was only one boat with three soldiers left.

"The others went home first with the bodies of our comrades," Thom said. "Don't worry. I told them not to be provoked when they saw something."

"You're not worried about us?" William said.

Tom smirked. "You're here, aren't you? So I don't have to worry. Or should I?"

"Maybe you should. And I thought, maybe I already know what provoked our comrades yesterday. This girl. They saw her by the river. She ran, they got out of the boat and chased her. But in the forest, the Hualeg warriors surrounded them and killed them."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. But it doesn't matter what they saw now," William answered quietly.

He and his soldiers rowed quickly. They didn't light torches, so they could be safer when they travel. William had killed six Hualeg warriors, but he was sure there were many more. That group was only a small part.

They rowed all night. William, who had only slept for a while yesterday, slept and let his soldiers row.

He awoke at dawn when they were almost at Thaluk. The red-haired girl beside him had also opened her eyes. The girl looked at him warily, but couldn't make a sound because they stuffed her mouth with a cloth.

"I had to gag her as soon as she woke up," Thom said, "so that she won't scream in the village."

That's a wise move. They were quite far from the river to the north, and if the girl screamed, it would be impossible for her comrades to hear. Nevertheless, it was better for her to remain silent until she arrived at the base, so as not to attract the attention of the people in the village.

Once in the village, William carried the girl and brought her to the headquarters in front of Rogas, Taupin, and Morrin, who had gathered. He told them briefly about his experience and the reason he brought her.

“She can tell us how many Hualeg men came, and where they are now,” William explained.

“Are you sure?” Rogas asked uncertainly.

Taupin retorted, “We have to find someone who can speak Hualeg to question her.”

“There’s one person who can,” Morrin said. “Dorin, he lives in the village’s west. I’ll get him now.”

“Yeah, get him.” Rogas snorted. “Looks like this girl really needs to talk. Otherwise, I have to do something to her.”

William glanced at him and scolded, “Don’t be such an asshole! I caught this girl, so I will take care of her. We’ll ask her nicely. If I see you being so impudent, I’ll break your nose again.”

Rogas smiled wryly. “Do you really think this Hualeg woman can help you? This girl speaks or not, dead or not, the Hualeg people will still come, and we still have to fight them. You better take her straight to your room. That would be more fun.”

William was furious and almost landed his fist on Rogas’ nose. If only he hadn’t heard someone shouting from outside the base.

Taupin and Morrin rushed out, followed by Rogas. William glanced briefly at the girl, whose hands were now tied to the post, then followed out.

Thom ran across the village, approaching them. “Hualeg warriors are in sight! There are ten boats!”

William hurriedly ran, followed by the others, towards the top of the cliff to see for himself. Thom was right. Far to the north, ten long boats appeared from behind the forest and were moving at high speed towards the south. It’s not clear how many people were on each boat, but at least ten.

Morrin immediately ran down to the village to inform the residents. They must immediately evacuate to the hills. Meanwhile,

Taupin ordered Rogas to prepare the soldiers.

“Come on!” Rogas cried to William. “What are you waiting for?”

“You go down first! I will follow!”

William returned to base and pulled his captive girl out of the main room. William picked up the girl and took her to his room in the backyard. In the room, he tied the Hualeg girl’s hands to the wooden cot.

“Listen, I won’t do anything bad to you. But you also better not make a fuss. I’ll be back if your friends don’t kill me first.”

With her mouth still gagged, the girl could only moan. Her legs kicked, her eyes bulged. It seemed she wanted to say something. There’s no point. William wouldn’t understand what she was about to say, so he ignored it.

All the soldiers had gathered in the middle of the village. Rogas divided them according to plan. A third of the troops stood guard at the edge of the cliff to attack from above, another third hid behind the boulders by the river as the first line of defense, and the rest held on to the path leading to the village.

William, who was the strongest and the best at wielding the sword, had to be by the side of the river. He fully understood what he did in battle would affect the entire army. If he’s able to fight well, it will lift the morale of his comrades. If he failed and got killed, everyone would lose courage. He couldn’t lose, no matter how minimal his experience was, and this was his first major battle.

The screams of the Hualeg warriors were heard.

William looked up and watched the cliff top. Taupin and Morrin should be ready there. Then he turned to his left at Thom and the soldiers who were waiting anxiously with him behind the boulders.

“Just do what I do,” he said. “We will only come out if the Hualeg men escape the initial attack and come ashore. Don’t be afraid.”

William peeked through the rock. The first boat, containing about fifteen men, was getting closer. They are now at the bottom of the cliff. That’s the time of the initial attack.

The village soldiers, led by Taupin and Morrin, rolled large stones from the top of the cliff. The rumbling sound startled everyone.

Hualeg’s warriors had no time to escape. Huge stones hit their heads and bodies, even destroying their boats. The first and second boats were destroyed. People scattered into the river. Those who fainted drowned or were carried away by the current to the north, while those who were not injured then swam to shore.

The next Hualeg boats dodged. They moved away from the left side, which was close to the cliff, and drew closer to the right side of the river. Only then did they cross over to the bank that led to the village. The Hualegs men, who were in the third and fourth boats, were ready to land.

William gripped his sword tightly.

This is the time.

Roar Like a Lion

William steeled himself. As soon as one enemy soldier emerged from behind the rock, his sword slashed at the man's neck. Screams of war rang out from behind him, as well as the shouting from the Hualeg troops in front of him.

Brutal fighting took place on the banks of the river. William struck and slashed at every enemy body, sword, and axes that approached him. His comrades attacked with spear thrusts. Screams of death mingled with the sound of metal clashing and bodies splitting apart.

William and his comrades killed more enemies early in the battle. They kept the enemy in a narrow recess on the bank of the river so that the enemy could not move freely.

But things turned around as more boats landed. One by one, the wooden shields used by the village soldiers were destroyed; unable to withstand the swing of the Hualeg people's axes. One by one, the village soldiers were killed. From the original thirty people who fought on the riverbank, perhaps now only twenty-five people remained.

And the Hualeg warriors kept coming.

“Retreat!” William exclaimed. “Everyone! Retreat to the village!”

William let his soldiers run up the path leading to the village. He and Thom were the last to fight. Before he left, he had time to kill some enemies. William fended off every sword and ax that came close to him, and cut whatever was in front of him. He was already at the stage where his ferocity began to frighten the Hualeg warriors so that they no longer dared to attack him alone. He had time to run.

He hurried over the long steps, then down the path between the bushes and the stone wall. Behind him, dozens of Hualeg warriors chased him. William kept his distance and then turned his head. There were already about twenty enemies that had almost reached the plateau.

“Now!” he exclaimed.

Rogas and his soldiers emerged from behind the bushes and stone walls, directly attacking the startled line of Hualeg men. William stopped his run, then turned around and joined the attack. The second stage of the battle began, and again, the villagers had the upper hand.

William and his men slaughtered the enemies, who were pinned from two directions. The spears flew. Hualeg men fell and lay piled on the steps. But the waves of their troops' attacks did not stop. Their terrifying war cries grew louder and louder, and they were no longer careless by trying to attack William alone. The path leading to the village gate was twice the width of an adult's hand, and Hualeg men could advance at once with three people, after jumping over the corpses of their comrades.

The men from the north smashed the spears and shields of the village soldiers. William, Rogas, and their soldiers tried

their best to keep the enemy stuck on the narrow path and not reaching the plateau where the village gate was. But then William heard another scream from behind.

“Three Hualeg boats landed in the south!”

William gasped. “Where are Taupin’s and Morrin’s troops?”

“They just came down from the cliff!” someone replied.

“Send them here! Hurry! You!” William pointed to Thom and a few of the soldiers defending behind him, most of whom had been fighting with him on the riverbank. “Twenty men, come with me! Rogas!” He called out to his friend who was fighting at the front, forgetting that he shouldn’t have called the man by his real name. “Can you hold them?”

Rogas raised his shield to block the ax and then plunged the tip of the sword into an enemy’s stomach. “No problem!”

Despite his hesitation at first, William ended up entrusting the defense of the main road to Rogas and his soldiers. They would have survived if Taupin and Morrin’s soldiers from the top of the cliff came quickly. Now he has something else to do.

He ran south, followed by twenty men. They crossed the village, which was now deserted because the villagers had been hiding in the forest and then continued down the hillside, which was covered in tall grass. In the distance, three longboats have docked on the river bank. The number of Hualeg warriors in it probably reached forty men.

As soon as they got off the boat, the Hualeg warriors ran, trying to get through the thick muddy field. Meanwhile, from the top of the hill, William did not want to lose the opportunity. He had to get to the bottom quickly and restrain the enemy from getting out of the muddy ground.

William ran faster. On the edge of the muddy ground, he shouted fiercely and swung his sword across the first line of

Hualeg warriors who approached him. Behind him, Thom and the others advanced to form a line of spears and shields.

William let go of all his emotions, raging with strength, speed, courage, and recklessness that he could never have imagined before. Even the people of Hualeg, who were notoriously ferocious, cringed at the sight.

Seeing what he did, the spirit of the village soldiers was pumped and together they rushed forward. They held the Hualeg warriors who were now trapped in the muddy ground, which made their legs unable to move. In that place, the enemy troops became easy prey, slaughtered one after another. The muddy ground became a killing field for the people of the north.

Then a long shrill sound was heard from the village.

William was stunned, wondered what the mark could be. He shuddered. He imagined it might be a sign of the Hualeg people's victory.

The dozen Hualeg warriors before him turned around and then ran towards their boats. William was silent for a moment, still confused, and then tried to catch up. He killed the two slowest running enemies. However, one boat escaped, with about ten people on board.

Out of breath, William turned to the soldiers beside him. "Back to the village! We have to help the others! Hurry!"

He climbed the grassy slope with the remaining dozen of his soldiers. His body was tired, his breath ragged, but he kept pushing himself. Bad thoughts came to him. What if he turns out to be too late and can't save anyone in the village? What if his comrades had already lost and died there? William was almost in tears.

He reached the top of the hill and continued to run across the village. The center of the village was still quiet. He had not yet

seen the Hualeg people. So he kept running.

There is still hope! Maybe he can still join the fight!

He finally arrived in front of the village gate. All his colleagues who were there were cheering, jumping up and down, and hugging each other. Some people wept with joy.

“We won!” they cried. “We won!”

William froze in disbelief. He ignored everyone who greeted him and continued his run to the top of the hill.

There, at the highest point in the village, he could finally see it all.

The defeated Hualegs had rowed their five boats back north.

Shivering, unable to contain his emotions, William raised his sword and fist to the sky, roared like a lion.

His roar boomed throughout the valley.

It might even reach the ears of the Hualeg people.

All his emotions were gone. He felt tremendous relief. William closed his eyes with his arms outstretched, letting the sunshine on his face, then he opened his eyes and looked down at the village below with a big smile.

For a moment, dozens of village soldiers were gazing at him in awe, and then they all raised their fists and weapons into the air as well, roared with him.

Make Peace, Is That Possible?

William sat on the floor looking at the red-haired girl whose hands and feet were still tied. William had removed the gag from the girl's mouth, so now she could scream as loud as she could if she wanted to.

But until late at night, the girl just gazed at William. She didn't make a sound, though she no longer looked as frightened as she did yesterday. Maybe because she already sensed that William had no bad intentions towards her, especially after he had fed her and given her a drink. Well, her not squirting water on William's face was a pretty good sign.

But what if later she found out that this morning her Hualeg friends had lost, fifty of them were killed and it was William who killed the most? Or maybe the girl already knows? She must have heard the sounds of battle this morning, and how the village soldiers cheered for victory. Maybe that fear has now turned into anger and vengeance.

William didn't know what to do with the girl. Dorin, the villager who Morrin said could be a translator, had disappeared. The man had fled to the south with several people, not just

fleeing to the hills. An understandable act. Now, if there is no translator, is this girl still needed?

Rogas said the Hualegs had already lost and probably didn't care about the girl. So now it's up to William how he wants to treat her.

"You can make her a slave," Rogas said with a laugh. "You won today's war, and you should get something. So just think of her as your prize."

"What do you mean?" William asked, annoyed.

"Yeah... you know."

"Bastard!" William almost beat up Rogas. "What do you think I am?"

"You know, if those Hualeg people won the war, they would do the same to our women in the village."

"I'm not like them!"

"Yeah, whatever. She's your business." Rogas shrugged, then left William and the girl in his room.

William looked at the girl. "Listen, in case you understand. I guess you don't, but I still have to tell you this. Your comrades have already lost, but I'm sure they won't stop and will attack again later. If I could hope, I wouldn't want that to happen. I lost many friends, many of your friends also died. The joy of victory is short-lived, and the sadness is always much longer when you know you have lost a friend or family. Have you ever thought like this? Why can't you guys come as friends, huh? If you guys need something, we can trade. No need to fight like this. Maybe I'm stupid for hoping that, but maybe not, if you think about it." William shook his head in annoyance. "So if you can answer, I wonder what you can do to prevent something like this from happening again."

The girl answered in an incomprehensible foreign language.

Her voice was high. Her bound hands were pointing the other way.

William shook his head. "That's enough. You sleep now. Don't worry, I won't do anything bad to you." He lay down on the wooden floor. "We'll see tomorrow. Maybe I'll set you free. Rogas won't like it, neither will the others, but that's up to me. You can go home. Two days ago, your friend, the yellow-haired girl, let me go home, so why can't I do the same? If I'm lucky, once you get to your country, you can tell your friends not to attack the south anymore. There's no need for war, and we can all live like civilized people." William snorted. "If you are a good person, I believe you will do what I say."

He pondered his own words. Make peace with the Hualeg people. Is that possible? As strange as it may sound, it shouldn't be impossible. There has been a story where his father used to trade and live in peace with the southerners. So why can't it happen again?

Or maybe it was William who had to do this. His father had already paved the way, and maybe now he should continue it. Can he? Can he become a great person like his father?

He continued to think before finally closing his eyes.

Unfortunately, at midnight, the door to his room was banged on again. He quickly took his sword and opened the door.

A soldier reported. "Sir, they await you. We see Hualegs' boat again!"

William had expected the northerners to attack again, but he didn't expect them to do so on the same day after their defeat. He went to the meeting room, then with Rogas, Taupin and Morrin walked to the top of the cliff to see for themselves.

The moon was hidden behind the clouds, and the night was quite dark. They could see nothing further down there, to the

end of the valley to the north. But a soldier said that he had seen a boat in the river.

“Longboat?” William asked.

“Yes...” the soldier said, but suddenly hesitated. “It seems so ...”

“You’re not sure?” Taupin looked annoyed.

William looked at Rogas beside him. “Wake up everyone. Put fifty soldiers at the main entrance and another thirty on the hill near the river to the south. There’s no need for soldiers on rock cliffs anymore.”

William’s words made him sound like a boss. But after the special thing that he did yesterday, Rogas and everyone else didn’t seem to mind getting advice that was more like an order from the young man. And basically Rogas never had a problem with his position. He cared more about the pay. If he could earn money without having to work, that man would gladly do it.

They divided all the soldiers into two groups. They move on command. William went to the west side of the river and waited in the dark. The atmosphere was silent. He could only hear the river flow.

After waiting so long, he got curious. Why is there still no further information from Taupin regarding the number of enemy troops? And why didn’t he hear their voices, either? Did the enemy really not come? Or maybe the Hualeg people landed their boat in another place?

William looked up to peek through the rock. In the dim moonlight, he could see the river flowing quite far to the north, and as far as he could see, there was not a single Hualeg boat.

One soldier said, “Last news, there are absolutely no enemies so far to the north. Mr. Taupin said you can rest again.”

William still had doubts. He allowed some of his soldiers to

return to rest, but he remained on guard by the river. Dozens of soldiers then accompanied him. They rested and took turns keeping watch. They remained there until morning, when William's concerns proved untrue.

In the afternoon, after resting, William gathered with the other leaders at the base to discuss the next plan.

"I just asked the soldier who saw the boat again," Taupin said. "He's not as sure as he was last night."

"The boat isn't there?" Morrin asked.

Taupin nodded. "Maybe they've returned north."

"Are you sure Hualeg people are that weak?" Rogas said. "They just gave up as soon as they lost?"

"No," replied Taupin. "It's not like them. Even if they go home, I think they will come again in more numbers."

If Not Stupid, Crazy Then

Morrin agreed with Taupin's opinion. "It's only the end of spring. There are still months for them to come again before winter arrives. Yesterday they came with a hundred and fifty soldiers. Next time they might gather more people and come with twice the number. They will find this an interesting new war. I'm certain. If you don't believe me, you can ask the opinion of the village elders."

Rogas laughed bitterly. "If there are that many of them, we'd better go. We can't possibly win."

"That's right." Both Taupin and Morrin nodded in agreement, then both turned to William.

"What do you think, Tuck?" Taupin asked. "Shall we evacuate? Should we make defenses further south and leave this village to those people?"

"There aren't that many of them yet," William said, "so we don't have to give up anything. But we still have to be careful. I think the hundred Hualleg warriors who survived yesterday are still around, not far to the north. They already knew our defenses, then probably sent a boat last night to test

our vigilance. I believe they didn't go home right away. They will try to attack us one more time."

"Right," Morrin admitted. "It is more in line with their nature. Whoever leads the Hualeg troops will surely be ashamed if they return to their country with defeat. They will attack again."

"Or maybe it's the other way around?" Rogas said. "They know Thaluk is difficult to conquer, so they could choose to skip us, then continue down the river to look for other villages that are easier to conquer in the south."

"It's not in their nature," Morrin replied. "They like to rob, but don't like to do it without fighting."

"The possibility still exists," Taupin said. "And if they ever get past this place, there will be a disaster in the south."

"Then we must keep them here," William said. "Don't let them pass us."

His three companions looked at him.

"What do you mean?" Rogas asked.

"Tie up all your fishing nets, as thick as you can, then stretch them from here to the other side of the river," William explained. "If the pegs are strong, and the nets are held together, their boat cannot pass. If you want more powerful results, you can also make traps. Gather the trunks of trees that are big and strong. Sharpen the ends, then attach them to the riverbed without being seen. Their boats will leak and sink, and we can attack them when they're vulnerable."

Rogas smiled broadly. "That's a good trap!"

"Yes, we can do it," Morrin agreed.

"It will take a long time to make it all," Taupin said. "Three to five days. If Hualeg men come sooner, it won't help us."

"We can try it. It's still a good plan, better than nothing," Morrin said. He looked at the others. "So? Do you all agree?"

Rogas and Taupin nodded.

“Tuck?”

“Of course,” William said. “You guys just do it. I’m just thinking of another plan, which, if successful, will make them delay the attack longer, or even... maybe cancel it forever.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to make peace with them.”

“What?!” The others were immediately shocked. “That’s not possible!”

“Why not?” William said. “I’ve heard stories. There were people who used to trade with the Hualeg people. That means the possibility exists.”

“It might have been like that back then, but it’s definitely not possible now!” Taupin said. “You just killed dozens of their soldiers yesterday. Do you think they will just forgive you and make peace with us? Impossible!”

Rogas snorted as he frowned, trying to contain his annoyance. “Okay, Tuck, how do you do it? What’s on your mind?”

“That girl. I’ll set her free and leave it to them.”

Roger laughed. “They won’t care about her! What do you think they will do after you hand over the girl? Be thankful?”

“Why not? Maybe they will be very grateful. Maybe they will even call off the attack and return north.”

“You... you’re kidding, right? You are dreaming!” Rogas laughed louder and louder, while Taupin and Morrin were stunned.

“Whatever you say, I don’t care,” William became even sterner. He stared at Rogas without blinking. “I will head north with her and look for her friends. May luck be with me.”

“You really are crazy!” Rogas said irritably. “Do you know that? Crazy! Who are the soldiers who want to accompany you

to the north? Nobody will!”

“I can row alone if I have to. Besides, if I brought troops, the Hualegs would consider it a threat. So I’d better go alone. I will go quietly.”

“I can’t let you go alone!” Rogas shouted. His chest heaved up and down in anger. After a while, his voice subsided. “Take some men with you! Ten soldiers, if anyone will. I’m not sure there will be—”

“Five,” William said. “And I will find myself who wants to come with me. If no one wants to, I’ll take care of myself.”

Taupin continued to stare at him, unable to believe it. “Tuck, think about it again. Do you really know the risk you’re taking?”

“Yes. If I’m not lucky, I won’t come back.”

“Right! And I don’t want to be like that!” Taupin exclaimed. “Remember, I paid you to stay here! Not looking to die there!”

“You paid me to keep this village safe from Hualeg’s attacks. Maybe this way I can actually succeed.”

“But how is that possible?” Taupin held his head in disbelief. “Perhaps... for more money, would you be willing to stay?”

William shook his head. “Save your money. I’ll pick it up later.”

“You are stubborn. You’re wasting your own life!”

“Not really. I can take good care of my life. Do you think I’m such a fool to just walk away without a plan?”

“If not stupid, crazy, then.” Taupin shook his head. “Yeah, you’re crazy!”

“Master Tuck,” Morrin said carefully, apparently not wanting to provoke William. “I really don’t understand. What you did yesterday was right. You fought and defeated those Hualeg people. Now, why do you want to make peace with them? I don’t understand!”

“I just don’t want more people to die.”

“Are you sure... you’re not hiding something from us?”

Taupin looked suspiciously. “Some people say... you are descended from Hualeg. Yes, I think it has spread and become the talk of many people. Don’t get me wrong. It’s not a bad thing. They just admire you. They believe that’s what makes you scary on the battlefield. But... is that true?”

William looked at Taupin sharply. “My origins are none of your business.”

“That’s our business if it affects the way you decide!”

“Don’t you believe me?”

“It is not like that! How could I not believe in the person who had killed dozens of Hualeg people in one battle? We certainly believe in you! We just don’t want you to make a careless decision and then do something that could put all of us in danger!”

“If you really believe, believe it better! I’m taking the risk of doing this is for everyone’s sake. If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t bother doing it! I already said my reasons. We’ll see if I’m as stupid as you think or not. Just prepare your money, Master Taupin. I’ll be back to get it.”

She'd Rather Kick Me Than Be My Wife

William tried to forget his annoyance, although when he thought about it, it was only natural that Rogas, Taupin, and Morrin would not agree with his plan. What was he hoping for? They all agreed right away?

Now it was more important for him to show that his plans weren't as stupid and crazy as they thought. Or at least, if his plan failed, he had a way out of danger.

He took the red-haired girl, then left the village. The five soldiers who went with him were Thom, Mullen, Boulder, Spitz, and Alend. They were the soldiers who had accompanied William when he went north two days ago. Contrary to Rogas' prediction, when William asked if anyone would come with him, it turned out that quite a number would. Maybe after yesterday's battle, they really believed in him, so they didn't hesitate to follow him anywhere, even though it was dangerous.

His quarrel with Rogas, Taupin, and Morrin, however, was still stuck in William's heart. He wondered, was it the right thing to do? Was it because his father was a Hualeg that made him intend to make peace with them? Yesterday he had slaughtered

them in such a way, so how could they now accept him so easily? Or was it because he wanted to be a great man like his father, who could make peace with the southerners?

That should be a pretty good reason. But how could he get the Hualeg people to think the same as him? He can not speak Hualeg. Isn't this plan too much? Is it worth the risk? Did the soldiers who came with him have to join the fight with him?

As they rowed, William said, "Listen, what we're doing is going to be very dangerous, and you guys really don't need to come. So, if you suddenly get scared in the middle of the river and change your mind, you can jump out and swim back to the village. You are free to go."

The soldiers laughed.

"It was hilarious, swimming back to the village," Thom said while rowing in the front. "Yes, it's possible if you force us to do it. But please tell me, if it's you who suddenly got scared and changed your mind, would you jump out?"

William smirked. "If I jump out and you all too, who will accompany her?" He glanced at the red-haired girl whose hands and feet were still tied. "She can't row alone all the way north."

"Why not? I think she's strong enough," Thom said.

"Hey, Tuck, are you serious about taking her north?" Boulder, the bald-headed soldier, asked. "I thought you'd just leave her somewhere and let her find her own way north."

"If it's just like that, it's too easy for us. You've never been north, have you? Aren't you curious to see further?"

"No," Boulder said, "if my head is at stake."

"You can swim home," William replied. "All of you."

"And let you have your own fun with this girl? No, man." Thom laughed, and the insolent laughter of his comrades followed this. "But Tuck, if you'd like to hear my opinion, I

think she's a beautiful girl. And she's here for you to pick up. She's yours. If you don't want to make her a slave, why don't you just make her a wife?" He chuckled to show that he was joking.

William snorted. "First, she is not mine. Second, I think she'd rather kick me than be my wife. Look at her eyes. She really hates me."

"I disagree. I think she actually likes you," Thom said.

"Yes, that's right!" The others chuckled and joined in the heat.

"That's a look of love. Like the one Ante gave me in Orulion," Thom said.

"Then you're wrong, Thom," Mullen chimed in. "Ante hates you."

Thom glared at him. "How do you know?"

"Because she told me."

"You? She won't talk to you!"

"Oh, she talked. You know when? When we were in the room, not long after she spoke to you." Mullen smirked.

Thom's face turned red, and he cursed while the other soldiers burst out laughing. A moment later, their laughter stopped as soon as a brief speech sounded from the mouth of the red-haired girl.

Everyone was stunned. No one understood.

Once they were quiet, the girl spoke again, this time longer in a high-pitched tone. She pointed at William, then also pointed north.

"Do you want me to gag her mouth again, Tuck?" Thom said. "She's noisy again."

"I think she said something about his tribe," Spitz, the young man sitting in the back, said. "*Ahruhr*. She mentioned it. That's

a Hualeg word for 'tribe'."

William looked up in surprise. "Do you speak Hualeg?"

"Only knows a few words. My late grandfather could understand. He's a descendant of Hualeg."

William looked at the innocent-looking young man, inwardly happy because he suddenly found a friend of the same fate. "Any more words that you understand?"

"No. She spoke quick. But at the end of every *ahruhr*, she always mentions *valnir*. *Ahruhr Valnir*. Maybe... that's the name of the tribe?"

"Valnir?" William mumbled. It was as if he had heard that name before. Certainly not Vilnar—that's his father's name—but... "Do you mean Vallanir?"

It was the name of his father's tribe in Hualeg, as his mother had told him the two nights before she died.

As soon as William said those words, the girl beside him smiled widely. Her round eyes lit up, and she punched William's chest with her fists to show her excitement.

"Vallanir!" the girl cried. "Vallanir!"

William smiled too. Although it felt a little strange because at last, he could see her smiling, no longer scared, angry, or sad.

"So what does that mean?" Tom asked.

"Maybe she's happy to be home," William replied.

"I guess that's not all." Spitz looked at the girl suspiciously.

William didn't answer. He didn't know what she really wanted to say. But he knew what he felt. Anxious, angry, sad, once he realized that this girl, and the dozens of Hualeg people he had killed yesterday and dozens more he would meet later, were probably from his father's tribe, Vallanir, and not the other Hualeg tribes. It felt like everything was getting worse.

"So, now what?" Tom asked.

The soldiers waited for William's response, while the girl was still looking at him with a beaming face. Strange enough, considering that William almost killed her two days ago while in the woods. It was as if everything had passed without a grudge.

"Let's go on," William said. "She looks happy. That's a good sign. She knows we will set her free. Hopefully, later she can speak well to his friends so that they won't attack us again and return to the north."

Thom glared at him. "Frankly, I'm not sure about your plan. I don't know what's in your head. You are too positive!"

William shrugged and told the soldiers to look back at the front. "We are near the forest. Be careful."

The Wrong Word

The boat moved, following the river to the north. So far, they had seen nothing suspicious among the bushes and rows of trees. However, something that is too quiet is not a good thing. William glanced at the girl beside him, who looked nervous, and he tensed up too.

“Hold on,” he whispered. “Hide over there.”

The five soldiers brought the boat closer to a large rock on the right side of the river. William squinted, noting what appeared to be about fifty strokes to the north, on the left side of the river. There was a boat, the long end of which was stretched forward, visible behind the leaves and branches of trees that dangled to the surface of the river. There seemed to be a creek behind it, and that meant there wasn't just one boat.

“Go a little further,” William said.

“They can see us,” Thom replied.

“It's fine, as long as you don't get too close.”

They advanced over the rocks on the side of the river. As soon as they reached the clearing, they stopped. Everyone waited. They could see the front of the boat, which was not far to the

north, more clearly.

“Don’t tell me we have to go further, Tuck,” Thom whispered. “Maybe they have set a trap there. Do you remember? Maybe this is what Hualeg’s people did when luring our five friends in the east to come close.”

William froze. “You’re right. We should be the ones to lure them out.”

He was standing on the boat. The soldiers looked at him in surprise.

“What... what are you doing?” asked Thom.

“I’ll call them.”

The soldiers froze.

Before they could protest, William had already shouted, “Vallanir!”

That’s the word he chose because he didn’t know another word he could use to address the Hualeg people.

“VALLANIR!” William shouted again.

His roar echoed throughout the valley.

William and the five soldiers waited. So did the girl, who seemed more and more restless. Loud cheers rang out from the forest across the river, followed by the clang of metal clashing. After that, cheers came back from the mouths of who knows how many people. In short, all the sounds and screams that people make when they want to fight.

“Looks like you picked the wrong word, Tuck,” said Thom.

Really? The word ‘Vallanir’ invited those people to fight?

William waited. The longboat behind the leaves and bushes moved forward. There were about ten people rowing, all of them were big men. Behind them appeared another boat. Then another, and another longboat behind them.

“Guys, time to go!” Mullen exclaimed. “They want to attack!”

“And they don’t seem to care about this girl at all!” Thom said. “Haha! Tuck, your plan failed!”

William turned to look at the red-haired girl. The girl’s face looked pale. She even hid behind William’s feet, as if she didn’t want to be seen by the Hualeg people in front of them. This was clearly not the reaction William was expecting.

“Maybe they haven’t seen her,” William said. “If they have seen this girl, they will understand ...”

Thom shook his head. “So, are we running away or not?”

“Hurry if we want to escape!” Mullen said. “Before it’s too late!”

William raised his hands, then waved at the Hualeg people. “Stop! Stop! We don’t want to fight!”

“Say *Arnez!*” Spitz shouted.

“What?”

“*Arnez!* It means stop!”

“*Ichst! Arnz!*” the red-haired girl exclaimed.

William looked up in surprise.

“*Arnz!*” the girl said again, as if trying to convince William. “*ARNZ!*”

He nodded. It seemed he had to trust the girl’s words more than Spitz. “*ARNZ! ARNZ!*” he exclaimed.

Hualeg’s leading boat stopped, followed by other boats behind him. Their cheers died down. William stared at the dozens of Hualeg soldiers who were in the five longboats in silence. The distance between William’s boat and the northerners was probably only about twenty strokes or the equivalent of a hundred steps. A Hualeg man in the first boat stood up, then swung his arm while saying something. The boat was advancing. William and his men grew tense.

“What does he want?” Mullen asked.

"Maybe to talk," William answered doubtfully.

"Who can talk to him?" Tom asked. "You, Spitz?"

Spitz's face paled. "I only know the language a little!"

"You'd better get this girl off quickly," Mullen pointed, "on the rock. Just leave her there, and we'll leave as soon as possible."

William froze. Right, that seems like the wisest choice. Getting away from the Hualeg men as soon as possible would be better for them. And just let the girl do the talking to those people.

But the red-haired girl whispered, "Mornir." She lifted her face and looked at William with a pitiful look. "*Ireir. Ireir!*"

"Spitz," William said, "what does that mean? SPITZ!"

"Uh... what?" The young man's face turned pale.

"*Ireir. What does it mean?!*"

"That... mmm... go, or run. I guess."

William gulped as he looked at the Hualeg men who were standing on the first boat. From a closer distance, William could see the man better. He was tall and had broad shoulders. His hair color is brownish-red. A thick beard covered his jaw. He looked very dangerous, with a long ax in his right hand.

William tried not to be afraid, but it would be very unwise if he dared to fight his enemy on the boat. Besides endangering his own life, he also endangered the lives of his five soldiers, as well as the lives of the girl who had begged him to run away.

"Turn!" William exclaimed. "Back to the village!"

Skillfully, his soldiers turned the boat to the south. They rowed as hard as they could against the flow of the river.

Hualeg men chased them with fierce shouts. The longboats from the north were moving fast. With more rowers, of course, they were stronger. But rowing on the meandering Ordelaehr River filled with boulders requires not only strength but also

agility and experience. William's boat is small and light, so it's easy to move. In addition, Thom and his colleagues were experienced enough with conditions in the river. They knew when to paddle at full speed, and when to turn and sneak between rocks. Until halfway, they could keep their distance from the pursuers.

But fatigue hit them. Especially when they arrived at the straight and wide part of the river. Slowly, the Hualeg boats approached. The fierce shouts of the northern people grew clearer. William looked up at the cliff in the distance where the village of Thaluk and its headquarters were. They should have been there before sunset if the enemy had not overtaken them. In the village, they can fight, because there are more of them than the Hualeg people who chase with only five boats.

"Row! Faster!" William cried as he continued to row.

All of his comrades responded with groans of exhaustion, using the last of their strength to keep up with his oars.

This Is Not a Mistake

While they were all rowing as hard as they could, the red-haired girl beside William looked more annoyed and restless. It seemed like she wanted to do something. Maybe she wanted to go rowing, too. Unfortunately, they didn't have spare oars.

Suddenly the girl shouted while pointing to one side of the river on the left. "*Vida! Asterein! Avenida!*"

William didn't understand what the girl was pointing at.

The girl said a series of foreign words. "*Asterein!*" The girl glared. "*Esperei lou din aszter! Kniir!*"

"What do you mean?" William exclaimed in exasperation between his breaths.

"*Kniir!*" The girl pointed to the front again.

William narrowed his eyes. He was stunned when he saw someone standing on a rock by the river and holding a long sword. William could recognize her even from afar. It was the yellow-haired girl who, a few days ago, caught and then released William.

"She told us to go over there," Spitz said from behind William.

His breath snorted with exhaustion. "Pull over there ..."

Thom, who was in the front, turned his head for a moment. William glanced at his other comrades. Everyone rowed nonstop, but they must wonder what they should do now. Hualeg warriors are getting closer. They will overtake William and his men before reaching Thaluk.

William and his men should land somewhere and then run to the forest. They can hide. If he had to fight, William would also be more confident fighting on land than on the river.

"To the riverside!" he exclaimed. "We go there, then run to the forest!"

"Are you sure this isn't a trap?" Thom shouted.

The redhead was nervous, apparently hoping that William would follow her words to go down to the riverbank where the yellow-haired girl was. Of course, she wanted to, so she could return to her group. But is this a good choice too for William? Nothing was certain. The worst thing could happen, but considering the kindness of the yellow-haired girl had done him, perhaps William had nothing to fear. He had to believe that these two foreign girls had no bad intentions.

"We're going there!" he exclaimed. "Quick!"

They rowed as hard as they could and got away again from the pursuers. Once on the bank of the river, William cut the ties on the hands and feet of the red-haired girl. They hurriedly jumped out. The red-haired girl shouted happily, but the yellow-haired girl waiting for her only nodded in response.

Without saying a word, the yellow-haired girl ran into the forest. Everyone immediately followed her, leaving their boats untied. William ran behind the two girls, sneaking through the thickets and trees. His five soldiers tried not to be left behind. Far behind, Hualeg's men also seemed to have landed.

In the deepening forest, William and his companions came to an uphill and rocky plain. They hiked around the hillside. The place was quite high. When William looked back, he could see the flow of the river and several Hualeg longboats below it. The boats were empty. Everyone had gone down to catch up with William and his friends.

William looked at the two girls in front of him, then was stunned to see three ax-wielding men on the hill.

William hastily grabbed the sword at his waist.

Fortunately, the yellow-haired girl raised both hands to hold. "Calm! Not the enemy!"

The girl said, using Hualegs' language to the three men, then turned her head. "Hide. Wait for my signal."

William and all of his companions spread out and hid behind rocks, trees, or bushes. He heard snorting breaths and the footsteps of the pursuers from below. He gripped his sword tightly, watching the enemy emerge from behind the bushes.

One, two, three, and more. William was ready to come out, but he remembered the girl's words asking him to wait for the signal.

Turned out the girl came out first. She jumped, then slashed the neck of a soldier with her sword while shouting. William didn't understand what she was saying, but it was the signal to attack. He jumped out too and killed his closest enemy. All his comrades came forward as well, as did the three Hualeg men who were friends of the yellow-haired girl.

Brutal fighting took place in tight spaces. Hualeg warriors who appeared from below were shocked, didn't have time to fight back, and were slaughtered. Their bodies tumbled from the top of the hill and fell into the dense forest below. There were probably a dozen enemies killed, with William and the

yellow-haired girl killing the most.

After the first group of enemies was exhausted, William and all his comrades waited. They heard shouts from under the hill. William was sure there were too many, and the next battle would be even tougher. But long shriek echoed throughout the valley, as William had heard yesterday in the village of Thaluk before the battle was over.

The yellow-haired girl screamed, then turned and climbed up the cliff wall behind her. Her movements are agile, like a cat. In no time, she had arrived at the top of the cliff. She looked away towards the river.

William quickly climbed up, too. He wasn't as agile as the girl, but he got to the top. He stood up, following the direction of the girl beside him. Far below the cliff, Hualeg's five longboats were moving again. Farther north, beyond the bend of the river and thick forest groves, five other longboats seemed to join the army in front of them.

"Five boats, plus another five new arrivals. All up to one hundred and fifty Logenir men," the yellow-haired girl said, then gazed up at the cliff-top to the south. "They will go to your village."

William was stunned. "They're going to attack the village now?"

"Tonight."

"But we just beat them yesterday!"

"Mornir and his men are hungry. They won't waste time." The girl turned to look at William. "Your people will lose now."

"We defeated the same number of enemies yesterday, and we will do it again!" William said. "I have to go now."

He was getting ready to go down, but the girl caught his left arm, held him back. "With what?" the girl asked.

“What do you mean with what?”

“By what?”

“By my boat, of course!”

“Mornir must have destroyed your boat.”

William was silent, then annoyed beyond belief when he understood. “Then this is all wrong!” He glared at the girl. “I shouldn’t have pulled over here! I shouldn’t have followed the redhead’s words!”

“Do you consider my help a mistake?” The girl answered William coldly, not provoked by his emotions. “You, two days ago, killed six of our men in the forest, then kidnapped my sister. It was a mistake. My men previously killed five of your soldiers. That was also a mistake. But this is not a mistake.”

Even a Big Wolf Can't Do It All By Himself

William was silent, unable to answer the yellow-haired girl.

The girl continued, "Listen, no matter what, I have to thank you for bringing my sister back."

"Yeah, but it doesn't matter anymore." William was still upset, but realized it was inappropriate to be angry at the girl. If there was a mistake, maybe he was the most guilty, because it was he who forced himself to go north and leave his friends in the village. "Thank you for your help. But I'm going to my village now, even if I have to go by land."

"Through the forest, you will arrive at your village tomorrow morning. Or noon, because you can't walk well in the dark."

"Doesn't matter. The important thing is that I come."

"But it might be too late. You know. And without you, the people in your village will surely lose."

William looked back at the girl, suspicious. "What do you know about me?"

"Enough to know. All I need to know."

“What do you know?”

“I can judge friends. Or foes. I know which one is a big wolf, which one is a small dog, and which one is a small dog who only pretends to be a big wolf. You, big wolf.”

The girl gazed at William for a moment, then continued, “But even a big wolf can’t do it all by himself. Everyone in your village must act. They can be a wolf too, in time, if they dare. They have to choose. Fight or leave. With you or not, they should be able to make their own choices.”

William was pensive. “It’s my responsibility...”

The girl nodded as if she understood. “But you must know your limit. Go. Sorry, I was hoping to help you, but I can’t.”

William watched the girl a little longer. His curiosity arose. “How do you want to help me?”

“I wish I could take you in my boat and help attack the Logenirs from behind. But, I can’t. If Mornir sees me disturbing him more, our tribe in the north will be in a disaster.”

William asked quietly, “Vallanir?”

The girl’s brow furrowed. “You know?”

“The Vallanir are your tribe, and those people down there are your enemies?”

The girl nodded. “They are Logenirs. From the outside, they didn’t look like enemies. But inside, they’re our most bitter enemy, from the past until now.” The girl’s expression changed, her gaze sharp. “What do you know?”

William was silent. Something stirred in his heart. Little by little, he understood. It turned out that only these two girls were from Vallanir, plus their three male followers. While the hundreds of people boating down, there were enemies of the Vallanir tribe from the north. The Logenir tribe.

William was curious. Suddenly there were so many questions

he wanted to ask the yellow-haired girl. About who this girl was, about what her father's tribe in the north was like, and so on. But then he realized he had more important things to do right now. Something that if he didn't do it soon, he would regret for the rest of his life.

William replied, "I've only heard a little from your sister about your tribe."

The girl stared at him intently, apparently not quite believing it.

"I must go now." William lowered his feet to the cliff wall. Before descending, he lifted his face. "Thank you for all your help. I hope... the two of us can meet again if I survive. May... I know your name?"

The girl still looked at him.

"I'm William."

"I'm ... Vida."

"Vida. Your name is beautiful. Like... your face."

William grinned at the girl, whose face suddenly turned red, then quickly stepped down before he became embarrassed himself. He cursed. That was a ridiculous temptation that was out of place, especially in a precarious situation like this. But somehow William wanted to say it, and since it wasn't such a bad thing, it shouldn't be a problem, right?

Below, William explained the whole situation to his comrades. Once they understood, he invited them to leave quickly. He ran through the woods to the south, leaving Vida still standing on the cliff, and another girl behind her, the redhead, who had not once taken her eyes off William.

The forest that William and his soldiers had to pass through was difficult. It's not only dense, but the plains were also up and down and rocky. Several times, after traversing the forest, they

came to a dead-end or a cliff, so they had to turn around to find another way. They must be careful and monitor the direction of the sun and the shadows it casts so that they did not stray far from the direction they were headed.

The situation became more difficult as night fell. As Vida said, the forest was completely dark. William had hoped for some moonlight. Unfortunately, no luck to him. The clouds were quite thick, and it seemed impossible to continue the journey. It forced William to stop.

He and his soldiers rested in the forest. Maybe it's time to rest after a very hard day. In no time, everyone was asleep.

The next day, William awoke while the woods were still dark, even though the sun should have risen. With fresh bodies, they ran faster. Spirit had recovered.

When the sun reached its peak, they finally made it out of the forest. Ahead, a high cliff wall loomed. On top of that cliff, the village of Thaluk was located.

They were happy, but not for long. Worry arose as soon as they saw Hualeg longboats moored by the river.

William and his comrades looked at each other.

"Can you hear the battle?" William asked.

The five soldiers listened, then shook their heads. "No."

"That means... is it finished?" Thom asked nervously.

"Finished what?" Spitz asked.

"We've lost!" Thom said curtly. "What else?"

"All dead," Mullen said sadly.

"Not necessarily," William replied. "We have to see first."

"You want to go there?" Thom asked. "To the village?"

William noticed the hill that was located to the east of the village. "I will climb this cliff and enter the village through there. That's the only way to get up without being seen from

the village.” He looked at his soldiers. “Maybe I can still do something. Are you guys coming? You don’t have to come if—”

“Surely we’re coming!” Thom.

Mullen nodded. “Yes. Come on.”

“Wait a minute,” Boulder said. “Do you mean we will climb this cliff?”

“You can stay here if you can’t,” William said.

“I can do it!” Boulder grumbled. “It sucks, but I can!”

Followed by his men, William ran across the slope at the foot of the hill until he reached the side of the cliff. The cliff they were about to climb was about fifteen spears high, roughly the same as twenty adults. Quite steep, almost perpendicular to the surface of the river. They can use many gaps as footholds and grips, but it was difficult and dangerous.

William was determined. He had to go up. He should be able to.

Go Out There and Kill Everyone

William tightened the sword straps on his back as he looked up at the cliff, choosing the path he would take. He imagined how his body would move, where his hands should reach, and where his feet should stomp. After making sure, he climbed. Carefully, he tucked his fingers and toes between the crevices of the rock, then pushed his footing.

While climbing, William did not glance down at all. He just looked up or rested to relax the muscles in his neck so he wouldn't tense up. His comrades climbed under him too.

William kept going up. He should be quite far from the bottom of the cliff now. He was getting tired. His hands and feet ached, but when he saw the edge of the cliff above him, he regained his spirit. It looked like he was only five spears away.

Someone's moan reached his ears. "Tuck... Tuck..."

From the soldiers below him. William ventured to glance down, but from his position, it was difficult to see who called him.

"Tuck... I can't stand it anymore..."

"Spitz!" William recognized his voice. He tried to find the

words that can raise the spirit. "Come on!" he exclaimed. "You can do it! We'll be up there in a minute!"

William kept trying to cheer up each of his soldiers and climbed up. A little more! Slowly, his body moved higher and higher, and finally, he made it to the edge of the cliff. He gripped the thick grass on top of the cliff, then lifted his leg and rolled over. Out of breath, he grinned at the sky. The sun that had reached the top of the sky lit up his face, and he closed his eyes.

Then he glanced around, making sure he was in a quiet place. Luckily, there were only rows of trees here and there. He then shifted his body, looking down the cliff.

"Come on!" he cried to all his comrades, who were still creeping. "A bit more! After that, you can rest."

Thom followed up shortly after, then Mullen. Spitz, who appeared next, looked exhausted. His whole body was shaking, but he finally made it. The young man laughed, half crying. The next two, Boulder and Alend, also safely reached the top of the cliff. They all laughed happily and patted each other on the shoulder.

"Come on," William said, as he felt his strength recover. "We'll see what happens in the village."

William and his soldiers circled the hillside to the east, then passed a path flanked by a stone wall as high as five spears. They arrived at the end of the cliff gap. On the far right, there were several small houses belonging to the villagers. The residents had fled far away. The houses looked empty.

"Do you have a plan?" Thom asked William.

William nodded. "First, we check the condition of the village and its residents. After that, kill the Logenirs or expel them."

"Logenir?"

"Those Hualleg people."

“Are you sure we can do it?”

William looked at his comrades. “Yes.”

Thom didn’t seem willing to believe it. “I mean, the residents should have fled to the hills to the east.” He pointed to the forest on the left. “Why don’t we go there first?”

“Mullen, Spitz, and I will check things out in the village,” William replied. “Maybe some of our friends are still there, and we have to save them. You, Boulder, and Alend go to the hills. Look for the survivors.”

“No,” Thom said. “I’m coming with you.”

The other soldiers agreed. Boulder and Alend went into the hills, while William and the other three surveyed the village. They advanced slowly, infiltrating the thick bushes and grass. After making sure that there were no Hualeg warriors around, they ran there. They hid in the back wall of the house, then crept forward.

There were voices of several people talking.

William peeked from behind the wall. In the courtyard, four Hualeg soldiers were sitting and drinking.

“Ale’s no good during the day,” Thom whispered.

“Agree with that.” William gripped his sword tightly, then jumped out and slashed at the neck of an enemy soldier.

His movement shocked the other three Hualeg men. Before they could scream for help, death came to pick them up faster. William slew another one with a stab to the stomach. Thom and Mullen finished the remaining two.

They moved like seasoned assassins, but William still felt it was luck, for this action wasn’t heard or seen by the Hualeg warriors who had gathered in the middle of the village.

He and his comrades pulled the lifeless bodies away, hiding them behind the bushes. They then drew closer to the village,

to the house, which was on a plateau near the cliff. There were only two Hualeg men on guard, and William slayed both of them without causing a fuss. From there, he could see the entire village. A sight that took his breath away.

Hualeg warriors were everywhere. In the clearing in the middle of the village, around the old building on the cliff, also around the main road leading to the river. Most of them were on the wide ground on the left. Those people were collecting dozens of bodies. All mixed into one, the corpses of Hualeg people and the corpses of the village soldiers.

For a moment, William and his three companions were silent. Sadness mixed with revenge. They had imagined they would see such a terrible thing, but once they saw it, they still couldn't believe it. The thought of the friends they knew had died and been treated like that was indescribable in words.

"There's so many..." Spitz said quietly.

"The corpses? Or those bastards?" Thom asked.

Spitz just shook his head sadly.

"I count around forty Hualeg warriors," Mullen tried to contain her emotions. "As for the corpses... maybe twice as much."

"That means not everyone is here," William muttered.

"What do you mean?" Thom asked.

"Some of our comrades haven't died, and some of Hualeg's warriors aren't here either." William looked up at the hills far to the left.

"Do you think our friends ran there?" Thom asked. "And the Hualeg soldiers are chasing them?"

William nodded. "Or they fled by boat to the south, and the enemy pursued them."

"What is your plan?"

William thought for a moment, before replying, "I don't enjoy seeing the Hualeg people here any longer."

"Huh? Who enjoys that?" Thom said.

"I will kill them."

His men looked at each other.

"Hey, Tuck, let's think straight, shall we?" Thom said. "You can't just go out there and kill everyone. Unless you're crazy. It's better if we gather with our other men first, then make a plan."

"You asked about my plans. That's my plan. I will kill them. Or at least... drive them back north."

"Fine. How do you do that?"

"Kill their leader."

Failed Plan

William snorted as his comrades could only gape after hearing his last words. They must have thought he had really gone mad. Yes, there had been a lot of evidence of his madness, but perhaps madness was what they needed.

“Do you remember? The one who was standing in their boat yesterday?” William said. “His name is Mornir, leader of the Logenir tribe. If we can kill him, his army will break. They will lose control, maybe even their aim, and then head back north.” He glanced at his soldiers one by one, checking their convictions.

“Well, maybe so,” Mullen said flatly. “But where is this guy you mentioned? I didn’t see him here.”

“Probably in one of these houses, resting. I’ll look for him. If there’s a chance, I’ll kill him right away. Otherwise, I agree with you. We will join the others to come up with a plan.”

“Are you going to the village center now?” Thom asked. “That is dangerous. Hey-”

Before Thom could finish his sentence, William was already running towards the nearest house. He didn’t want to waste

time. While there was still a chance, he had to be quick.

His target was the largest house in the center of the village, Morrin's house. But before he got there, there were five people talking in front of a house that was closer to him.

As he was observing, a Hualeg soldier passed in front of him, carrying a large basket filled with something. Probably the loot from Morrin's house.

The man turned when he sensed William's presence. The person's sudden appearance surprised William too. Without thinking, William swung his sword, hitting the man's head.

The loud sound of a sword splitting head caught the attention of the five nearby Hualeg warriors. Those warriors dashed over with their weapons raised.

There's no need to hide now. William stepped forward, ducked, dodged an ax, then tore a warrior in the stomach with his sword. He spun around, dodged, then parried another attack. The swing of his sword cleaved the chest of one enemy warrior and tore the waist of another. Next, he helped Spitz kill the fourth enemy, while Thom and Mullen killed the fifth.

The noise they made invited all Hualeg soldiers in the village. Those men ran over, screaming. This time, even though William had boundless recklessness and believed in his luck, he knew it would be impossible to win against that many enemies.

"Run!" He ran east towards the hill. "Failed plan!"

"Damn it! Of course, it is!" Thom muttered. "Why did you think it will succeed?"

The three men ran beside William, past the first house they had attacked, to the gap between the rock cliffs. They continued to run down the grassy path.

They pushed their way through the thicket, deeper and deeper into the forest, until they realized they could no longer hear the

screams of the Hualeg people behind them.

In the forest, they stopped short of breath.

“Why...?” Thom grinned. “They didn’t chase?”

“Maybe they’re afraid of falling into a trap,” William guessed. “Or... maybe they were just told to stay in the village.”

“I didn’t see that Mornir,” Mullen said.

William nodded. “Looks like he went after our comrades or the villagers who survived. They all entered this forest. We can find them, right? So be careful. Open your eyes and ears.”

His colleagues did not object. They went deeper into the forest.

While they were walking in the dark, someone suddenly appeared from behind the thicket and startled them.

“Boulder! What happened?” William asked worriedly, but was also grateful that he didn’t cut his friend’s throat.

“We met the villagers who had fled here before the Hualegs attacked,” Boulder replied. “Some of our soldiers ran here, too.”

“Did you see Morrin, Taupin, or Dall?”

“Morrin is there, but Taupin and Dall are not. They withdrew from the village later. Morrin said they pulled the enemy to another part of the forest.”

“Where to?” he asked.

“Southern forest.”

“Then we have to go there,” William said nervously, thinking of his comrades who were still in danger. “We have to save them.”

“Hualeg warriors must have been on guard at the edge of the southern forest. We couldn’t have gone that way,” Thom reminded William again.

“We’d better ask Morrin,” Mullen suggested. “He must be more familiar with this area.”

This time, William agreed. He and his men immediately

entered the middle of the forest. Then he saw several village soldiers, who were on guard or hiding behind trees. He arrived at a fairly spacious piece of land on the hillside. There were many children and women, but few men. Morrin was with them.

William was relieved. At least there were many villagers who survived.

Morrin, the village head of Thaluk, said, "The Hualeg raiders came after dawn. We held them off for quite a while, but there were too many of them. We retreated here, while Dall and Taupin lure the enemy to the south so we can be safe."

"Take me to them," William said. "Show me the way."

"Maybe you're too late if you want to help them."

"Maybe there's still something I can do!"

Morrin nodded. "Okay, calm down. We go together."

William departed with fifteen soldiers who were still strong, including Morrin. They circled the slopes of the hills, rose to higher ground, and then descended again to penetrate the forest. Morrin said they were getting closer.

William believed him as soon as he found some corpses in the forest. There were the bodies of the Hualeg people, as well as the villagers, who seemed to have died recently.

William heard shouts in the distance, followed by the sound of metal clashing. He ran to the top of the hill. Once he got there, beyond the hill, he saw a group of village soldiers surrounded by Hualeg warriors, which were three times in number.

There were a dozen village soldiers there, including Rogas. Taupin had fallen with his body covered in blood, badly injured behind Rogas. The leader of Hualeg warriors was that sturdy man with reddish-brown hair named Mornir.

Here he is. The man William was looking for. There was no other choice. He had to kill that man now.

He galloped down the hill while raising his sword and immediately attacked the rearguard of the Hualeg army. His sword swung, killed two enemy warriors who were shocked and had no time to react.

The rest of the Hualeg warriors turned their heads in panic. Some tried to block the attack of William and his new companions, others still tried to surround Rogas and his soldiers. The number of village soldiers was still less, but they now had the upper hand.

This Is What He Is

Bloody battles took place at the foot of the hill. Victims fell on both sides. Screams of pain and death rang out. William again killed the most. He moved here and there, sneaking between enemy weapons, jumping, dodging, and slashing. Unstoppable.

But along with the death he brought, he could not prevent his friends from death. Alend, who was fighting nearby, failed to escape the Hualeg warriors' ambush. An ax crushed his head. The young man died instantly.

Before long, Mullen became another victim. The burly soldier tried to fend off a Hualeg's ax that tried to attack William from behind, but another Hualeg's ax hit from the side. Mullen collapsed in a pool of blood with the ax stuck in his back. William shouted in anger. His sword mercilessly spun around to kill the two Hualeg men who attacked Mullen, then slaughtered more.

The Hualeg warriors were desperate. Their number decreased drastically. There was a long scream in Hualegs' language, as if giving a command. William was stunned for a moment, then understood. Mornir and his remaining soldiers attempted to

escape. The northerners turned around and ran away. They crept through the trees and thickets, heading west.

“Twenty men who are still strong. Follow me!” William shouted. “Others, help the injured!”

Trying to shake off his exhaustion, he chased after Mornir and his warriors. A group of comrades followed, less than twenty, but William didn’t care. He got close to the Hualeg warrior who was running behind, and immediately slashed his enemy’s back until it split open. He continued to advance through the bushes in front of him. As soon as he found the next Hualeg warriors, he slaughtered them one by one.

The remaining Hualeg soldiers screamed in horror as if being chased by a demon. When they finally reached the village, only Mornir and his two soldiers remained. The northerners ran towards the village, and William kept on chasing, not caring that not far in front of him there were dozens of other Hualeg warriors coming at him, ready to help Mornir.

William shouted fiercely. His emotions had covered his entire mind. His comrades followed him. They were only half the number of Hualeg warriors, and also still tired, but seeing William fight fearlessly seemed to lift their spirits. The village soldiers began to believe that they could win. They attacked with a bravery that scared the men from Hualeg.

William charged, swinging the sword at every enemy nearby. Slashing, throwing their body parts in various directions. His every stab and slash was deadly, his every move was fast and powerful. Hualeg troops were soon scattered and finally pushed to the main road.

William could finally confront Mornir. As soon as he saw him, William wasted no time and immediately attacked with slashes from top to bottom. But the Hualeg man was quite agile.

He dodged, then parried, countering William's multiple sword swings. The ax attack of the leader of the Logenir was no less powerful. In fact, on one occasion, William's body almost split in two had he not jumped to the side.

William fell onto the grass. Another Hualeg soldier intervened and swung an ax from above, ready to cut his body. William rolled quickly, then stabbed his enemy in the stomach. The Hualeg warrior roared to death.

William struggled to his feet, quickly pulling the Hualeg warrior's body into a shield when Mornir's ax came back at him. The ax plunged into the warrior's back and William swung his sword, successfully knocking the ax out of Mornir's hand.

Without his major weapon, the leader of the Logenir panicked. William stood up, roared at him to both frighten him and shake off his tiredness. Mornir backed away while pulling the short sword from the side of his waist, then glanced left and right.

Seeing the defeat suffered by his troops, Mornir's spirit was crumbling. He shouted, asking a nearby Hualeg soldier for help. It forced William to fight his new enemy and let Mornir go.

Mornir ran down the cobbled streets to the river bank. Several desperate Hualeg warriors followed him.

When William finally killed his last enemy and chased Mornir to the riverbank, a longboat was already speeding towards the middle of the river. Mornir and twelve Hualeg soldiers were in it, rowing hard north.

"Logeniir!" William shouted with great anger. "Come back here! Let me kill you all! LOGENIR!"

The thirteen Hualeg people on the boat only dared to look. Everyone was silent. No one dared to respond.

Panting, William turned to his soldiers, who had just arrived. Among them were Rogas and Thom.

“Why did it take you guys so long?” William cried angrily.

Roger shook his head. “I think we’ve had enough—”

“We’re after them! Take the boat! Gather everyone!”

“William!” Rogas shouted. “It’s enough! Do you hear me?”

His breath rose and fell, then he grabbed William’s shoulder.

“That’s enough, man. It’s finished. Do you understand?”

For a moment, William could only stare at his friend.

“You have won.” Roger smiled. His eyes were wet. “We won.”

Only then did William realize what had happened. His chest rumbled. His hands were shaking. He looked at his bloodied sword, then at the corpses strewn along the path.

All of his memories of killing every enemy, when all those people were struck by his sword, when their death screams sounded endlessly, filled his mind. Anger, desire to kill, sadness, all those feelings churning to get out, and finally released uncontrollably.

He dropped his sword and screamed.

“Hey.” Rogas put his arm around his shoulder. “That’s okay.”

William fell to his knees to the ground, covering his face. What just happened? Did he do this? Did he kill them all?

His eyes closed. In the dark, he tried to calm himself, trying to shake off the terrible memory, which he knew would surely dwell there forever. He had done this, and he had to accept whatever the consequences, for himself as well as for his soul, that this is what he is now. A killer. A massive killer.

Thom drew closer, looked back and forth between William and Rogas. “Hey, why did you call him William? Isn’t it Tuck?”

Roger laughed. He looked at everyone gathered around him.

“Guys,” he pulled William back to his feet. “Now, listen to me! I’ll tell you something very important. This young man, his name is not Tuck! In extraordinary times like this... you

understand that this is something that will only happen once in your life, which you will then proudly tell your children and grandchildren about. It's the times when you fought alongside this incredible young man. And won! So now you should all know his real name. Listen up and remember this name well! He, this young man's name, is... Tuck!"

"What?" Everyone stared in confusion.

"Oops, I was wrong." Rogas grinned happily. "His name is William! William! Did you all hear that? This is William, the Conqueror of the Northmen!"

Prepare For the Unpredictable

The Conqueror. What conqueror?

And why did Rogas reveal his real name?

Muttering, William leaned his back against the edge of the boat. Both legs stretched out. His head looked up at the slightly cloudy night sky. He let the gentle breeze caress his face. The boat swayed slowly and made the fatigue in his body lessen. Soon he could sleep and forget this terrible day.

But Rogas didn't seem willing to let him rest. The man came to the river bank and laughed. The smell of wine wafted from his drink, or from his breath. He stumbled into the boat and sat across from William. William couldn't help but stare at him.

"If you want to sleep, find another boat," William said.

"Sleep?" Rogas smirked. "I want to take you out for a drink! Come on, have a little fun with the others. We should celebrate it. You, my friend, deserve it. Or do you want a drink here?"

"Celebrating what? We won, but we also lost so many friends today. Forty-seven people, dead, you remember? I don't think I want to drink right now. But go ahead, if you want to celebrate."

"It's been a tough day, William. Very tough. Yes, we lost a

lot, but look on the bright side. We destroyed the Hualegs. They could no longer attack the villages in the south. Imagine the hundreds or maybe thousands of people who are now safe. Why don't you try a few sips to appreciate yourself?"

William looked at his friend, who was grinning as he continued to offer drinks. Finally, he accepted the wine, took a few sips of it, before handing over the bottle.

"I think that's enough," he said. "There should be one person who remains sane and alert in this place."

Roger laughed. "Those northerners are afraid of you. You don't see it in their eyes? Because of you, they won't dare come here until next winter."

William shook his head. "Someone must prepare for the unpredictable, not the predictable."

"Again, you're right." Rogas shook his head. "You brat, you really are a special little bastard. I've been to many places, and in my life, I've seen no one like you. You did something that even the bravest men wouldn't dare do. Something that the greatest men can only achieve at the pinnacle of their lives. And you still want to do more things like this? You know, you look like the men in the legends. Sorry, you don't mind me talking big like this, right?"

"Well, I'm used to hearing your bullshit. There's always something you hide behind your talk. What do you want to say now? That something usually done in excess will lead to death? That's what always happens to the men in legends?"

Roger nodded. "So you know that, don't you? That in those legends, usually great people die young."

"Do you think I will die sooner? Sooner than you?"

"Well, I will live to be a hundred years, so yes! But, William, what I mean is, such great and brave people, they should have

been more careful. First, because they think they are great, they are usually easy to underestimate something. Second, great people are loved by many, but they also have a lot of enemies. Those who are jealous, who are afraid, who are angry. Those who hate them. Such enemies ...”

“Wasn’t I the one who said ‘I don’t want to drink’? That there should be someone who remains sane and alert in this place? It should be clear that I’ve been more careful than you.”

“That’s why I said you were a special little bastard. You can still be alert like this. Still trying to be better. But, listen,” Rogas smirked, seemingly genuinely enjoying his own words, “there’s always one thing that makes people great, but they don’t always take it seriously. Yet this matters. Do you know what it is?”

“What?”

“Luck!”

“Oh! Luck!” William acted as if he was surprised. “Of course!”

Rogas pouted. “You don’t believe it? You’ve seen the effect of your ring, haven’t you?”

William looked at the ring on his finger. “Maybe... I’m starting to believe.”

“You have to! That’s what kept you safe all this time!”

“Hey, what exactly are you trying to say?”

“I just wanted to say, seeing what you’ve done so far, eventually, you’re going to be in trouble again. Bigger ones. Problems that can make you die faster, no matter how good you are. That’s what I wanted to say!”

“Okay ...”

“But I can help you one more time.” Rogas held a black necklace decorated with a bear hooves in front of his neck. “This necklace, my lucky necklace, I will give this to you.”

William’s eyebrows rose. “Are you serious?”

Rogas removed the necklace around his neck. He took William's hand and gave it to him. "This! Take this. With your reckless and insane style, you need this thing more than I do. What? Do you think I'm kidding?"

William looked at him. "What I meant was that do you really believe this thing brings you good luck?"

"Wow, what you said was really insulting. Insulting myself, as well as yourself. Why? Because I'm sure you actually believe that luck will always help you, thanks to that ring!"

William froze. "Then, thank you. But... wouldn't this be weird? Now you don't have any lucky items anymore."

"I don't need that kind of thing anymore." Rogas grimaced. "Soon I will stay away from anything involving war, death, or all terrible things like that. It's too heavy for my soul. Let this matter be your business. I don't want to deal with that anymore."

"Hmm... are you serious? You're a mercenary. You fight and kill people. That's your job."

"Being a mercenary doesn't mean you have to keep fighting in the war. I can just be a small town guard or fight ordinary robbers. That's enough for me. We just have to be smart about choosing jobs that are safe for us."

"Then... you stay away from gambling, too?"

The grin on Rogas' face disappeared. "Hmm... that's right. I still need money." He smiled wryly. "Apparently... I still need the lucky item, huh?"

"So, you want to take this necklace again?"

"No. It's for you. I'll just take the small one. That ring. We swap."

William laughed. "Well, if you say so."

They exchanged the two lucky items. Ring and necklace.

William wasn't sure about that. Maybe they were just ordinary things and had no luck in them, but they became special because Rogas always considered them special.

"Now... I will return to the village." Rogas tried to take a sip of the wine from his drink, which turned out to be all gone and there was only a drop left. "You sleep or wake up, whatever you like..." He shook his head. "Huh, if you want to sleep, why not in your room? Was it because the red-haired girl was no longer there?"

William laughed dryly. "Good night, asshole."

"Good night, little bastard." Rogas stood up, trying to keep his balance on the rocking boat. For a moment, he stared at William. "Always be careful. Don't die quickly."

"Sure. I am okay here."

Rogas jumped on the bank of the river. "I will have two soldiers stand guard with you. You know, just in case, for the unpredictable, right?"

Missing

William looked at the figure of Rogas, who disappeared into the darkness, then looked at the necklace in his hand. He wondered if this thing really could bring good luck, then what kind of luck could he expect soon? Escaped death in various battles again? Or avoid all those kinds of battles? The latter was definitely better.

Or maybe that's not what he wanted.

William leaned his body and neck against the edge of the boat, then closed his eyes. His mind drifted. Something crossed his mind. Earlier, Rogas had teased him by mentioning the red-haired girl. The beautiful, sharp-nosed girl.

Then he thought of his yellow-haired sister, Vida, who was also beautiful but always serious and never smiled. This girl was clever. She seemed to know a lot about everything, so William really wanted to know more about her.

Next, he thought of Muriel. The stubborn but lovely Muriel. William had left her in Ortleg. He remembered his promise that one day he would come home to see the girl.

Thinking about all three brought in unimaginable complica-

tions. William laughed to himself. It would be better if he slept tonight without having to dream about any of them.

When William awoke the next morning, he had forgotten all of them. One thing that made him relieved, there were no more enemies who came to disturb him. Rogas also fulfilled his word. Two soldiers were keeping watch with him by the river, and both had given William bread and hot drinks for breakfast.

Since Taupin was still injured and Rogas had not been seen since last night, William took command. He checked the condition of the troops and asked all the residents who had taken refuge in the hills to return.

The wounded and dead were gathered. He counted thirty-seven fit soldiers, twenty-three wounded, and sixty-seven dead, counting from the first time they arrived at Thaluk. There were so many dead, but they couldn't continue to be sad. They buried all the bodies in a large pit. It was a long and arduous job. They did not finish it until afternoon.

Everyone rested for a while, then continued to clear the village of the rubble from the battle. At sunset, the village is calm and comfortable.

The second night after the battle passed in peace.

The next morning, an additional confusion arose. Rogas was still nowhere to be seen.

"Who last saw him?" William asked, after gathering a few people.

The soldiers looked at each other.

William pointed to the two men who had accompanied him on guard two nights ago by the river. "You two were the last to speak to him, right?"

"That's right," a soldier said. "He asked us to stay with you on the river. But that's it. We didn't see him again."

“I checked,” another soldier said. “One of our boats is missing.”

Thom said, half-jokingly, “I think he’s tired of the north and wants to get back to having fun in the south.”

“You mean he left us?” a soldier asked.

“If he really wanted to go, he would have said it,” William said.

“Do you think so?” Thom looked unsure.

William was silent. Was Rogas really going to tell him if he really wanted to get out of here? Probably not. Rogas was always hard to predict. And if he really left, was that decision sudden, or was it planned? William was still sure that Rogas would not just walk away. Not before he received his next payment from Taupin.

“I think if he wants to go, well, let him go,” Thom said. “Then let Tuck—I mean, William—lead us here. I think it’s even better for us. Right, guys?”

All the soldiers nodded in agreement. It seemed that Rogas’ departure wasn’t too important to them. For William, this still seemed strange. Maybe he didn’t really know Rogas.

William finally returned to his duties. He ordered the soldiers to prepare nets and traps to be set in the river, just in case another Hualeg army came. He also sent a group of soldiers to the north to monitor.

In the village, he worked with the villagers to repair the houses previously damaged by the Hualeg people.

While he was watching them, Boulder came to see him.

The bald-headed man said, “While I was patrolling the river this morning I met someone who wanted to meet you.”

“Who?” William asked in surprise. He didn’t feel like he was waiting for someone. Who would want to meet him in this place?

“That girl from Hualeg, the tall one.”

Vida? William was stunned.

Is the problem with Mornir not over yet?

Or... the girl just wants to meet?

“Where?” William asked.

“Not far south,” Boulder answered.

South? Not in the north? William continued to wonder. Does that mean that the girl made her way down the river to the south and through the village without being seen by her soldiers on guard?

William immediately rebuked Thom, who was not far beside him, “Are you sure the guards are keeping a good eye on the river?”

“I’m sure,” Thom replied, but looked a little doubtful. “But I’ll ask the boys again. Maybe they were tired at night.”

“Tell them it’s no small matter,” William said. “They are lucky because those who pass now are not enemies. But tomorrow may not be so lucky, and we will all suffer the consequences.”

“I know. I don’t like it either when they let their guard down.”

“I have to go now. Meanwhile, you’re in charge here, Thom.” William turned to Boulder. “Take me to that place.”

The two of them went south on a small boat. William rowed in front, Boulder behind him.

They followed the river until it was quite far from the village. They turned left, toward a small creek shaded by thick leaves.

“Are you sure this is the place?” William asked without looking back. He looked around, looking for Vida.

“Yes. I saw her here this morning. She said she wanted to meet you,” Boulder said. “I don’t understand why she’s not here now.”

William stared at the forest in front of him. The sun shone through the leaves, making the creek still look bright.

“Come on, let’s go,” he said.

William and Boulder continued to row, now slower and more carefully. William looked left and right, constantly looking for Vida’s figure, who might hide in one place. But after quite far, he doubted.

“Maybe she’s gone,” William said.

He was a little disappointed. He wondered what made Vida want to meet him in this place. Maybe there really wasn’t anything important. That’s why the girl then left again.

He said, “I think we should go back—”

Something hard hit his head from behind.

Instantly, his consciousness vanished.

It's Just an Ugly Necklace

William awoke a long time later. Dense tree branches were visible above him, and he felt his body lying on the grassy ground. He was surprised to find his hands tied behind his back.

He rolled over and tried to sit up. When his head looked up, someone seemed to grin in front of him. A grin he hadn't seen in a long time, from someone who always wore a black robe.

Mornitz.

"Finally, you're awake, boy," the man said. "Good. So I don't have to water your face. But from what I've heard, you don't seem fit to be called a boy anymore. You've been acting like an adult here."

William looked around, for he heard laughter nearby. They were on the bank of a river in the forest, and it turned out that there were indeed several other people there.

Sitting to the left of Mornitz was a thick-haired youth with wild hair around his chin and lips. His nose was crooked, and he grimaced so that his face looked even more annoying than Mornitz's.

Behind the young man was another man whose hair had turned white. He wore a cloth covering his head to his neck. His body was thin, his face looked old. This one just glared at William.

Then behind him were two other rough-looking men. They laughed the loudest, probably because they were the dumbest of all.

So far, William had not wanted to admit that maybe he was the most stupid person in here.

Then he thought of Boulder. Where is he? Is he... dead?

“What do you want?” William asked Mornitz. He glanced at each of his enemies one by one. “Are you looking for Rogas? He’s gone from Thaluk..”

“Then we will look for him again. Anywhere, until he dies. We’ll kill you first so he can catch up with you later, in hell.”

“Rogas is not the one we want,” a hoarse voice returned to Mornitz, coming from the skinny old man wearing a hood. “He’s none of our business anymore.”

Mornitz immediately replied curtly, “He’s still our business! Until the day he dies.” He looked at the young man beside him and said, “Rogas is the one who smacked your nose, remember? Don’t you want to give him what he deserves?”

“You don’t have to mention my nose!” the young man cried in annoyance.

“Master Darron,” the old man said, “we didn’t come all the way here just to hunt down that useless man. If you do all of this the way Mornitz did, you’re doing yourself a disservice. Everything I taught you so far has become useless.”

Mornitz shook his head furiously. “Hey, you think you’re smart, Brenis? Do you want to teach this kid to be forgiving or forgetful? Master Bellion had never made such a mistake. He

always kills if someone gets in his way. That's what makes him feared."

"Don't listen to him," the man named Brenis said again to the crooked-nosed boy. "Don't waste energy and time on revenge. One day you will be a better person than your father, believe me."

Mornitz immediately laughed. "Master Bellion already dis-trusted you and threw you away. Why should anyone else believe in you?"

"He didn't throw me away. He still believes in me," Brenis replied coldly. "If you don't understand what you're saying, then shut up."

"Hey, you two, I got it!" the young man named Darron shouted in annoyance. "You don't have to say much and keep on talking as if only the two of you were right. I know what I'm doing!"

Mornitz smiled wryly, while the old man nodded, apparently pleased to hear the crooked-nosed young man's words.

William looked at the young man and tried to restore his memory. Darron is Bellion's son, if William remembered correctly. It was he who, according to Rogas, used to lead bands of robbers and fought against Rogas in the south. There Darron got injured and fled. Because of that incident, Bellion ordered his men to chase Rogas to the north.

Of course, that's a story from Rogas' side. From the chatter of the people in front of him, William was sure the problem was not that simple.

"Then go ahead," Mornitz said to Darron. "Do what you think is right."

Darron gazed at William. "William. Er, that's your name, right?"

William looked at the young man, who looked nervous. “What do you want?”

“Mmm... My stuff. I believe you have it. Where is it?”

“Stuff?”

“Necklace!” Darron’s voice rose. “The one Rogas gave you!”

William’s brow furrowed. Did he mean the necklace that Rogas gave him? That lucky necklace? Where’s that thing, huh?

He can’t remember!

“Do you mean that ugly necklace?” William shrugged. “I don’t know. Rogas gave it to me two nights ago by the river. But I fell asleep soon after. When I woke up, the necklace was gone, and I didn’t notice. Then Rogas disappeared from the village. Do you understand? I think Rogas took it back from me.”

“Are you trying to lie to me?” Mornitz threatened, then glanced at Darron. “You want me to cut off a bit of his body? So that he would be honest?”

“I’m not lying, you bastard!” William replied. “I don’t know where that thing is! If I know, I’ll definitely give it to you! I don’t need it.”

He looked at everyone in front of him, who didn’t seem to believe it, and continued, “I think it’s obvious the necklace has been taken by Rogas again! You know how sneaky he is. The necklace must be in his hands by now.”

Brenis stood up, then crouched between Mornitz and Darron. The old man brought his face close to William’s, sniffing.

William pulled his body away. What was this guy doing?

Before long, Brenis shook his head as he looked at William. “The last person to hold that thing was you.”

William looked back at him fiercely. “If you really have the ability to sniff like a dog, why don’t you just use it to find the object? Feel the surrounding air, then follow the smell. Maybe

you'll find it somewhere!"

A moment later, a bad thought came to William. If these people believed Brenis could sniff like a dog, then they wouldn't need William anymore and would kill him right here, right now.

Damn it, William cursed. He was careless. He had to come up with a better idea so he could escape.

"Wait a minute, I remember!" William said quickly. "Rogas gave me the necklace while we were on the boat. By then I was sleepy. I fell asleep, and now I think the necklace might have fallen into the river beside the boat. The next morning when I woke up, I had completely forgotten about the necklace. Yeah! Why not? It's just an ugly necklace—"

"Did you mean my necklace fell into the river?" Darron shouted hysterically as he grabbed William by the collar and shook him. "Then it's gone?"

He Should Have Been Killed!

“Relax,” William said. “The riverbank there is not deep. If you dive a little and search for a while among the rocks, you should be able to find your necklace there.”

“What if the necklace drifts northward?” Darron was getting hysterical.

William grimaced. “Then you have to look north. Be careful. You’ve heard of Hualeg people, haven’t you?”

“Hey, kid, you’re trying to play around, aren’t you?” Mornitz brought the tip of the knife to William’s neck. “You think you can joke?”

William gulped, then shook his head.

“Look, I don’t want to be hostile to you guys,” he said. “I prefer to be friends with anyone. It doesn’t matter who you are. So let me help. I’ll take you to the village, and I’ll show you where the necklace fell, and you can find it safely.”

“Once we bring you to the village, your friends will attack us!” Mornitz said.

“I can ask them not to attack you.” William looked at them one by one. “I promise we won’t bother you.”

Darron nodded, then turned to Brenis. The two of them had more faith in William's words.

But Mornitz hasn't. "He's going to harm us! You're crazy to believe him."

"We have little choice," Brenis said. His blue eyes stared straight at William. "Can we trust your words?"

"I don't want to die here, nor do you want to die once you get to the village. I don't need to be your enemy, and you don't need to be my enemy and my friends' enemies, either. Instead of making the problem bigger, why not just solve it? That's why I'm offering to help. We can work together, and you can trust my words. I will be good to you if you are good to me."

Brenis nodded. "I trust you. Master Darron?"

Darron, who was still a little hesitant, didn't answer right away. He was still glancing at Mornitz.

The black-robed man took the opportunity. "Take him to the boat, but tie his hands and feet. Let me sort it all out, Master Darron. If this brat betrays us, I will kill him."

They led William to a boat moored by the river. A bandit rowed on the front end. Mornitz sat behind him, followed by William with his hands tied, Darron, Brenis, and another bandit in the back.

Slowly, the boat moved, while William tried to think again. Boulder brought him here because he said Vida wanted to meet him. In fact, it was the bandits who came while Boulder disappeared. Maybe he was dead, and they dumped his body in the river.

However, how could Vida and these criminals appear in the same place? It seemed too coincidental.

Maybe the yellow-haired girl isn't here at all. If so, could it be that Boulder was just tricking William? Did he purposely lure

William to a deserted place, to be caught by Mornitz and his gang? Why? Was he offered a large sum of money? Or had he been Mornitz or Darron's men from the start, who later went north with William?

William remembered the times Boulder had fought with him. They are often in a life-and-death situation together. How could he betray him now? Or maybe William was really stupid for not being able to judge his men better.

William did not recognize the part of the river he was now passing. The afternoon sun peeking through the leaves occasionally shone from the left, and sometimes from behind. That meant they were heading north, away from the mouth of the creek he and Boulder had entered.

Did this mean that Mornitz found another way to the north?

William broke the silence. "Is this an alternative path to Thaluk?"

Darron, who was sitting behind him, replied, "Mornitz found it, and he also found another resting place in the forest here."

"Why don't you just go by the major river? It should be closer to the village."

Darron laughed. "Then we'll meet your patrol, who keeps watching over there."

"We just prepared them for a few days, and you already know about them?"

"We were told by—"

"Master Darron," Mornitz cut in. "There's no need to say anything to this boy. He's not your friend."

"I don't think this is something to keep secret," Darron said.

William laughed. "If people can only tell their friends, then I doubt anyone will tell you, Mornitz."

"That's never been a problem," Mornitz snorted, "as long as

I can get what I want. By ripping your stomach, for example.”

“Ssshhh!” The bandit in the front row raised a hand, telling everyone to be quiet.

Their boat reached the bend. The creek continued to the left, but to the right, about twenty paces beyond the mainland, was another, larger river. Ordelaehr River.

They got out of the boat, pulled the boat from the small river, and pushed it through the narrow land to the big river on the other side.

William pushed along, but Mornitz gripped the knife tightly as he glared at the young man. He seemed afraid that William would scream for help.

The man shouldn't be afraid. William knew the village patrol wouldn't be here. Besides, he had also decided that he should just help Darron and his men. After all, he lost nothing.

William was stunned when another boat emerged from behind the rock and approached them. There was only one rower in the boat. Boulder. William recognized the boat, too. It was the one he had shared with Boulder.

Boulder's face turned pale as soon as he saw William.

William smirked. “Startled? You don't think I'm still alive?”

“Guys, what happened?” Boulder asked nervously, mixed with confusion.

“William will help us,” Darron replied cheerfully. “The necklace fell by the river, near the village. So we'll look for it over there.”

“Are you guys crazy?” Boulder exclaimed in disbelief. “The village soldiers will kill us if they see him with us in this state!”

“I said so too,” Mornitz said. “But I lost the vote.”

Boulder stood up and drew his sword. “You should have killed him! He's dangerous, don't you know? He had already killed

hundreds of Hualeg men as easily as hitting mosquitoes! If given the chance, he will kill us, too.”

“Hey,” William snapped him. “I can talk to the men in the village. They won’t kill you. And I won’t kill you either,” he glared at his former subordinate, who had betrayed him.

“Put down your sword, Boulder,” Brenis rebuked.

“Listen, let me find the necklace!” Boulder said. “You guys just hide here. If I’m alone, the soldiers in the village won’t be suspicious.”

Mornitz replied, “Great idea! That means we don’t need this boy anymore.”

William held his breath, tense. Things got worse. He had to do something before it was too late.

“Do you mean we should kill him?” Darron grimaced, his face turning annoying again. He looked back, asking Brenis’ opinion.

The old man was silent. It seemed he was still confused.

“Are you sure?” Darron asked again.

“It should be like that!” exclaimed Boulder. “Damn it! You should have done it a long time ago!”

Mornitz raised his knife. “Well, it doesn’t matter. Then or now it’s the same.”

Something Bad Might Happen

William cursed. He had to act now.

Before Mornitz could move forward, William kicked him in the chest so that the man's body was pushed against another bandit behind him. William's hands were still tied, but he managed to stand up and stomped his elbows to Darron's ribs, who was standing beside him. The young bandit fell to his knees and groaned.

Boulder's sword from the next boat swung toward William's head. William backed away, but as a result, he lost his balance. His heel tripped over the wall of the boat, and his body tumbled into the river. His head went into the water first, then his whole body sank.

William moved frantically. With his hands and feet tied, he thought he might drown. His feet kicked in search of a foothold in the water. Then he tried to calm down. The river's bottom is not very deep. He could see the rocks thanks to the sunlight that penetrated the river water.

He looked up to see the boat above him. Another object seemed to fall into the river, hurtling towards it.

A sword! Whose sword is that?

William dodged and watched the tip of the sword slip into the rocks at the bottom of the river. William swam closer, then clamped the blade of the sword against the rocks with his two feet, trying to cut the rope that bound his wrists.

A bit more... and succeed!

He untied the rope that tied his leg. As soon as the rope came off, he slid and swam away from the boat above him. His breath will soon run out.

He came to the surface shocked. Boulder was already on his back on the edge of the boat with a knife stuck in his chest. The man's dead. Two other bandits in the boat next to Boulder were also dead, one with his head cut off, the other with the contents of his stomach spilled out. Darron and Brenis were nowhere to be seen, probably had fallen into the river.

On the boat, two people were fighting.

Mornitz fought the tall, yellow-haired girl.

Vida? Where did she come from so quickly?

There's no way she just came. She must have been near here first and attacked when she saw William fall.

The black-robed man and the yellow-haired girl clashed swords. Every time Mornitz swung his sword, he growled, like an expression of anger. Or maybe it is the voice of a frightened person. Mornitz was scared because Vida seemed to be more skilled with her sword and clever. After enduring several attacks from Mornitz, the girl's legs stomped left and right, making the boat sway wildly.

As the nervous Mornitz lost his balance, the sword in Vida's left hand moved swiftly against the man's blade to open his defenses. The girl's sword then went straight to pierce the black-robed man's stomach.

Mornitz backed away, trying to dodge, but his heel hit the seat block behind him. He fell backward, and the grip of the sword in his right hand weakened. Vida swung her sword again, easily sending Mornitz's sword flying.

Panicking, the man threw an oar with his left hand. Vida dodged and jumped back with the sword pointed straight ahead. Mornitz groaned as the sword pierced his stomach. Blood spurted from his stomach and mouth. As if not satisfied, Vida drew her sword and swung it horizontally, decapitating the bandit.

Vida turned her head the other way and called out using Huallegs' language. William could see now that another boat with two ax soldiers was approaching the part of the river where Darron and Brenis were swimming. The two bandits must be scared to death by now.

"Vida!" William exclaimed, waving his arms and trying to keep his body afloat. The girl turned. "Don't kill them!"

The girl's expression changed in surprise.

"Please, don't kill them..."

Vida was silent, then turned to her two soldiers who were chasing. The girl gave the order. His two soldiers understood and put down their axes.

Vida pushed the bodies of Mornitz and the other bandits out of the boat. She rowed over to William, who was on the bank of a river whose bottom was deep beside the rocks, then pulled the young man's body.

"Thank you." William smiled broadly as soon as he got on the boat.

Someone, out of nowhere, suddenly jumped behind William. A girl's laughter was heard. It was the red-haired girl, who was now beaming at him. Apparently, the girl jumped off a rock by

the river.

The girl spat out a series of words in Hualeg while pointing at the river bank. William just chuckled as he caught his breath. Whatever the girl said, she looked happy.

Meanwhile, Vida was still watching the other boat across the river. Her two soldiers had already captured Darron and Brenis.

Vida looked doubtful when she saw the two bandits, and asked William, "You don't want them to die? They wanted to kill you."

"Those two... are not dangerous," William replied, though he wasn't sure about that, especially considering Darron's bad intentions towards him.

"They just need to be punished," he continued. "After all, their deaths will only inflict further grudges on the young man's father in the south, which may put some people in danger. We will not solve all these problems."

"If we killed them now, the father in the south wouldn't know," Vida argued.

"Do you think so? Just kill them and forget about it? I don't want to be like that. Too many people have died here," William said. "Forget it. Let them be my business."

The girl looked at him, then shrugged. "Okay."

"Why are you here, anyway?"

"We're looking for something. We travel a lot, we know a lot of places, and we see a lot of things you don't see. But you need not fear, we are not like the Logenir. We are harmless to you. Then this afternoon, we saw him," Vida pointed to Boulder, who had become a corpse, "who used to come with you. He emerged from behind the forest, here, then waited a long time, but seemed unsettled. Freya said something bad might happen, but it wasn't clear what it would be. So we hid and watched everything."

"Freya?"

“My sister.” Vida glanced at the red-haired girl beside William.

The cute, sharp-nosed girl smiled when she heard her name being called.

“She... knew something was going to happen?” William asked doubtfully.

“She can sense something.”

William was silent. Sense? Like Master Horsling did?

He suddenly got goosebumps, imagining how he had almost killed Freya the first time he met her at the river. Luckily he didn't, because the girl had saved him now.

The red-haired girl said something.

“What did she say?” William asked Vida.

Vida looked doubtful. “She... is happy to help you.”

William nodded while smiling at Freya.

“Then thank you again,” he said. “Looks like I have more and more to give you all in return.”

Vida looked at him closely. “Do you mind if you have to repay us later?”

We May Need Your Help

William was stunned to hear Vida's words. "What do you mean? Of course, I don't mind! If I have to help you later, I will gladly do it. I'll do anything for you."

"Good." Vida nodded. "We may need your help."

William looked back at her. Vida's eyes were turquoise, as were Freya's, and it always reminded William of his own eyes. Maybe it was like that because he and the two girls were from the same tribe. Vallanir. Something warm felt in his heart when William wanted to get to know the two girls closer. But not now. He had more important things to do.

"Just tell me when you need anything," he said. "I promise, I will help after all my business is done."

"Do you need help with your business?" Vida asked.

"From you? Once again?"

"Freya and I can help guard those two all the way to your village."

"You want to come to my village? That's good! But then I have to repay the favor more, huh?" William laughed.

“There is no need to count services. I didn’t do that, and you don’t have to do that either.”

William nodded. “I agree.”

They set off, and it overjoyed William that Vida and Freya could come with him. Their boat of five, including Darron and Brenis, headed south along the Ordelaehr River to Thaluk Village. While the other boat containing Vida’s men was far behind, and later it would only be on guard and would not come into the village.

As William had predicted, Mornitz and his group had found a tributary parallel to the Ordelaehr River on the west side of the forest, which could carry them through the Thaluk from south to north, without being seen from the village. William had to pass on this new discovery to Morrin and Taupin. It is likely that some villagers knew about this tributary, but did not consider it important.

While rowing, William was pensive. To Vida and Freya, there were many things William wanted to ask. About the situation in Hualeg, about the Vallanir tribe, and also about his father’s family. Although for the latter, William had to be careful. From his mother’s story, he knew his father had left his tribe not in a pleasant situation.

William wasn’t sure how Vida would respond to his story once she found out who he was, whether she would be glad to hear it or become hostile. So it would be better if he kept quiet for a while, and they didn’t need to know that William’s father was from Vallanir. Besides, Darron and Brenis were with them right now, so it was impossible for William to talk about important matters in front of the two men.

They arrived at Thaluk in the evening. The village soldiers who were on guard were astonished and alert when they saw the

two Hualeg girls coming with William, especially Vida, whose appearance looked tough and dangerous. But William said they all had nothing to worry about because these two girls were his friends. Luckily, there was Thom who had seen Vida and Freya before and could explain it to everyone in the village.

Meanwhile, William had to be more careful with Darron and Brenis. They were bandits who deserved to be punished, but the punishment had to be done fairly because otherwise, it would only lead to new grudges and trouble from Darron's father, who was the head of the bandits in Alton.

William said to Thom, "These two are bandits from the south. They're looking for Dall. Since Dall wasn't around, they're looking for me."

"Where's Boulder?" Thom asked, looking around.

"He turned out to be a member of them. He's dead."

Thom was dumbfounded. His face was full of questions. "What happened? Did he set you up? So all this time ..."

William nodded. "He's been lying to us all this time. Never mind, forget him. He doesn't deserve to be talked about anymore."

"Okay." Thom hesitated, then turned around. "So, what should we do with these two?"

William glared at Darron and Brenis. Their hands weren't tied, but they knew it was impossible to run or do anything like that in Thaluk. "Basically, if they still see me as an enemy, you can kill them. Yes, that seems better. I can live more peacefully. Can you do it?"

"Killing them?" Thom grinned as he reached for the hilt of his knife. "With pleasure."

Darron and Brenis were frightened. Their faces turned pale.

"You promised to help us!" Darron screamed hysterically.

“That was before you guys tried to kill me,” William said.

“Boulder’s right!” Darron kept screaming. Everyone in the village would probably hear his screams. “You will kill us once you reach the village!”

Brenis raised his hand, telling the young man to be quiet. He said quietly, “Master William, we beg your pardon. Everything that happened on the river was beyond our expectations. All because of Mornitz. Darron and I really don’t want to hurt you. We really hope that didn’t happen. Let us go home, sir, and we will never again regard you as an enemy, even without you asking. We promise.”

“You seem to be the best among all these bandits. But I’m not sure we can trust such promises,” William replied. “You’re still just a subordinate to this young man’s father, and you can’t guarantee anything. So, now that I think about it, what I said earlier seemed wrong. Your life depends not on you, but on us.”

“That’s why I’m begging you...” Brenis said quietly.

“You may go,” William answered quickly.

Darron’s face brightened. It seemed he really didn’t expect it. His mouth trembled. “R—really—?”

Meanwhile, Brenis reacted more quickly. He immediately nudged Darron’s arm and quickly lowered his head. “Thank you, Master William! You are a very generous person.”

Darron hastily followed him. “Thank you, sir!”

William nodded. “And I will also help you find that thing. So that you may know, and also remember this later, that I really do not want to be hostile to you.”

“We definitely remember that, sir.” Brenis nodded.

Darron also replied, “I will never forget!”

William chuckled. They both seem earnest, but can he really trust them? Time will tell. For now, the important thing was

that he was done dealing with them.

William then called a few soldiers and ordered them to look for a necklace that might have fallen around the dock where he was talking to Rogas before the man disappeared. By now, the sun was almost setting, so they had to hurry to find the necklace before it got too dark.

Killing Something

While his soldiers searched by the river, William stood watching from the top of the cliff with the two Hualeg girls, Darron, Brenis, Morrin, Thom, and several other soldiers.

Before long, a soldier below shouted. "I found it!"

The soldier sprinted up the steps to the main road, up the cliff, then handed his find to William.

William looked at it carefully. A black necklace which is said to bring good luck and save the wearer from death. So far, William had never worn it, and he could still escape death, whether by luck or fate. Therefore, does he still believe in Rogas' words? The man who had disappeared and left him behind?

"This." William handed it to Darron. "Your necklace."

Darron accepted it with both hands as if it was a precious sacred object. "Thank you, sir! You are a good person!"

"That's yours. Now, go."

"We... can go now?"

"Unless you're afraid of boating at night."

"No, no! I am not afraid!" Darron said hastily.

“Then go. We’d better not see you any longer.”

“We’re leaving now.” Brenis nodded respectfully, once again making the youth beside him follow him. “Thank you, Master William. I promise, even if you don’t believe in promises like these, our troubles with you and Rogas are over. After this, nothing else will hang between us.”

William gave the two a boat. Slowly, Darron and Brenis’ boat moved south, and gradually the light of their torches disappeared into the darkness. All the residents and soldiers who were still on guard then dispersed. Some rested and some returned to their respective homes.

On the cliff William, with the two Hualleg girls, looked far to the north. The wind blew slowly with them, descending from the hillside around the valley. After all the bloody events and deaths William had endured today, everything was now much more peaceful.

“In my place,” said Vida, “if anyone wanted to kill me, and he failed, I would not hesitate to kill him. That’s always the right thing to do. Here, you don’t just forgive, you help him.”

“I did what I thought was good,” William replied.

“Will it always be like that? Forgive when people have apologized?”

“Perhaps.” William shrugged. “I can’t say what will happen in the future.”

“One day, it could be fatal to you.”

“It could be.”

“What do you want to do now?” Vida asked.

William was silent for a moment.

“I don’t know yet,” he replied. “Maybe I’ll stay here until the fall. Although I believe, after Mornir loses, the Logenirs won’t dare come here until winter. Next year maybe they will come

again, but it's still a long time. I don't want to think about it now."

"Mornir is not stupid. He's not coming soon."

"That means I can go back south. I'm no longer wanted by the bandits, so I should be able to go home." William smiled. In his mind, he pictured the faces of Muriel, Bortez, and his village.

He sighed. Only now did he think about this again. He seemed to have left them for so long, even though it was only a few months ago. If he told Muriel about all of this, would the girl believe him?

Freya then said something.

Little by little, William understood some words that the girl always said, but he asked Vida anyway. "What did she say? Looks like she's nagging, huh? Haha."

"Hmm... no," Vida replied. "She only has a few requests."

"Does she? What's that?"

"He wants you to come with us."

"Where?"

"To the north."

William was silent.

To the north? Really going north? To his father's land, a place where his mother forbade him to go?

He looked at the two girls.

"Why does she want me to come along?"

Freya babbled again.

Vida smiled faintly. "She said she likes you."

William laughed at that.

Freya laughed too. Vida then followed with a big smile. Which meant, perhaps, it looked like Vida was just kidding.

"Okay, so you need help, apparently," William said. "You can just say that right away, right?"

“I was right. Freya likes you.” Vida was serious again. “But you are right, too. We need help. And you are the one who can help us the most.”

“What should I do?”

“Killing.”

“Killing?”

“Killing something.”

William’s brow furrowed, confused. First, he didn’t expect Vida to ask him to kill. Second, “What do you mean by something? Something? Not people?”

“Yes.” Vida nodded in approval. “But I can’t explain yet. If you agree, I can tell you more and you can see for yourself later what kind of thing you have to kill.”

“Are you sure I can really help?”

“You have already killed six soldiers who were supposed to be helping me. You have also proven that you can kill enemies that are far more many than my soldiers. So yes, I’m sure. You can, and you must help us.”

“Okay. Where will go exactly?”

“To the forest, northeast from here.”

“Can you explain why you want to kill this thing?”

“Later. Long story.”

William looked back at the yellow-haired girl who was looking at him without a smile, then glanced at the red-haired girl.

He nodded. He couldn’t think about this yet, but he agreed. “Okay. Though I thought... you wanted to take me all the way to Hualeg.”

“After that, you can come to our country. Do you want to come?”

“Does Freya want me to go there?” William asked, laughing.

“Do you want me to ask her?”

“No, no. No need. I... just wanted to know if she’s the only one who wants me to go. How about you?” William teased. “Do you want me to come along, too?”

Vida’s face blushed slightly. “It is none of your business.”

“Wrong answer.”

Vida snorted. “Okay. I want you to come, too.”

“That’s the right answer.” William chuckled. “Then I’ll go with you.”

Vida looked at him for a moment, then nodded and told Freya William’s answer.

The redhead cheered while raising both hands. William laughed at the girl’s childish behavior and the three of them laughed.

The wind was still blowing gently. William looked back at the stream of the Ordelaht River that meandered between the valleys. In the night’s dark, there wasn’t much else to see, but for him, it didn’t matter. After all, he just wanted to think about all these things. He had decided to go north, and if he got there, he had gone against his mother’s message.

For a moment, his guilt and anxiety arose. But soon that feeling disappeared, replaced by a sudden curiosity. With all his apologies to his mother, this was still something he had to do. In the end, he had to be honest with himself, that the country in the north was the place he really wanted to know and come to. That’s where he came from, and that’s where he wanted to go. And now was the time.

As Master Horsling said, it was time he got to know himself. Knowing something that was already deep inside him. Something that will lead him to the next path in his life.

BLACK STONE OF VALLANIR

~ the end of Book One ~

Read the next story:

Origin of the Northmen: Northmen Saga ~ Book Two

KILLING SOMETHING



BRIGHTSTONES

NORTHMEN SAGA ~ BOOK TWO

ORIGIN OF THE NORTHMEN



R.D. VILLAM

The Emperor and the Knight

Seventeen years before

Northwest of Tavallo, 98 A.R. (98th year of the Age of the Alton Kings) or 7 N.E. (7th year after the founding of the Greater Elniri Empire)



The autumn wind blew gently from the northern slopes, moving down the deserted valley west of the town of Tavalo.

Under the shadow of the hilltops and cloudy skies, the wind could be heard faintly through the dense trees along the cobbled path, as if welcoming Vyndassi, the Quazar of the Greater Elniri Empire, or the Emperor.

The guards around Vyndassi kept looking left and right, trying to find anything that might be dangerous behind the trees. Vyndassi had explained to them that there was nothing to worry about. But he also understood that surprises could still happen anytime, and reality was often different from expectations.

The guards certainly didn't want him to be harmed while in their care, and he didn't want to give up his life just like that, either. He had to be careful.

Vyndassi and his entourage arrived in the city of Tavalo five days ago secretly, because he did not want to invite any danger, and now he had arrived at the western end of the Elniri empire's dominion.

A gray stone monument appeared in front of him. The monument was a relic of the former kingdom of Terran, which serves as a signpost before entering the territory of the kingdom of Alton in the west.

In the Southern Continent, the Elniri people used to use a monument with a carved head of a horse, buffalo, or wolf as a marker for their hunting ground. Here in northern countries, the shape of the monument is more simple without carving. Its height was over two spears so that everyone could see it from afar.

Beside the stone obelisk, Vyndassi stopped his horse and scanned his surroundings, looking for someone he would meet. He should have arrived but was probably still hiding, Vyndassi thought. That person also definitely preferred to be careful. Vyndassi dismounted from his horse while signaling his guards to wait behind him.

Before long, a man appeared from behind the trees about twenty meters from Vyndassi. The man's robes were white and dull-looking, and his hair and sideburns were brown.

The man gave a respectful nod, then sat down on a rock, waiting for Vyndassi. The man seemed quite calm and unafraid of the group of Elniri soldiers on guard.

Maybe because he also believed in Vyndassi.

Vyndassi walked over to him, then sat down on another large rock in front of that man. Vyndassi leaned his sword beside him.

The man looked at him, before saying in a polite and clear voice, "Quazar Vyndassi, I'm glad to meet you."

“Knight Fabien,” Vyndassi answered carefully. “This is a meeting that I never thought could happen. I think... this is a good thing.”

“You were the one who invited me, Quazar. I came because I believed... you wouldn’t kill me.”

Vyndassi smiled, inwardly admiring the man’s words, who were both straightforward and fearless and yet polite, then replied, “And I trust you won’t do the same to me either.”

The knight smiled faintly. “Quazar, I’m just an ordinary person. You’ll see later. I’m only accompanied by a handful of people. Whereas you have many soldiers behind you. You can kill me easily here.”

Vyndassi shook his head. “I didn’t think you were so into jokes. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t be able to do it easily. In the past, you killed my brother, a commander and a warrior far greater than me. You did it in front of thousands of soldiers and still got away. Now you could just kill me and get away, too.”

Fabien gave a short laugh. “Killing you is an attractive offer, especially to some people. But I think it will only be bad because your successor might start another war.”

“And killing you would make all those people hate me,” Vyndassi retorted. “I, frankly, don’t mind if they all don’t like me. But it becomes a problem, if in the end there are more people who oppose me, then destroy everything I have built.”

“Everything you’ve built...” The knight tilted his head, seeming to think about those words. “Seems like that’s all that matters to you.”

“I believe it is best for the people,” Vyndassi replied. “Not only for now, but also for the future. Do you think there is anything more important?”

The knight was silent for a moment before replying, “Life.

The lives of thousands of people who disappeared as soon as your soldiers came to this land.” He looked at Vyndassi sharply. “Isn’t that important to you?”

Vyndassi looked back at him. “I know it’s important, of course. But what do you think I can do?” he asked back. “Returning everyone’s life? Bringing the dead back to life?”

“Please ask yourself about what can you do.”

“Will my answer determine your decision?”

“Of course, Quazar.”

“Then I’ll tell you what you need to know,” Vyndassi said. “First, we will not leave the northern lands. The Elniri will live here, forever. All the land that we have taken now belongs to us. Everyone who lives in this land is now our people. History has changed. Our lives all change. The Kingdom of Terran and the other kingdoms that were here before we came are now gone. Right now, all of them were under the Greater Elniri Empire. You are part of the Elniri nation, from now until thousands of years into the future. This is the first reality you have to face. This is something that can no longer be changed.”

The knight was silent, apparently thinking about Vyndassi’s words, before replying, “Many people will not agree with you. Especially those from the Terran Royal family in Minardes.”

“I understand. But eventually, they must be able to accept it so that peace can be achieved soon. That fact that I spoke earlier is the basis.”

“You are an optimist, Quazar,” the knight replied. “That’s natural, since you have an army. You can do whatever you want. Bringing your troops to Minardes, then killing all remaining members of the Terran royal family and destroying everything there, you can do it too. If your predecessor was still alive, that’s what he would do. Right?”

“Maybe. But I’m not him.” Vyndassi clenched her jaw. “This is the second thing I want to tell you. I don’t like war. Yes, I could do it if I had to, but I don’t like it. I prefer to build a country. That’s what I used to do at Elniri, at Melhaus, and I’ll do it here too. I will build fields, farms, markets, roads, and also schools. I can do it better than the kings who previously ruled in Terran. The result? I will give it to the people. Think of it as a payback for all the losses you’ve experienced before. Also, this can be a provision to achieve a better life. I promise to protect and guarantee the lives of all of you, in peace.”

The knight took a deep breath. “Then, what do you expect from me, Your Highness Quazar?” he asked.

Vyndassi smiled. “I can’t do all that if there are still rebellions here and there. You are a very influential man, Knight Fabien. To the people of the north, you are a hero. A symbol of resistance. I know you did not lead the commotion that happened. They move independently. But everything happened after you rose against us. Logically, the best option for us is to capture you, then eradicate all those who oppose us. But, then again, I don’t enjoy doing it. I believe there is a better way. You are a wise man, who cares for the people. You know what I want to do, and they don’t. Therefore, I hope you will stop opposing me, and even help me achieve that goal. This is the offer I can make to you.”

The knight fell silent once more, before saying, “You want me to talk to everyone? About your peace plan? About all kinds of kindness that you want to give?”

Vyndassi nodded. “I want everyone to get back on their feet, in peace. In what way you help me, I leave it entirely to you.”

For a moment, the Knight stared at Vyndassi.

Then he asked, “Don’t you have a grudge, Quazar?”

Vyndassi was pensive. “You mean the feeling of revenge

because you killed my brother? For me, all that is long gone. I have forgiven you. Instead, I have to ask, do you still have a grudge against us? You are the one who should have a lot of grudges.”

“Many people still have a grudge against you. A grudge so deep and incurable, no matter how sweet you speak, or how much money you give them.”

“I know.”

“But... if you really mean it, then...” the knight seemed to think again, before nodding, “just show it. Give everything you have, expecting nothing in return. They will judge later on whether you deserve support.”

The knight then stood up. He looked away at the sun almost setting behind the trees. “Let’s see, Quazar, what will happen. If you are indeed a good leader, a wonderful future will lie ahead for you, too. And after that, maybe I will help you.”

He looked at Vyndassi. “I’ve forgiven you, too.”

Vyndassi stood and bowed respectfully. “Thank You.”

“As you said, maybe I’ll talk to a few people, including the descendants of the king of Terran, who now live in Minardes,” Fabien said. “Maybe they won’t just accept your wish at this point. But if it turns out they’re willing to accept it, and in the end, all goes well, then maybe I don’t need to do anything. After this passes, maybe I’ll go west, and stay there more.”

“To the west? To Alton’s country?” Vyndassi asked, slightly surprised. Inwardly, he wondered. Was this knight from Alton, and not from Terran?

“There are many lands in the west,” Fabien said. “A much wider world there. There are people... who may need me. Or maybe I am the one who needs them.”

Vyndassi nodded. “Then this may be our first, and also our

last meeting.”

“If we live long, maybe we will meet again.”

Vyndassi smiled. “I won’t live long.”

The knight raised his eyebrows. Vyndassi gave a short laugh, seeing the astonishment on the man’s face.

“And you’re the first to hear it,” Vyndassi said. “I’ve told no one this before.”

“You know about the length of your life?” The knight was dumbfounded as he stared intently at Vyndassi. “I think you should at least tell your wife. You look healthy, Quazar, so I don’t understand what you mean. But, if you know how much time you have left, I hope you can put that to good use, and make sure your successor will have the same goals as you. Your people depend on you.”

“They’re your people too.”

“Of course. They are my people.” The knight nodded without hesitation. He glared at Vyndassi for a moment, before greeting, “Do your job well, Quazar.”

“You too, Knight.”

The Knight turned and walked away, down the hillside.

Vyndassi stood, watching. In the distance, several horsemen appeared. They numbered about twenty people. One of them pulled a horse, which Fabien then rode. Before long, the horsemen were gone, disappearing into the twilight.

Vyndassi was pensive, sighed.

Yes, do the work, and leave the best. Before it ends.

The Forgotten

Every child wants to know who the father is. Today he asked, “Mother, can you tell me one more time?”

“About what, my son?”

“My father.”

“Your father is the Quazar of Elniri. The ruler of this vast land, before he died ten years ago, at the same time as you were born.”

“Is he hated by people here?”

“He is admired by the people of his land, but disliked by those who are conquered by him, who are his enemies.”

“Then why are we now being chased by people from his country? Aren’t they supposed to be helping us?”

Auria could not answer her son’s question.

She could, but she didn’t want to explain it. The answer would be very long, and she wasn’t sure her son would understand at his age. Understand that hate comes from fear.

But maybe she should start talking. And not only about her

son's father, but also about herself. So that he knows where he came from, why they got to this point, and what he should do next.

Auria finally spoke. Everything from the beginning of time, thousands of years ago. In long forgotten times, when the Land of Spring in the north was still a green plain under the umbrella of the giant tree of Eviendares, and the Rooftop Mountains of the World had not yet been raised high through the clouds to separate the Western and Eastern Worlds, and when the Autumn Lands of the south had not yet been unleashed far away across the ocean.

At that time, Ernu, the Creator, still seemed to care about each of his creatures, especially humans. Very caring, as far as Auria could remember. Ernu sent down avern, his first creatures from the sky, to help humans grow on earth. Avern showed the good ways of life, showing humans how to coexist with wind, earth, water, fire, and other elements. They also taught them about life and death.

Ernu, through the averns, taught everything to humans, gave everything, even to the point of making the averns themselves jealous.

After some time, humans became skilled and clever. They could master various elements of nature and became arrogant. The averns who had lived on earth for a long time had considered themselves as gods to be worshiped by humans, so they tried to punish humans for their arrogance.

Feeling threatened, humans fought back. The human kings, along with elemental controllers, fought and killed each avern, of which there were fewer. A great war took place, long and spread everywhere, until finally, it was no longer between averns against humans, but also averns against averns, and

humans against humans.

In times of chaos, it was no longer clear what was right and what was wrong. Auria and her twin sister, Istra, were averns who stood on the side of humans who did not want war. This made them hostile to their people. Both were arrested and imprisoned.

Next was a time of suffering where everything changed when the bonds of sisterhood for thousands of years were finally broken by betrayal. Istra changed direction and joined in attacking humans, while Auria who still refused to fight was banished to the south, buried in a frozen prison in the earth, and finally forgotten, no matter how much she screamed hysterically at her sister asking to be released.

In the end, humans won the war. Istra and the remaining averns fled to the north. The human kings grew proud and crowned themselves as new gods. Seeing them, Ernu became furious, so angry that he gave an unexpected punishment.

Wind, earth, water, fire rebel and no longer wanted to submit to humans. Nature swept, thrown, swallowed, drowned, burned everything. The earth was deformed, the Tree of Life withered to death, the Roof of the World was lifted to destroy mankind. The land was divided; some drowned, and some drifted in various directions. Life was gone.

But not everything disappeared, because Ernu still had forgiveness for his creatures, including humans.

Also, because someone asked for it.

And do humans know who was asking for their forgiveness?

Istra.

Reasoning that humans had received enough punishment and deserved a chance, Istra prayed for humans to be forgiven. Auria wasn't sure if her sister had good intentions, but Ernu accepted

her prayer. Humans may live on earth. Ernu did not replace them with other creatures.

Ernu also allowed the averts to stay on earth, but to avoid clashes with humans in the future, they were required to live secluded in a forest that now grew densely in the north, the Wodnar Forest.

After that, Humans lived in various parts of the world. In the west, east, and also far in the Southern Continent. No more averts to teach them. There was no longer any old knowledge that had made them proud. And it seemed that Ernu didn't have the same affection for them as before.

But humans are intelligent and stubborn creatures. They made it through the rigors of nature. After thousands of years, a group of humans had again found a way to control the elements. People who call themselves magicians.

That was when the Age of Wind and Earth in the Heiszl Valley began. The heyday of the wizards. Hundreds of years, the influence of these magicians strengthened. Until a new nation appeared in the east to fight them: the Terran people who drove the wizards away and finally closed themselves in the Heiszl Valley.

Human history continued. New lands sprang up, rose, and fell. Meanwhile, the averts were now only myths and were slowly being forgotten, just as Auria was forgotten in her prison in the south for thousands of years. Being in a frozen prison gave Auria immortality, and Istra had made a seal in the far north that made Auria's body unable to step on the northern mainland if one day she escaped from prison. To Auria, immortality felt more like a painful punishment than a blessing.

But everything changed when Anthravai, the Quazar of Elniri, arrived. Ocean water that eroded coral for thousands of years

finally made Auria's frozen prison visible from the top of the cliff. Guided by fate, the Great Lord of Elniri shattered the stone, with powers that might indeed have been given by Ernu, not just ordinary gods as the Anthravai often uttered. Anthravai then completed it by breaking Istra's seal on Mount Vetr. With this Auria could return to the northern mainland, even if it meant she lost her immortality and would die one day.

Eight years ago Auria finally took her son across the ocean to the north, a year after his son was born. But the situation on the Northern Continent was precarious. Elniri faced rebellions everywhere, so Auria stayed away and live in a deserted place.

After things calmed down, Auria went to meet Donati, the Elniri commander based in the city of Dindel. Anthravai once mentioned Donati's name as his trusted officer, because they were from the same tribe in Elniri. That's why Auria dared to meet Donati.

To the man, Auria told about her son. Donati then asked Auria and her son to stay in Dindel and keep this a secret from others. Auria agreed. After some time Donati then explained his intention, that he no longer wanted to be under the control of Quazar Vyndassi, the successor of Anthravai, by using the son of Auria and Anthravai to attract support from the people of Elniri.

Auria was interested. If this was successful, her son could get his rights as the son of Anthravai. But after a while, she realized that Donati only used them as pawns, and he would kill them if they were no longer needed.

Auria and her son ran away. Donati and his troops chased after them, but Auria escaped. She took her son to hide in the Favalath Mountains. Her son was still young and couldn't defend himself, so neither of them could do anything. Therefore, they must stay there until her son grew up. Both escape from those who hate

them. A hatred that grows out of fear.

Years later, Auria felt her body weaken. She had tried to ignore it all this time, but finally, she realized that as an avern she could no longer live on the northern mainland like she used to. If she wanted to live longer, she would have to go to the Wodnar Forest and stay there until the end of his life, like Istra and her descendants.

But her son was not like that. With half-human blood, he might live longer outside the Wodnar Forest, like an ordinary human. Time will tell if it's true or not. But clearly, everyone who enters the Wodnar Forest and lives with the averns can't get out anymore. Auria didn't want that. She wanted her son to live as a human and get his rights as an Anthravai descendant.

So she made a choice. Auria stayed at her home in Favalath. And now, she knew that her time had come.

On her bed, she said, "My son. After I die, you are free to go anywhere. You are free to be anything and free to achieve anything. But I want you to remember who you were, who your father was, and what he left behind. Don't be afraid and doubtful, but don't be rash, either. Don't ask people to give what you want to you. Take it with what you have. If you deserve it, you'll get it."

Her son replied, "Mother, I'm not going anywhere. I'll stay here with you forever."

"You know I'm going to die soon."

"Then I will continue to care for your grave."

"You can achieve a lot out there."

"I just want to stay here."

Auria finally smiled. She really wouldn't be able to change her son's wishes if he didn't want to do it. Desire must grow from within. But her son was still very young; everything can

still happen, desires can change. Auria was only sad because no matter what her son would experience or achieve later, she could no longer see it.

That day Auria died, and her body slowly crumbled to dust.

There was no grave for her. There was only dust, which was blown away by the wind and returned to the sky.

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About the Author

An Indonesian writer who has published several fantasy books and is now bringing his story to the international world.

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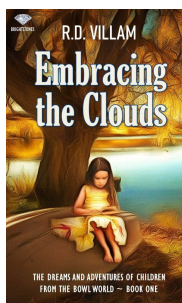
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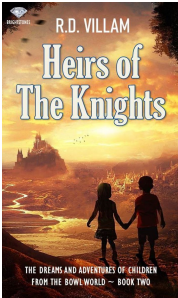
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Also by R.D. Villam



Embracing the Clouds: The Dreams and Adventures of Children from the Bowl World ~ Book One

Piri, Yara, and the other children have lived in an isolated world shaped like a bowl since they were babies without the company of adults. Filled with curiosity and a desire to embrace the clouds, one day they climb the mountains to see if there is another world out there. But what feels like a fun trip at first turns into a terrifying experience. They fall into the abyss, and from there, a fantastical adventure takes them to a far and mysterious land, where they meet strange creatures, new friends, dangerous criminals, and an evil witch. They must survive in the harsh world of adults if they want to return to their cozy and beautiful Bowl World.



Heirs of the Knights: The Dreams and Adventures of Children from the Bowl World ~ Book Two

One hundred days after their first trip, Piri and Yara arrive in the outside world again. This time they do it without a plan, and as a result, they are immediately caught up in various problems. They are captured by their old enemy but rescued by new friends, who then ask them to speak to a monstrous giant creature that has been imprisoned for a hundred years under a hill. Piri and Yara manage to find out who their true ancestors are, as well as the hidden power that is passed on to them. It is a secret that can bring hope to many people, as well as disaster.

